

# CONFERENCE CONNEXITY

**Delivering On Your  
Networking Promise**



**Velvet Chainsaw Consulting**

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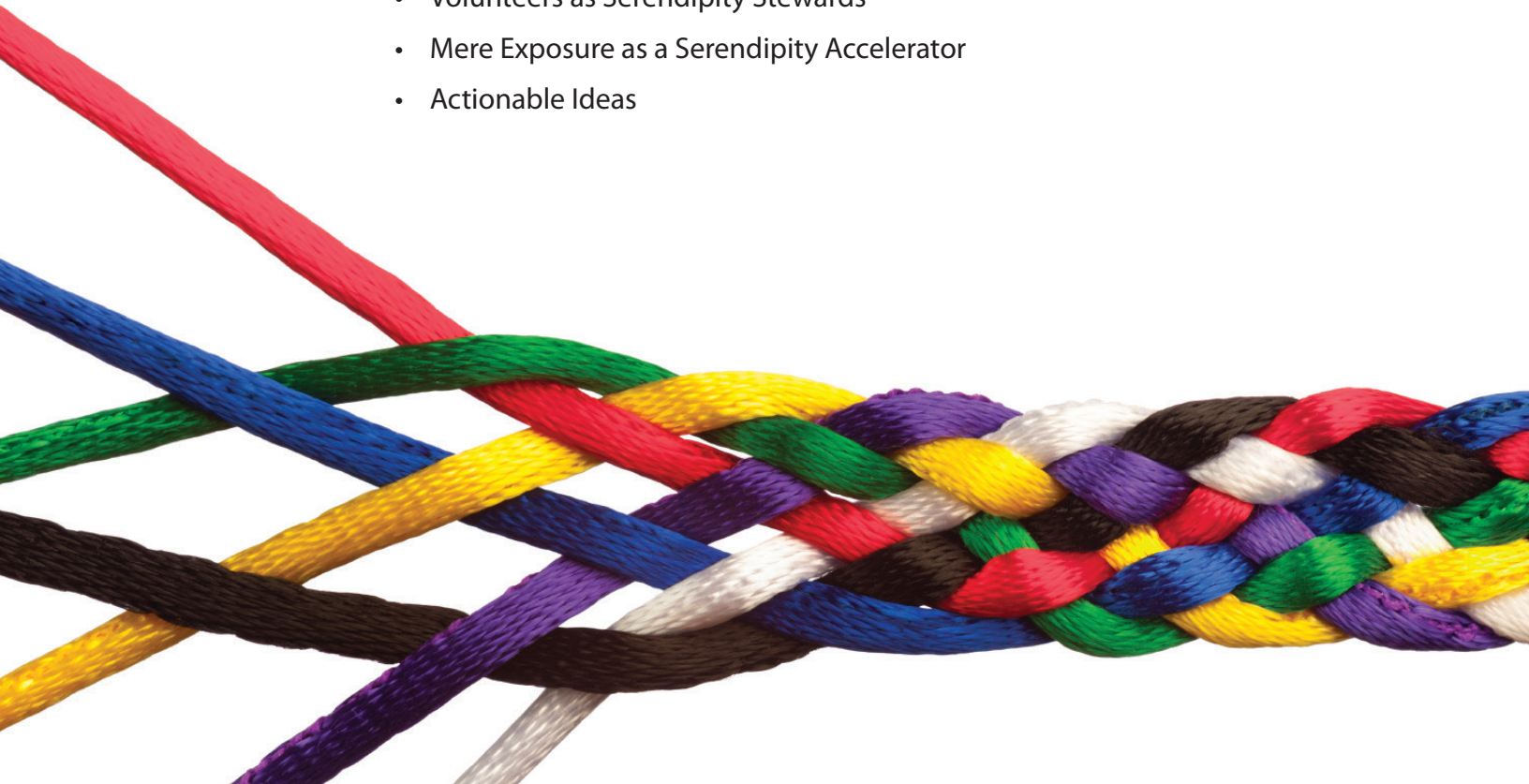
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## INTRO

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*“Call it a clan,  
Call it a network,  
Call it a tribe,  
Call it a family...  
Whatever you  
call it, whoever  
you are, you  
need one.”*

— Jane Howard

This is not your typical book on networking. It’s not about the traditional networking that many of us know. It’s about challenging assumptions, introducing a few disruptive, innovative twists and showcasing new networking models.

Networking is one of the top reasons (and frequently the primary reason) people choose to attend your conference or trade show. With education accessible 24/7 online, the quality and speed of face-to-face networking opportunities is too critical to be left up to chance. If people are going to board a plane or fight through traffic to get to your event, they expect to connect with like-minded, senior level executives who will share knowledge, opportunities and ideas to help them do their job faster, better and easier.

Organizers often boast about their conference’s networking value, but how can you be sure the experience you deliver is one that’s valued and appreciated by attendees? We believe there are three primary indicators you can measure to do your own self-assessment:

1. Healthy repeat attendance – at least 50% – and ideally 70% have attended two out of the past three (or more) years.
2. An abundance of decision makers, practitioners and high influencers – 35% or more of your total attendance.
3. A strong attendee onboarding process that delivers high networking value in year one.





So how did you score? If you're like most, improving one or more of these metrics will significantly help deliver revenue growth while adding value to those you serve. Who doesn't want that?

Networking at large conferences or trade shows can be an overwhelming experience. With jam-packed agendas, session rooms and busy expo floors, locating and nurturing those valuable business connections is a difficult task. It doesn't have to be that way.

## Designing Conferences Rich in Connexity

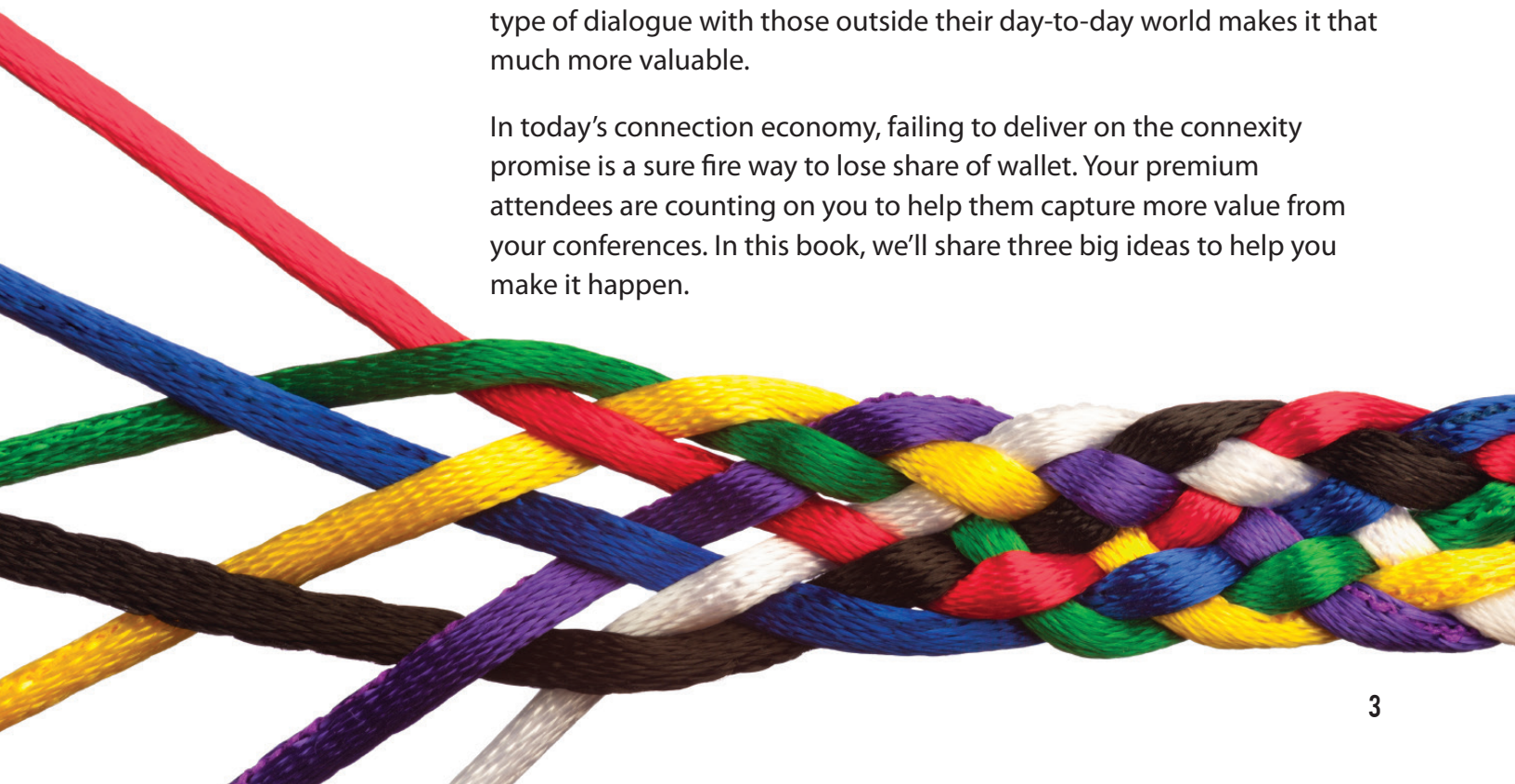


We're at a pivotal point in time where we have the opportunity to dial up the real benefits and value of meetings. Today, attendees crave two things most of all – connection and community. The hi-tech industry coined the word “connexity” that refers to the merging of these two concepts.

