



oneonone

Robert B. Tucker

The author of seven books on innovation, he's a frequent speaker on the global conference circuit – which has given him the opportunity to observe firsthand the 'transformative changes' the meetings industry is experiencing. He recently convened a two-day think tank for a small group of executives who produce conferences to help them chart their own path – in other words, to innovate – in a shifting landscape.

By Susan Sarfati, CAE

Early in his journalism career, Robert B. Tucker interviewed innovative people — from Dr. Jonas Salk, who discovered the vaccine for polio, to FedEx founder Fred Smith. In speaking to inventors, entrepreneurs, and otherwise creative individuals, Tucker came to understand that being innovative is something that can be learned. Twenty-five years ago, he parlayed that passion for creativity into The Innovation Resource, a company he founded to help individuals and organizations profit from — rather than be blindsided by — change.

“Innovation is about generating fresh ideas that add value and bringing them to life,” Tucker said in a recent phone interview with *Convene*. “Innovation is the process by which you grow your business, [yet] many organizations have a process for everything except innovation.”

And that includes the meetings industry. “This may turn out to be a golden age for conferences,” he said, “yet each conference operates in a highly uncertain environment.” Tucker invited an intimate group of high-level professionals involved in the conference industry to the Elite Retreat on Aug. 21–23 in Santa Barbara, Calif., to explore how they could develop a process of innovation for their own events.

Tucker is quick to point out that he is “an innovation guy, not a conference guy,” and that for this retreat (and this interview), he wanted to be careful not to “step out beyond my expertise.” But what he does bring to the conversation — and what the Elite Retreat’s 14 participants took away — is a fresh perspective on a changing industry, and some new ideas and tools that all planners can put into practice. He shared some of the group’s insights with *Convene* shortly after the retreat concluded.

Your retreat focused on “Inventing the Future of the Conference Industry.” What was the impetus behind that?

I saw how the conference industry was changing rapidly, disrupting some [events] while rewarding others, and how attendance is declining in some sectors, while exploding in others — for example, TED conferences and those put on by magazines like *The Economist*, *Fortune*, and *Chief Executive*, among many others.

The result is that there are more conferences competing for shrinking budgets and attention spans; there’s this new high-end, exclusive, elite conference tier that commands up to \$16,000 per

attendee, as does one of the TED conferences. *New York* magazine reported recently that the typical TED conference rakes in \$23 million. Meanwhile, the pressure to do more with less and exceed last year’s numbers is intense for everybody in the industry. So at the retreat, I wanted to create an environment free of the pressures these senior people are normally under, where they could come together and discuss critical issues with peers in other parts of the conference industry whom they might not normally meet.

What criteria did you use to invite participants, and what was the attendee composition?

My team and I discovered pretty quickly what high-end conference producers have long ago realized: Senior people want to interact on a peer-to-peer basis with other senior-level people. And they want the environment to be commercial-free and confidential.

We knew that we also needed to limit the number of people to fewer than 20, because the intimacy gets lost if you go higher. We thought of it as an “unconference” in the sense that we involved these producers in creating the agenda. We said, “Here are the issues that have come up as important to discuss, but what do you want to talk about?” We also adopted the Chatham House Rule — everything that is discussed here, in confidence, remains so.

We were fortunate in that we attracted at least one executive from most of the major sectors of the conference industry — for example, top executives from the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE), the CEO and founder of Lincoln Healthcare Events, a for-profit conference organizer, the senior vice president of a major software company, a senior executive from The Conference Board who is in charge of a portfolio of 400 annual meetings, the CEO of the Fluid Power Association, and an executive from the printing industry.

What kind of disruption is the industry experiencing? I thought you said this is a golden age of conferences?

