

Creating Powerful Communities at Events ***Event Matchmaking: 5 Things That Will Increase the Value of Your Next Event***

By Mark Sylvester, CEO, introNetworks, Inc.

Social Networking Makes Instant Connections

We've all been to conferences with a glimmer of hope that we'd walk away with extraordinary contacts, promising sales opportunities, or greater knowledge about a particular area of interest. Instead, we returned to the office with a stack of business cards and little inspiration. Social networks that focus on matchmaking is set to change all that. As an event organizer, you now have the power to exponentially magnify the value of your conference - for attendees, sponsors and your career. This paper will explore our approach to removing the randomness of networking at events and replacing it with social networking tools that enable people to connect with relevant information even before the event, giving them the opportunity to maximize the value of the event.

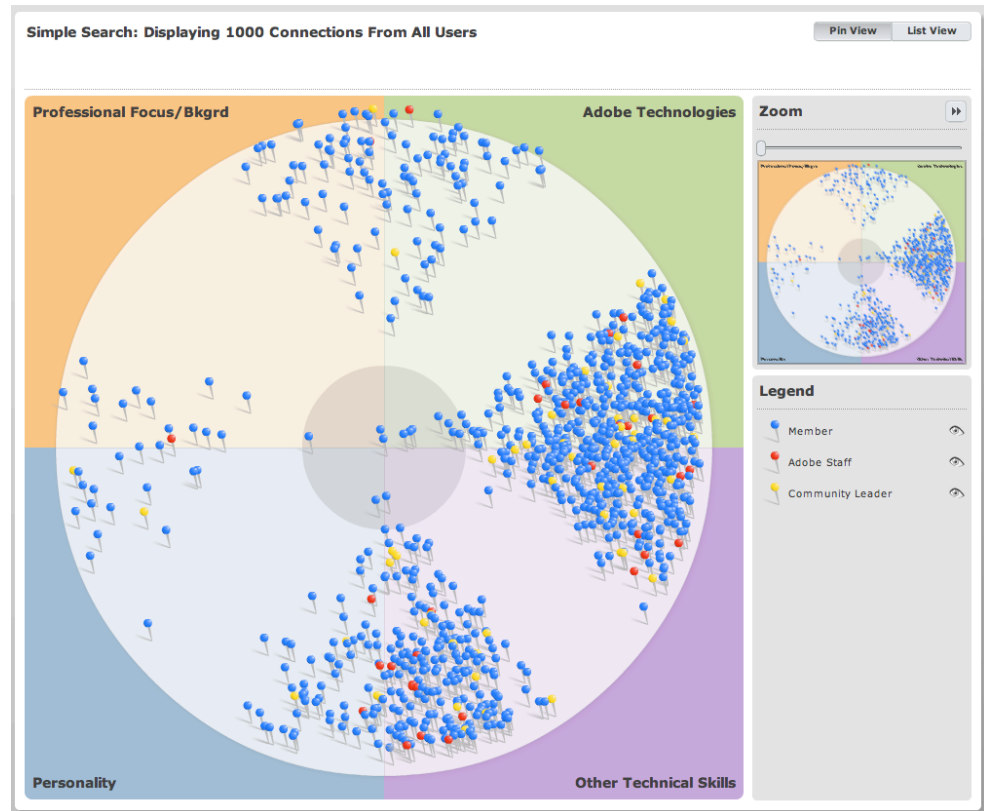
Using social networks to support the communication and marketing goals of an event has recently become an important consideration for meeting planners. Since the first social networks began to appear at events in 2003, many meeting planners have begun to experiment with and have achieved great success by implementing some form of this new technology - giving attendees another valuable reason to attend their event.

introNetworks believes that instantly and perfectly matching attendees to the people and resources they need is an important aspect of planning an effective event and has become a critical success factor for many event organizers.

Social networking technology gives meeting attendees an ideal way of interacting with each other prior to an event to establish contact and make appointments to meet once they are on-site at the event. Using an online community to find people you have not seen in a while, to search for peers facing similar challenges or to make yourself available to others that might want to interact with you has become an expected part of the conference experience.