Connexity doesn't magically take shape. To satisfy connexity cravings, organizers must be more intentional about fostering community and creating connections at their events.

Our pursuit of individualism and the explosive growth in virtual teams and telecommuting have left us hungry for human connection – something that can't quite be satisfied through digital or online interactions. Conferences need to become vibrant gathering places where global villagers congregate at “watering holes” to share best practices and new ideas. Giving people an opportunity to engage in this type of dialogue with those outside their day-to-day world makes it that much more valuable.

In today's connection economy, failing to deliver on the connexity promise is a sure fire way to lose share of wallet. Your premium attendees are counting on you to help them capture more value from your conferences. In this book, we'll share three big ideas to help you make it happen.



# **Embed Networking Throughout the Conference Program**

Most conference agendas promote learning during the day and networking at night. Some agendas include a clever icebreaker, new attendee orientation or speed networking to accelerate connections – but for the most part, this learn-by-day, network-by-night model is prevalent throughout hundreds, even thousands of conferences and meetings.

It's a flawed model in serious need of a makeover.

What's even more troubling is the steady stream of one-way talking going on throughout the day. Audiences are held captive, as they watch a cavalcade of speakers and panelists take the stage to share industry insight. Sometimes, there's Q&A tacked on at the end, but short of that, it's sit tight, turn your cell phone off and listen. It's an exercise that frustrates attendees and fails to deliver meaningful knowledge transfer that sticks.

At afternoon sessions, audiences thin out. If you're paying close attention to the Next Gen crowd, they're often the first to bail. The diehards who stay to the end then scurry back to their guest rooms to freshen up for an evening of wining, dining, partying and yes – networking.





Networking is consistently ranked as one of the top two benefits for participants that attend conferences, yet many make audiences sit through a six-hour endurance test before delivering soundly on this expectation.

Is it any wonder why:

- many participants fail to meet the right contacts at conferences?
- weary participants choose to hang with people they already know?
- some question whether this conference is still worth the investment?

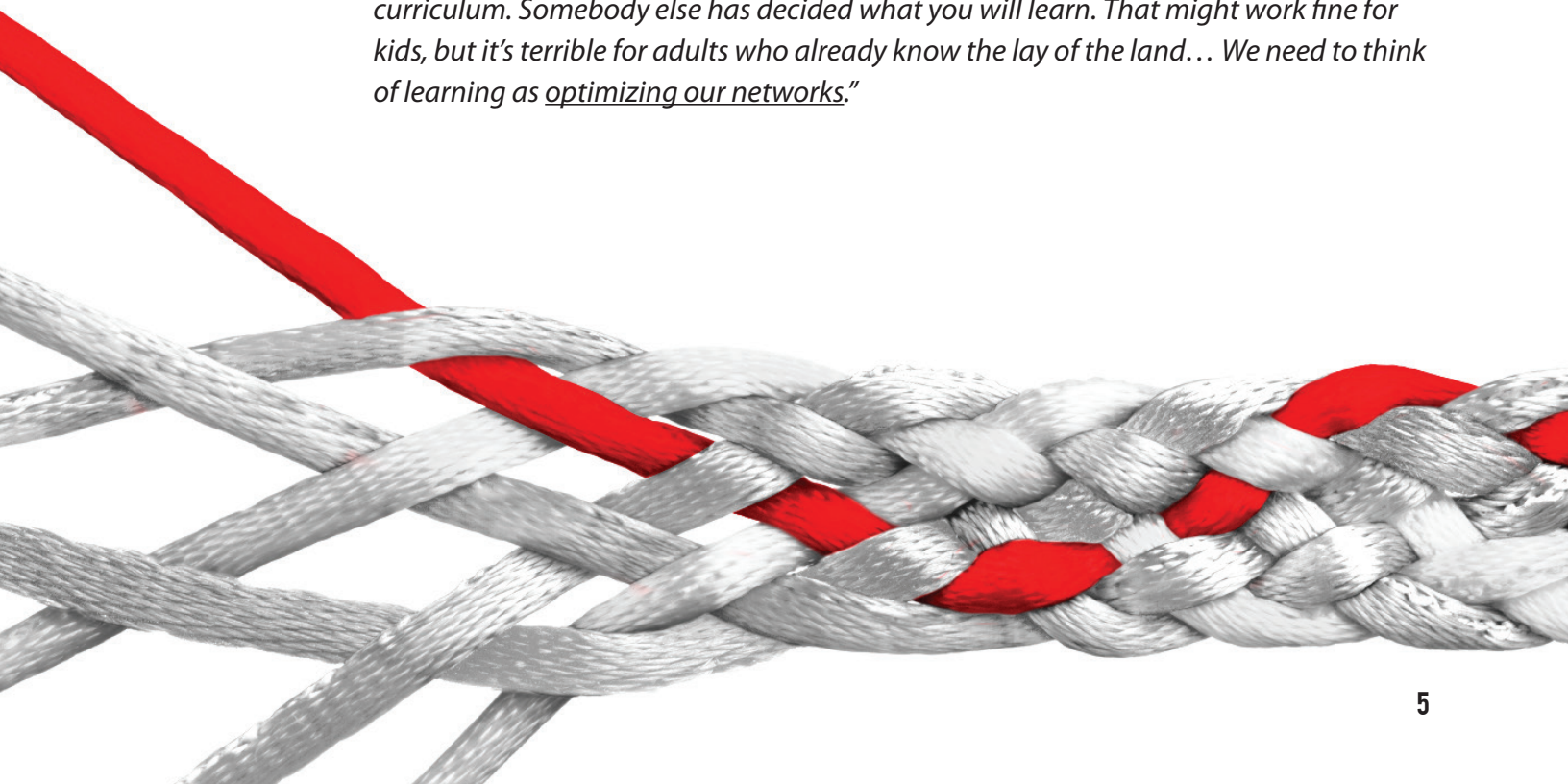
Today, many conference organizers are battling stagnant or declining attendance. They're struggling to grow registration, as well as keep attendees through the final session. There must be a better way to deliver on the networking promise.



## Informal Learning Unlocks a Multitude of Valuable New Connections

Adults learn more and better through informal learning exchanges than through formal, instructor-led sessions. In most organizations, informal learning accounts for up to 80% of the most valued learning advances. We learn best through discussions with others who are tackling similar challenges.

In his book, *Informal Learning*, Author Jay Cross explains, *"Formal learning has a curriculum. Somebody else has decided what you will learn. That might work fine for kids, but it's terrible for adults who already know the lay of the land... We need to think of learning as optimizing our networks."*





Ah, there's that network word again, but this time, there are no cocktails. No business card swaps. No awkward conversations with strangers or glancing over shoulders to see who else just entered the room.

