The Evolution of Event Technology: Past, Present and Future

By: Lawrence Coburn, CEO and Co-Founder of DoubleDutch

In just a few short years, we have evolved from an industry that relied on paper as the primary vehicle to deliver mission critical information to event attendees, to an industry that is now experimenting with the full spectrum of what is possible with the modern smartphone.
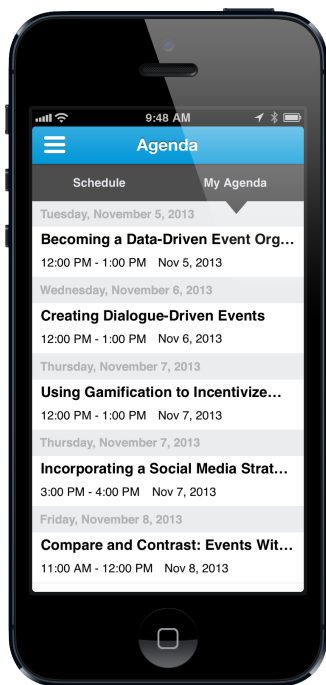
Table of Contents

Table Stakes: Get Rid of Paper

Investor Ben Horowitz famously said that for a new technology solution to be successful, it must be 10x more effective than the incumbent solutions. In the mobile event guide world, the incumbent is paper. Happily, few would argue that the capabilities of the modern smartphone don't already meet the required 10x to displace the paper event guide.

Despite the mismatch in horsepower between a smartphone and a paper guide, the initial value proposition of the mobile event application was pretty simple - take all of that content that was in the paper guide and put it on the phone. Printing costs could be reduced, trees could be saved, and conceptually, all mission critical event info could be easily accessible by each attendee.

DoubleDutch Agenda

Once thorny issues like how to handle notoriously spotty internet connectivity within fortress-like event venues, and what to do for attendees with ancient BlackBerry devices were (mostly) handled, the stage was set for more interesting experiments with the smartphone's capabilities in an event setting.

Events Are Not An Island

As for the direction these enhancements would take, not surprisingly, many of them can be attributed to some of the defining themes of the larger mobile revolution like Cloud, Social, and Big Data.
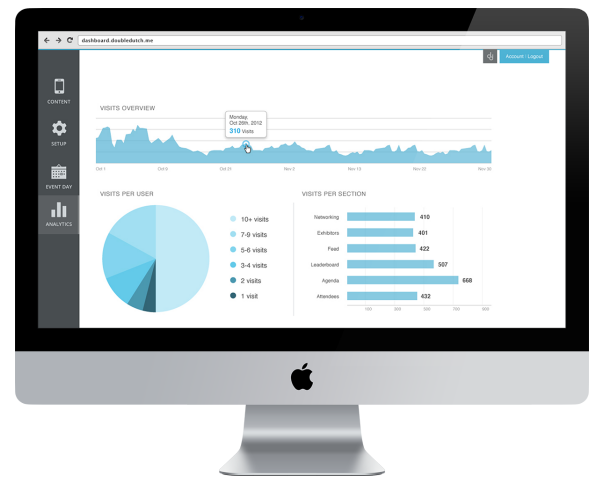
Real-Time Analytics in Web-Based CMS

Cloud based delivery of content is allowing event organizers to tweak event content on the fly, even to native applications. Social gestures and features are becoming standard in event apps; indeed, many of the better event applications feel more like place / time / interest based social networks, than they do paper event guides moved to the phone. And as we move into 2013, it seems that Big Data will start to play its role as well - data gleaned from event app deployments can be instrumental in delivering ROI to attendees, exhibitors, and event producers.

**Within these macro waves, there are many interesting sub plots.**
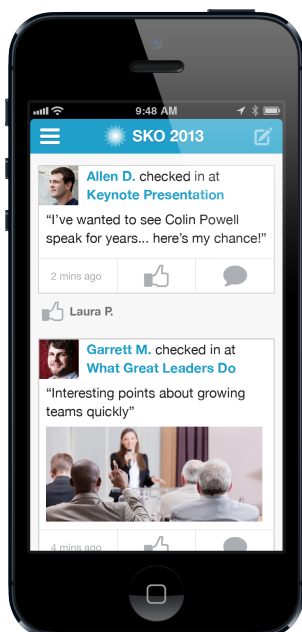
DoubleDutch Activity Feed

Cloud based delivery of content allows event organizers to imagine what might happen if an event application never turned off. Might the event community live on year round? Can content be delivered via the event app post event that keeps people coming back? Could the social connections forged in an event setting complement friend and work relationships as a third sort of social graph? Cloud makes these sorts of experiments a possibility.

