Continuous Education & Learner Engagement: THE FUTURE OF CONFERENCE EDUCATION AND THE MEETINGS INDUSTRY
Table Of Contents

1. Continuous Education vs. Continuing Education
2. Continuous Education Platforms
3. Continuous Education & Networking
4. Increasing Learner Engagement
5. Get Your Game On.
6. Looking Forward...
7. References
8. About CadmiumCD
There is a lot of talk lately about what continuing education means. Traditionally it meant cramming information in attendees’ heads and hoping they’d be more knowledgeable when they walked away from a conference. Attendees, the theory went, could memorize and retain this information, then later call it from memory at a moment’s notice.

Cramming all these facts into attendees’ brains however is problematic. The meetings industry is focused on creating knowledgeable and intelligent people, but there is now a shift in how people retain and reference important material.
A couple days at a conference yields far too much information to be memorized and retained. Attendees take part in so many sessions that much of the information is soon forgotten or lost after they return to the office.

Memorization of course is crucial to success. But to have a meaningful impact, that information needs to be digested over a prolonged period of time while being put to practical use.

This is where continuous education comes in. Continuous education is the idea that, in a society founded upon communication and technology, knowledge is available and accessible at any time.

But what exactly does that mean in context to your profession?
For the meetings industry, it means two things:

First, your conference’s proceedings should be easily accessible after your event. This ensures that attendees can learn the material at their own pace, access sessions they may have missed, and revisit presentations from sessions they attended.

Second, your conference should foster collaboration and build a network of resources for your attendees. This is crucial for building the type of knowledge that will have a meaningful impact on the real world.

Let’s explore these more...
Continuous Education Platforms

THE RIGHT TECHNOLOGY MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Digital Content... Anywhere, Anytime

Making your conference’s proceedings digitally available means giving your attendees an experience that will live beyond the conference. Once these are available, your attendees will feel that they’ve not only attended a continuing education conference, but that they can also continuously educate themselves in their own time.

They will appreciate that they’ve gained maximum ROI by coming to your conference and will be sure to spread the word.

This is obvious to event planners. That’s why they’ve made sure to send attendees home with brochures and pamphlets since conferences began. That’s why they sent home VHS, cassette, CD, and DVD proceedings once these technologies became available.
Today's attendees want content that's stored in the cloud and instantly accessible from their smartphones, tablets, and PCs. They want to be able to access it anywhere, at anytime. From the office, from their homes, from the bus or train. For them, the opportunity to learn something new and relevant to their field is indistinguishable from their everyday activities.

Luckily, with things like event websites and native mobile apps, it's easy for you to provide your own attendees with these tools. They can log in on the web and access worksheets and other session materials, follow presentation slides synchronized with audio and video from your conference, or download data into an app for off-line viewing.

A conference whose materials are readily accessible, and therefore lead to a better educated attendee, is a conference attendees will want to attend (and employers will want to send their employees to). They will appreciate your effort, and because of this, attend future events you host and refer their colleagues to your organization as well.

With the right online proceedings, attendees will be able to bring the conference home with them, and continuously learn the material your event offered in their own time.
A Digital Reference Book

Learning isn’t always a passive experience. Your attendees were engaged by the speakers at your conference, so why shouldn’t they still be engaged while learning back in the field? Sitting at the desk and memorizing the content offered doesn’t always work - and it’s certainly not always practical.

Have you ever tried to recall that piece of information you memorized, only to have it slip away at the tip of your tongue? Technology now makes it easy to look up exactly what you need, precisely when you need it.

With an event website and mobile app, it’s possible for your attendees to have access to whatever information they need from your conference at a moment’s notice. They can scan their notes to jog their memory, revisit powerpoint slides and other session materials to find that crucial piece of information, or watch a video of a speaker’s presentation to get an in depth understanding of a topic, whenever they need it most.