Meeting planners are recognizing that traditional methods of networking at events such as mixers, planned group activities, team building and other time-honored techniques can be bolstered by the addition of a social network that gives information about attendees well in advance of the event. Helping users find the five or ten people that they need to make connections with and make their own

on-site networking effective is the real key to creating a powerful networking outcome at an event. This approach is far more effective than the traditional randomness that hinges on the hope that you will run into the perfect contact at a party with hundreds or thousands of guests.



Visualization of a Social Network for an Adobe Developers Conference. Users are at the center, with closest matches near them in their inner circle.

Step 1 – Understanding networking at different types of events.

Social networking is being used today at a wide variety of events including conferences, seminars, corporate and association meetings and tradeshows. These events differ greatly when it comes to the goals of an effective social networking deployment. Conferences and seminars are closely related to one another in that their focus is on information sharing and networking. Attendees and delegates gather for the annual event to share research, trends and developments in their industry. It is common also for these types of events to host hundreds of sessions, multiple tracks of content and many opportunities to interact with industry experts, speakers, executives and analysts. Much of the online presence for these events focuses on event logistics, session information and speaker biographies, but not the building of an event-specific community, which creates a missed opportunity to add value to the attendees and delegates, before the event even begins.

Corporate Events

Corporations host seminars and conferences and produce meetings for employees, partners and customers. These meetings serve to align the company with the needs of the target audience. For employees, the meeting becomes a way for management to outline a corporate objective in the form of an All Hands Meeting or an annual World Wide Sales Meeting. This desire for alignment extends to partners that are working on the company's behalf in the marketplace as well as those closely associated with the organization's business goals. The company's customers are the final ring around the communication circle that encloses the ideals and aspirations of the company and are showcased at User Group Meetings, Customer Executive Forums, Annual Product Showcases, Product Launches and other meetings that bring corporate executives and staff into direct contact with customers.

Association Events

Associations have a different challenge in that they have annual events that typically attract perhaps only 20% of their membership. In order to reach a larger share of members, it has become important for Associations to have a regional, local, or chapter based meeting strategy to support the communication goals of the organization and to stay in-touch with their members. These organizations rely on ongoing dues to sustain themselves and ensuring that they are aligned with their members is a critical success factor. In this sense, they share the same challenges as corporations have; they need to be in touch with their customers and have a robust channel for communication.

Tradeshows

Tradeshows present a unique challenge for social networks, as in many cases the primary reason for attending the tradeshow is not to network with other attendees; instead the focus is on exhibitors promoting products. Tradeshows have a long history of giving vendors a venue to highlight their products and to showcase new goods and services. Meeting people that can be turned into loyal customers is the prevailing purpose for the vendors and finding products that meet specific requirements is the main reason why attendees go to the show. Social networks add value to this type of event in that they provide a communication channel for both vendors and attendees to better understand each other and see how aligned they are with each other's needs. Vendors can better understand issues that are facing prospective customers when a social network has been designed to capture this type of information and buyers can more

Why is it called Matchmaking?

effectively manage their on-site shopping when a social network has effectively shown them what to pay attention to well in advance.

In the past couple of years, the meeting and event industry has taken to calling these types of online networking systems; matchmaking solutions. While it confounds us as to why this term has taken such a strong hold, it does point to the most obvious benefit of a social network - that of making effective matches for the users. While we might argue that a more business-like term would be more politically correct, as matchmaking brings to mind online dating sites, it does accurately speak to what a well designed social network can provide.

A smart social network will take into account all aspects of the business objectives of the event planner and the attendee and provide a platform for those objectives to be discussed, point-by-point, and analyzed to see where the alignment is between them. That information can be used to guide the design of the social network profile. This profile is key to the effectiveness of the resulting matches and a key component to a successful online community.