Cloud configuration also enables a single application hosting multiple events with unique content, look and feel, and functionality, as well as the ability to offer different user groups different experiences.

Events as Place-Based Social Networks

The concept of the event as a temporal, place based social network is still a relatively new one, but is starting to gather momentum. And why not? For attendees, events have always been as much about making connections with other attendees as about attending sessions. As Facebook and Twitter train a generation of professionals in how to post status updates, friend and follow, like and comment, and share photos, it is only natural that these gestures emerge in an event setting as well.
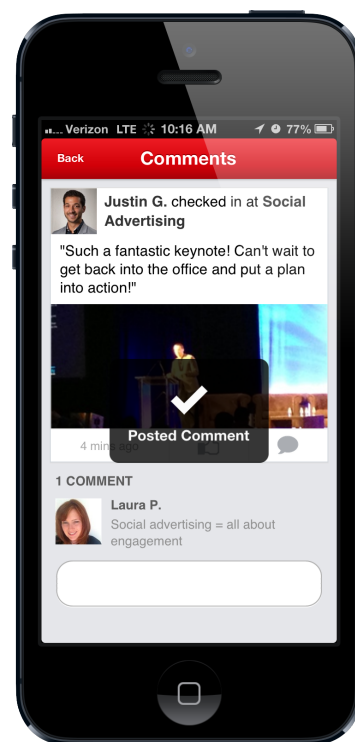
Post Comment in the Feed
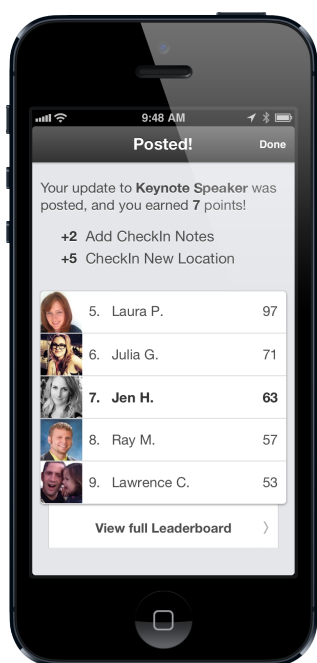
In-App Game Mechanics

Given the temporal nature of an event based social network, efficiency in building relationships is crucial. App features that facilitate these connections - whether they introduce attendees to like-minded individuals, or whether they match attendees to sponsors - address a clear business need.

Even game mechanics are starting to cross the chasm from consumer tech to professional events. In study after study, game mechanics have been proven to influence behavior in a variety of environments. In this context, it makes perfect sense for there to be a digital rewards for visiting sponsors, interacting with other attendees, or performing other actions that benefit the show as a whole.

Out With The Old

One of the most curious holdouts of a legacy event world is the stubborn refusal of standalone lead capture devices to die.

For years, exhibitors at events have been asked to carry (and pay extra for) a specialized device to scan badges. This device needs to be kept charged, can only be in one person's hands at a time, and is awfully clunky to bring out to the after parties, where much of the serious networking is taking place. Shouldn't this function live in the cloud as well? Shouldn't anyone with the event app be able to scan or be scanned?

It is almost inconceivable that these relics will survive even two more event seasons, bringing opportunity to a new generation of cloud based vendors.

Everything is Becoming a "Data Play"

But as we move into 2013, perhaps the single most fascinating development in the event world is the mountain of data that is being generated by the modern event app. Just as Google learns from our search queries to better serve us ads, or Facebook learns from our social graphs and posts to better serve us engaging content, so should event organizers, exhibitors, and attendees expect to learn from event data in order to maximize ROI.

