5000 People, 5000 Personal Journeys

PCMA Convening Leaders 2019
PARTICIPANT-FOCUSED RESEARCH, SYNTHESIS, AND INSIGHTS
April 10, 2019
Business events are a catalyst, not just to inform and educate, but to inspire and motivate. Great events impact participants such that they leave the event transformed, with new knowledge, new relationships, new attitudes, and a new mindset for approaching their work. That transformation means that an organization’s investment in the event was a valuable tactic for growth, driving change, and achieving strategic goals and objectives.

PCMA initiated a research project to gain insights and empathy into the participant’s experience at their very own 2019 Convening Leaders event. This demonstrates PCMA’s commitment to improving their own events while also strategically gathering more knowledge to add to their professional development and education thought-leadership in the business events industry. Steelcase is an industry leader in understanding human interactions within workplaces—as a driver for behaviors, culture, engagement, and effectiveness, so the fit was natural.
THE ACTIVITIES

> Interviewed PCMA leaders to gain relevant context and specific goals around the participant experience.

> A team of Steelcase Applied Research + Consulting and Event Experience experts were onsite for the duration of the event.

> Observed and documented participant activity, interviewed participants, recorded patterns and trends, noticed physical interaction and spatial dynamics, identified patterns of behavior, and tracked any other peripheral qualitative actions of note.

> Following this collection of observations, Steelcase Event Experiences organized a multi-disciplined internal team to review the data and distill insights as intelligence to inform and strengthen future PCMA events and to share with the broader business event industry.

INSIGHTS

From photographs, observations, conversations, and interviews, the Steelcase team collected numerous data points at the event. In post-event meetings, conversations, and internal workshops, that data was synthesized into the following insights. These are thematic groupings that took shape based on the sorting and organization of real participant-based findings. These insights can be useful for PCMA to inform future event strategies and to enhance their base knowledge of participant behaviors, needs, and interactivities.
PCMA has worked hard to support all the needs and desires of participants but the event scale, volume of content, and level of activity can contribute to participants feeling overwhelmed.

“Sessions starting at different times disrupts the ability to network. Since the times are not reliable, there is a lot of confusion and wasted time checking and rechecking the schedule.”

Scheduling of the sessions was confusing to some due to the number of sessions that took place concurrently as well as the staggered start times.

The abundance of signage and information to assist with way-finding was not effective in supporting navigation of the space in some areas. Volunteers were also often not helpful in this effort, which resulted in significant time wasted for some attendees.

While conference tracks were developed for managing schedules, we did not see evidence of these being used.

Participants felt the event provided ‘something for everyone’ and that it was valuable for people at different levels of experience in the industry in different ways.

“I have no idea where I’m going, so I just follow the pack.”

“There’s just too much going on at once, which makes it difficult to pick and choose, especially because times overlap.”

The PCMA app contributed to the feeling of overwhelm due to the amount of information and lack of understanding of the app’s features.
Enabling Meaningful Experiences

Active and interactive experiences created throughout the event seemed highly valued.

“Informational Experiential

Crowds drew crowds—people were seen spontaneously joining visibly highly-attended sessions and preferred in-person experiences over the digital ones found in overflow rooms.

Sponsor experiences that included interactive elements and services (i.e., coffee bars, notebooks) increased participant engagement, however this was also influenced by location.

Amenities (i.e., massage, water flavoring stations, claw machine) were well used and created an atmosphere of fun, delight and exploration.

“It’s interesting to feel the personality of different cities through their experiences.”

“I love how there is so much to do in between sessions. It really makes the whole event seem like a party.”
Accommodating Connection Strategies

Participants had differing goals, strategies, and motivations for connecting with each other.

Organic and Unplanned Networking

Structured and Planned Networking

Participants took different approaches to networking—some unplanned and organic, some planned and strategic, in order to achieve different goals (i.e., business development, learning, personal development, building new relationships, maintaining existing relationships and fun/socialization).

Networking was highly valued by some attendees as a “vehicle of learning” through others.

Networking was effectively facilitated through focal points, prompts and shared experiences (i.e., claw machine, dessert display, lunch discussion cards) but could have been better supported through the physical space (with the exception of a few specific areas: Braindates space, lounge seating next to PSAV Inspiration Café).

“Being here inspires me to become a Subject Matter Expert—to become like the people here—respected with so much expertise and knowledge and connections in the industry.”

“Creating soft connections and organic networking is what PCMA does best!”

“Some participants felt smaller and more intimate gatherings that allowed for more time would help networking to happen more effectively.”

“I wish the parties were more spread out over different days so I could attend more of them or stay longer. It feels so rushed trying to get to everything.”

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Enabling Learning Strategies

Participants desired a variety of learning opportunities with a multitude of available approaches.

Formal Learning

Aspirational Content

Informal Learning

Business Practice Content

The variety of ways learning was supported at the conference helped to make it more pervasive and personalized for participants.

The combination of analog and digital content created richer informational and learning experiences that spoke to different audience demographics.

Testing and experimentation was highly valued by attendees who saw the conference as a safe space to take risks and try something new. Missteps were valued as learning experiences.