## It's Time to Harness the Hallway Chatter

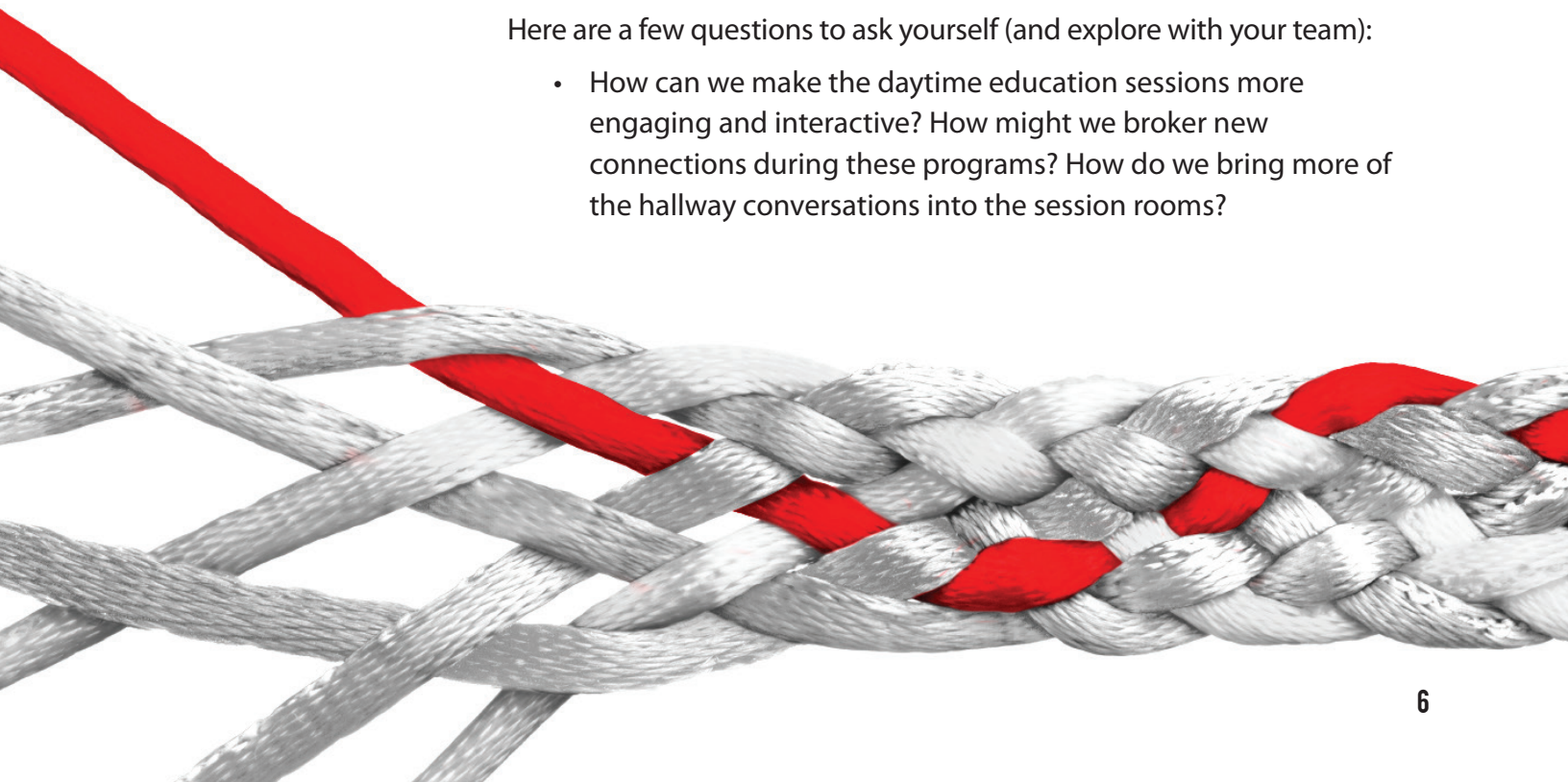
Cross continues: *"We need to move away from the formal workshop structures. The 'shut up and listen,' coffee breaks last just five minutes and chairs are lined up in rows where people can't get up and talk. The real action at meetings happens in the hallways. It's in the hallways where you have one-on-one conversations, rather than one-to-many presentations coming at us from the stage."*

Are you intrigued by this concept of stirring up more one-on-one conversations? It's well within our grasp, and will require some drastic changes. It's time to loosen our grip on traditional conference content delivery models. No more 60-minute monologues or dialogues among panelists. No more dimly lit rooms where we lull participants to sleep.

In the average conference day, participants have a shot at attending as many as four or five education sessions. Within these sessions are a host of mini-networking possibilities that rarely materialize. We're managing a goldmine of knowledge and connections sitting right there in the meeting room, yet we're not capitalizing on these as well as we could – or should.

Here are a few questions to ask yourself (and explore with your team):

- How can we make the daytime education sessions more engaging and interactive? How might we broker new connections during these programs? How do we bring more of the hallway conversations into the session rooms?





- What skills are needed to lead sessions where the focus is on learning through interaction and discussion with peers? Are our current speakers up to the task? How might we help them raise their game and better prepare to facilitate these types of learning and networking experiences?
- What's stopping us from making these changes? What will it take to overcome these? More funding? More time? More courage?
- How will you sell this new strategy and content delivery model to leadership?

*Speaking of leadership...*

## **People Value Connections with Leadership and Experienced Practitioners**

Scan any number of conference marketing brochures and you'll see strong emphasis on content, speakers and the opportunity to learn from the industry movers and shakers. But when the conference education takes place, where are these leaders and experienced practitioners? Many are immersed in committee meetings, strategy sessions and private meetings. They only attend sessions if they or one of their close colleagues is presenting. Other than that, they're not eating their own dog food. Their absence at education sessions shows that they're not dedicated to the product the staff and volunteer leaders helped envision and assemble.

These leaders and practitioners are the very people your attendees want to meet most, particularly the Next Gen and first-time attendees.





If you are ready to raise the ante on conference networking and learning, you'll need to persuade this elite group that attending and participating in the education programming is critical, but it doesn't stop there. You'll need to transform this crew into an Army of Connectors.

This Army of Connectors will:

- Greet participants as they enter session rooms.
- Seek out new participants they've never met and get acquainted.
- Ask smart questions and listen intently to get to know them better, particularly the first-timers.
- Introduce participants to others in the room who they'd most like to meet.

Be sure to explain why you're taking this new approach. Remind your faithful Army of Connectors that their success in driving more and better connections is a crucial step to ensure that your organization and membership not only survives, but thrives well into the future.



When you expand networking to encompass nearly all aspects of your event, particularly the daytime education sessions, these conversations roll into the evening networking receptions. Chats happen more naturally and become more purposeful as you dig into what transpired that day.

More importantly, as participants enter that evening reception, they now know dozens more people than they would have, thanks to your smart approach to education design.



## How One Association Delivered Deep Networking Value

The NeuroLeadership Institute reimagined their conference agenda for their annual summit. Their leadership realized that bums in seats goes against how the brain operates. Instead, they created purposeful, meaningful participant experiences. They focused on attendees' real goals of useful new ideas and new human connections. These cognitive psychologists and neuroscientists know that social matters to the brain and to each attendee. During every breakfast, lunch and dinner, plus one reception, the conference organizers had everyone together in one large ballroom. There was not a formal scheduled program during these events. Instead, it provided the opportunity for people to network and connect. This equaled 4.5 hours of unstructured social time each day.

In every formal session, they required speakers to spend 5- to 10-minutes at the beginning of each session where attendees met others at their table. Each attendee could attend a total of 12 sessions throughout the conference. Attendees met eight people at each table which resulted in a minimum of 96 human connections. That in addition to a total of another 12 hours of social time allowed participants to make a ton of new meaningful connections.

We can all take a lesson from the NeuroLeadership Institute in placing a high value on social and human connections. What an exciting way to foster networking at a conference.





## Chapter 1 Actionable Ideas:

### → **Launch Networking Igniters at Learning Sessions**

Ask speakers to start each session by asking attendees to introduce themselves to others at their table or sitting to their left, right, front and behind.

Our colleague, Jeff Hurt is a master at this one. In the first few minutes, he'll start by asking people to introduce themselves to their neighbor and swap answers to an icebreaker question (What season best describes how you're feeling today? Name two people, dead or alive, that you would like to have dinner with.). After he introduces learning objectives, he issues another networking igniter: Turn to your neighbor and share which learning objective is most important to you and explain why.

### → **Create Presentations that are More Participatory**

Chunk down content into shorter segments and intersperse with table or small group discussion. Encourage speakers to provide questions to initiate these peer-to-peer conversations. Get speakers to move about the room during table chats. Ask speakers to call out a place to meet after the session to continue the conversation.

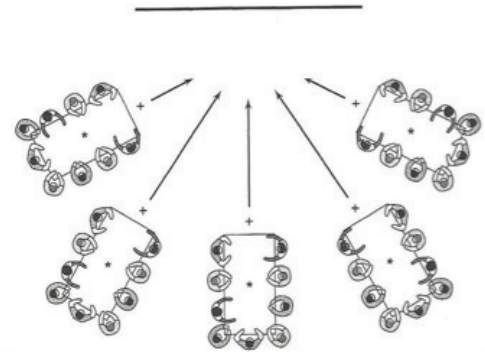
### → **Program Enough White Space (aka Free Time)**

Fifteen minute breaks between sessions is not enough. A minimum of thirty minutes should be scheduled between each session. Our brains need more downtime for learning to stick.



