Blogs, mash-ups and wikis – new tools for evaluating event objectives: A case study on the LIFT06 conference in Geneva

Glenn O'Neil
Benchpoint Ltd and International University in Geneva, Switzerland

This case study examines the evaluation of the impact of a major conference on its participants. Combining traditional research methods and the experimental use of new technological tools such as wikis, blogs and mash-ups, the author designs and tests a framework for event evaluation. Through analysing the data collected, the author shows to what extent the knowledge, attitudes and behaviour of participants was influenced by their participation in the LIFT06 conference. The limitations of this model and suggested future research are also discussed.

Introduction

Events have always taken an important role as an activity of public relations and in the wider business world. For many years, the event has been recognised as a key activity of public relations (Grunig, 1984). This case study will look at an attempt by the author to evaluate the impact of an event on its participants. The evaluation uses a combination of methods, traditional research methods such as surveys and interviews combined with the experimental use of new technological tools such as *wikis*, *blogs* and *mash-ups* (these terms are explained below).

Evaluation and Events

One of the most widely accepted models for the evaluation of PR activities is based on a three level approach: output, outtakes and outcomes (Lindenmann, 2003). Within this model, evaluation of events is mentioned specifically in the case of output; what is generated as a result of a PR activity and in the case of events, the number of people in attendance. Of much more interest, however, is the level of outcomes: changes to knowledge, attitude and behaviour as a result of a PR activity. And more precisely, in terms of an event, did participants' knowledge, attitudes or behaviours change as a result of participating in the event? In this field of study, considerable research and case studies have been documented (Watson & Noble 2005, Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2004). The majority of these studies focus on evaluating the outcome of a combination of PR activities and not specifically on the impact of events. A recent guide on measuring event sponsorship (Jeffries-Fox, 2005) points out that only a small percentage of events are evaluated due to the lack of evaluation know-how amongst PR professionals.

Outside of the PR evaluation field, a significant body of research has been developed in the field of learning evaluation, in particular in relation to adult education and training. If it is assumed that an event has a learning aspect to it, then certain parallels can be drawn with this body of work. A widely known model for the evaluation of adult learning is "Kirkpatrick's model" (Kirkpatrick, 1998). Kirkpatrick proposed four stages of learning that can be evaluated: reaction, learning, behaviour and results. The literature in this field points out that the majority of evaluation of learning often focuses on "reaction" – did participants like the learning activity and find it useful? (Guskey, 2000). As for the different levels of PR evaluation, of more interest in learning evaluation is the "behaviour" and "results" stages – how do participants apply what they have learnt (behaviour) and what is the overall impact in the working place (results). Consequently, for this case study, the evaluation methodology was developed drawing on elements from both the PR and adult learning fields.

About LIFT06

The LIFT06 conference took place in Geneva, Switzerland on February 2 and 3 2006. The conference focused on emerging technologies and their impact on society. Its aim, as stated on its website, was to:

> Connect people who are passionate about new applications of technology and propel their conversations into the broader world to improve. (LIFT website home page, www.lift06.org, 2006)

Over two days, the conference featured 31 guest presentations and was attended by 285 delegates, mainly from Europe. The conference was organised by a group of practitioners and academics active in the web and technology fields.

Methodology

In collaboration with the LIFT team, an evaluation framework was developed by the author. This framework (**Table 1**) established three levels of evaluation for the event:

Table 1: Evaluation Framework for LIFT06

Evaluation Objectives	Key Measures	Research Methods	Data Sources
Immediate reaction of participants to LIFT06	- Quality - Relevance - Planned actions	Participant survey Participant interviews Program wiki	Participants Participants through posts to wiki
Change to knowledge and attitudes of participants as a result of LIFT06	- Knowledge - Attitudes	Participant survey Blog monitoring	Participants Participants' blogs Mash-up feed
Changes to behaviour of participants as a result of LIFT06	- Actions undertaken - Initiatives launched - Contacts made	Participant survey Post-LIFT survey	Participants

The research methodology combined qualitative and quantitative methods. Following is a description of the research methods used.

Participant survey: An online survey was created focusing on the key measures as described above. This survey contained close-ended and open-ended questions, producing both qualitative and quantitative data.

Participants received an email invitation to participate in the survey: 173 participants out of a total of 285 completed the survey. Given the 60% response rate, this conforms to an acceptable sample size for a population with a finite size (Patten, 1997).