There are as many types of potential matches as there are types of meetings. The most obvious one is to match buyers to sellers at a tradeshow. The tradeshow organization that can convince potential exhibitors that they will provide quality buyers will be the one that is most profitable and able to keep exhibitors coming back year after year. At a customer meeting, it is invaluable for attendees to find the correct executive to talk to when they are there and by making themselves easily accessible in the network, the corporation meets its goals of having meaningful conversations with customers attending their annual event. At a seminar on 'Growing Your Business', using a social network to find funding sources that are aligned with an attendee's business idea or their stage of growth will have them feel that not only did they learn some important information, they made valuable connections that were only made possible because of the social network.

Step 2 – Success is tied to clearly stating your objectives for the community.

Understanding your business objectives is a critical first step in planning your event - no matter what type of meeting you are planning. There are many objectives that a well-planned social network can help achieve. Most would agree that an effective meeting would be one that provides ample opportunities for communication, conversation, learning, listening, selling and telling. A social network can be used for each of these outcomes and provide an innovative mechanism for doing so. Let's look at each one briefly:

Improved Communication

Effective communication happens when the issue being discussed is relevant to both parties. Relevance can be determined well in advance when a social network has been designed to match topics of general interest to attendees and that the matches extend over a wide range that includes both professional and personal interests. Knowing what your audience is most interested in and concerned about will inform your outbound communications and give you valuable points to discuss, thereby making the communications more relevant, because you had access to this key information in advance. As an online community grows and becomes vibrant, it is easy to monitor communications and have a sense of what these interests and topics are, so that your messages are both targeted and on point. Most discussions of managing a social network fail to emphasize that having access to this information is vital to meeting business objectives, which are usually associated with alignment and audience satisfaction.

Community Conversations

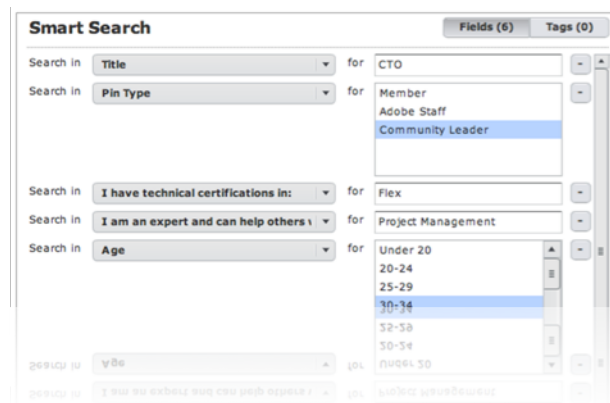
One of the most underutilized aspects of a social network at an event is the forum (discussion board) capability. In a forum there is the opportunity to pose leading questions that will spur conversation among attendees. Forums are a way for attendees to weigh in on various issues related to the event. Issues that address lofty themes like relevance, industry trends, areas of concern and improvement are all key subjects of an event forum. Being able to easily create new forums as you see discussion trends evolve and as a community manager, weigh in during especially topical conversations, can give you phenomenal access to information that you may never have had before. Knowing what issues are on the minds of attendees well in advance of your event assures you that key stakeholders are well informed and able to respond appropriately. After the event the forums give an ongoing voice to the community providing one of the biggest benefits of an online community: the ability to have a conversation that continues and doesn't stop when your event is over and instead extends the event from over a period of days to weeks and months. Having your event front of mind for attendees well after they have returned to their busy lives is an opportunity to have your message, your sponsors' message and other key ideas in front of them for more than just a few days.

Learning More - Before, During and After the Event

This is one of the strongest reasons to deploy a social network for an event as it highlights the learning that event planners gain as a result of the attendees' use

of the system and the learning the attendees receive as a result of their interaction. Attendees can learn who else is coming to the event and can begin conversations that will enrich their on-site experience. Organizers, who have placed well designed questions and tags into the profiles can easily learn more about their attendees than by any other method currently available. Event attendees will complete a profile with great specificity in order to make sure that they are matched with others who share their interests and goals of attending the event.