What makes continuous education so beneficial though, is its ability to foster collaboration. Technology allows for sharing knowledge with colleagues, calling a peer when you run into a tough problem, and being able to say “I don’t know the answer, BUT I know how to get it.”
Through a mobile app, for example, attendees can access speaker, attendee, and exhibitor biographies and contact information, in addition to presentation slides, audio, and their own notes. They can do this from anywhere, at anytime, right on their smartphones and tablets.

That means through your mobile app and event website they have a complete system for finding out how something works, or getting more information on a specified topic. Your conference’s attendees will be better educated before, during, and after the event.

Building a system for continuous education means delivering better content, fostering an environment for collaboration, and creating an accessible database for your attendees to access knowledge whenever and wherever they want it. It means organizing a way for your educational materials to not only be academic and informational, but also to hold weight in real-world situations and be available when people need them most.
Meetings education is changing.

Attendees want to walk away with an experience that will rejuvenate their outlook, get new ideas, and meet people passionate about their interests. They want engaging material that they can refer to at anytime, especially in an age where information is so ubiquitous. They want the ability to continuously educate themselves and to share this knowledge with their peers.

Having a strong online and mobile presence is a crucial building block for this. It will be essential for every meeting – no matter how large or small – and, for many attendees, it will be the deciding factor for attending your conference.

“Attendees want to walk away with an experience that will rejuvenate their outlook...”
Building Lifelong Relationships for CE

An experience that lasts is not only contingent upon the quality and availability of the content presented at events. Attendees also expect the chance to network with other attendees, speakers, and exhibitors.

In fact, this is one of the primary reasons professionals continue to attend conferences and other on-site educational events. They want to engage with their peers, learn about new ideas and services relevant to their field first hand, and they want to leave with connections that will improve their careers indefinitely.
There are varying methods attendees use to build connections. Some collect business cards and jot notes on the back, some bring an address book along, and others simply scribble the names and numbers of people they meet alongside their session notes.

While these methods may be tried and true, they lead to disorganization and even missed opportunities. It’s easy for a contact to get lost in the fold when they’re thrown in a pile with fifty–maybe a hundred–other business cards, or written in the margins of those session notes an attendee forgot about.

CRMs and other online tools have certainly come a long way to streamline this process, but they still don’t deliver in real-world situations. Asking for contact information in the middle of a conversation might disrupt the productivity of that interaction. If an attendee is in a rush, he or she may not have the opportunity to gather more information, leaving that attendee with only a name.

Many native mobile event apps now integrate a system into their event technology. CadmiumCD, for example, has built a section in their mobile app where a full list of attendees can be accessed.
Users can access their own data, customize their profiles, and search others who are in attendance. They’re free to carry on conversations without scribbling notes and fumbling with contact info. This creates fuller, better-realized connections between individuals.

To mark a contact, attendees simply need to open their app, pull up the attendee list, and—at the touch of a button—add that attendee to their bookmarks. They can see any relevant contact information or send a message directly through the app to their new colleague. The receiving attendee will receive a push notification on their phone and be able to quickly respond through the app.

This allows for increased connection between individuals. In addition to having a complete system for networking that’s fully integrated with the event’s registration list, making plans, getting together for dinner, and connecting personally are now native to the app attendees will already be using for the event’s educational sessions. They will stay focused on the content your organization offers, while having access to a rich database for communication.

Back home attendees can access their list at any time. Even if they forgot to exchange contact information or misplaced the stack of business cards they collected, attendees can stay in touch and communicate easily with their new colleagues.
Now, attendees will come away from your conference or meeting with a huge network of peers and experts. If ever attendees need an answer, or want to find a partner to collaborate with, they know exactly where to look. They’ve not only increased their knowledge, but they’ve also created a platform for communication that will be a valuable resource while building their skills in their particular field.

That’s continuous education fully realized.
Getting Social

...speaking of networks, there are plenty that already exist. The popularity of platforms like Twitter and Facebook have grown tremendously over the past few years. These networks are now used to stay in touch professionally and personally on an increasingly regular basis.

They are vital for continuous education because *staying connected means always having the right resource available*. And at a conference or event, networks like Twitter and Facebook are great tools for keeping attendees engaged.
Continuous education demands new approaches to how attendees learn. Gone are the days when you set attendees in front of a lecturer and pumped them full of information. Increasingly, speakers are looking further to engage attendees so they come away from a conference feeling that they’ve had an experience that will last.