## → Get More Creative with Room Sets

Theatre seating is too snug for extended chats and it's difficult to move about and connect with others. Classroom seating is slightly better, but it's still designed for all eyes up front. Crescent rounds work well for presentations that alternate between speaker presentations and table talk. If possible, create informal pod cluster seating (couches, chaises, etc.) within the room, even if it's just up front. Some meeting venues allow planners to move furniture from the pre-function space into the meeting room (get permission). Test out room sets that encourage discussion, like this one:



Adapted from Donald A. Bligh image of Buzz Groups in What's The Use Of Lectures.

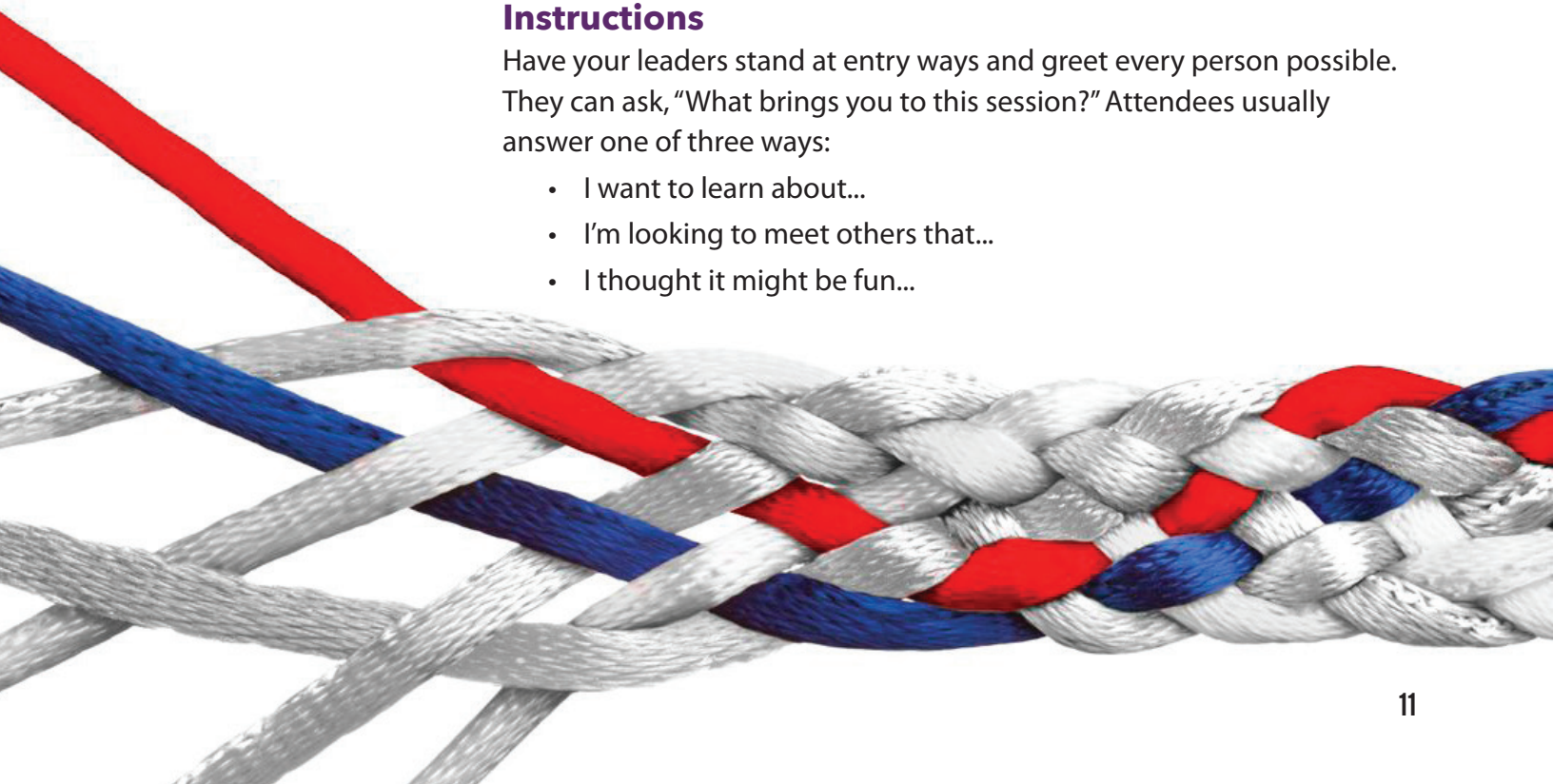
## → Coach Your Speakers

Industry speakers will likely struggle in leading these types of sessions, so you're going to need to provide coaching. Invest in presentation and audience engagement training for your speakers via webinars, videos and speaker tip sheets to help them develop their skills. While you're at it, make sure all staff and volunteers are also participating in this training. They'll come away with new skillsets that can be applied across your business.

## → Provide Your Army of Connectors with Artillery & Instructions

Have your leaders stand at entry ways and greet every person possible. They can ask, "What brings you to this session?" Attendees usually answer one of three ways:

- I want to learn about...
- I'm looking to meet others that...
- I thought it might be fun...





For each of these possible response sets, provide greeters with a list of people in the room who could be a resource and encourage them to broker introductions. Having your leaders and influencers modeling connexity will set the tone for everyone else to follow.

Make it clear to your staff, leadership and volunteers that hanging out in the back of session rooms is not an option. Once the session begins, they need to be elbow to elbow with the participants.

### ➔ **Use the Attendee List as a Registration Lure**

One of the biggest factors influencing conference attendance decisions is “Who else will be there?” In today’s time-constrained world, that decision factor grows ever stronger. Post a list of names, titles and companies in PDF format of those attending your conference to prompt others to register. Many will reach out to their existing connections to nurture those relationships.

### ➔ **Don’t Rob Your Attendees of Prime Networking Time**

Scale back, and we mean really scale back, on the amount of chest thumping and sponsor messaging during meal functions. Attendees are paying for a networking and learning experience. Every minute you waste by telling them what else they can buy from you or how many things you accomplished this year chips away from your conference promise.



# Link Networking With Innovation

We hear a lot about innovation today. It's a top priority of many C-suite executives.

Here's an interesting tidbit about innovators. They don't network in the traditional sense with a handshake, "Hi, how are you?" and business card swap. They network differently and we can learn a lot from them.

Hardly a week goes by without some new article or study about business innovation. Today, executives have an insatiable appetite for all things innovation.

IBM conducted a study with input from more than 1,700 CEOs and senior leaders from around the world. They investigated emerging strategies in the context of a digitally connected world. What did they discover was top-of-mind for the C-Suite?

- How do we amplify innovation?
- How can we mobilize our collective brain power for innovation?
- As collaboration grows, how can we manage the chaos, protect the business and deliver results?

As you might expect, the war for innovation talent is on. But there are only so many "Steve Jobs in the rough" out there... or are there? Many people see innovation skills as inherent. Either you're born with these "big idea" tendencies or you're not. Many people are wrong.







## Innovation Skills Can Be Learned

In *The Innovator's DNA: Mastering the Five Skills of Disruptive Innovators*, authors Jeff Dyer, Hal Gregersen and Clayton M. Christensen dispel the myth that innovation skills are genetically endowed. It's a skillset that can and should be acquired and nurtured. That's good news for conference organizers, as our events are fertile ground for this highly valued, skill-building experience.

In their research of 5,000 executives, the authors identified discovery skills that distinguish successful innovators from other executives. These include:

- **Questioning**

A passion for inquiry • Seeking to understand • High empathy • What is? • What if? • What caused this to happen? • Why? • Why not? • Provoking new possibilities and directions

- **Observing**

Observe customers and watch for workarounds • Alert for deviations • Customers don't always behave as we expect • Why did they do that? • Engage all the senses

- **Networking**

Linking ideas in your area with ideas from others who play in different sandboxes • Moving outside your sphere • Combining new concepts and perspectives with traditional ones

- **Experimenting**

Visit new places • Try new things • Scan the situation from new vistas • Pilot new projects • Deconstruct ideas • Map processes • Disassemble a process • Debrief, discuss and refine

Our conferences can become havens where participants immerse themselves in interactive learning labs and discussions to observe, learn and fine-tune their innovation skills.



But hold tight for a moment. There's one more overarching skill we need to introduce to complete the innovation puzzle.

## Innovators Network Different(ly)

The majority of executives today are delivery-driven types – the polar opposite of our innovators who are discovery driven. Delivery-driven executives favor networking opportunities where they can:

- Connect with like-minded individuals
- Connect with people who have the same or higher power, authority, influence and have access to resources
- Connect with individuals that might have solutions to their current problems
- Promote their company, promote themselves and continue their climb up the career ladder

The entire focus of traditional networking is transactional. People stuck in this outdated model are now perceived as network users, because they're only concerned about getting, not giving. It's all "me, me, me" and how can I get ahead? The innovators and netWORTHers, on the other hand, are more focused on others and how they can be a helpful resource to these people.