Another key benefit for attendees is the ability of the smart social network to use matching technology to match attendees with sessions and other relevant content at the event. For example, attendees who only glance over conference materials might miss an important talk or presentation. However, through a social network there is the opportunity to suggest to them, based on information in their profile, that certain sessions, speakers, content and other material may be relevant to them. This form of learning serves to make the overall event experience extremely powerful as attendees are exposed to items that they may never have found on their own and the innovative use of matching can make these hidden gems appear miraculously.



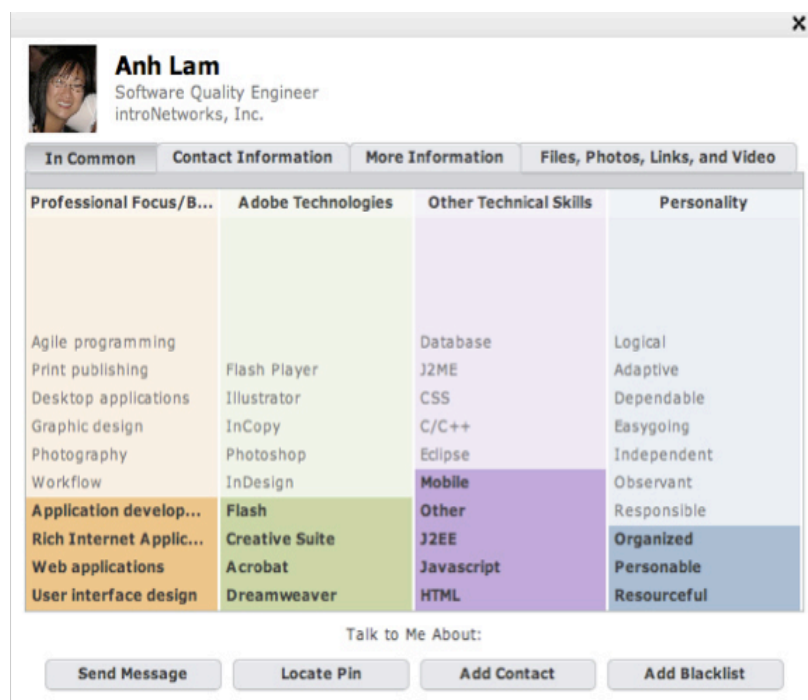
Searching a community for detailed information is as simple as point and click.

**Step 3 –
Designing the
system to capture
your event’s tone
of voice.**

At the heart of every effective social network is the profile. This piece of the puzzle is necessary as it gives the system the required information to make effective matches, properly manage distribution of internal and external messaging and provide a single place to gather the diverse bits of information that fully describe a person or piece of content.

The profile needs to be designed cleverly so as not to be perceived as a burden on those who have to complete it. Looking at the profile portion of the social

networking experience is critical in deciding how to design your system. Making sure that you eliminate any chance for something called 'profile fatigue' is critical. This means that you want to re-purpose profile information you already have in one form or another and use it to pre-populate the attendee profile for them - before they even login the first time. Thankfully this task is eased considerably by the use of web-services. If you are not familiar with the term, it is software that allows databases to communicate securely and privately, automatically. This means that you can connect the smart social network to your registration system, your attendee database, or your membership directory and push that information to the social network as needed, so that users do not have to retype. This in itself is a key component to a successful implementation.



The introCard uses color to highlight common interests visually.

The profile is also your opportunity to create a 'tone of voice' for your site. What you ask and how you ask it can change the success of a site dramatically. If you create profile questions that are only in your best interests or that are crafted by your marketing staff exclusively, then users may stay away from them. On the other hand if you ask questions that you know will help each of the users in their quest to learn about and understand each other more effectively, you will be surprised at how much time and care they will take by giving deliberate and thoughtful answers. This is what makes a social network most relevant - honestly filled out profiles with meaningful information.