It is, but that doesn’t mean a rising tide is lifting all boats. For example, one conference producer whom we contacted in researching the Elite Retreat revealed to us that her conferences are being disrupted in a strange way. Ten years ago, this conference organization attracted up to 10,000 C-level participants annually who paid top dollar — but now attendance is down to 4,000. ➤

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Light Fires

A smattering of takeaways from Elite Retreat participants:

- › A conference on diversity hires an actor who performs a one-man show of James Baldwin, the African American gay poet. This addition to the conference becomes the highlight for many in attendance, and electrifies attendees with the message.
- › *The Economist's* Ideas Conference organizes an Oxford-style debate at its annual conference at the Hass School of Business at the University of California, Berkeley — itself an “innovation” in changing the venue from the familiar hotel ballroom to a more stimulating environment.
- › Ask what percent of your conference experience is in the category “things we’ve not tried before.” Ask what aspects of your conference are working so well that you would never think of getting rid of them.
- › Hold brainstorming activities with committees or staff in a space that allows for creativity — a hospitality suite, someone’s home, or a museum — rather than in a traditional education room. Cover tables with butcher paper and have people write their ideas down and share.
- › Music and art can help create an immersive conference experience that grabs attention and enhances retention. Consider hiring a music planner to help score your conference.
- › Smaller, segmented meetings are more resistant to economic downturns because they are focused on information and networking that such targeted groups can’t afford to miss. Larger, more general-focused meetings are more subject to cost-containment pressure. Future conferences will segment and serve to the max.
- › So many conference organizers have gotten so good at putting out fires that they’ve forgotten how to light them. To truly inspire and engage others, the design process must be more immersion, a combination of sensory overload and sensory deprivation with scattered outbreaks of constructive feedback and strategic focus.
- › Build in more social networking with longer breaks; mix-and-match icebreakers; spot-me badges that identify attendees with similar needs/interests; sponsored events that mix vendors, existing clients, and new prospects;

conversation areas in exhibits; and slideshows with conference pictures.

- › In a world in sensory overload, sell the need before you sell your conference program. Like movie trailers, provide a picture of the threats, emerging unexpected trends, and short segments from speakers

previewing fears and opportunities. Let them know they can’t afford to miss what will be provided.

- › Spouse and family programs consistently increase attendee loyalty. Provide programming that serves their interests.

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So she's wondering: "Where did my audience go? We are getting satisfactory evaluations. When we ask the attendees what [they] think of our conferences, the response is, 'It was good; it was nice.'"

So why is she losing attendees?

Because other conferences have apparently siphoned her participants off. There's some solid customer-service research out of Harvard pointing out that 75 percent of people who leave a business (or conference) never to return again were "satisfied." They weren't mad. They weren't disappointed. They just weren't engaged. And some other conference producer dangled another conference and they jumped ship.

So what's the solution?

The only solution to this situation is to innovate. To change the way she and her team of conference producers think about creating value in an increasingly competitive space. Satisfactory evaluations are not giving her insights into her attrition problem. So she needs to get closer to her population's unarticulated needs and expectations, and develop new metrics of attendee ROI and engagement. This was a big topic at the retreat.

Okay, let's say a conference planner's key conference is losing steam. What should he or she do?

One option would be to just copy the TED format. After all, TED conferences are hotter than hot right now, and imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. But from a practical standpoint, what they do a poor job of is [providing] the latest tools, strategies, and insights that busy professionals can actually apply to their work once the conference is over. In other words, they don't really "take on the customer's problem" in any significant way, because that would require knowing the audience's pain points. It would require the conference producer recruiting speakers who could address those needs. So what I'm saying is, build on your strengths. Don't try to mimic someone else's model.

What did the Elite Retreat's participants want to spend the most time discussing?

We spent the most time wrestling with the issue of how you innovate to create a more powerful experience overall, and a more compelling educational experience in particular. In this over-communicated world, how do you gain people's attention

and inspire their future loyalty? The overarching response to these issues is the need to begin with the end in mind. There is a compelling need for conference producers to redefine their role and see themselves not solely as meeting planners, but as orchestrators, or architects, of conferences. The planner role is so linear, left-brain, so reductionist. If you define yourself as a meeting planner only, then it's all about execution, checking things off your to-do list.

But what if that's your title and what's expected of you?

Even if that's part of your job description, what the Elite Retreat really brought out was that if you are in the meetings role in your organization, you can empower yourself to enlarge your scope and view yourself in a larger context. If you begin to see yourself as conference architect, then innovative thinking is central to everything you do. And every decision you make. You're really an artist, and you're creating more compelling experiences.

