



Analysing and implementing participant feedback from conferences can greatly enhance future events.

COLLECT FEEDBACK TO IMPROVE YOUR EVENT EXPERIENCE

Nature speaks to four conference organizers who share the art of the feedback form.

Scientific conference feedback forms have evolved as the COVID-19 pandemic has forced events online. Usually handed out to departing attendees as they booked taxis to airports and railway stations, the paper forms, often running into the hundreds, were collected to analyse audience feedback about talks, seminars, poster presentations, lunchtime networking and evening receptions, and to gather suggestions for improvements.

Virtual events are an opportunity to rethink how feedback is solicited and acted on (see

'Getting answers'). If you're new to running an event and want to find out what your delegates, speakers and sponsors thought, you could benefit from the tips of four event organizers.

LINCOLN LAUHON MAKE USE OF TECHNOLOGY

I first got involved with the Materials Research Society (MRS) as a symposium organizer 12 years ago. It was a great way for

an early-career researcher to get experience in organizing meetings, and I now chair the meetings committee, where I help to coordinate the work of MRS staff and the organizing team to put on large events with 5,000–6,000 attendees from around the world.

At MRS, a dedicated committee solicits feedback from symposium attendees and organizers to improve future meetings. This was especially useful during the pandemic, because meeting formats had to evolve to accommodate virtual audiences. Feedback led to us adjusting our schedule of live events, for example by scheduling plenary lectures in the morning for the United States and shifting afternoon symposia later in the evening so that researchers from Asia could participate.

We are also experimenting with ways to improve the virtual meeting experience for poster presenters. We will hold live poster-awards sessions and advertise posters in oral sessions to attract viewers and enhance the visibility of young researchers. Previously, winners were announced over e-mail, which didn't attract as much attention as we'd like. Because ideas such as these are new, it makes collecting feedback even more valuable. We are hoping to organize a hybrid meeting – part-in-person and



Lincoln Lauhon chairs the meetings committee of the Materials Research Society.

part-virtual – this year, and integrating feedback from our previous physical and virtual meetings will be very handy.

We are also increasing efforts to engage early-career researchers in society activities such as chairing meetings, and feedback forms will be crucial to help us understand how they would like to be involved. The MRS website provides information about volunteering, but we were told that it does not seem welcoming to the diverse volunteers we aim to attract. This was, we found, because it failed to give enough detail about the responsibilities and profiles of current planning-committee members – whom volunteers often want to reach out to with questions. The feedback provided us with ideas for how to get more young researchers involved, including the formation of special-interest groups to build connections around common interests.

Conference technologies including mobile apps are also a great way to disseminate information and collect feedback from attendees. We have explored the use of apps on smartphones to provide real-time feedback and solicit questions during a presentation or conference session to enhance engagement. That said, app development moves quickly and in parallel with the evolution of conference platforms, so combining your conference app with the platform you're using to host the conference online can be a big challenge when organizing large hybrid meetings.

Lincoln Lauhon is a professor of materials science and engineering at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, USA.

KATE SARGENT OFFER INCENTIVES

I have more than 20 years of experience in event management, and am currently deputy managing director at Bioscientifica, an events company owned by the UK Society for Endocrinology. We provide management services for scientific events.

Feedback is usually solicited after an event, but there is great value in getting it live, when attendees are engaged. For virtual events, direct messaging can be done during talks by



Kate Sargent organizes events at Bioscientifica in Bristol, UK.

event organizers and speakers so that we can understand why attendees chose to come to a particular session and what impact the session would have on their work.

I recommend getting feedback not just from delegates, but also from speakers, organizers and sponsors. They provide perspectives from different angles. To ensure that the feedback is balanced and does not come only from people with extremely good or extremely bad experiences, consider offering incentives such as prize draws for a journal subscription and free registration. People who are apathetic about your event won't engage with your survey unless they have a good reason to.

Sometimes feedback is unclear or contradictory. At one conference in 2016, we switched from a physical poster-presentation session to electronic ones. Attendees had to scroll through the electronic poster database. They looked only at posters in their research fields, and told us they missed those 'surprise' findings from walking randomly around a poster hall getting coffee and having quick chats. We also had feedback that the electronic poster initiative was great in saving costs and helping with environmental sustainability. To solve this conundrum, we implemented a new scheme in which top abstracts chosen by our reviewers were presented as physical posters, whereas the others were presented as electronic posters. When feedback presents a conflict such as this, it helps to be creative to identify a middle ground.

