

Turning Traditional Conferences Upside-down - The 'Unconference' Model

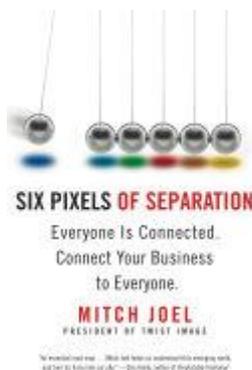
How do we turn online relationships into person to person connections and real-world events? Digital marketing is on the rise and businesses are more and more turning to social media platforms and digital communications to spread the reach of their brand and build their consumer base by appealing to online communities.

A movement is taking place where conventional marketing strategies are being turned upside-down; printed communications and traditional advertising models are no longer the best method in targeting consumers. Smart marketers and entrepreneurs are turning to the creation of digital content that indirectly targets consumers. The rise of online communities has brought on new opportunities for connecting your brand to the billions of people online every day.

One of the areas you can see this movement taking place is when looking at conferences. The traditional conference model favours the costly approach of using advertising tools such as direct mail pieces, full page ads in industry trade publications and getting selected keynote speakers featured in local news media. Conferences are generally produced by a company or association, and involve ticket sales/ registration fees and solicit sponsorships.¹ A notable change from the conventional to non-conventional approach to conferences has taken place – those active in online communities and digital marketing platforms are organizing and attending “unconferences”. Unconferences are one of the avenues in which connections made through online channels and online communities are creating real world events and person to person connections, rendering the traditional conference model less relevant in terms of targeting a wide consumer base. As Kathleen Craig notes in her article, [Why “unconferences” are fun conferences](#), “At traditional conferences, the most productive moments often occur in the corridor between meetings; at unconferences, attendees like to say, it's all corridor”.²



[Wikipedia](#) defines unconferences as “a facilitated participant driven face to face conference around a theme or purpose. The term [unconference](#) has been applied, often self-applied, to a wide range of gatherings that try to avoid one or more aspects of a conventional conference such as high fees and sponsored presentations”. In the book, [Six Pixels of Separation by Mitch Joel](#), this definition is further explained and expanded upon. Joel notes that in reality an unconference starts with an individual taking initiative to set up a wiki page (a web page anyone can edit), sometimes the individual goes one step further and finds a person, company or association willing to provide sponsorship in the form of providing a venue and/or audio-visual equipment and then the online community takes over. According to Joel, unconferences are completely self-organizing, with the digitally connected individuals defining the presentation topics, the schedule for the event etc. Interested participants simply sign themselves up, contribute via the wiki page to develop ideas and themes, and post the topics they wish to present about into the unconference schedule.³

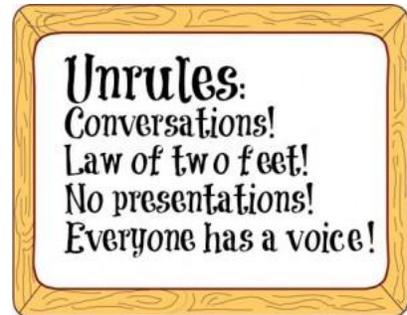


¹ *Six Pixels of Separation*. Mitch Joel. Hachette Book Group, 2009 pp. 108 – 109.

² Craig, Kathleen. *Why "unconferences" are fun conferences*. June 06th, 2006. Online.

³ *Ibid*, p. 109

One key point to keep in mind when organizing or participating in an unconference is that sales pitches and self-promotional presentations are strictly prohibited. The unconference movement is ruled by the “[Law of Two Feet](#)”, which states: If at any time you feel you’re not learning or not contributing, you can use your own two feet to go somewhere else.^{4 5} Of note however, is that this movement has also been used as a way to promote events that don’t really fit the criteria for an unconference. Mitch Joel warns about this in one of his blog posts [The Death of the Unconference](#).



Unconferences are intriguing in that due to the open participation component along with the “Law of Two Feet” rule, the content has to be compelling in order to engage the audience. These unconference meet ups are a great example of how online connections can lead to real world interactions. This model is empowering for entrepreneurs who are successfully engaging online communities to turn those relationships into person-to-person connections. These events remove traditional barriers to innovation and connection among entrepreneurs by redefining who is an expert.

If you are following key blog posts and podcasts in your industry, you will likely come across and have probably already run into promotion of these events. Become a leader in your online communities by presenting or helping to organize unconferences in your area!

⁴ Ibid, pp.110-111

⁵ Bagley, Rebecca O. *How ‘Unconferences’ Unleash Innovative Ideas*. August 18th, 2014. Forbes Magazine Online.