Some participants, especially those with more experience, felt learning happened more through interactions with others than through more formal sessions.

Participants valued a mix of high-level aspirational and more applicable tactical content from the sessions.

Feedback on the session content was mixed; some found it very valuable while others felt it was not disruptive and didn’t challenge their thinking.

“The fluffy stuff is fun, but the meat and potatoes is more what I need. When I go back, I need to be able to share what I learned and demonstrate the ROI.”

“I understand that the topics need to be relatable for a variety of people, but I’ve been in the industry for a long time and haven’t found much lately to challenge my thinking and push me. I would like to feel like I learn more each time I come, but realistically, I’m here for the networking.”

“I love when I can point stuff out to my people and say ‘you see what is happening there…how could you do that differently?’ It really gives me the opportunity to coach outside of my own event, where the stress level is much lower.”
Supporting Participant Wellbeing

When personal wellbeing needs were under-supported, participants experienced stress, tension, or agitation.

Unmet needs cause a sense of low level stress and anxiety. For example, lack of places to do individual work, food not easily accessible between meals, sessions running long and conflicting with other sessions/activities, etc.

Areas for privacy and respite were difficult to find throughout the space. Participants were observed implementing workarounds to meet these needs.

Wellbeing amenities such as the water stations, massages and aroma therapy were well used.

"When sessions run over, I don’t know what to do…stay and be late to my next session, or get up and leave."

"I like to book my hotel nearby so I can step out several times a day for short periods—it’s exhausting having to be ‘on’ all day."

"It would be nice to have some daylight at least during lunch or in sessions, but overall the venue is great!"

Participants remarked on large windows and views in foyer area but felt natural light in session studios and lunch area (Hall A) was lacking. Some felt the artificial light in these spaces contributed to feelings of fatigue.
Designing for a Journey

Boundaries, paths, views, and adjacencies shape and support the participant’s journey.

Space could better support unstructured time in terms of waiting, networking, eating and working, with more seating, gathering spaces and places for temporary periods of individual work not far away from the action.

Bottlenecks in circulation were observed outside main stage entrance and on both sides of the bridge during busier times in the conference.

The activity level in different spaces was unevenly distributed—some spaces were challenging to move through and crowded and others uncomfortably quiet. Utilization of specific spaces seemed to depend significantly on location and surrounding adjacent spaces.

"The Braindates space is awesome!—but, I would like to have more areas to relax and network."
Insight Summary

Focusing on the central question, the Steelcase Event Experiences team identified key insights that encapsulate opportunities to better support engagement, human connection and learning, and personal growth through the physical environment.

1. **Supporting Diverse Needs**
   - PCMA has worked hard to support all the needs and desires of participants but the event scale, volume of content, and level of activity can contribute to participants feeling overwhelmed.

2. **Ensuring Engaging Experiences**
   - Active and interactive experiences created throughout the event seemed highly valued.

3. **Accommodating Connection Strategies**
   - Participants had differing goals, strategies, and motivations for connecting with each other.

4. **Enabling Learning Strategies**
   - Participants desired a variety of learning opportunities with a multitude of available approaches.

5. **Supporting Participant Wellbeing**
   - When personal wellbeing needs were under-supported, participants experienced stress, tension, or agitation.

6. **Designing for a Journey**
   - Boundaries, paths, views, and adjacencies shape and support the participant’s journey.
While the Insights can be seen as macro-syntheses of the participant’s experience, there were requests from PCMA leadership to take particular note of participant behaviors within specific spaces at the Convening Leaders event, at a more granular level. Please note that “Braindates” is both here, as a space, and in the next section, as a session.
Color-coded map was effective for individual navigation, however three of the colors were too similar to distinguish.

Activity level in the arena was highest on Monday and fell off on Tuesday and Wednesday.

The Elevate and Innovate stages and Marriott space were observed to be the most active spaces in this room.

Exhibition booths/spaces were less active/attended in the Arena than in other locations on the floor.

Elevate and Innovate stages were well attended with people standing around perimeter and in surrounding spaces during some sessions.

Elevate and Innovate stages - standing height tables in back row were in high demand and often first to be occupied.

Elevate and Innovate stages - small screens made it very difficult to see the content from back rows of seating.

Orientation/hosting desk provided clear arrival point and place to ask questions and get information.

Elevate and Innovate stages - provided greater flexibility than the Studios in terms of postures supported and number of people that could be accommodated (not confined by hard boundaries). Availability of headphones was the greater limitation to attendance, as there were not enough available for some sessions.

The idea incubator space was largely vacant for the duration of the conference, and was seen used primarily as an overflow space for the Elevate/Innovate sessions and for small meetings.

Elevate and Innovate stages - people used these spaces/seating in between sessions for 2 and 3 person meetings/discussions, individual work, phone calls and as an anchor between sessions/activities.

Elevate and Innovate stages - compared to the Studios, these spaces were open and inviting and enabled people to slip in and out of sessions easily.

Event Observations: Spaces

Event Observations: Sessions
Quiet Zone

13 Quiet zone was well utilized and appeared to be ideally located—removed but within close proximity to primary spaces (i.e., Arena, Braindates lounge) and circulation on the second floor.