According to the authors of the Innovators DNA, innovators network differently. They favor opportunities where they can:

- Connect with different-minded people
- Encounter new and surprising information and perspectives they'd never think to search for
- Test out a few ideas "in process" and gain valuable insight to perfect ideas for launch





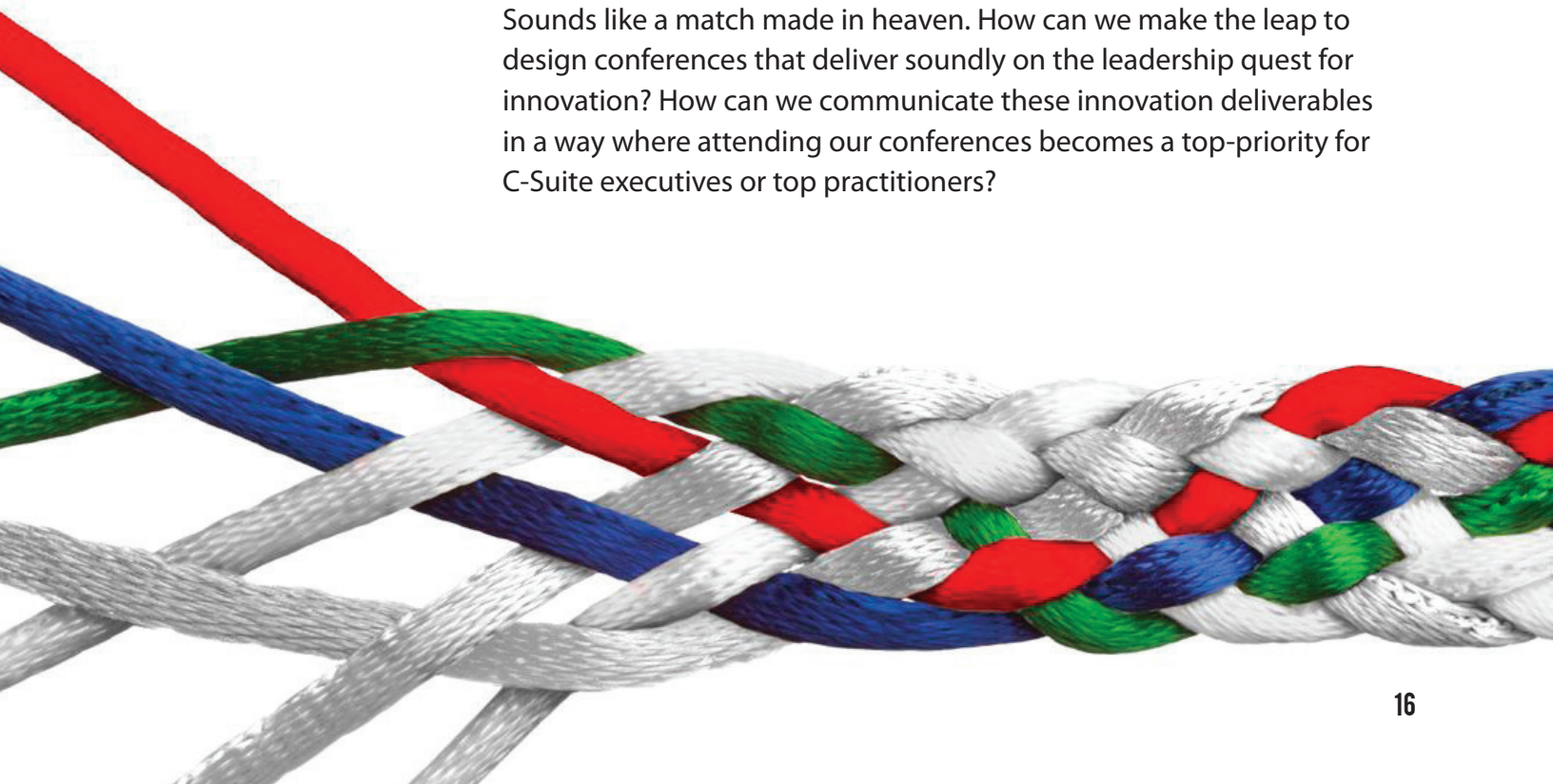
Innovators create idea networks where they can bounce ideas off of others for feedback. These idea networks help them think differently and see through a new lens. They purposefully remove themselves from echo chambers where everyone is just spouting the same thing over and over again. Their idea networks challenge them and even disagree with their thoughts.

## **Linking Innovation With Top Target Segments**

Today, delivery-driven executives are being asked to dial up the innovation within their organizations, but many are struggling. Now consider this:

- **Who are the most targeted audience segments for conferences?**  
C- and VP-level executives or top practitioners
- **Who are the most difficult people to get to commit to attending a conference?**  
C- and VP-level executives or top practitioners
- **When asked, “Who do you want to see most at this event?” – exhibitors and sponsors often say:**  
C- and VP-level executives or top practitioners
- **Who do participants want to network with most at conferences?**  
C- and VP-level executives or top practitioners

Sounds like a match made in heaven. How can we make the leap to design conferences that deliver soundly on the leadership quest for innovation? How can we communicate these innovation deliverables in a way where attending our conferences becomes a top-priority for C-Suite executives or top practitioners?



- **Position Conferences as Innovation Think Tanks**

Market your conference as a golden opportunity where executives can step out of the board room and immerse themselves in accelerated learning to build innovation skills, competencies and networks. Encourage leaders to bring their teams (particularly their rising stars) for your one-of-a-kind experience.

- **Highlight the Benefits of Networking with Different-Minded People**

Day in and day out, senior executives tend to be surrounded with like-minded people and agreeable types. Help executives see your conference as a valuable place where they can explore different perspectives and tap candid and constructive feedback to uncover new ideas.

There are many great stories in The Innovator's DNA. A favorite of ours is a story about Mike Lazaridis, an executive on the rise who attended a 1987 trade show in search of new ideas. At the time, his company provided tech solutions for the automotive industry, but they were struggling to retain and grow their market share. During the show, Mike heard a speaker discuss a wireless data system designed for Coca-Cola. That's when the big "aha" moment hit... combining wireless technology with computers. While that discovery may seem commonplace today, it was revolutionary for 1987. That revelation led to the birth of the Blackberry. Hey, they had a good run!

We want to help you create an outstanding event where these types of game-changing revelations happen more frequently.





## Chapter 2 Actionable Ideas:

### → Create Idea Exchange Network Sessions

These facilitated and structured sessions should be opportunities for attendees to meet others that are not like them with the goal of walking away with at least one idea that challenges them to think differently.

