The Founder of Social Media Week Breaks Down the Keys to a Great Conference

Discover how Toby Daniels built a conference into a must-attend event for thousands of professionals.

August 27, 2019 6 min read

Opinions expressed by *Entrepreneur* contributors are their own.

Toby Daniels is the founder of Social Media Week, one of the world's premier conferences and industry news platforms for professionals in media, marketing and technology. I first met him when I spoke at Social Media Week (SMW) in New York at NASDAQ. Although I actively avoid Times Square with a passion, it was a great time. The event kicked off by ringing the opening bell, which is typical of Toby, who always goes over the top to deliver amazing experiences.

During our interview, Toby spoke about his childhood entrepreneurial endeavors, the foundation of a good conference experience and how he juggles entrepreneurship with parenthood.

Related: Driven to Succeed: How an Entrepreneur's Love of Cars Led to a Lifetime of Success

Entrepreneur by necessity

"We didn't have much disposable income growing up, and my mum, who was a single parent, had to focus on keeping the lights on and clothes on our backs. If we wanted something – a new toy,

fancy sneakers or to go to the movies – we'd have to figure out how to earn the money ourselves. My first enterprise was something called The Garden Mate, which I started when I was 10. After that, I delivered milk, newspapers, and later I painted houses with my best friend Bruce. It didn't really matter what the work was, I just loved being enterprising and industrious. These experiences also taught me how to be independent and work with grown-ups, which gave me the confidence to take on bigger and riskier endeavors."

His motivation for starting Social Media Week

"In the mid-90's I completely fell in love with the Internet and wrote my graduate thesis on relationship marketing. The basic premise was that technology was going to fundamentally change the nature of how we manage business relationships. This put me on a path towards a decade of thinking about the role of technology and how it can enhance human connectivity and communication. When I thought of the idea to start Social Media Week in 2008, I knew that social media was going to be a disruptive and transformative force and that we needed a place to come together to discuss how we can capitalize on the opportunity for business and society. The next 10 years were spent exploring this through hundreds of conferences, which we've held in 25 different countries and through our writing and research which we publish on Social Media Week News."

Related: Here's What I Learned at Warren Buffett's 2019 Berkshire Hathaway Shareholder Meeting

Why he feels impactful storytelling is essential on social

"Our theme for this year's conference is Stories. The number of social media users worldwide in 2018 was 3.2 billion. By

2020 almost 5 billion people will be connected. Social media is the most influential storytelling platform we have ever had at our finger tips and yet we must recognize that with this power and influence comes a responsibility to tell stories than impact people in positive ways. We are the product of the stories we consume and we can be the story we want to see told in the world. We must recognize that social media is a tool that can be used for good and evil. If you are simply a user of social media, a creator, influencer, brand or publisher, it is your responsibility to ensure that stories matter and that they create a better future."

His definition of a good conference environment

"Creating any kind of physical experience, especially for thousands of people who all have different needs and expectations, is incredibly difficult. We create a blended experience that is more choose your own adventure than being overly prescribed or dictatorial. Over the course of three days, we want to inspire you, educate you and give you access to strategies that you could not have found elsewhere. We want to provide you with guidance in terms of how to think about the future of the world and the industry you are in. Finally, the best conferences are the ones where you walk away with new relationships that foster collaboration and the potential for new business endeavors, whatever they might be."

In regard to speakers, you need someone who cares deeply about the audience, what they will learn and walk away with that can impact their work in some meaningful way. Too many speakers are motivated by the glory of being on stage and the opportunity to promote themselves. The best ones change how people think and that is hugely difficult but incredibly important."

How to get the most out of attending a conference

“For attendees, like anything else, the more you put in, the more you get out. Planning and preparation are key. Know who’s speaking beforehand, do your research, take notes, ask questions, engage other attendees in conversation about the content. Reach out to speakers via social and ask them follow-up questions. Be engaged! At SMW we work really hard to create an experience that delivers on why people attend. We provide a recap of every session, an insights report after the conference that distills the most salient things that were shared by the top speakers and access to on-demand videos where attendees can re-watch sessions or check out the ones they missed.”

Related: Entrepreneur Insider Video of the Week: How Storytelling Drives the Purchase Process

Launching a podcast

“Over the years I’ve interviewed hundreds of leading thinkers at our conferences so moving the conversations to a podcast format felt natural and a great way for us to engage our audience throughout the year – and also to reach new people who might not otherwise get to attend our conferences.”

Leads2Scale has been a big undertaking but it’s honestly one of my most favorite things I get to do. We’ve had a wide range of guests on, but the through-line and focus on our conversations is about building businesses and scaling audiences. We just recorded our 35th episode and I’m looking forward to hosting many more conversations in the future.”

Related: The Social Media Strategy That Scored Big Wins for Athletic Greens

Balancing parenthood and entrepreneurship

“This has been the hardest thing for me and my wife, but I’m proud that we are able to spend so much quality time with both our kids. We hang out a ton in the mornings before the nanny arrives and our son heads to daycare and we try and be back at 6:30pm to spend time with them before they go to bed at night. Ultimately, and I feel that sometimes people lose sight of this, my business is just a business, we’re not saving lives. We are very mission-driven, but nothing can ever take precedence over the time I get to spend with my family.”

https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/338653