Some presenters ask attendees to take live surveys, post tweets, and even play games to get the most out of their sessions. This engages learners so that the information presented is more memorable, and therefore will be easier to retain.

Social media also allows for greater interactivity between speakers and attendees. Rather than choosing a few attendees to ask questions at the end of each session, presenters can ask attendees to tweet throughout the course of the session. This way, everyone has the opportunity to ask questions as each piece of information is presented. Speakers can access a live feed of questions and comments and respond in real-time to the ones that are most relevant.

Adult learners expect to be treated as colleagues, not students in the traditional sense of the word. They want to drive content so they can maximize their conference experience and come away feeling they have learned something valuable.
Attendees come to each conference with highly varied experiences and knowledge. They don’t want to review material they’re already experts on, nor do they want to waste their time on material that isn’t relevant to them. Engaging attendees will make the difference between successful sessions and failed sessions for the sole reason that speakers will be able to assess the level attendees are at and adjust their content in real-time based on attendee feedback.

Essentially, social media allows speakers and attendees to engage in a conversation. The lecturer can use this conversation to make his or her presentation more interactive and specific to the current audience.

Mobile event apps are a great way to engage attendees in this way. Attendees can access your organization’s Twitter and Facebook pages directly from your conference app, live tweet about your event, and discuss important topics with speakers and other attendees using hashtags.
Continuous Education, Continuous Fun

More sophisticated mobile event apps include a camera tool which attendees can use to take pictures around your event, share them with colleagues, and post them to their social media accounts as well. QR scanners are also increasingly built into event apps. Both of these tools can be used to engage with exhibitor materials and other attendees for informational and social purposes.

One of the newest trends, however, brings gathering informational materials and engaging attendees socially together into one unified activity. This is called ‘gamifying’ education, or ‘gamifying’ your conference. This new concept is a big part of continuous education. It is a team-building exercise not only for cultivating knowledge, but also for establishing connections.

The most popular type of gamification at conferences is the scavenger hunt. Scavenger hunts compel attendees to explore your event’s entire convention center, visit exhibitor & sponsor booths they may not have known about otherwise, advertise your organization on social media, and attend important sessions that may have otherwise been overlooked.
For the meetings industry, this means two things:

There are countless possibilities for a scavenger hunt gamification app: scan a code to unlock a quiz which in turn unlocks downloadable content; post a picture of a session, booth, or poster to earn achievements; and so on. Every achievement an attendee earns can be published to Facebook or Twitter with your organization’s hashtag embedded into the post.

Event technology such as this engages attendees to explore your entire event and to network with people and organizations they may not have otherwise known existed. It creates a more memorable experience that will have a much greater educational impact. Attendees will come away with more contacts and a better sense of accomplishment than they ever knew possible.
FUTURE IMPACT ON THE MEETINGS INDUSTRY

The future of the meetings industry depends on smart, intuitive software that connects speakers, exhibitors, and attendees like never before. People want engaging experiences and rewarding networking opportunities.

As the industry continues to grow, it is essential that event planners and managing organizations understand continuous education and the necessity of learner engagement.

Few solutions are sensitive to the educational needs of attendees. Building systems that connect and engage attendees during educational sessions, in the exhibitor hall, at the posters gallery, and while they explore your organization’s chosen venue will increasingly become essential to the conference experience. Event planners will be pleased with attendee response and gain their organization a positive reputation with technology focused on this new generation of CE.
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Special thanks to a few valuable resources indispensable in writing this white paper:

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About CadmiumCD

OUR COMPANY

CadmiumCD has spent the last fifteen years building technology for educational conferences and meetings. With an all-inclusive line of products and services, CadmiumCD strives to ease the conference planning and management processes for event organizers. Their fully integrated system includes abstract collection, exhibitor and speaker data management, attendee accessible websites & floor plans, mobile event applications, proceedings distribution, and A/V production.