The conference industry is the experience economy and the social-networking economy personified. People come to meetings from different ages, stages, places, and hopes, most of which are hidden from us. So conference orchestrators need to meet a very diverse set of needs, especially the nonlinear, human component. We were fortunate to have the seven-time Emmy-winning composer Gary Malkin join our discussion [at the retreat]. Gary was kind enough to not only perform for us on opening night, but talk to us about music's role in creating what he calls "multisensory" experiences, as he did for [TED curator] Chris Anderson, at a recent TED conference in Beijing. Gary's lifework is about the dire need to rejoin heart and head, logic and intuition.

You say that everyone who has taken a shower has had an idea, but the innovator is someone who dries off and goes on to implement the idea. You point to the "knowing" and "doing" gap. Why is this so wide?

We all know we need to do these things to become indispensable, but somehow we don't do what we know we need to do. The details drag us down to fighting fires and continuing longtime routines. What the Elite Retreat really highlighted is the need to nurture the visionary component of meetings and not allow ourselves to get beaten down.

After putting on [my own] small conference, I am in awe of what planners do! They must put

'In this over-communicated world, how do you gain people's attention and inspire their future loyalty?'



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‘The conference industry is the experience economy and the social-networking economy personified.’

together a whole new team of people for each meeting — keynote speakers, breakout speakers, the hotel and production staffs, and other outsourced personnel. They contend with thousands of moving parts, and in distant cities. All of which activate the execution part of the brain instead of the part that needs to be exercised, nurtured, and supported.

And what part is that, exactly?

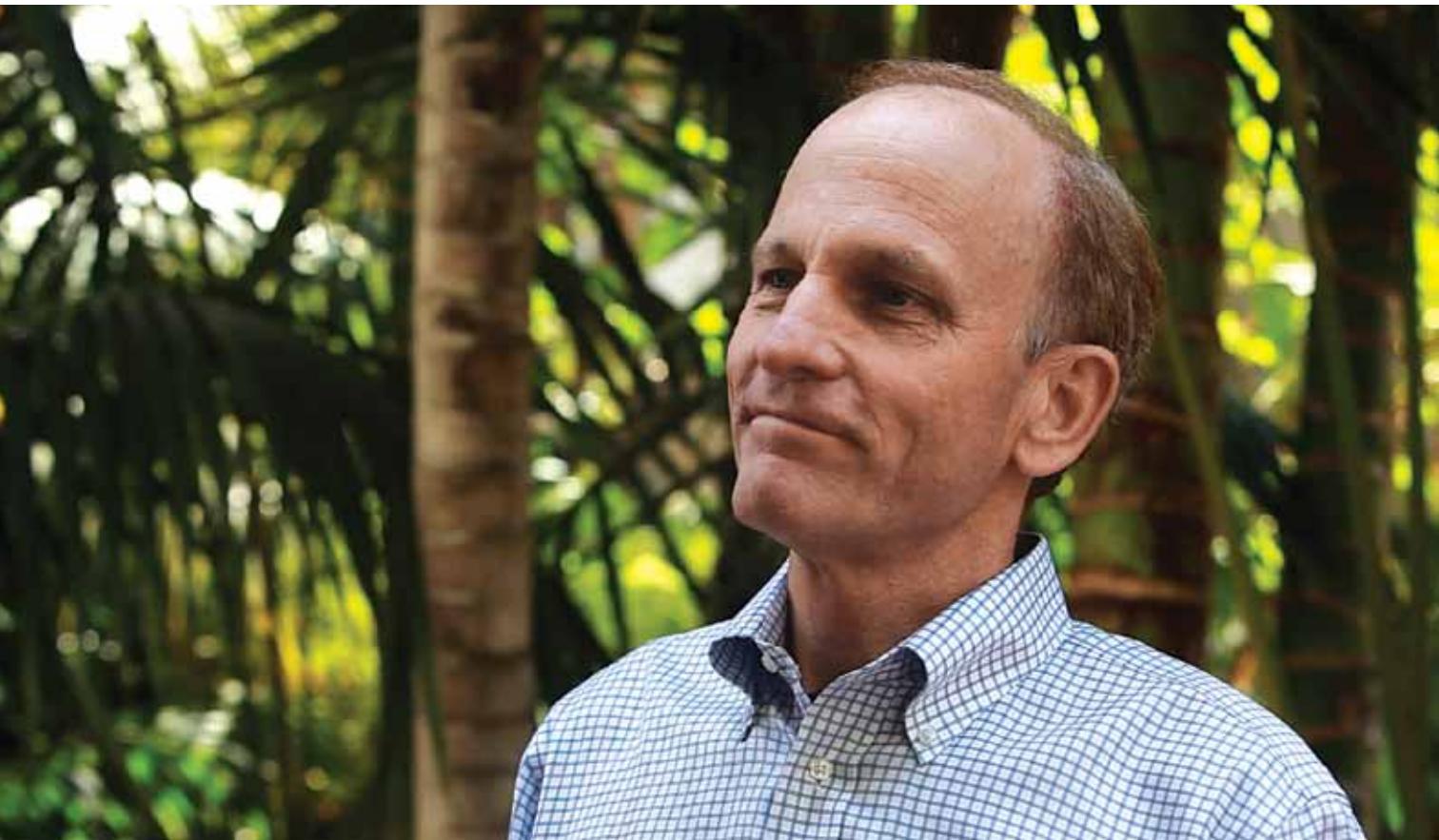
The founder, chairman, and co-chief executive of Panera Bread, Ronald M. Shaich, said recently in a *New York Times* interview that in all organizations there is a *delivery* muscle and a *discovery* muscle. He went on to suggest that most organizations focus way too much on the delivery muscle and give the discovery muscle short shrift. The discovery muscle in the meetings industry is about how attendees’ needs are changing and if they’re really being fed on an emotional level. The mega-question is: How engaged are participants at your conference and what can you do to turbo-charge engagement and become indispensable to people? This is a new frontier.