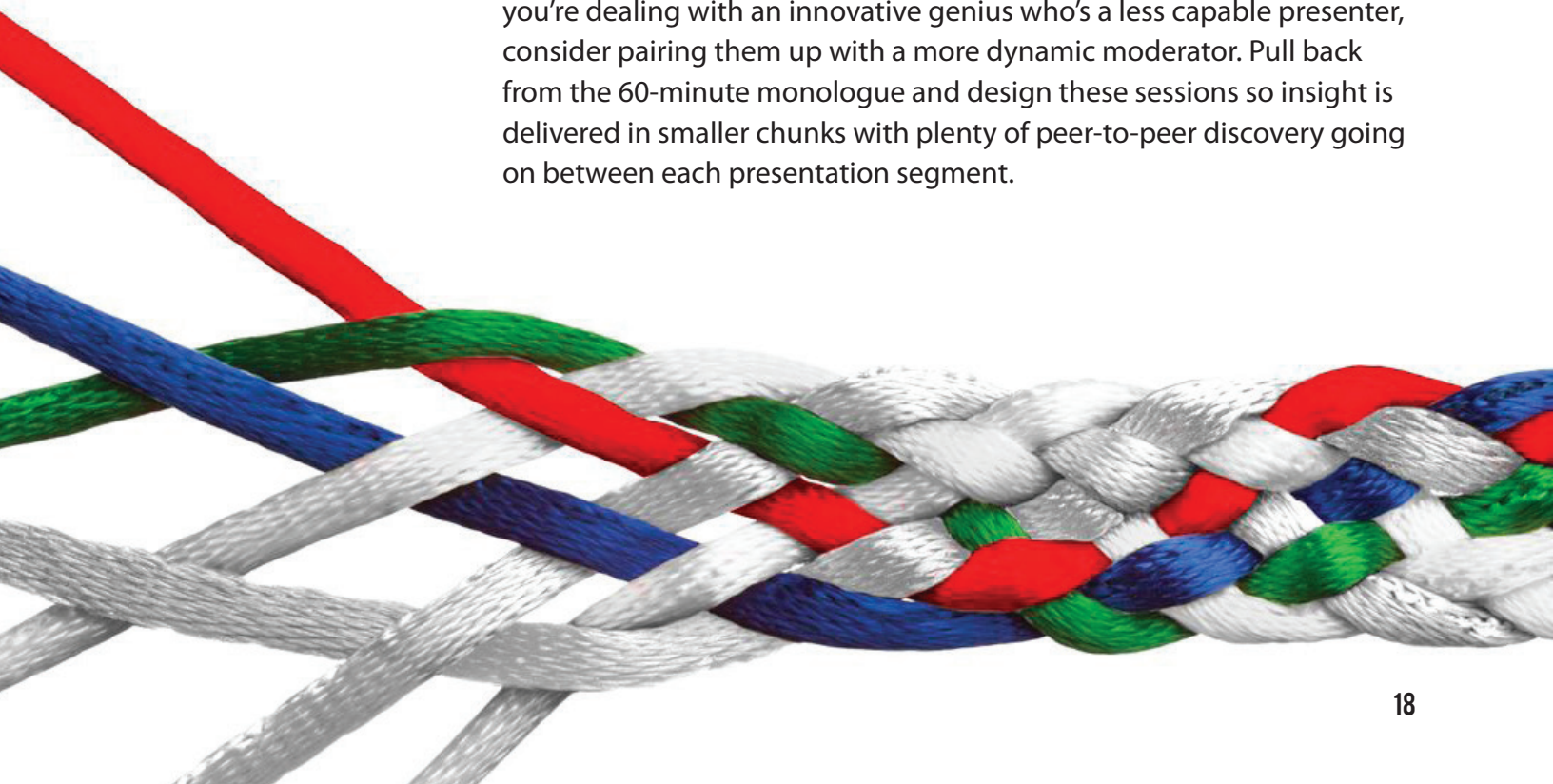
### → Consider Round Table Discussions Based on Unusual Ideas

Instead of traditional round tables each seeded with a specific industry topic, place unusual topics on the tables. Attendees are to find a group they want to join and discuss the topic. The last 15-20 minutes of the session can be devoted to how the topic has similarities to industry related issues or how the topic might serve as a metaphor for a larger industry issue.

### → Weave Innovation Thought Leaders into your Program

Your opening general session sets the tone for your conference. If innovation is a priority, consider a keynoter that helps ignite those conversations. The best speakers will likely not be from your industry, but will have a strong track record for customizing their talk for any industry. The more disruptive their message, the better.

Your industry innovators don't always make for the best speakers. If you're dealing with an innovative genius who's a less capable presenter, consider pairing them up with a more dynamic moderator. Pull back from the 60-minute monologue and design these sessions so insight is delivered in smaller chunks with plenty of peer-to-peer discovery going on between each presentation segment.



### → **Develop an Invitation Only - VIP Innovation Experience**

Within the context of your main program, develop an exclusive opportunity for a select number of VIP's to be part of a special experience. Scarcity (limited number of seats) and exclusivity (limited invitation) are critical for attracting the right audience. Perhaps program a working lunch with your opening keynoter to pick her brain. Or maybe schedule a special facilitated breakout that attempts to tackle one of your industry's biggest problems.

### → **Ditch the Standard Room Sets and Get Creative**

It's time to get more creative in room sets for these innovation sessions. Walk the talk and dazzle them with a room set that's unexpected. Work in imaginative visuals (posters, trinkets, toys, etc.) and consider hiring a graphic recorder who will capture highlights in vivid color while these sessions are going on. Add "sticky walls" where participants can create mind maps and move concepts and ideas around freely to reveal that next big breakthrough idea. Catalyst Ranch in Chicago puts this concept into practice best.

### → **Add a Big Ideas Lab or Innovation Lounge to Your Expo**

Design a hub of creativity that's highly visible for all to see. Consider incorporating Plexiglas walls, so passers-by can get a glimpse of ideation in action. Showcase the past year's best industry innovations. Schedule 15-minute TED-style talks in this space, where innovators can share their tales from field. Surround this area with casual seating clusters where innovators (and wannabe's) can gather for impromptu innovation chats.





## ➔ **Extend the Innovation Game**

Capitalize on this momentum with a strong line-up of post-conference communications and webcasts. Don't push everything out all at once. Drip these inspiration nuggets out, one at a time, but regularly. Keep these idea conversations going and your organization will soon be viewed as the gatekeeper for innovation communities.



# Unleash Planned Serendipity

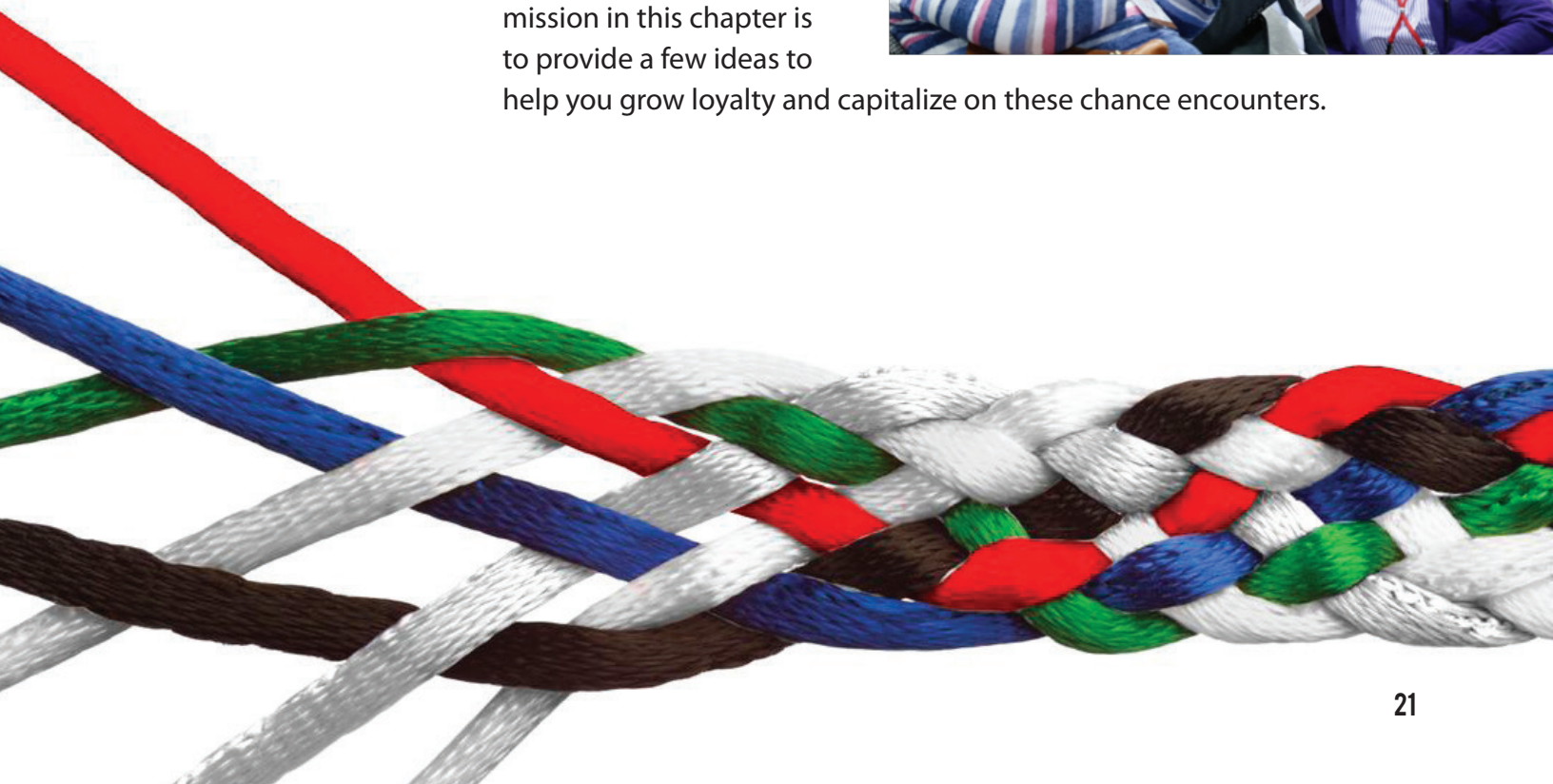
*“Sometimes serendipity is just intention unmasked.”*

— Elizabeth Berg

Serendipity is often described as a happy accident or surprising revelation that comes around when we least expect it. It’s a “stumble upon” moment when unlikely circumstances and people collide for mutual benefit. It’s when you find yourself sitting next to, in the elevator with, or bumping into exactly the person you needed to meet who made the whole conference worth it.

