How the Internet Connects Knowledge

HICK TECH

Learn from the chair of HICK Tech how to roll out your own community event. **BY EMMA JANE HOGBIN**

In the land of milk, honey, and the Internet, it is possible to become disengaged from the physical community that surrounds us. HICK Tech started in 2007 in a small Canadian town as a one-day community technology conference. Since then, the conference has grown into a community technology consulting service with international speaking engagements [1][2]. In a region in which dial-up Internet connections are still common, HICK Tech has found some unexpected successes that might surprise urbanites and rural dwellers alike. The lessons learned from HICK Tech are applicable to communities of all shapes and sizes [1].

Know Your Strengths

My first year, I tried hard to make HICK Tech just like my favorite big-city conferences. We are not a Web 2.0 community. So in my second year, I bought cowboy boots and relaxed into the experience I was providing. HICK Tech now focuses on local: local speakers, local food, and the local hockey rink for the venue. All food served at the 2008 conference was grown, caught, or produced within 100 miles of the venue (with the exception of coffee). Food brought people together. You've probably never shared your experience of drinking a Diet Coke, but fresh maple syrup–sweetened cookies made from locally grown and milled flour creates a flavor that has to be shared, not to mention the local beer. Starting with a bag piper and ending with a jazz duo, music became a shared experience, as well. At your event, figure out what is unique and relevant to your region. Make it as important as the technology to help put a human face on the experience you are providing [2].

Attract Real People

For many conference organizers involved in a technical community, it is easy to create a dream list of speakers, but it is much harder to list people who will definitely attend an event on a specific date sometime in the future. I have come to realize a single client empowered to ask the right kinds of questions is as valuable – if not more so – than a developer who's learned a new time-saving trick. HICK Tech focuses on engaging and empowering the kinds of people that I want to work with. Look beyond the usual suspects. In my community, the early adopters of technology include grandmothers connecting with their grandkids via Facebook. These women are part of the local matriarchy – they are experts at networking and very good at convincing their friends (and husbands) to participate in events. Consider it viral marketing honed over 50 years to a very fine art.

Ensure your participants can see themselves reflected in the speaker line-up. One of the best presentations I had at the first HICK Tech conference was delivered by the local animal shelter.

The Animal Control Officer is a self-proclaimed technophobe, but she is an amazing storyteller. The story of how her website went from seven visitors a day to 7,000 is both charming and incredibly powerful. Not only do attendees want to be educated, they want to be inspired and entertained, and Renee delivered on all counts. Choose your speakers for their expertise as well as their ability to engage an audience. Talk to your speakers on the phone. Remember that it is better to have fewer speakers who are inspirational than a roster of presentations that bore or confuse people.

Ask Others to Share Their Passion

The easiest way to get great speakers is to ask people you admire. In my first year, I requested session descriptions from the presenters; in my second year, I relied on the personalities and the expertise of my speakers. Both approaches work, but allowing speakers to talk about their current passion can be more engaging for the audience. The inspiration for this comes from the TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) conference. Videos of the presentations from this conference are available online [3].

Sponsorships

After you have a rough vision for your event (including at least a third of your speakers confirmed), you can start approaching businesses for sponsorships.

Figure 1: Nora Young leads the panel discussion. Pictured from left to right: Meg Pickard (guardian.co.uk), Sean McGivern (Saugeen Specialty Grains), Glen Estill (Sky Generation wind turbines), Leigh Honeywell (hacker), Nora Young (CBC Radio).

Target those businesses that should be represented at your event, and target the ones that are useful to your delegates. For example, in my second year, my Premier Sponsor was Everus Communications, a wireless line-of-sight Internet Service Provider.

Local businesses support local efforts. Paying for advertising in a community newspaper resulted in a registration. Buying a computer from a small business resulted in a conference sponsorship. Think about where you shop – if you tend to buy local, you have already started to develop the relationships you need to run a successful conference. Also, ask for in-kind sponsorships. HICK Tech has received in-kind sponsorships for venue rental, newspaper advertising, and food from local producers.

Don't forget that magazines, newspapers, and radio stations are also in the business of sharing news. Write a summary of your event and send it to all the local news purveyors – from the weekly free publication at the grocery store, to the largest media organization that distributes to your region – and send your media release to relevant trade magazines, too.

Be aware of your timing. Print magazines generally go to press up to two months before they are released on newsstands, whereas daily radio, news, and print media can often respond to a short lead time.

Marketing

Find those people who are interested in being champions for your event, and ask them what tools they need to convince others to come too. Tools could include brochures or an email people can forward to their personal network. Listen to them talking about your conference and learn the sound bites to use when talking to others. Encourage your marketing champions to personalize the message they send to others. By including their endorsement, you are more likely to get buy-in from the people they contact.

Be aware of things happening in your community, and offer tickets to your event as a prize. In my second year, I gave away 10 free tickets at local events. Even though none were redeemed (therefore costing me nothing), the promotional exposure resulted in additional advertising for HICK Tech.

Figure 2: Don't underestimate the power of food.

You can offer your own registrants perks for doing promotion for you. For example, ask one of your sponsors to donate a prize to the person who refers the most registrants. The sponsor will be happy to get additional exposure for their own business, you get free word-of-mouth marketing. Everyone loves a freebie – people are naturally competitive and many will spend more time promoting your conference than it would have taken to earn the money required to buy the prize.

Make Registration Easy

Make the registration process easy, and then make it easier again. In the first year, I had an online registration process that included PayPal payments. Some corporations insisted they could not use a credit card to register online. Payment mattered to me more than the process, so I opted to issue invoices and accept checks. In my second year, I adapted the registration process – I allowed people to register online without paying. Payments could be remitted by credit card via PayPal or via a paper-based check. When attending conferences, I have used some exceptional online conference registration systems that include airport shuttle bus and hotel bookings (DrupalCon 2008), and I know you can only pay for DEFCON with cash. Make it easy for your delegates to say yes to your conference in whatever way is most convenient for them.

Do charge at least a small amount to attend your event. Charging a fee forces people to commit their time. Be clear in what you want from your participants, and in what they will receive for participating. From its participants, HICK Tech wanted a day of time and US$ 150. In return, the event gave attendees a sense of community and the confidence to explore technology.

Is It Worth It?

A one-day conference costs me hundreds of hours of my time, and the financial return does not match this investment at my full contract rate. So is it worth it? Absolutely! The HICK Tech initiative has expanded my personal and professional network – and even my client base. More importantly, it has started a huge ripple in my local community. I know of many connections that were made at my conference, and I am proud to have facilitated those discussions.

Technology conferences are typically industry specific and focus on learning discrete units of obscure information and networking between geeks – this is my idea of a good time, too. But my dream is world domination of free and open source software. To realize this dream, we need to turn outward and attract a new market. Community conferences help to engage new users. By the end of the conference, delegates felt inspired to learn more about technology because of the day's human connections and humanized technology. In the closing announcements, I pointed delegates to the bottom of their cloth bags, where they found an Ubuntu CD, of course. ■

THE AUTHOR

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