

## General Session Design 3.0

Keys to Your Organizational and Personal Success  
Fusion Productions, LLC and Partners

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## SPEAKERS

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Knowledge Architect, Fusion Productions, LLC  
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Nick Wilson  
Founder and CEO, Clever Zebra  
<http://cleverzebra.com>

Mitchell Beer  
President, The Conference Publishers Inc.  
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Mark Spector  
Vice President and Executive Producer, Innovative Event Production  
[www.iepevents.com](http://www.iepevents.com)

Glenn Thayer  
The Voice of Meetings and Events  
<http://glennthayer.com>

## SESSION SUMMARY

Fusion Productions collaborated with Meeting Professionals International (MPI) to produce the general sessions for the 2010 World Education Congress (WEC 2010). To demonstrate its “meeting of the future” design strategy, Fusion brought in a team of world-class partners and continued to co-create through the entire production process---before, during and after the WEC.

During a Monday morning knowledge session, representatives from each of the partner organizations talked about what and how they contributed, and demonstrated ways that event planners could implement similar strategies.

Jamie McDonough asked participants to think about what meetings are all about, and what people should do after attending them. “From our perspective, meetings are about building a community of ideas,” he said. A well-planned combination of design ideas, digital tools, hybrid communities, documentation strategies, and audiovisual components is integral to helping participants retain knowledge and achieve conference objectives.

The WEC 2010 general sessions were planned with the intention of telling people why meetings matter. “The value of your meeting will be measured by the changes you effect, the ways in which your attendees internalize your messages, and the degree to which you achieve your business objectives. You can’t get any of that unless you can engage your attendees emotionally,” McDonough said. “That’s why it so critical that you tell a quality story.”

Fusion Productions and its partners created an online community for WEC 2010 (<http://www.netvibes.com/mpiwec>). McDonough said meeting planners can use this type of interface to combine up-to-the-minute onsite content, including videos and text summaries of general sessions or panels, with case studies, blog entries, and Twitter feeds. An online community is especially useful for members of an organization or community of interest who can't attend a meeting, and it can be used to show clients a new way of engaging with their members and stakeholders.

## HUGH LEE

Hugh Lee said a conference that delivers on its goal of creating lasting impressions for participants begins with focused, strategic design. For the WEC, MPI and Fusion spent significant time collaborating on the design of messages, graphics, media, and conference flow. "Probably 40 to 50% of the time on a project will be spent up front," he said. "Here's the key: you have to look at the first step and say, 'Who are we targeting? What message do we want to deliver?'"

A thorough understanding of a meeting's goals, focus, and audience lies at the heart of designing an effective program and maximizing its impact. "Do your research and find out the story your client has to tell," Lee advised. Production design and a sequence of other decisions will be based on that story.

## NICK WILSON

Nick Wilson said a virtual component increases the value of a meeting by allowing participants to "attend" remotely. Wilson demonstrated an immersive web application where avatars interacted by walking, waving, meeting, shaking hands, sitting down, and chatting in a virtual convention center. He presented the online virtual environment Clever Zebra created for WEC 2010 as an example (<http://wec.cleverzebra.com>), and some participants had a chance to try it themselves.

Wilson said the digital tool, created in conjunction with A World For Us, allows users to log in from anywhere using any browser, operating system, or platform. A small (3 MB) plug-in is the only special equipment needed to interact in the immersive environment. A virtual meeting can be modified for any client, and participants can decide the appearance of their avatars. One hundred users can log in at one time.

A virtual environment can include a Twitter feed and relevant links, and can incorporate advertising, messaging, branding, and sponsor logos to generate revenue. A matter of weeks is all it takes to create a virtual environment to suit a meeting's needs, Wilson said.

## MITCHELL BEER

Mitchell Beer said meeting planners and participants need a way to take knowledge home, so The Conference Publishers produces written session summaries that are "more detailed than a PowerPoint presentation, but less detailed than a transcript." He said the ultimate purpose of a session summary is to "give voice to the conference theme by telling participants' stories," in a way that makes pertinent session information easily accessible after the meeting is over.

Before WEC 2010, The Conference Publishers produced blog entries, testimonials, and case studies for Fusion's online community site. Onsite, a team of writers prepared online news reports on more than a dozen selected sessions and posted 145 live "news tweets" during the two general sessions. After the conference, the firm will deliver more in-depth white papers on corporate social responsibility (CSR) and strategic meeting management (SMM).

“But why bring in any form of content capture when social media coverage is free?” Beer asked. He explained that when a host organization hires a team of independent writers whose work is aligned with the conference message, the resulting “cornerstone content” balances the user-generated material in the blogosphere and on Twitter—just as factual reporting and reader opinions complement one another in a daily newspaper.

