

Working Smarter

If You Link It, They Will Come

Strategist Daniel Burrus is convinced that new technologies will only increase the value of face-to-face meetings. And he has a few suggestions for how you can leverage that process.

In our technology forecast last issue, Daniel Burrus wrote: "'Either/or' thinking often occurs when dazzling new technologies first appear, but the new thing rarely supplants the old thing." A very good point. But we wanted to know more, so we asked Burrus - a technology forecaster, business strategist, and author who works for corporations and associations alike - to further explain the relationship between the new thing and the old thing.

Specifically, how can meeting professionals use new and emerging technologies to drive attendance to in-person meetings? In a far-reaching interview, Burrus began by saying that the former is actually creating demand for the latter by increasing the speed at which information travels around the globe. Burrus said: "The need to communicate with ever-expanding numbers of people dispersed over not just the country but the planet is increasing, not decreasing."

And not all of that communication will happen electronically. "I think the biggest competitive advantage that organizations can get is to strengthen relationships in bad times," Burrus said. "And strengthening relationships doesn't happen over a phone or over a teleconference."

How can you capitalize on Web 2.0 technologies in a way that doesn't undercut face-to-face meetings? Burrus has a few suggestions:

Tease your speakers online. Whenever an association asks Burrus to make a keynote presentation and talks about streaming the entire thing online, Burrus offers a counter suggestion: Record the entire presentation, but post only 10 minutes online - "so they know they really missed something big," Burrus said, "and [they] better go next year." New technology is no different from any other tool in that you have to use it strategically. "If I can see all of the keynote speakers by not going," Burrus said, "why would I go?"

Build Web 2.0 communities. Burrus once consulted for a large corporation whose employees included 83,000 engineers. Every year, about 10,000 of the engineers attended a conference, but otherwise didn't do much information sharing. So Burrus pitched the corporation on creating its own internal Web 2.0 applications, including a Facebook-style site, a wiki, and apps that emulate Twitter and Flickr.

The idea was that the engineers would use these tools to collaborate - to post problems, offer solutions, compare notes, and get to know one another as professionals. "Instead of 'Here are my interests and hobbies,'" Burrus said, "it's 'Here are the projects I'm working on, and here are my tools.'" Burrus said: "In a short amount of time, the impact has been huge."

From participating in a specialized online community, it's a short step to attending an in-person meeting. "We want to enable communication, we want to enable collaboration, we want to enable the sharing of best practices and best solutions," Burrus said. "What better thing to do than give [members] a place to do that - and that's your association."

Feed the buzz. "Every time you have a meeting," Burrus said, "there are hot subjects you don't know are going to be hot until you're at the meeting." Maybe your opening keynote speaker creates buzz around a certain topic. Take note of that, and after the meeting introduce that topic into your virtual communities.

"We create actionable knowledge for our members that's ongoing," Burrus said. "But the heart and soul of it started at that meeting. We need to educate our members as to the physical, tangible power of the meeting."