Much is possible with data as a backdrop. Event organizers should expect to know which speakers to elevate to keynote slots, and which ones not to invite back. Attendees should soon expect to receive personalized analytics report that shows how their networking and event participation compares to event wide benchmarks - information that could be useful in justifying the trip. And sponsors should no longer limit their definition of leads to those that walk up to the booth to be scanned.
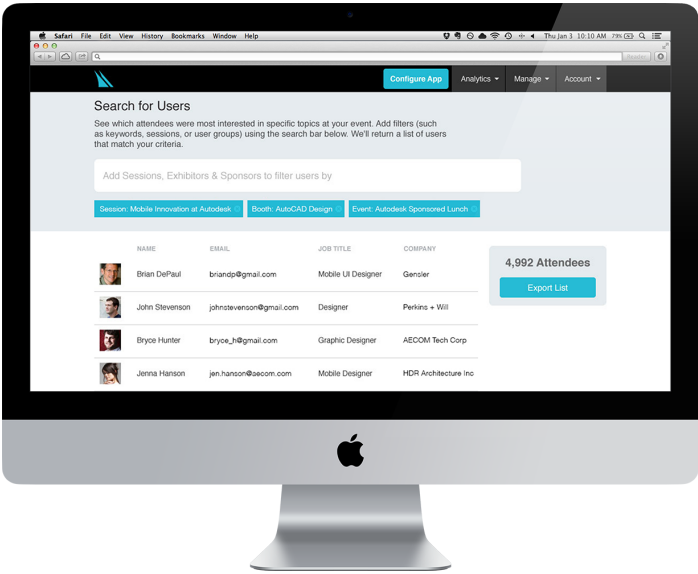

Sessions
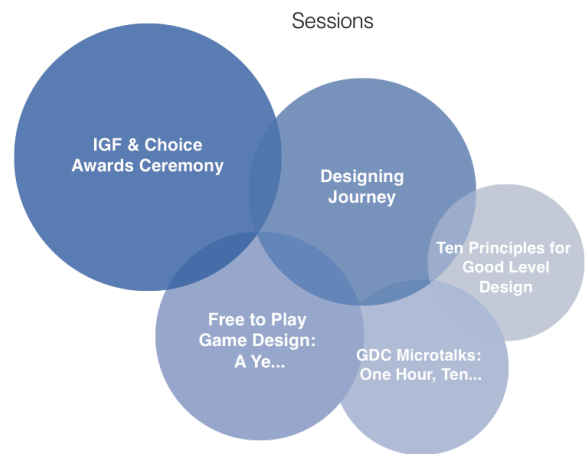
Reporting Generated by DoubleDutch

Lighting Up Dark Leads

At the end of the day, the fuel that powers much of the event ecosystem is the sponsorships of companies wishing to connect with attendees who might be prospective buyers of their goods and services.

Here at DoubleDutch, it is our position that event sponsors are being grossly underserved by the lead capture systems currently in place at most events.

Based on our estimates, scanned leads account for only 20-30% of the leads available to an exhibitor at any event. Not everyone has time to visit the expo floor, especially decision makers. Not all connections between an exhibitor's team and a potential buyer are made while the lead capture machine is charged and handy. And of course, not everyone likes to be scanned.

Lead Scoring in Web-Based CMS

To hammer this point home, here is an example from our own experience.

I recently attended a very large and respected IT show. DoubleDutch made a big investment at this show - I had a speaking engagement, we had a booth, we sponsored a happy hour. We also met a lot of people at the event and peripheral parties, some of whom while we had the lead capture gizmo with us. We were listed in (a competitor's) event app.

After the event, we were given a file with the contact information for the people that we had scanned.

We didn't get to see the people who signed up for our speaking engagement. We didn't get to see the folks we met who we didn't scan. We didn't get to see who checked us out in the app. And of course, we weren't provided any help in tracking down the folks who had a high likelihood of being a good match for us.

In short, we left a boatload of leads on the table. Obviously, we will not be sponsoring this event again.

The unfortunate part of this story is that I have no doubt that there were plenty of leads for us at this particular event - we just weren't able to connect with them. It was a lost opportunity for us, attendees who might have been interested in our service, and the event organizer, who won't see sponsorship dollars from us again.

We can do better. Mobile Technology + Data Science should light up these dark leads.

The Path Ahead & The Consumerization of Event Apps

Between optimizing mobile event applications for cloud based delivery of content, social, gamification, lead management, and analytics there is lots to be done in order to deliver maximum ROI to event attendees, organizers, and exhibitors. And this doesn't even touch on what's possible with augmented reality, indoor positioning, and other emerging technologies.

The good news is that events are not an island.

Much of the hard work around how to connect strangers based on time and location, how to match people to objects (content, sponsors, products), and how to manage the delivery of rapidly changing content to native mobile apps, is being tackled by companies in other markets.

Addressing the short-term opportunities within mobile event app technology hinge not solely on idea creation, but idea application.

Watch this space, as things will move quickly.

DoubleDutch

Branded Mobile Apps for Conferences, Tradeshows, and Meetings

Thrill attendees and exhibitors, update content on the fly,
and maximize ROI with a scalable mobile event app by DoubleDutch.

REQUEST A DEMO