

THE COMMUNICATIONS NETWORK

strengthening the voice of philanthropy

Communications Network 2011 Boston Conference – Post-Conference Survey Analysis

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Question 1

Was this your first Communications Network Conference?

Compared to last year, Boston had a slightly higher proportion of returning conference attendees completing the survey – 55 percent of respondents this year had been to previous conferences, and 45 percent were first-time conference goers. Last year the number of veteran attendees vs. first-timers was evenly divided.

On a several questions, returning attendees were slightly more enthusiastic about various elements of the conference than new attendees (detailed in each relevant question below). That could suggest while the Network is getting better at serving – or knowing the needs of repeat visitors – each year brings new people and new expectations.

Question 2

How many other Communications Network conferences have you attended?

The majority of returning attendees have more than one conference under their belts to make their assessment of Boston. Of the returning attendees, 41 percent have been to four or more previously, 13 percent to three, 14 percent to two and 32 percent to one.

Question 3

How would you rate your overall satisfaction with the conference in Boston?

The overall satisfaction levels with Boston are virtually identical with the survey results of the Los Angeles conference last year. This year, 46 percent said it was “excellent,” 49 percent said it was “good,” 5 percent said “neutral,” and none said it was “fair” or “unsatisfactory.”

Those who have been to the conference before were just slightly more likely than new attendees to rate the Boston event “excellent.” Of returning attendees, 50 percent said it was “excellent,” 45 percent said “good,” 5 percent said “neutral” and none said fair or unsatisfactory. Of the new attendees, “43 percent said “excellent,” 53 percent said “good,” 4 percent said “neutral” and none said fair or unsatisfactory.

Question 4

If you attended a Communications Network conference before, please tell us how the Boston event compared to past conferences.

Last year's survey didn't ask for a numerical ranking of the conference, but instead invited comments about likes and dislikes. For this survey, 48 percent of those who had been to previous conferences said this was a better one. The next highest, 42 percent, said this year was about the same. Only 11 percent of returning attendees said this conference was not as good.

Comments:

Those who like this conference more than others generally praised the overall learning content – both the plenaries and the breakout sessions. Other commonly discussed positive elements included comments that the speakers were generally more relevant this year, that the small group sessions were more informative and that this year's conference was equally wonderful in comparison to past conferences. The most common, although not at all frequent, area of dissatisfaction expressed in the comments were about the breakout sessions not being as good in one way or another. A few also preferred past years' lineups of plenary speakers, but these were relatively few. Two especially notable comments include:

"Last year, in this same post-conference survey, I made suggestions that I felt were really taken into consideration for the conference in Boston. I love that you are so connected to participant's needs and requests...you really make it happen. Thanks!"

"They keynote speakers were amazing. Best ever. Hugely relevant. Inspiring. Thought-provoking. The hotel was perfect. The receptions were lovely. The breakout sessions - very hit or miss. As they typically are. The best ones, I am told, were led by consultants. No surprise - they earn a living doing this sort of thing. My CN colleagues - not so much."

Question 5

Please rate the quality of the emails, announcements, information available on the website and other information from the Network you received or saw before conference. How well did they help you prepare?

The Network did better on this question last year. While 50 percent of people responding to this year's survey said pre-conference communications were "excellent," 44 percent said "good," 5 percent said "neutral" and only one person each said "fair" or "unsatisfactory," last year 60 percent said "excellent," and 32 percent said "good."

Returning attendees were a bit more likely to rate the pre-conference communications more highly – 55 percent said they were "excellent," 40 percent "good," 4 percent said "neutral," 1 percent said "fair" and none said unsatisfactory.

Of new attendees, 43 percent said they were “excellent,” 49 percent said they were “good,” 7 percent said “neutral,” none said “fair,” and 1 percent said “unsatisfactory.” Respondents working for foundations over \$5 billion were significantly less likely to describe the pre-conference communications as “excellent” than respondents working in smaller foundations.

Comments:

The comments about pre-conference communications were mostly positive, most commonly saying they were “just right” or generally helpful. The most common critique of pre-conference communications is that there is not a “conference central” landing page on the Communications Network site where attendees can go to find information that may have appeared in a past email but that can’t be located. Several said that information on the site about the conference was scattered and hard to find.

The other most common critique was that people would like, if possible, to get more detailed information sooner about the content – especially the breakout sessions, but also some wanted more information about what plenary speakers would be talking about.

Question 6

How would you rate the meeting site at the Boston Renaissance Hotel?

The majority of respondents said the conference venue was “excellent,” but at a slightly lower percentage than last year. This year, about half (53 percent) said it the venue was excellent, while last year 70 percent said the same. This year, 32 percent said it was good, 7 percent said “neutral,” 7 percent said “fair,” and 1 percent said “unsatisfactory.” Interestingly, those who had previous venues to compare were more likely to give favorable ratings to the venue this year. While both returning and new attendees most commonly rated the hotel as “excellent,” returning attendees were said this at a much higher rate – 60 percent v. 46 percent.