When you are thinking about designing questions for the profile, one approach can be to imagine that you are at a dinner party with a lot of friends and that there are also people you do not know. This is not unlike an evening mixer at an annual event. Think about the questions you ask when you are in those conversations. You probably don't ask survey style questions do you? Instead you think about your questions and in an effort to get beyond idle chit-chat, will try and ask an interesting question, as it will more likely get you an interesting answer, which in turn leads to an interesting conversation, which is what you are looking for in the first place. Designing questions for the social network profile is no different than these questions. For instance, one of the things you might want to find out is what a person does for a living. There are a lot of ways to ask that. Such as, Where do you work? or What do you do? These are obvious starting points, although have you considered the different type of response you get when you ask, "So, how do you spend your day?" You will be surprised at the response - try it.

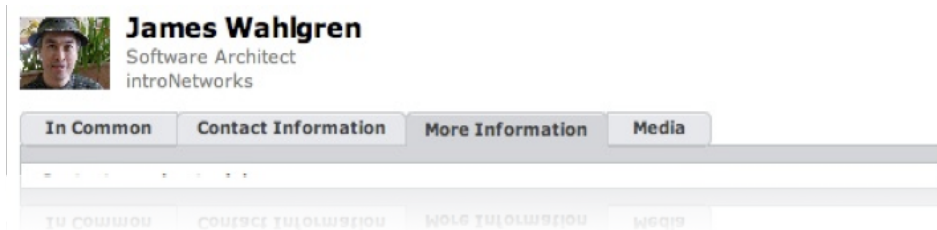
A smart social network that can provide matches, suggestions and recommendations does so because it knows enough about all of the participants in the network to use that information intelligently. The introNetworks' system does this by presenting tags (or keywords) to the users. These tags are selected and visually arranged in a stack that indicates how strongly the words are associated with the user. This weighting is then used in the matching process. Designing a profile with these tags in mind then becomes the most important part of the planning process. Figuring out how much of the profile is personal and how much is professional is challenging. However our experience is that designating three quarters of the tags to professional topics, such as experience, career, industry, trends, strengths and challenges that are very focused on your industry, and the final quarter on more fun, personal or hobby type categories, will provide a good balance to the users. Knowing that the person you need to have a meeting with is aligned with your background, business interests and shares not only your love of international finance, but also likes to visit art museums will go a long way towards assuring that you both have a great first meeting.

Another key element in balancing the burden of information collection with the need for a deep profile (to make great matches) is the use of innovative user interface techniques. For instance, the interactive tagging approach used in the introNetworks system, is not only easy and fun to use, but it allows the user to select and rank their profile tags in about 10% of the time that it would take using a traditional approach. In other words, you get about ten times the depth of information for the attendees' investment in building their profile.

What features do you need for success?

Creating the profile is a big part of the design of your social network. But it's just one element to consider. With so many choices on the market today, just figuring out what base platform to use or deciding on the feature set you require can seem overwhelming. You can easily feel that you need to become an expert in social networking just to make a decision.

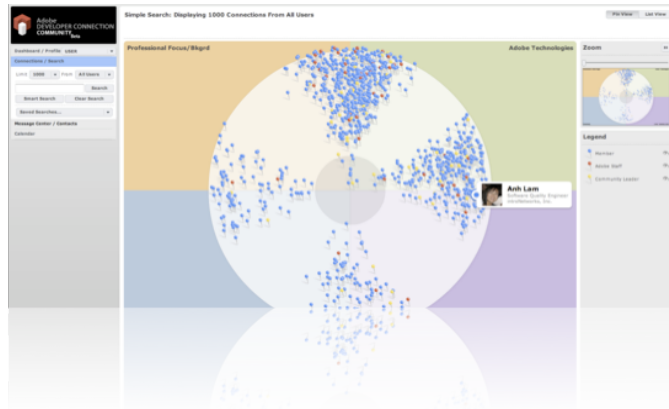
Our experience has been that less is more. Just as 'profile fatigue' can limit the participation of your attendees, giving them too much to do can mean that they won't do anything. Beyond a simple calendar to call out key times for the event, forums to keep the conversation alive and a simple and effective way for them all to communicate in a secure and private manner, you don't need a lot of extra bells and whistles. While it may be true that a Facebook or MySpace site can let you put in everything, including the kitchen sink, for a business-to-business social network it's important to remember that your attendees actually have full time jobs and don't spend all of their time on the Internet checking out what their friends are doing. They need to get in to the system, find the right person, make contact and move on to the thousand other things they need to do in any given day. Designing a social network that efficiently uses the attendees valuable time is a very important consideration when selecting a vendor.