Wouldn’t it be great if we could gently guide the serendipity wheel to dispense these treasures more often and at more opportune times? Planned Serendipity is just that, where purposeful steps are taken to increase discoveries and connections.

We believe there are many opportunities for conference organizers to better leverage attendee data and insight to increase the likelihood and frequency of serendipity moments at conferences. Our mission in this chapter is to provide a few ideas to help you grow loyalty and capitalize on these chance encounters.





## Going Back to School

Planned serendipity is hardly a revelation for Wendy Holliday. She's been engaging this strategy successfully throughout her career. Wendy describes planned serendipity as "wonderful unexpected discoveries of things not sought for, but planned by outside forces."

While Wendy now serves as Vice President, Marketing and Member Services at the National Association of College Stores (NACS), it was earlier in her career while serving as Assistant Dean of Students at a university when this concept first caught her eye.

Keeping freshman dropout rates in check is a constant challenge for colleges and universities, particularly for freshman who live on campus. Recognizing this dilemma, the university strived to house freshmen studying the same major in the same dormitory buildings. By housing these students within close proximity of each other, they would share the same walk to class each morning. Through repeated exposure, new friendships would form... serendipitously. Before long, these students would feel a deeper sense of belonging, thus increasing their resolve to return the following year.

Think about the "singleton" and first-time attendees at conferences and trade shows. Might they be having some of these same freshman feelings of isolation at our conferences? How might you leverage proximity to drive more chance encounters?

Fast forward to today and Wendy's serendipity playbook has expanded greatly, as she applies many of these same strategies to help NACS members make faster and more qualified connections at their conferences.





## Volunteers as Serendipity Stewards

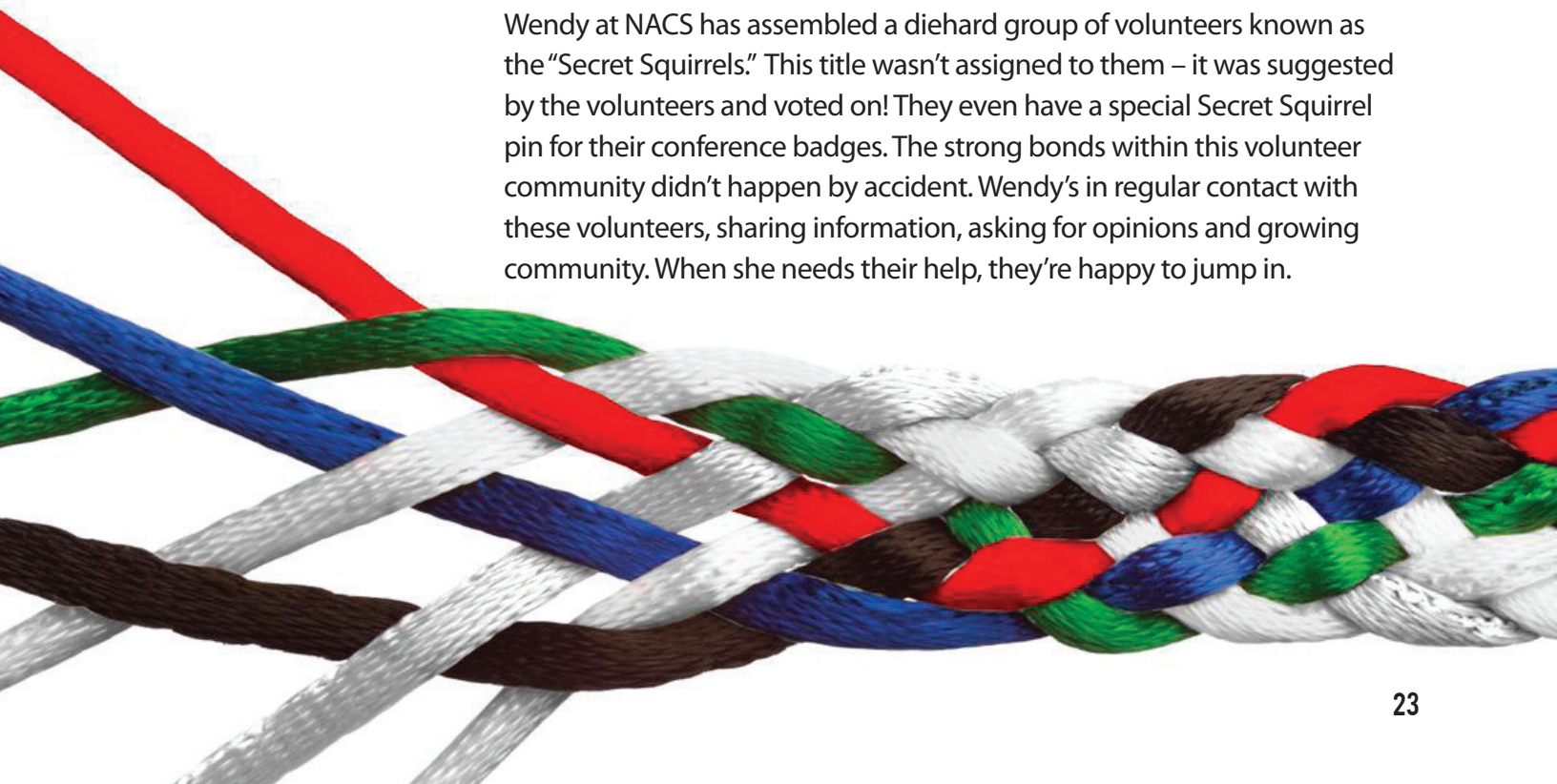
Promixity is just one part of the planned serendipity equation. People appreciate being noticed and invited to participate. Sometimes this happens organically. More often, it needs a little nudge. That's where your volunteers come in, as they help attendees not only connect with others, but explore best options for deeper community involvement through volunteerism.

Cynthia D'Amour is one of the best advocates for building community within associations. Her People Power Unlimited practice specializes in helping associations get members more engaged and involved. Cynthia recognizes that to get volunteers to step up as serendipity stewards, it's important that volunteers feel this same sense of connectedness to each other.

For this reason, as volunteers come together to prepare for a conference, Cynthia starts off their chat with a Claim to Fame share.

"Volunteers often serve in isolation. They participate in meetings, but they never get past 'Hi, I'm Cynthia.' When we take a few minutes to share a Claim to Fame that's happened since the last time we got together, the conversation opens up immediately. Often, these updates are about something in their personal life. 'How's the grandchild? Let me see pictures of the new puppy.' In an instant, these volunteers become more human. Trust is one of the four phases of team development. This type of sharing builds trust. Without trust, they'll never get to the serendipity part."

Wendy at NACS has assembled a diehard group of volunteers known as the "Secret Squirrels." This title wasn't assigned to them – it was suggested by the volunteers and voted on! They even have a special Secret Squirrel pin for their conference badges. The strong bonds within this volunteer community didn't happen by accident. Wendy's in regular contact with these volunteers, sharing information, asking for opinions and growing community. When she needs their help, they're happy to jump in.





## Mere Exposure as a Serendipity Accelerator

### The more I see you, the more I like you.

In social psychology circles, this is known as the mere exposure effect, where people develop stronger preferences for things (or people) as they become more familiar with them.

You'll see mere exposure at work in advertising. It's why we see the same TV commercial or the same magazine ad, repeated over and over. When a message is well designed, as exposure increases, buyer preferences begin to tip in favor of the advertiser.

