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The Big Debate: Is the tide turning on the traditional conference format?

3 December 2012 by Tom Hall, [Be the First to Comment](#)

C&IT examines whether the traditional sit-down conference is dying out in favour of new formats.

Is the traditional conference format dying out?

Perhaps fearing that familiarity can breed contempt, a spate of corporates are steering away from the traditional 'sit down' conference format, opting for something completely different.

While the movement away from 'death by Powerpoint' has been gathering pace for some time, planners are now questioning whether traditional event formats are dying out.

Siemens recently ditched its annual Diversity conference in favour of an around-the-world tour with social media and video maximising its reach (see C&IT, October 2012). Meanwhile b2b events have embraced virtual environments and experiential - with Sainsbury's adding 'village' spaces to engage staff.

According to Line Up, delegate expectations compete with other media. Jess Littman, head of events at the agency, says brand 'storytelling' is dictating format. "Every element is designed to take audiences on a journey. Whether we build a conference around an inspirational story, use cutting-edge technology or employ interactive elements depends on communicating messages," she adds.

But the formats themselves are not new, according to Reftech's director Ken Clayton, previously of Jaguar. "Siemens knew a traditional conference would not meet expectations, and put a much bigger budget behind the tour."

Clayton says he ran a similar event format for British Leyland in the 1970s in which he recorded a series of presentations by figures including a government minister. "Videotape players weren't widely available, so the video was transferred to film and distributed throughout the company. Modern technology has made this more efficient, but the basic format remains."

Lancaster London events manager, William Harding agrees that technology isn't necessarily transforming formats but instead helping clients reach additional audiences. "We are seeing technology used to extend the event experience pre, during and post event," he adds.

The key is to keep messages simple, bite-size and salient. Tom McInerney, director of Etherlive, says: "Society's use of tablets, laptops and smartphones mean that we are happy to use them in the workplace. Reticence in raising a hand was commonplace. Now questions can be asked with a simple, yet effective tweet or post on a private forum."

It all boils down to making conferences memorable, says Diamond Martini's managing director Courtney Rogers, who started her agency as a reaction to the rise of 'conveyor belt' event formats. "Corporate does not have to be dull. First impressions count, so why guests frequently queue to receive their name badge only to be ushered into a stuffy room for a stale cup of coffee baffles me," she adds.

For the QEII conference centre, however, the tried-and-tested format of the conference is here to stay. Sue Etherington, commercial director at the venue, says: "Conferences are made more memorable by improving on elements such as the food, AV, event content and quality of speakers."

So, while conferences are evolving, the traditional format will not disappear as long as the content is compelling enough. However, in a world ever more obsessed with interaction and digital communication, the traditional conference format will continue to be challenged by brands that want to make a real impact on their audience.

<http://www.citmagazine.com/Article/1158420/Big-Debate-tide-turning-traditional-conference-format>