Comments:

Respondents were, on the whole, very positive about the venue. There were many comments about the rooms being nice, that the venue was the right size, that it was good to have accommodations and meeting spaces in one place, and good proximity to evening offsite events.

The most common critique that a more downtown location would have been preferred was offered up many times in the vein of “...if I had to point out one thing...” Almost as common, and of seemingly more intense concern, was the critiques of the breakout meeting rooms – which were said to be both too small and poorly sound insulated. The other common critiques were that the all of the rooms were too cold, that WiFi and cellphone connections were bad, making it difficult to Tweet, and that the food (mostly breakfast) was subpar.

Question 7

Please rate the opening night reception at the New England Aquarium.

This year's opening reception got much higher ratings over last year. Well over half – 59 percent – said it was “excellent.” Another third (32 percent) said it was good. Only 5 percent were neutral, 2 percent said “fair,” and 2 percent said “unsatisfactory.” This compares very well to the opening night in LA, which only 44 percent described as excellent.

Comments:

The comments were overall very favorable.

The ice breaker was very popular, it received dozens of positive comments for its wittiness and simplicity. A very small number said they don't really like those kinds of networking games, two thought that this particular game encouraged very quick meets to get game information at the expense of fuller engagement and one person didn't like receiving the “sucker fish” label because he/she felt a plenary speaker judged her by that name the rest of the conference. On the whole however, it was a very strong endorsement for doing a fun, simple networking game that helps people meet each other.

The Aquarium also received great plaudits for its location, exhibits and ease of networking space configuration. A small number thought that the space configuration was not great for networking, especially having people spaced out over several floors. But the most number of critiques of the space itself was that the placement of the first bar in the small first floor area without directions that there were other places to go led to a big bottleneck at the entrance. A few said it was too dark.

Question 8

Please rate each of the plenary speakers you heard.

	Excellent	Good	Total Positive	Neutral	Fair	Unsat.	Attendees
Eli Pariser	72%	24%	96%	1%	3%	0%	140
Van Jones	72%	19%	92%	6%	2%	0%	98
Jelly Helm	65%	25%	90%	7%	1%	2%	120
Frontline	32%	49%	80%	13%	6%	1%	136
America F.	37%	43%	80%	11%	7%	2%	142
Swanee H.	16%	25%	41%	13%	17%	29%	120

There was no discernable difference between returning and new attendees on their ratings of the various plenary speakers.

Comments:

The comments on plenary speakers were generally very positive and many hailed it as a “great lineup” providing many ideas and insights. This is a contrast to last year

when a great many people expressed the feeling that there wasn't enough practical information provided. While there was some of that in comments about certain speakers, it wasn't a critique of the overall lineup. Several also noted with thanks the good diversity in terms of age, race and gender among the presentations.

If there is one prominent overarching critique of the speaker lineup, it is that there is a preference for have at least one or two experts on philanthropy or communications speak ("more like Eli Pariser"). Additionally, several suggested that presenters should "know their audience" and be forced to come up ahead of time with 2-3 take-aways they intend to leave with these foundation communicators.

Question 9

This year's "Group Therapy" sessions were designed to encourage sharing and group problem-solving, instead of placing the spotlight on presentations by designated speakers. On the whole, how do you think this worked?

Of those answering this question who had been to previous conferences, 44 percent said that the Group Therapy format produced more useful breakout sessions, while 46 percent described them as "more varied." Only 18 percent said they couldn't tell the difference, 19 percent said it produced less useful breakout sessions and 4 percent said they produced less varied breakout sessions.

On all the other questions, there were no discernable differences between the responses of Communications Network members and nonmembers, but here there was a small difference. *Members were a bit more likely to say that this format produced more useful and more varied breakout sessions than nonmembers.*

Comments:

We received verbatim comments from about 30 percent of the 151 people who answered this question. The vast number of comments said that the Group Therapy sessions were novel, worth giving a try and produced feelings of communality. However, even among people who gave the Network credit for this approach, many felt the sessions did not produce enough valuable, practical information. Specifically, they said that the sessions resulted in way too much complaining and not enough solutions. Others noted that participants seemed to take the "group therapy" name extremely literally – and like psychoanalysis, there was a great deal of complaining, over-sharing, and more questions than answers. Many said that the sessions were extremely variable and that the more successful sessions were lead by facilitators who first presented core pieces of usable information and then opened it up to discussion. There were a sizable portion of respondents who were big fans for the format and said "keep it!" but that has to be balanced against concerns from other about too little focus on solutions.

Several wisely noted that the group therapy format might be better suited to some topics and not others. For instance, some suggested, that in the future more

technical topics especially could be handled by experts presenting in a traditional format and other topics utilizing this group therapy format.