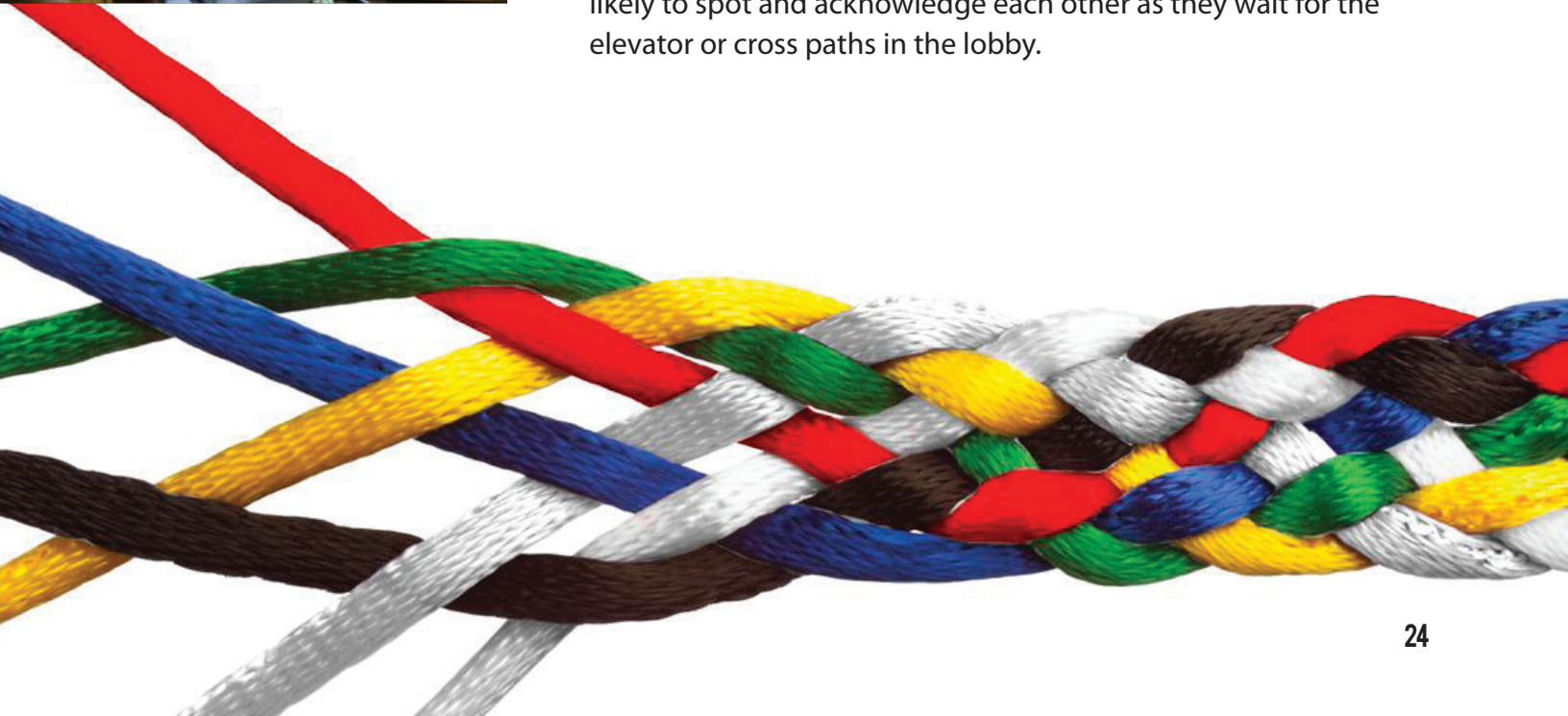
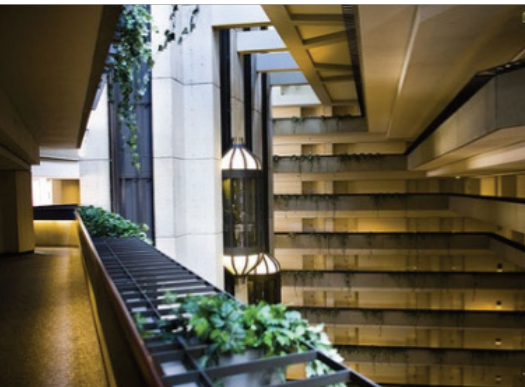
Let's flip this back to the conference and trade show world. How might we better leverage mere exposure to trigger more serendipitous connections and conversations? Here are a few ideas:

- **Learning Tracks**

When learning tracks are categorized by the attendee's problems to solve and session rooms for each track are within close proximity, mere exposure increases. Suddenly, the same people are navigating the same corridors and gathering around the same break tables. Conversely, if learning tracks are sorted by job function or more disparate criteria, participants are more likely to bounce around from one track to the next. Mere exposure decreases, meaning fewer chance encounters.

- **Hotel Rooms**

House like-minded conference guests on the same floors or building and mere exposure increases. If they've been attending some of the same sessions throughout the day, now they're more likely to spot and acknowledge each other as they wait for the elevator or cross paths in the lobby.



- **The Expo Floor**

At some trade shows, the expo floor is arranged by product category or pavilion. Exhibitors who offer similar solutions are

located in the same section. This not only sets the stage for more efficient booth visits for attendees; it also accelerates mere exposure. On the other hand, if exhibit space is a free for all, this makes for a more diverse array of exhibitors in any one aisle. As you might guess, mere exposure impact diminishes, but discovery increases.

Suffice it to say – the more planned serendipity is at work, the more your attendees will value your conference and continue to come back to the “watering hole” for more.



Take a look at this smart floor plan from the Sage Summit Live Expo, where each color-coded section represents a different solution set. Even better, each section had its own networking lounge!

## Serendipity to Create Vibrant Volunteer Communities

In Chapter 1, we made a case for recruiting volunteers to serve as an Army of Connectors, helping attendees meet others at the conference. We'd encourage you to take this volunteer strategy a step further and engage serendipity strategies to help volunteers build stronger connections with each other.





## Chapter 3 Actionable Ideas:

### → Know What Motivates Your Audience

Are they looking for more connections? More ideas? More learning? More fun and camaraderie? Understand the unique motivators for each targeted segment. Reach out and have some one-on-one conversations to test your assumptions. You can't plan for serendipity, if you're fuzzy on what the desired deliverables should be.

### → Create a Meet-up Around a Popular Social Media Discussion

Scan your LinkedIn, Facebook or community group discussions. Look for a recent topic or two that has attracted strong opinions and active discussion. Create a meet-up to informally continue the discussion in person. You'll attract the like-minded individuals that were part of the conversation and some lurkers, too.

### → Clean Up Your Data

As you gain a deeper understanding about who's coming to your event and what's most important to these individuals, you'll need to capture this data in a way that's easy to access, sort and filter by any number of criteria. A scattered or incomplete database will be a drag on serendipity speed. Consider using tags to track and identify common interests.

### → Get Your Host Facility Involved

There are a ton of ways that your hotel or meeting venue can help accelerate connections. Besides housing your attendees in close proximity to one another, ask them to offer group seating in restaurants or lounges. Encourage them to strike up conversations with guests on the shuttle bus or front desk to draw others in.



### ➔ **Create Small Within the Big**

Create meet-ups, competitions or receptions for smaller targeted segments. If everyone's congregating for a reception in a grand ballroom, create a few gathering spots within the ballroom for each smaller group. Make sure there's good signage, so they can find it. Place conversation hubs outside the session rooms or in the exhibit hall. Color code badges or provide ribbons for special interest groups, so they can spot like-minded colleagues more easily. Leverage the mobile app at every opportunity to increase serendipity connection speed. Use push notifications within the app to announce gatherings (The Chemical Engineers Meet-Up is starting in 10 minutes at the Big Idea Lounge.)

### ➔ **Go the Extra-Mile in Welcoming and Connecting First-Timers - Ditto for "Lone Rangers"**

Attending a conference for the first time can be overwhelming. Host a special first-timer reception, away from the maddening crowds. Make them feel special, appreciated, and then get busy connecting them to others. Recruit conference veterans to mentor and check in with first-timers. If you have a significant number of first-timers, create a special lounge, too. Don't forget to apply some of this same TLC for those attending solo from their company. Make sure you're introducing these singletons to others to ensure that they have a rewarding and profitable conference networking experience.





## **Now, It's Up to You**

Conference and trade show organizers need to foster connexity and strive to create communities that hold meetings to connect, rather than hold a meeting where community is layered on as an afterthought. Those that do will continue to thrive, as members return year after year (and bring others) to get their fill of community and connection.

The conference connexity economy is here. The question is: How will your organization capitalize on it?



## About Velvet Chainsaw Consulting

Velvet Chainsaw Consulting (VCC) is the leading choice for conference and trade show organizers looking to grow or transform their major face-to-face programs. We provide expert advice for providing premium education and networking experiences that result in increased loyalty and revenue. With laser focus on the attendee experience, the VCC team will study every aspect of your business model and value proposition. We customize our recommendations for each client project.

VCC is comprised of a team of industry experts who are change agents for where conferences and tradeshow need to evolve. Clients engage us for large projects to solve these problems:

- Improving attendee acquisition & loyalty (including next generation participants)
- Differentiating with premium learning experiences
- Fostering more connections & community
- Increasing exhibit/sponsor sales & value

We'd welcome an opportunity to chat with you to better understand how you're tackling these issues and determine if VCC would be a good fit.

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