Simple tabs give ready access to detailed information without screen clutter

Helping users with their primary task of making connections turns out to be a challenging problem. You certainly want to provide them with a lot of tools. But how the tools are accessed, determining what information is on the screen at any one time, or just being able to choose between a list of information or an informative graphic is as much a consideration during the design process as anything else. Thinking about the user experience is so important. If you don't pay attention to this deceptively simple concept, you will end up with users who visit the site once but leave when they find it hard to use or challenging to do simple things.

Step 4 – Deciding what gets connected to whom.



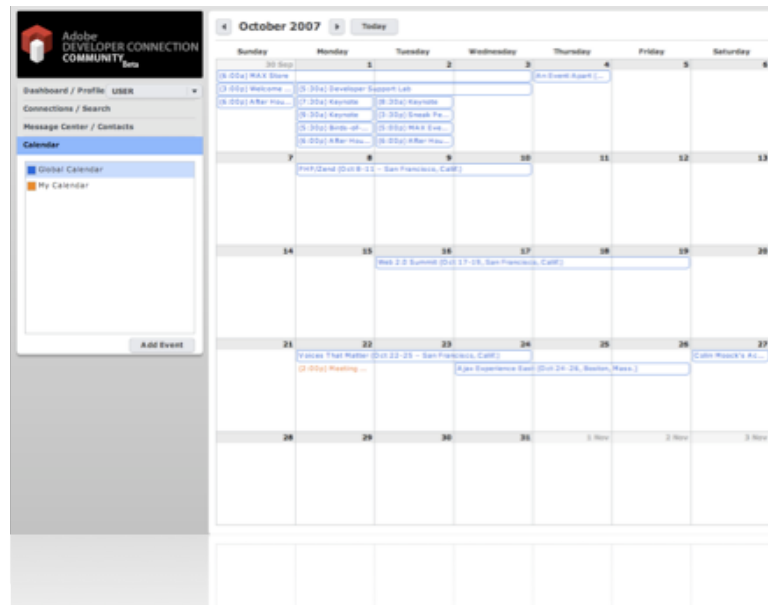
Community at a glance with everything attendees need at their fingertips. The inner circle shows the closest matches and the color-coding helps them pinpoint common interests.

When you are thinking about the objectives of your event-based social network and you think beyond the basic ability of providing a platform for conversation and a place for attendees to search for people that they may need to meet, you begin to explore the more nuanced capabilities that a smart social network offers, especially one that has been designed to match people to content.

Imagine that all of your sessions are tagged according to people's interest and that their tags also easily find white papers and research reports and articles of interest to the community. When an attendee is in the system and looking at their best matches, they will see not only people with whom they should connect, but also sessions for which they should register and articles or White Papers that they should read. In a recent conference created for Fortune Small Business, the event planner, who is also a contributing editor for Fortune, tagged all of the articles that he has written, so that people attending the event would see the articles that matched their specific business interests. This way they would be connected to him through his writing and to each other on an entirely new dimension.

Another example of using the matching technology effectively is in a tradeshow network. Getting in front of prospective buyers is the number one consideration for exhibitors trying to market themselves effectively. Giving them yet another platform for increased visibility is becoming a requirement. Having your product listed in the online directory seems so old fashioned when you can have a system that intelligently matches the product to a prospective buyer and automates the entire process, so that more effective lead generation is achieved instantly. This is a powerful benefit for planners that have to communicate how their event will increase ROI for exhibitors.