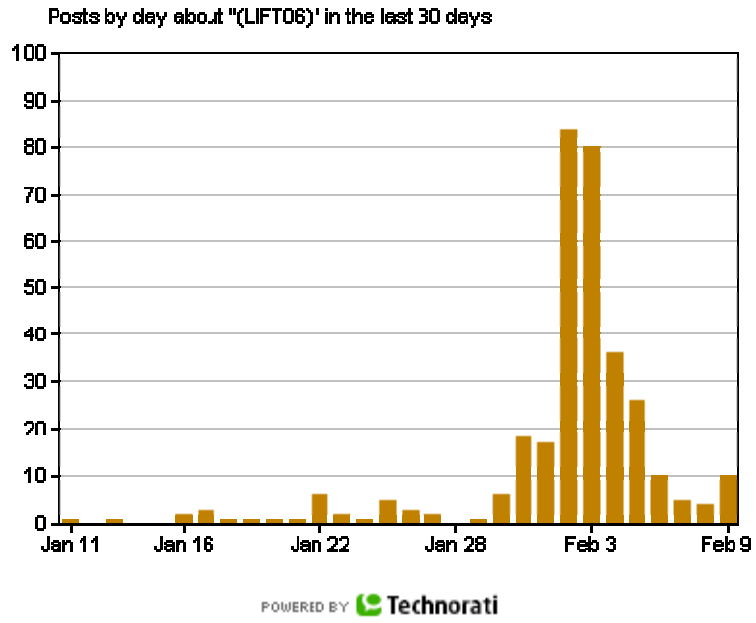
Participant interviews: During the conference, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 participants. Most interviews lasted between 15-20 minutes and participants were selected randomly.

Program wiki: A *wiki* is a type of website that allows anyone visiting the site to add, to remove, or otherwise to edit all content, very quickly and easily, sometimes without the need for registration. On the conference website, every speaker had one web page established for them. These web pages were wiki-enabled and participants and speakers were encouraged to leave comments directly on these web pages. In addition, a central feedback wiki-enabled page was established on the website. The concept of the wiki feedback page allowed participants to contribute random thoughts about the conference without being constrained by themes chosen by the researcher, similar to the concept of open-ended question (Bowen, Krosnick & Weisberg, 1996). In addition, it should be taken into account that according to a rough headcount by the author during the conference, some 20-30% of participants had laptops with them and were able to access the Internet and thus contribute to these wiki pages.

Blog monitoring: A blog (or weblog) is a website in which messages are posted and displayed with the newest at the top. During the conference, over 20 participants were actively posting their reactions and thoughts concerning the conference on to their own blogs. A search of blog posts mentioning LIFT06 produces over 680 posts (retrieved 10 April 2006 from http://www.technorati.com/search/LIFT06).

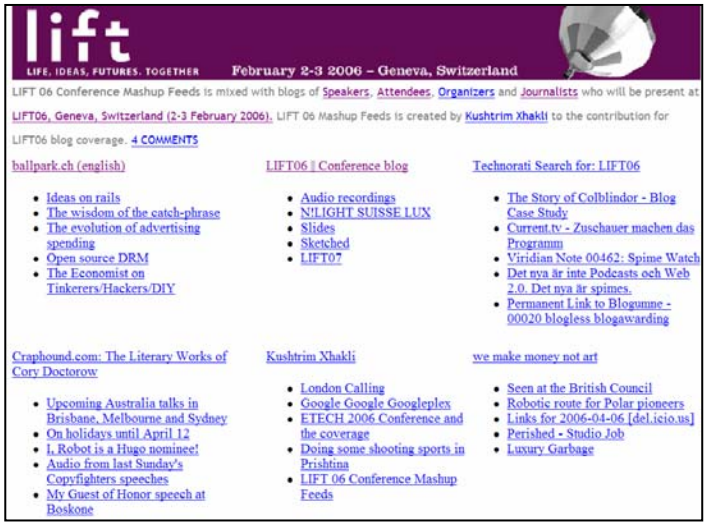
During the conference, a peak in posts mentioning LIFT06 could be seen, as displayed in this monitoring chart:

Table 2: Number of Blog Posts on LIFT06: 11 January to 9 February 2006



Through a mash-up page created by a conference participant, a number of these blog posts could be monitored and analysed using traditional content analysis methods. A *mash-up* is a website or web application that combines content from more than one source into a single web page. 50 blog posts were selected randomly and analysed.

