

# Wow! What a great idea!

How to find more great ideas at your next conference!

## Assess your past conference performance...

### Did you:

- **Make notes but never look at them again?**
- **Collect business cards from people you can't remember?**
- **Find a great idea and do nothing with it?**
- **Spend your time with people you know?**
- **Eat and drink more than usual? Sleep and exercise less than usual?**

Everyone at a conference has access to exactly the same resources such as speakers, workshops, other participants, and so on. Some people will carry away a treasury of insights, return to work full of excitement and enthusiasm, and act on their big ideas. Yet others leave and wonder, 'What was that about?' What makes the difference?

Your success at finding ideas depends on how effective you are at tapping the resources available to you. Ideas are everywhere, waiting to be captured and turned into opportunities.

Start with this question — why are going to the conference? Presumably you want new ideas that you can apply toward achieving some business and personal challenges. Therefore, here is the first step:

- set your business challenges — what do you need to solve problems, to create opportunities, or to enhance your work?
- set your personal challenges — to learn new skills, meet new people and develop your career.

With your challenges in place, here are some strategies to help you develop your conference creativity skills.

### What it takes to find new ideas

The only way to find more and bigger ideas is to be an 'active' participant. You have to look for ideas that have value. Being an active participant takes the right attitude and some new skills. Three approaches to increase your odds of finding great ideas are:

*Be open and curious.* Listen to everything as if for the first time and as if it can have some value to you. Pay attention with the intention of discovering something new.

*Be diligent.* Be persistent and relentless in your search for insights and ideas. Practise the discipline of writing down your ideas and the rigour of testing their validity.

*Be involved.* Put something of you into the idea. What are your unique skills and talents that can make this idea great? Put your heart into it.

### How to be an active participant

#### 1. Listen

You will be doing a lot of listening at this conference. It pays to sharpen your listening skills to ensure you do not miss anything important. Let go of assumptions and expectations that you have about the topic. Stay focused on the content, even if the style of

the presentation is very dry. Listen for the message. Stay engaged by noting what is new or novel.

#### 2. Be an active note taker

Do not record everything the speaker says. You are managing information. Knowledge becomes clearer and more accessible if it is visible and not lost in a page of notes. Therefore, listen for ideas, not to summarise the presentation. If an insight is triggered, write it down to get it out of your head but do so in a way that you will recognise the importance of this insight after the event. Organise your notes in a natural way for your style of thinking.

Try taking notes in a new way that is designed to organise your thoughts to produce more creative connections. Focus your listening in these three areas:

- listen for good ideas that make sense right away.
- what questions arise about the presentation that need an answer?
- list the actions that you want to take after the event.

#### 3. Be a visual thinker

Many scientists, architects and designers sketch their ideas to help them depict their thoughts. Often the process of sketching an idea leads to new insights. Use symbols, shapes, lines and dots to represent your thinking. The very act of drawing a sketch helps you to define and develop your ideas.

### Selling your great ideas

Having a great idea is one thing. Getting others interested in it is another. Your ability to sell the value of your idea often determines if you get the commitment or resources you need to develop it. Every great idea needs to be well communicated. Therefore, it often helps to save interesting quotes from speakers to help you remember the story that triggered the idea.

In conclusion, enhancing your tool kit of listening and note taking skills is a great way to get more value at your next conference — but it is only a start. Part two is actually doing something with the ideas you come up with.

*Ed Bernacki is an innovator and idea champion. With an American partner, he created a Conference Navigator Guide to help participants get more value from conferences. His new book on innovation, Wow! that's a great idea! was released in June 2001. For more information visit the Ideafactory at <http://www.ideafactory.com.au>*