The ability to tag and create individual profiles for content related to your event adds an amazing level of information you are able to present to your attendees. This translates into increased exposure for the sessions themselves and products from small as well as large companies. This also positions papers or other event-specific material that you want to make sure are discovered -- and not buried -- in the mountain of information that is already being presented to them on a daily basis.



Being able to create calendars for each type of user is an important capability

Transforming the user experience

When looking at anything on the Internet these days you have to consider what is going to attract people and keep them on your site as well as bring them back after the first visit. If there were a single answer to this challenge, all of the online marketers would be out of a job, as it is a complex problem that has as many answers as there are websites.

We have learned, however, that at least thinking about the user experience will go a long way towards creating a good one. We've already talked about reducing profile fatigue, but what do you do to create a fun experience? Even if you are producing a very professional conference or event, having a social network that plays to people's sense of fun is a very effective engagement strategy. It might not seem intuitive at first - focusing on the fun factor - but it turns out to be one of the more important aspects of a successful deployment.

What makes it fun? Well, for one thing, an effectively designed network is not boring, repetitive, hard to navigate or one that presents the user with long lists of

text. Rather it uses color, design and imagery to portray complex relationships and associations between users and the rest of the community. This visualization of diverse and detailed information has been shown to be the key factor in bringing people back again and again.

An interesting point about how much of an impact broadcast media has had on all of us is that we tend to focus on motion, color, design and simplicity - even if we do not do so consciously. This is because a designer has already done that for us and through their design has shown us what to focus on. In an advertisement, it is the product. In a movie, it is the lead character or the sweeping cinematic background. In a smart social network it is the collected information and how it is displayed. There is definitely an art to this, especially with the understanding that most people will not take the time to read instructions or click around and investigate the site. So, you have to make the system simple and straight-forward or much of your hard work in crafting the community will be lost. Take a look at your favorite sites. Are they effective because they lead your eyes to what is most important, easy to understand and simple to navigate? When looking at your objectives for your community, you must take into account how well received the network is, because you must first get them in to take advantage of all of the great information that will be collected once the system reaches critical mass.

Step 5 – How to maximize your investment of time and money

Once your social network is online and your attendees are using it as you designed, you will begin to accumulate a rich amount of collective community intelligence that has many uses. With a clear sense of your business objectives in mind before you launched the community you now have access to the information that meets those objectives. If one of the things you wanted was a way to find experts to use as speakers at future events for example, then asking the question, "I am an expert in and can help others with..." becomes an excellent source of new people to recruit. If one of your objectives was to be sure you were focusing on the right issues at the meeting, then the question, "The issue that is currently affecting my business the most is ..." will give your content specialists a list of hundreds of topics to consider in planning your breakout sessions, or adding new panels, or redirecting existing panels to focus them on these areas.



A sample of a tag-cloud that shows what words are most popular

If an objective of the social network is to provide you with an updated and dynamic picture of the community as a whole, then looking at the tags and understanding how aligned your audience is with the mission and values of the organization will be a key ingredient in any training or development agenda you might also be responsible for.

Thinking about how you use this information may in fact be the most important consideration when evaluating a social network for your event. Certainly the benefits for the attendees are obvious, they make valuable and meaningful connections, set up meetings in advance of the event and make deliberate contact rather than wait for the random encounter in the line waiting for a cup of coffee.



Chart from a Technology Conference with insight into the attendees' day.

The benefits for you, the event organizer, transcend the matching of the individual attendees and provide you with information that can take your event to an entirely new level. With insight into what matters most to your attendees you can provide them with a more targeted, meaningful and relevant experience, which in the end will keep them coming back.

In conclusion

Designing your first social network for an event doesn't need to be your life's work. Seriously, you should be able to design, build, deploy and take advantage of an easy to use system in a few days without worrying about a lot of the details that should be managed by people who have experience in making these types of networks. When you are evaluating vendors for your smart social networking system, be sure that they truly understand that an effective deployment is more of a business challenge and not a technology issue. If you have a clear set of goals and objectives for what you need done, then finding a strong technology partner will be easy.



A few companies that have used an introNetworks brand smart social network.