Table 3: Mash-Up Page of LIFT06 Blog Posts



Post-LIFT survey: An online survey will be created to assess longer term impact on participants six months after the conference. As the conference occurred in February 2006, the survey will be sent to select participants in July 2006. This survey will follow the idea of a post-impact survey as recommended in the results phase of learning evaluation (Phillips & Stone, 2002).

Results

Based on analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data, the following conclusions were drawn:

Immediate reactions of participants: Drawing on the participant survey, the wiki feedback pages and interviews, the level of participant satisfaction and assessment of key quality variables (programme, administration, facilities, social events, etc.) could be assessed. These findings were useful to the conference organisers in adjusting and planning future events, usually the main use of such findings for learning evaluation (Phillips & Stone, 2002).

Change to knowledge and attitudes of participants: The author proposes that there were enough indicators to support the conclusion that the conference did result in a change to what participants know, think and feel about emerging technology. Although the research did not have the scope to place hard quantifiable figures on the percentage of participants where change could be seen, based on self-assessment measures, a large majority of participants indicated knowledge (82%) and attitudinal (70%) change as a result of the conference.

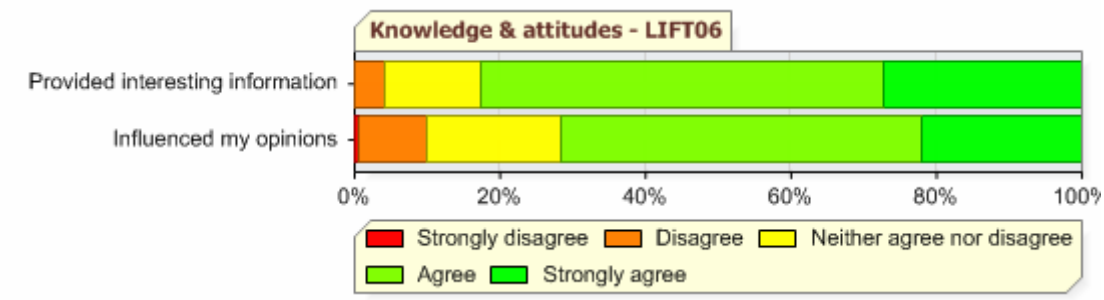
Two main sources were used to assess whether changes to knowledge and attitude had occurred: response to the participant survey and the analysis of blog posts.

Participant survey: A self-assessment measure, often used in learning evaluation (Phillips & Stone, 2002) was used in the participant survey. Specifically, participants were asked to what extent they agreed with the following statements:

> LIFT06 provided me with interesting information on the usage of emerging technologies (knowledge variable)
>
> LIFT06 has influenced what I think about the usage of emerging technologies (attitude variable)

Table 4 shows responses to these questions:

Table 4: Changes to Knowledge & Attitude



Consequently, 82% of participants indicated a change to their knowledge and 70% to their attitudes concerning emerging technologies. In an open-ended question of the survey, participants were asked:

> As a result of attending LIFT06, what will be of greatest use to you for your daily activities (work, study, etc.)?

An analysis of the responses indicates 25% of participants' own description of the greatest use in attending the conference could be described as a knowledge or attitudinal change. Following is a sample of these responses:

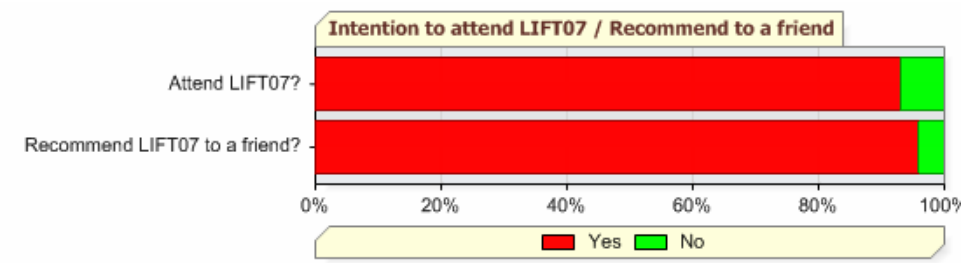
> LIFT was helpful for stirring up some cross-disciplinary ideas and re-evaluating our current thinking about technology in society.
>
> Actually; I'm still thinking how to use all of the different ideas I got from the conference. I'm thinking of getting a new job; but I'm still unsure in which field. Now I'm actually thinking of going tech.

In addition, another variable that can be measured by attitudinal research is the intention to act (Lindenmann, 2002). Within the participant survey, two questions focused on the intention to act, notably:

> At this stage, do you plan to attend the next LIFT conference in 2007?
>
> Would you recommend the next LIFT conference in 2007 to a friend?

