
GOOD MORNING LADIES AND GENTLEMEN...



A conference need not be a dreaded entry in your diary. The right events can be a chance to engage with a wide range of interesting people, exchange ideas and raise your profile, but it takes some work

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It is easy to do the conference fly-by and not think twice. But truly memorable events are about big ideas. They can be an opportunity for meaningful engagement with people from very different backgrounds who can offer fundamental insights. They can be a chance for get-togethers off the official agenda, perhaps with people of influence at the highest levels. Good events are, at the very least, an opportunity to raise your profile via a burgeoning array of media.

It is worth remembering that events these days are big business – almost every large media company has integrated conferences into their business model to create new revenue streams and stake out credibility on a particular topic or with a niche audience. Additionally, organizers such as think tanks, Wall Street firms and academic institutions have built up important thematic or industry-specific events. Conferences of all sizes can establish themselves in the calendar: think *Fortune's* Brainstorm GREEN, *The Economist's* Global Sport Summit, Morgan Stanley's Technology Media & Telecom Conference or, the biggest of all, the World Economic Forum's annual gathering of global leaders in Davos, Switzerland.

With the cost of engagement in leading global forums running into tens – if not hundreds – of thousands of dollars, and with multiple invitations vying for your attention, it is worth taking the trouble to make sure that investment delivers more than just your logo on the conference brochure.

Mixing it up

"In today's global economy it is essential for business leaders to step out of their comfort zone and engage with the citizens of the world. Failure to do so is certain to limit growth and opportunity at all levels." – Dr Melvin T. Stith, Dean, Whitman School of Management, Syracuse University.

A rich debate requires multiple perspectives, which is why top global forums convene leaders

from a cross-section of disciplines. They provide access to perspectives and ideas impossible to find at industry- or business-only events.

Last year, the Aspen Ideas Festival drew celebrity business leaders such as Jeffrey Katzenberg, CEO of DreamWorks Animation, and Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates. They were joined by artists, doctors, politicians and athletes, who were not at the Colorado resort just for the ski slopes but for discussion and debate on issues of global importance, such as dealing with epidemics, migration and environmental degradation.



Twitter co-founder Biz Stone was well-placed to headline the 2010 Milken Institute Global Conference's talk on "innovation." However, he was joined by others renowned in their field, including architect Frank Gehry, regenerative medicine pioneer Anthony Atala, and environmental justice advocate Majora Carter. The discussion ranged well beyond building design, stem cells, waterfront recovery projects and micro-blogging, to consider the big concept of how to translate ideas into action.

What's the big idea?

"Managing a global business today requires a longer-term view of the world, understanding the shifting social and environmental context you operate in, and how your business needs to change as a result. We're hearing leaders talk more and more about these global issues,

rather than just those which will affect next quarter's earnings." – Helen Clarkson, Head of US Partnerships and Projects, Forum for the Future.

Premier events demand a level of discourse that leaves little room for marketing jargon. Engagement in public forums is often tied to the notion of some kind of "thought leadership." Whatever it is called, that can be a very useful opportunity to define your company in terms of its greater purpose, rather than just the products and services it offers.

At this year's annual Technology, Entertainment and Design conference – "TEDGlobal" – Bill Ford, Executive Chairman of Ford Motor Company, spoke about the "future of mobility," describing how the surge in global population threatened to create global gridlock. Ford wasn't arguing for a new type of automobile or a different kind of engine, he was explaining that with 800m cars on the road and average daily commutes in cities such as Beijing and São Paulo at five hours, we are facing an infrastructure crisis. For a company that was founded on the idea of giving people freedom to move around, the issue threatens the very existence of Ford's business.

Ford went on to make the case for a new global network that ties all of our transportation options together. On Twitter, "#billford" was the number six trending topic that day and both National Public Radio and *The Wall Street Journal* pursued in-depth pieces on the topic in the days following.