So, are you saying that people come to conferences because they instinctively know they need to exercise their discovery muscle and they see your conference as a way of solving that problem?

Exactly. The difficult global economy, the ramp-up in complexity, the amount of change in society, the explosion of technology, the sheer amount of information — all these forces and factors are like a fire hose coming at people every minute. These forces are literally rewiring our brains as we try to cope. But whether we feel exhilarated or exhausted, in control or out of control, is a function of how we integrate it all and make sense of it around the campfire! And that’s what a good conference does: It puts you into an immersive experience with other human beings on their journeys, and it lifts you up and renews your faith in the future.

How do we avoid burnout and live up to this potential?

On a practical level, I encourage meeting producers to actually write out a conference vision statement — [to] go off to their brainstorming space and write out the vision statement. Then measure — quietly and secretly — everything else people suggest that is not in sync with the vision, [such as,] “We can cut that out, we can put some filler in here, and we can cheapen that.” Measure input



Insight to Spare Robert Tucker asked each participant to share some of their ‘keepers’ – a sentence or quote that provides a reminder of a bigger idea – from the Elite Retreat. Among them: ‘Overenthusiasm for change creates resistance to change.’

against your vision before making any decisions.

Every decision that meeting producers make, every element, every component of conferences [should] be approached from the standpoint of how it can be better for the guests.

Could you be more specific?

No detail is too small. For example, most conferences have someone who serves as an emcee. That’s an area for innovation right there. If the emcee is disconnected from your vision and goals for the meeting, they can destroy the culture and the deliverables pretty quickly. So if you put on your conference-visionary hat, you’ll search to find the right emcee and inculcate the emcee into the vision.

Receptions are a typical part of every conference. But how can you innovate the reception, knowing that people often attend because of the

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› For more on Robert B. Tucker, visit innovationresource.com.

› For more on the Elite Retreat, visit innovationresource.com/2012-elite-retreat.

› To watch YouTube highlights from the Elite Retreat, visit convn.org/elite-retreat.

networking? Instead of looking at staff as hands to implement, intimately involve them in value creation. The orchestration role becomes pivotal and will result in a more innovative conference.

Another conference-architect requirement is to be an industry expert who anticipates hot topics in advance. Great conference producers share the vision and objectives with their speakers. And they have a finger on the pulse of their people. ■

Susan Sarfati, CAE, is CEO of High Performance Strategies LLC (sarfatihighperformance.com), which focuses on organizational assessments, innovative thinking in organizational strategy, leadership and management, moving from ideas to execution, and building a human-focused learning culture. She served as CEO of The Greater Washington Society of Association Executives. She can be reached at susan@ssarfati.com.