The responses to these questions are shown on **Table 5**:

Table 5: Intention to attend LIFT07/ Recommend LIFT07 to a Friend



Consequently, 93% of participants expressed their intention to attend the LIFT conference in 2007 and 96% expressed willingness to recommend LIFT 2007 to a friend.

Blog monitoring: Through analysing blog posts using both a quantitative content analysis method (often used for media monitoring) and a qualitative analysis method (often used for analysing open-ended questions) (Broom and Dozier, 1990), a number of conclusions could be drawn.

The 50 blog posts were categorised in terms of content as following: 62% as positive, 30% as neutral and 8% as negative. Although many of the posts were reactions and comments on individual speakers, 26% of the posts could be described as displaying knowledge or attitudinal change. Following are some examples of the blog posts:

> And just think; if I had never gone to LIFT06 I would not be feeling anything like this strongly about the issue.

> I leave this conference with many more fresh ideas that I have trouble getting any sleep for fear of forgetting them. It was exciting, encouraging, fascinating and completely conversational.

An interesting result of the blog monitoring was that 26% of the blog posts selected randomly were by people that did not attend the conference. This case study focuses on the impact of the conference on participants, but it is interesting to note that the conference generated discussions and interests outside the immediate circle of participants.

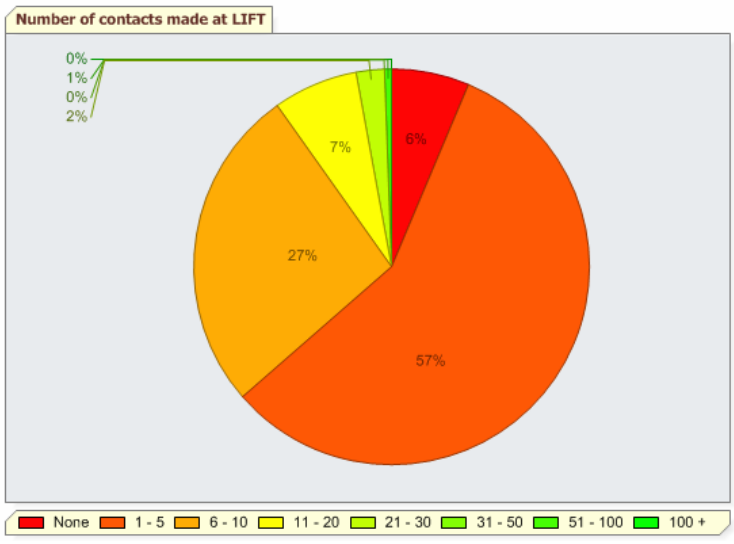
Change to behaviour: The author proposes that the research indicates that for certain specific changes in behaviour that occurred during or just after the conference, such as establishing new contacts or commencing a new work activity, these changes could be largely attributed to the participants' attendance at the conference.

Measuring behaviour often requires multiple data collection tools and techniques (observations, participation and experiments) in order to show the relationship between the change being observed and the given activity (Lindenmann, 2002). In an event setting, the impact of the event on the behaviour change is easier to identify. Through several questions in the participant survey, it was possible to assess a change in behaviour that could be largely attributed to attending the conference. For example, a close-ended question of the survey was:

> How many interesting contacts (people) do you estimate you met at LIFT06 that will be of use for your own professional network?

Table 6 shows responses to this question:

Table 6: Number of Contacts made at LIFT06



More than half of the participants established contacts with between one and five people at the conference and overall 94% of participants met new people. Given that one of the key aims of the conference was to "connect people", it could be assessed that conference did largely contribute to the establishment of new contacts for the high majority of participants.

In addition, in responding to the open-ended question cited above about the greatest use of attending the conference, 15% of responses could be described as indicating behaviour change. Following is a sample of these responses:

> Started a blog; have a renewed sense of the potential of internet communication.
>
> It has given me the quick to start building a website (with a blog service!) for a Geneva association.
>
> Got a new partnership there.
>
> Prompted me to move ahead with a major new project

Conclusions

The aim of the LIFT06 conference was to connect people and stimulate an ongoing discussion on the theme of emerging technologies and society. The analysis produced by this study indicates that the conference was successful in influencing what the majority of participants know, think and feel about emerging technology. In addition, the conference was responsible for limited and select behaviour change amongst participants: putting them in contact with new people and initiating new professional activities for some individuals.