Face time

"Particularly at a time when we are all overloaded and distracted by stimuli, the members of the Fortune Most Powerful Women community – women leaders in business and beyond who participate in our annual summit and other gatherings – say they want to come together to network live and in person, not just by e-mail, and talk with each other in a real and unfiltered way." – Pattie Sellers, Editor at Large and Co-chair, Most Powerful Women Summit, Fortune. 

In an increasingly impersonal world, the right conferences are rare opportunities for live discussions with people whose ideas and opinions matter. To only take advantage of formal timetabled meetings or a chance hallway encounter is to miss an opportunity. Most conferences compile and distribute a list of attendees ahead of the actual event, leaving ample time for you to identify and prioritize potential meetings, which should extend beyond existing relationships.

Indeed, with a bevy of important stakeholders in the same place at the same time, it can be an opportunity to take engagement to the next level by hosting a private side event. A small – or not-so-small – gathering often serves to highlight recent work or to raise awareness of strategy and goals.

On the sidelines of the World Economic Forum's 2011 annual meeting in Davos, Switzerland, Liberty Global, an international broadband company, invited policymakers, industry peers and media representatives to breakfast to discuss issues that will shape the future of Europe's digital agenda.

Side events can be an opportunity to associate a company and its expertise with highly influential people. On the fringes of the Aspen Institute meeting AGT International, a company that develops safety and security technology, led a closed discussion on how best to detect national security threats. Former Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff – who was attending the Aspen conference – joined in the meeting, underlining AGT's credibility.



Breaking news

"We're looking for themes, commentary and analysis from a series of people. Over-the-horizon ideas can be very useful in setting out our agenda for the future." – Andrew Edgecliffe-Johnson, Media Editor at the Financial Times.

Conferences that gain a reputation for breaking news or setting the agenda become a beacon for the media. Reporters, bloggers, tweeters – all are primed for breaking news at such events and companies now routinely tee up important news, on new initiatives, product launches, deals. Even without news, companies can become part of the coverage by offering relevant perspectives on the event's themes.



Ideas may yield immediate results or may gestate for later coverage.

The growing use of social media at conferences creates more opportunities for meaningful exposure. The World Economic Forum enlisted some 400 participants to tweet from this year's annual meeting and launched a "social media corner" at the bustling Congress Center in Davos. All social media output – including tweets, blogs, YouTube clips and Flickr photos – was made conveniently available via the forum's iPhone and Android smartphone applications.

At a mega-event, such as Davos, getting the attention of opinion-shapers can be daunting. At the latest Davos summit, Henry Blodget, the former Wall Street tech analyst who is now Editor-in-Chief of *Business Insider*,

blogged a vivid account of the avalanche of invitations that typically come his way and his experience one night of picking his way through some of them.

Blodget wrote, "I've told you about all the stuff that goes on outside of the 'official' Davos events – the breakfasts, the lunches, the cocktails, the dinners, the nightcaps, the skiing, the snow-shoeing, the ice-driving – all put on by corporations and countries who would like to get to know you better."

Interestingly, it is a night when he is bereft of invitations that Blodget makes his way through several hours of events that include: "cocktails to launch a hot new internet company," time spent in the "Deloitte hall," a specially constructed queuing area to funnel people to another event, then, after "three quick trips through the sushi line at Japan Night," a chat with a software CEO about the future of Microsoft and Google, and on to the PwC party – which "was rocking" – before a quiet moment in PwC's "Thought Café."

Another Blodget post, picked up by *The Huffington Post* among others, illustrates the perils of the loose comment. Titled *The Most Hilarious Moment at Davos So Far*, Blodget recounted a cocktail conversation in which an executive passed comment on a prominent central banker. Luckily for the speaker, Blodget identified him only as "a mogul."

Turning to the last slide...

Of course, not all conferences are in the Davos league. But with a combination of luck and judgment, you will have met interesting people from outside your normal world and perhaps shared some big ideas. And remember that a real conversation can be worth 1,000 e-mails. ☺

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