There were several comments that, regardless of the format, there simply wasn't enough time allotted for complex topics to be explored thoroughly.

Also, many also said that at each breakout time, there were too many choices.

A few noted that the group therapy format enabled consultants in the audience to hijack the conversation.

Question 10

Please rate each of the “Group Therapy” breakout sessions you attended.

	Excellent	Good	Total Positive	Neutral	Fair	Unsat.	Attendees
Winning Words: developing the right messaging	53%	43%	96%	4%	0%	0%	47
Decentralizing communications without chaos	29%	58%	87%	11%	2%	0%	38
Foundations and consultants	35%	45%	80%	8%	12%	0%	40
Achieving Kumbaya: linking program and communication	26%	54%	80%	9%	9%	2%	35
Harnessing the social media monster	26%	41%	67%	21%	12%	0%	34
Building communications into a foundation's DNA	28%	40%	68%	19%	8%	5%	43
What are we talking about when we talk about communications?	16%	49%	65%	11%	16%	8%	37
Prozac for Websites: managing and maintaining your website	11%	53%	64%	17%	14%	5%	36
Plugging into the digital era	10%	50%	60%	15%	18%	7%	40
Learning to act as a network	11%	44%	55%	22%	18%	5%	18
Measuring our reach in a digital world	23%	31%	54%	21%	15%	10%	35
Winning your boss with marketing Ju-Jitsu	69%	15%	84%	16%	0%	0%	13*

(*Attendance skews total ratings for this session in relation to others that higher number of participants .)

Even though respectable numbers of respondents who had been to previous conferences said that the format for the this year produced more useful and/or more varied sessions, most of the breakouts this year received lower ratings than last year's breakouts.

In 2010, half (5 of 10) breakout session had plurality "excellent" ratings. This year, only 2 of 12 breakout sessions had plurality "excellent" ratings.

Comments:

The comments attached to this question very much reflected the thoughts voiced in the previous question about the utility of the Group Therapy format. Again, people who had issues with Group Therapy felt that this format didn't offer enough practical solutions and didn't have enough expert information presented.

The most important new area of commentary offered here was that several said that presenters seemed to make the assumption of large budgets and sizable communications staffs, which is not the norm.

Question 11

Please rate the second day's evening reception at the ICA

While this year's second night evening reception at ICA received a slightly less favorable ratings compared to the first night reception at the Aquarium, it was rated almost identically to last year's second night reception. This year, 30 percent said it was "excellent," 43 percent said it was "good," 6 percent said "neutral," 2 percent "fair" and 1 percent "unsatisfactory." Just as with last year, 18% did not attend the second night's reception. Looking only at the 123 respondents who did attend, 37 percent called it "excellent," 52 percent said "good," 7 percent said "neutral," 2 percent said "fair" and 2 percent said "unsatisfactory" – not really changing the overall impression.

Comments:

The most common comments, by far, were those complimenting the venue, especially the space, location and view. There were also many comments praising its walkability from the hotel, although two noted that some dark areas along the way gave them some pause.

This year's second reception got lots of positive compliments about the food. One specifically wanted to thank the organizers for providing numerous vegetarian options.

There were a great many comments about access to the art – many didn't know that there was access to the art and others didn't realize it until much later in the reception.

The other common complaint was that there were not enough table tops to stand and eat at – making juggling food, wine and conversation a challenge. There were a few complaints that the room was too crowded (too small for the number of people) and that it was too hot, but these were relatively few.

There were a small number of people who say they want an activity or meeting exercise on the second day's reception, too.

Question 12

Reflecting on the conference overall, what do you think of the mix of time dedicated to plenaries, breakout sessions and networking?

For the most part, the results on this question are very similar to last year. A large majority said that the mix is just about right – 63 percent (last year was 64 percent). There was a very slight uptick in the number who said there were not enough breakouts (13 percent this year v. 7 percent last year) and a significant increase in the percentage saying there were too many plenaries (27 percent this year v. 10 percent last year). Perhaps this is a reflection of having had three plenaries and no breakouts on the final day of the conference, which was different this year.

While majorities of both returning and new attendees said that the mix of time dedicated to plenaries, breakout sessions and networking was “just about right,” returning attendees said this at a slightly higher rate – 68 percent v. 58 percent.

Comments:

While attendees are basically happy with the overall mix, the consensus in the comments was definitely that having three back-to-back plenaries on the Friday was just too much.

Question 13

Is there anything else about your experience at the conference not covered in the questions above that you'd like to tell us?

A bit less than half of the survey respondents offered additional thoughts, but their commentary was immensely varied. The most common was high praise for the conference overall and thanks the planners and organizers. The next most common set of comments were that the conference is a great networking opportunity that leaves attendees feeling connected to a community of people with similar challenges.