

The Five Horseman of the Coming Conference Reckoning

by [Nathaniel Whittmore](#) May 01, 2010 01:53 PM (PT) Topics: [Co-Working Spaces](#), [Social Investment](#)

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I don't use the word "hate" very often, but I hate mediocrity. I hate when things that are important are done just well enough; I hate it when people settle for "okay" when they could be achieving "great."

The field of gatherings and conferences for social change agents today is resoundingly mediocre. At a time when the importance of offline gatherings is steadily increasing, most of our conferences inspire us only to grumble about their banality.

This state of affairs is untenable. While even just a few years ago, the field of social innovation was small and fragmented enough that anything was better than nothing, our sector's rapid growth means more actors, more events, and more competition for people's time, money, and attention.

I believe that we're quickly reaching a point where bad conferences will cease to command high price tags and community devotion. This change can be seen in terms of five 'horsemen' of the coming reckoning.

1. A dynamic network of offline gatherings, rather than just one must-attend event. More and more people are entering the social innovation space. Offline network hubs are growing quickly. Communities and networks are the locus of power for a new generation of social entrepreneurs. All of this has supercharged the way we assemble offline. Mixers, pitch contests, brown bag lunches, regional or topical gatherings -- these are all part of the ecosystem of offline gatherings. At the same time, there are at least a half dozen major international conferences trying to be the single must-attend event. I think a couple of them will persist but mostly they will become top heavy and implode under the weight of their expectations.

2. Changing nature of content. The format of conferences that includes keynotes and plenary discussions is a relic of another era, in which content from thought leaders was accessible only in rarely published monographs or at speaking events. Today, content is available cheaply and at scale. This means that more and more conference attendees are familiar with planned remarks from top name speakers before they even begin to speak. In that older era, conferences were often owned by media companies, and treated as just another distribution vehicle for content. Today, the premium is not on great speeches but on face time with other excellent people. In that paradigm, content becomes secondary to networking and conversation.

3. A new model of networking. Networking used to be a predictable game. Meet at a conference, grab a business card, enter the file into a paper Rolodex, then call the line if you need a favor. The Internet has completely changed the architecture of connection. We have more, better information about friends and contacts than ever before, and we're making use of that information everyday, with constant exchange and support flying back and forth in bits and bytes. Offline gatherings become a place to build and cement those relationships over deep conversations and drinks. Speed networking isn't enough -- successful conferences need to fundamentally engineer their offerings around the attendees and sell that value. The best example we have of someone doing at right now is the Opportunity Collaboration.

4. Breakdown of professional categories. Another casualty of the era is the clear distinctions between professional fields, or even between 'professionals' and 'amateurs.' this makes it increasingly less acceptable to structure conferences to be divided between speakers, VIPs, and everyone else. What's more, it means that some of the best and most fulfilling events for social entrepreneurs aren't social entrepreneurship events at all, but sector-blending, innovation-focused gatherings like TED, PopTech, Palomar 5, etc. Even worse news for some, I believe that professional associations -- at least the kind that have paid staff and try to be central organizers of the network -- are quickly being relegated to the past. In the new model, no one and every one owns 'the list' of people, and any one and everyone acts as convener and referrer. Some of the most important conferences in the past have been those organized by these groups for their members, and I just think that business model is going to get harder and harder every passing year.

5. The platformization of gatherings. The single most interesting thing I'm seeing is that whereas conferences used to be one element of a larger media or association platform, they are increasingly the platform themselves. This means that their content is being distributed around the world on the web. This means they are hosting, enabling (or tolerating) parallel events that fill gaps in their programming or ethos. This means that they are sharing their brand to enable others to design parts of their event (as SoCap is doing this year with their philanthropy track) or entire solo events (as with TEDx). And it means that, like PopTech, they are playing the role of year-round enabler and collaboration concierge. More than anything else, this is where I think the field is headed and I think the events that do it best will be the real 'must-attends.'

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