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Using Speed Dating Techniques to Enliven and Improve Conferences and Workshops

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Abstract

Most Extension educators seek new ideas for organizing more exciting and animated workshops and conferences. This article describes structured networking activities (also known as "speed dating") that succeed in enlivening meetings, strengthening networking, and improving learning. A speed mentoring approach was successful in sharing knowledge among farmers' market managers with different levels of experience. Farmers and chefs used a more classic speed dating approach to forge new relationships and make deals.

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Introduction

Admit it--you wish your workshops and conferences were livelier. Often the most animated interactions and the most valuable learning take place during breaks, meals, and receptions. Extending these unstructured networking periods provides one way to improve these events. But another, underutilized means for strengthening them is by carefully integrating structured networking periods into the conference schedule. At Oregon State University we have begun using variations on the "speed dating" model (just another name for structured networking) in a wide variety of settings. The results have been excellent.

Sessions in conferences and workshops, whether keynote addresses, panels, or town hall meetings, share a common characteristic: one person at a time speaks, and everyone else is expected to listen. After hours in that role, it is little wonder that participants pour out into breaks, hungry for conversation. As an antidote, Robert Chambers, in his superb book *Participatory Workshops*, proposes the "buzz": "So easy. So underused. Invite participants to buzz with others next to them--about what has just been covered or done, an issue that has arisen, the agenda. The immediate wake-up often includes learning by talking."

Speed dating takes these conversations a step further by focusing on a specific topic of interest and by recognizing that individuals fill different roles in many conversations. The original speed dating was introduced as a way of promoting a safe and quick way of meeting a broad variety of date candidates. (A simple "Google search" will uncover many examples.)

Speed Mentoring Example

The Oregon Farmers' Market Association (OFMA) holds an annual conference to educate market managers about current issues. A panel of veteran market managers providing tips and suggestions has always been valuable, but it suffers from a format that is too similar to all the other sessions.

At the 2003 meeting, OFMA replaced the panel with "Speed Mentoring." The entire group divided itself into two categories--experienced managers and inexperienced managers. (Some juggling had to be done to make the two groups of equal size.) Worksheets were passed out to serve as discussion starters. The inexperienced managers listed market management issues/problems they

wanted to discuss. The experienced managers listed three significant lessons they had learned in managing markets.

The experienced managers lined up against one wall (think an 8th grade dance), and then the inexperienced managers selected one for a conversation. Instantly, the group of 28 managers who had listened attentively for nearly 2 hours to invited experts formed 14 pairs and went at it. The room became noisy and active. Energy was sky high.

After 10 minutes, a signal was given. The experienced managers stayed put, while the inexperienced rotated one station. Instructions were given to talk about either the same topics (since different people might have different views) or new ones. Without delay, new, intense discussions began. After a second period had passed, this conversation was closed, and the speed mentoring ended.

It was a tremendous networking and shared learning opportunity. Furthermore, the change of pace played a valuable role in the day.

Speed Dating Example

A more classic version of speed dating was used during the Farmer-Chef Connection, an educational event that seeks to foster better relationships between chefs and individual farmers. The traditional format for this program was a mix of speeches, panels, and workshops, along with long breaks that featured outstanding food provided by the farmers and prepared by the chefs. The primary workshop goal of making new matches largely was accomplished during the breaks.

At the most recent conference, the organizers inserted a speed dating session in the dreaded after-lunch slot on the agenda. Both groups were given worksheets that listed the types of information they might want to share. In advance, the chefs had been told to bring their menus, and the farmers instructed to bring their crop lists. Using the 8th grade dance model, the chefs line up against the wall, and the farmers went over and chose an initial "date." If it had been a smaller group (there were more than 80 participants), the chefs would have given a brief introduction so that farmers would have been better able to target their speed dates.

In introducing the speed dating session, we deliberately downplayed getting to actual deals and instead discussed these desired objectives/outcomes:

- Feedback on both products and presentation,
- Better understanding of the people on the other side of the table, and
- Better understanding of what is possible.

As it turns out, the objectives were needlessly conservative. All participants easily accomplished these three goals, and many actively engaged in deal making. After 10 minutes, we rang a bell and gave the instruction, "Shake hands and move on." After three rounds, we called a halt. A show of hands revealed that all felt that they had made useful business contacts. No complaints were heard about being sleepy from the spectacular lunch. Participants had renewed energy to face the afternoon workshops.

In Closing

These two examples demonstrate that pairing up people with a purpose can achieve excellent learning and networking results. The event organizer gives up control of the actual content of the interactions, but that is a small price to pay. Why don't we do more of this?

References

Chambers, R. (2002). *Participatory workshops: A sourcebook of 21 sets of ideas and activities*. London: Earthscan.

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