Kate Sargent is an event manager at Bioscientifica, Bristol, UK.

MARCY RIZZO COMMUNICATE CHANGES TO SURVEY RESPONDERS

My company helps to bring the *MIT Technology Review* editorial voice to the stage, curating programmes and sourcing experts to address the impact of emerging technologies across industry sectors around the world.

It helps to be specific when you are capturing audience feedback to help develop annual event programmes that you hope attendees will return to the following season. This might include rating individual speakers, or the programme overall, and whether the way it was presented met attendee expectations. To encourage repeat attendance, it is important to communicate back to the responders that their input and feedback has been heard and considered. Marketing efforts aimed at a returning audience are helpful here. The message in the subject line might start with

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BIOSCIENTIFICA

Getting answers

Seven steps to creating an effective feedback form.

Break down an event

Separating an event into basic components such as registration, programme and timing allows you to collect targeted responses to each component.

Decide when to administer surveys

Surveys done before, during and after an event serve different purposes, but they can all contribute to enhancing the attendees' experience of the event.

Design different types of question to get data and insights

Quantitative questions such as grading the smoothness of the registration process from 1 to 5 provide numbers for analysis, whereas qualitative, open-ended questions such as 'what do you like best about the programme' allow responders to highlight a particularly memorable experience.

Commonly asked questions around the content and networking experience of an event include:

- How would you rate the overall content quality?
- Which session did you enjoy the most (list a few options) and why?
- Are there new topics you wish to be included in future events?
- Was the length of each presentation appropriate?
- Did you try the live Q&A function? If yes, was it easy to use?
- How satisfied are you with the on-demand content?
- Did you find the virtual platform

"We heard you," before listing the event title, for example.

At virtual events, data analytics also provide insights about the audience and their engagement levels. These include how long they stayed in a session, what the optimal session duration is, and even preferred presentation styles. We can then communicate to speakers about what did and didn't work for their presentations.

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easy to navigate?

- How would you rate your networking experience?
- Are there features from other (in-person and virtual) meetings that you would recommend for our future events?

Choose a platform to collect and analyse survey results

Online tools such as Google Forms (free) and Survey Monkey (free for basic functions) provide a convenient way to conduct surveys and to analyse answers manually. You can also consider subscribing to premium tools such as Qualaroo, which offers audience segmentation and a suite of visualizations.

Avoid generic templates

If possible, include images and videos from the event to jog respondents' memories. Online platforms such as Typeform have highly visual survey templates that can also be personalized to capture attention.

Provide incentives

Attendees are spending precious time contributing to your event intelligence. Consider having prize draws or giving small gifts as incentives. This can help to attract people who don't feel strongly one way or another — often a quiet majority of attendees.

Communicate survey results

Acknowledge the opinions of survey respondents by communicating the results and what will be changed in future events. For instance, if there is a question on 'what would you like to see in future events', your marketing for the next event could highlight the survey results.

AMULYA TATIPELLI CUSTOMIZE YOUR FEEDBACK FORM

Biogate Scientific Centre is a start-up that aims to bring together leaders in academia and industry during scientific events.

On average, we get a 60–70% response rate for our surveys, which is very high. One reason for this is that we customize our feedback forms: depending on the participants, we focus on different types of question.

For example, if conference attendees are



Amulya Tatipelli advises customizing feedback forms to boost response rates.

there simply to watch talks, we focus on exploratory questions such as 'How was your experience at panel session x?', 'Which panel session was most useful, and why?', and 'What additional topics would you like to include?'

But for attendees who register to speak and promote their products or brands, and who tend to care more about airtime and networking outcomes, we might ask 'Was the time allocated sufficient?' or 'Were you able to interact with potential clients?'

We also try to respond quickly to feedback. A dedicated team designs survey questions that avoid being leading and making assumptions, which can create biases. For example, avoid questions such as 'Did you enjoy the Q&A session?' This assumes that the attendee participated in the session. Rather, ask 'Did you participate in the Q&A session?' first. If so, follow up with something like, 'On a scale of 1 to 5, how much did you enjoy it?'

That team also analyses feedback and comes up with solutions. For instance, at one recent event we were asked to share attendees' e-mails to continue networking. We quickly gathered attendees' consent and shared their contact details. Having a fast turnaround time let survey respondents know that we care about their inputs, which could encourage them to respond in a timely fashion to our surveys in the future.

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Interviews by Andy Tay

Interviews have been edited for length and clarity.