

What Growing a Niche Conference From 80 to 800 Attendees Taught Me About Building Something Meaningful

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Key Takeaways

- The best platforms are built with input from many different team members with unique skills and experiences. The same applies to building a community.
- When you're bringing a group of people together, the environment you provide for them shapes their creative potential.
- Whether you're building technical systems or human networks, you need an incremental process of introducing new ideas and carefully testing them until they function effectively within the whole.

I'm well-known as a tinkerer who loves building apps and tools. But I also love building communities.

Bringing the right people together for a team or conference requires the same core skills as determining the right features for a platform: You need an ability to appreciate the value of each individual component and the vision to see how they come together to serve a higher purpose.

I discovered precisely how true this was when I created the DRIVE (Data Reporting Information and Visualization Exchange)

Conference at the University of Washington in 2011. Its goal was to help people turn technical data into actionable strategic insights.

I've always believed in the power of finding new ways to present information clearly. It's a thread that has carried into my role as the CEO of PhoneBurner – a power dialing platform that includes advanced call analytics to improve outreach for phone sales teams.

But breakthroughs in fields like this don't only result from individual achievements. The real value of DRIVE was that it let me take some of the most brilliant people in my field out of the silos and echo chambers they were stuck in and put them in a place where they could build on each other's knowledge.

In just a few short years, the conference grew from 80 attendees to over 800. Here's what I learned in the process, and why you should be putting the same energy into organizing people that you put into optimizing features.

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Diverse inputs contribute to stronger overall outcomes

The best platforms tend to include a range of tools and capabilities. They're also built with input from many different team members, each with unique skills and life experiences.

The same applies to running a successful conference. Even in the early days, I knew DRIVE could only be a success if it brought together a variety of perspectives.

In 2011, data visualization was nowhere near as prominent a concept as it is today. Most of the reporting tools that

existed weren't much more advanced than simple spreadsheets.

Many people wanted to solve this problem, including some brilliant individuals at the University of Washington, where the conference was hosted. But their work was mostly academic. They didn't have experience translating their expertise into real-world impact. So I made sure the people I invited to the DRIVE Conference included private-sector professionals with practical ideas for turning abstract knowledge into usable power.

Those speakers would include everyone from Jeopardy! champion Ken Jennings to the entire data team at Wikipedia. We've even had scouts from Major League Baseball teams share how they use data to look for talent. Together, the experts and attendees have been able to learn from each other and discover insights they might never have found if they'd stayed in their own fields.

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Create an environment that facilitates brilliance

When you're designing a piece of software, the system architecture dictates user behavior. When you're bringing a group of people together, the environment you provide for them shapes their creative potential.

DRIVE quickly started to attract interest from other major universities like MIT and Princeton. I remember taking an attendee from Princeton out for dinner during one night of the conference and asking her why she thought such talented people were gravitating towards the event.

It was simple, she told me. The event made people feel like they were rich for three days of their lives. Their needs were

taken care of, they were surrounded by like-minded peers, and they had creature comforts that helped them relax and bring their best ideas forward.

Hearing that was a relief. I had obsessed over the smallest details when planning the event, leaving no stone unturned. I had even insisted on samples of everything the caterers were planning to serve beforehand.

It wasn't about showing off. It was about making sure that the tone and setting of the conference were as exceptional as the people I had invited. Just as the features in a platform are only as useful as its foundations, an organization is only as effective as its culture and resources.

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Grow via iterative refinement

Finally, technical systems and human networks are similar in that they almost never experience sustainable growth at random. Building either consistently requires an incremental process of introducing new ideas, then carefully testing and editing them until they function effectively within the whole.

I think it's safe to say that going from 80 attendees to 800 in under 15 years is a fairly significant accomplishment for a conference focused on something as niche as data visualization and reporting. The ideas we discuss each year have major implications for almost every industry under the sun, but the global pool of experts in the field is still fairly exclusive, so this represents a great deal of growth.

But the number of attendees at the conference has always been less important than the quality and integrity of our work. We didn't grow by inviting anyone loosely involved with data science; we grew by carefully curating our list of speakers

each year and gradually developing a reputation as a mecca for the best and brightest. In fact, we currently cap the number of attendees, and the last few years have sold out completely.

People don't want to come to a conference that's sprawling and unfocused; they want to participate in an event made by people who have invested significant time and effort to reach the top of their game. There's a quote I heard somewhere that I think of often when I'm inviting speakers to DRIVE and when I'm leading the team at PhoneBurner: "What got a wow five years ago won't get a yawn today."

If that means growing a little more cautiously so you can grow intentionally, so be it. Ultimately, it's a much better way to create something meaningful, whether it's a software program, a company or a conference.

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