“The key here is the integration across all communication elements and platforms, and between live and virtual audiences, before, during, and after the conference,” Beer said.

## INNOVATIVE EVENT PRODUCTION (IEP)

Innovative Event Production (IEP) is a full-service production company that provides efficient, versatile audiovisual support for events. Mark Spector listed video conferencing, webcasting, and web conferencing, as well as a variety of audiovisual tools and high-resolution graphics, as some of the key elements required to deliver a meeting message.

IEP has partnered with Fusion on five other MPI international conferences. For the general sessions at WEC 2010, the company supported Fusion’s set design, graphics, and media production through their highly skilled technicians and state-of-the-art equipment. IEP worked with Fusion on the formulas necessary for Fusion’s HD video, allowing for projection distance, lensing, rigging points, and other key technical details. The result was an interactive set, personalized for each speaker, produced by Fusion and executed flawlessly by IEP.

Spector recalled another recent project where webcast participants logged in from four sites: London, New York, Dallas, and Bangalore, India. The event was orchestrated from Dallas, but each city had its own stage and local presenters. The webcast drew more than 5,000 viewers around the world and saved IEP’s client “a fortune in travel costs,” he said, while delivering one of the highest returns on investment the client had ever seen.

## GLENN THAYER

Glenn Thayer, a professional master of ceremonies who specializes in strategic content delivery, said the first step in optimizing a meeting’s impact is for planners to put themselves in audience members’ shoes. He invited participants to think about meetings they’d planned that represented a departure from traditional conference design. Although there was strong interest in pre-conference interaction, rapid-fire roundtable discussions, and formats based on the popular TED Talks (<http://www.ted.com/talks>) series, very few WEC 2010 participants reported introducing new formats with the conferences they planned.

“Does anyone do pre-engagement with their speakers to engage attendees before the conference?” Thayer asked. A few participants raised their hands. “As attendees, how many of you would like to engage with the presenters and content before you show up onsite?” Everyone raised their hands. “How come you’re not doing it with your sessions?”

Most participants cited budgets as the main barrier to innovative conference design. When Thayer invited them to set that limit aside, they came up with a wide variety of ideas for increasing audience engagement, interaction, and value, including 3-D environments and live Twitter feeds on general session screens. Thayer encouraged participants to consider:

- A talk show format for general sessions
- Keynotes modeled on the TED Talks series
- Executive interviews using questions from the floor

- Facilitated roundtables and scheduled “white space,” where participants can discuss the content they’ve just heard
- Foyer discussions, where participants can discuss content informally while a general session is under way.

“Look at how people take in different information. Your attendees are no different,” he said. “What engages you as an attendee? If you’re not engaged, you can’t expect that your attendees will be.”

## JAMIE MCDONOUGH

Jamie McDonough recalled an early planning meeting for WEC 2010, where MPI President and CEO Bruce MacMillan stressed that “we need to be storytellers.” With that mandate, Fusion and its partners approached a selection of MPI members in the weeks before the conference and asked them why their meetings matter. Highlights included:

- Ed Simeone, executive director of the American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry: “When I plan AACD’s annual meeting, I help restore smiles to survivors of domestic violence.”
- Dennis Bassett, director of sales and customer programs, Bausch & Lomb Inc.: “When I plan the Bausch & Lomb North America national meeting, I help people regain their sight.”
- Nancy Reese, marketing events manager, Pictometry International Corporation: “When I plan the Pictometry FutureView users’ conference, I help save lives.”
- Cheryl Russell, director, convention and meetings, American Speech-Language-Hearing Association: “When I plan the ASHA’s convention, I help facilitate effective communication [that is] accessible and achievable for all.”
- Fred Schwartz, president Asian American Hotel Owners’ Association: “AAHOA members represent an annual US\$9.4 billion in payroll. When our members meet, they create jobs, support communities, and enhance the lives of families across North America.”

The examples demonstrate that “people listen to, and connect with, stories,” McDonough said.

McDonough described another project where Fusion worked with Bausch + Lomb to design a launch meeting for a new bio-product. As a tangible teaching tool for attendees who were unfamiliar with the new product line, Fusion distributed free briefcases that contained a number of more familiar bio-influenced products.

Fusion also designed a series of interactive games, in which participants were invited to answer a series of questions at the end of each session. Later, by visiting a supplier’s booth and answering a question correctly, participants could obtain a key, and the conference distributed more than US\$30,000 worth of prizes to key-holders. The technique ensured that people retained relevant information, and they also widely concluded that the conference was a huge success.

## MORE INFORMATION

For more information on these general sessions or how you can create your meeting of the future, contact

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