Therefore, could this experience serve as a model for evaluating the impact of events in general? Firstly, the limitations of the research methods of this study should be recognised. The methods used rely largely on self-assessment of change and interpretation of written testimonies of participants and are therefore indirect measures of change. Some scholars in this field would argue that this is not sufficient to evaluate knowledge, attitude or behaviour change (Broom & Dozier, 1990) and that the variables must be measured over time to show long-term change. On the other hand, multiple and long-term tracking of change is often used to ensure correct isolation of the factors that are producing a change being observed. In the author's opinion, this is not necessary in an event situation: a change in behaviour (such as meeting a new person) can be directly accredited to the attendance at the event. These potential limitations and issues should be known and taken into consideration if this model is to be used. Secondly, this model could be supplemented by more in-depth analysis of the changes being observed: what was the nature of the change in attitudes – mental and cognitive dispositions, emotional or motivational tendencies? (Lindenmann, 2002). Thirdly, if this model was used for another event, the event in question would need to have clear objectives – what was the event expected to change for the participants. The LIFT06 conference had a clear behavioural objective (establish professional contacts for participants) that was relatively easy to measure.

The use of new technology and evaluation

The small experience of blog monitoring and analysis made for this study illustrates the richness of the content of this medium. Although blogging is a new phenomenon in terms of Internet communication, the use of participant logs and journals as an evaluation method is not new. It is an often used qualitative tool in evaluating the behaviour phase of learning (Guskey, 2000). Learning logs offer researchers insight into participants' changes in attitudes, concerns and practices. Blog posts can be analysed in a similar fashion if it is recognised that blogs are not set up solely for the purpose of tracking change in participants, as learning logs are.

During the conference, another potential research source was discovered. It was found that some 10% of participants were communicating with each other using a collaborative note taking application. This allowed participants to exchange comments, views and links in one document while watching a presentation. The random and open nature of these documents, as for wiki-enabled feedback pages, could be interesting sources of information for researchers in the future.

Measuring attitudes or opinions?

Although the author asserts that there are enough indicators pointing towards a change in attitudes, the author recognises that research in this field indicates that what has been measured are in fact changes to opinion and not attitudes.

> We use "opinion" to mean the predisposition expressed in a particular situation. "Attitude" refers to the predisposition carried from one situation to another. (Broom & Dozier, 1990: 42)

Based on this definition, this study had looked at changes in opinions as there has been no possibility to compare the change in predisposition in different situations. The planned use of a post-conference survey may provide further insight and clarity concerning this issue.

Change in behaviour over time

In this study, it was possible to isolate specific changes to behaviour that could, in the author's opinion, be attributed to participating in the conference. What will be of interest is the number of participants that repeat or sustain a change to behaviour, an indication of the value of the behaviour change (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2004). The above-mentioned post conference survey will hopefully provide more useful findings on this point.

References

Bowen, B., Krosnick J., & Weisberg H. (1996). *An introduction to survey research, polling and data analysis* (3rd ed.). California:

Broom, G.M., & Dozier, D.M. (1990). *Using research in public relations: applications to program management.* New Jersey: Prentice

Cutlip, S., Center, A., & Broom G. (2004). *Effective public relations* (9th Edition).New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Grunig, J.E., & Hunt, T. (1984). *Managing public relations*. London: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Guskey, T. (2000). *Evaluating professional development.* California: Corwin Press.

Jeffries-Fox, B. (2005). *A guide to measuring event sponsorship.* Retrieved April 1, 2006 from http://www.instituteforpr.org/pdf/BJF_Event_Evaluation.pdf

Kirkpatrick, D. (1998). *Evaluating training programs: The four levels* (2nd Ed.). San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers

Lindenmann, W. (2002). *Guidelines for measuring the effectiveness of PR programs and activities*. Retrieved April 1, 2006 from http://www.instituteforpr.org/pdf/2002_Guidelines_Standards_Book.pdf.

Patten, M. (1977). *Understanding research methods: an overview of essentials*. Los Angeles: Pyrczak.

Phillips, J., & Stone R. (2002). *How to measure training results.* New York: McGraw Hill.

Watson, T., & Noble P. (2005). *Evaluating public relations: A best practice guide to public relations planning, research & evaluation*. London: Kogan Page.

Address for Correspondence

Glenn O'Neil, MSc, Benchpoint Ltd
Chemin du Martinet 2C, CH-1291
Commugny, Switzerland.
Tel: +41 76 325 6213
Email: oneil@benchpoint.com
Blog:
http://intelligentmeasurement.wordpress.com/