14 Large windows providing natural light and views to the river supported a peaceful and calming atmosphere that supported respite and heads-down focused work.

15 Space was underutilized from a work-setting density perspective. People were observed sitting and working in a narrow space between the window and stairway and standing along walls during peak periods, indicating a need for more work settings and potentially more spaces to support this use type.

16 There was no signage displayed in the space indicating it was a quiet zone (or outlining associated behavioral protocols) which may have reinforced intended use.

17 Partially shielded individual pod workstations (facing the window) were seen fully occupied for the duration of the conference.

18 Two-person standing height tables were used primarily for phone calls and small meetings, however, up to 5 people were observed meeting at these tables. This could potentially indicate a need for a continuum of quiet spaces (moderately quiet group spaces > very quiet individual spaces).

19 This zone appeared to extend up the stairs to the third floor mezzanine overlooking the Arena. People were seen working alone, on phone calls and meeting in small groups in this space. The black bench seating provided was not ideally suited to heads-down work.

PCMA Connect

20 Location and lack of enclosure provided maximum visibility, but made this space feel awkward to spend time in during busier periods, as you felt you were in the middle of a main circulation path.

21 PCMA brand was prominent and well displayed in space. Merchandise was visible and easy to access.

22 As planned, most people observed in the space were passing through or only there for short periods of time.

23 Space did not feel clearly delineated; it was difficult to know where the space began and ended.

24 High level of activity and exposure within this space was not conducive to deeper engagement with books and reading materials.
Open Space Studios

“I really like seeing the different ways they configure the rooms—this helps to give me new ideas that I can take back with me.”

25
While some sessions were sparsely attended, others overflowed into the hallways. Crowds seemed to create more crowds—if some gathered, more gathered—often blocking entrance ways.

26
Sessions were well-placed, making it possible for drive-by viewers: you could hear the speaker and assess whether the session was interesting, then choose to leave or stay without disrupting others.

27
Studios were often attended beyond capacity. People were sitting on the floor and standing around the perimeter and against walls of the rooms.

28
Narrow rectangular tables oriented perpendicular to the front of the room resulted in some attendees assuming awkward postures or angling their chairs away from the tables to see the speaker. Lack of circulation space between tables made it difficult to leave when everyone was seated.

29
People commented on the different configurations of these spaces and how this inspired and informed the way they approached the learning spaces within their meetings.

30
People primarily seen on phones and taking notes on paper (sometimes laptops), however tables and power did not always support this well.

31
Close proximity to primary circulation pathways and intersection points made these sessions highly visible and accessible—and easy to join late and/or leave early.

32
Content displayed on the screen was sometimes difficult to see from perimeter seating/standing locations.

33
Many sessions were attended well beyond seating capacity with many people (30+) standing or sitting on the floor individually or in groups—sometimes extending into main circulation pathways.
**Braindates**

“The Braindates area was great! SO much better this time than last time.”

Participants commented on the informal, fun atmosphere of the Braindates space and felt it added to the experience. The use of bright colors and lounge seating made the space interesting and inviting.

Clear delineation of the space from surrounding circulation pathways and spaces, more visible signage and a clear entry/access point would have helped participants better navigate the space.

Meeting/arrival tables and the reception desk played an important role in acting as a transition point into the space.

People were observed using the space for respite, individual work, networking, small and medium sized meetings, as well as Braindates sessions.

The informality of the space appeared to support more informal and relaxed postures. People were observed lounging in chairs and putting their feet up. When meeting with others, they were seen leaning forward to engage in conversations.

“Some Braindates are better than others, but I like the format and the space. It is a very unique experience and helps me meet new people with similar interests.”

Greater understanding of where the Braindates space was located, how it was intended to be used and accessed was needed.

SELECTIONS

Certain sessions were also identified by PCMA leadership for identifying specific participant behaviors and interactions. These observations are provided to further build participant empathy and insights for PCMA to leverage for future events and to share as additional context supporting PCMA’s thought leadership in the industry.
Keynote Session

“I feel like there is no good place to sit because you never know which way the speaker will be facing.”

Participants commented that the keynote speakers were inspiring and engaging. Audience appeared engaged during these sessions.

People tended to enter in groups, even when late. Because most free seats were in the far back corners, latecomers needed to walk in front of people if they wanted to sit down, causing distraction. Many congregated by the entrance instead.

Many participants brought coffee cups, food and personal belongings into sessions, however there was no place to put these items unless you used the chair next to you.

Arrangement of stage sometimes put people on the “back side” of the stage and presenters. Catwalk portion of stage rarely used by presenters.

Some participants took physical notes, but most just listened. People were observed taking photos of keynote speakers and screens.

Stadium seating rows were narrowly separated and it was difficult to move past people who were already seated to reach open chairs.

Music was used as a cue for beginning and ending sessions. When music was played in between speakers, audience appeared confused, often started to leave before realizing the session was not over.

“Main keynote speakers really had a WOW factor—very exciting!”
Many teams planned and delegated which sessions they would attend either prior to the conference or over breakfast the morning of.

Participants had mixed reviews on the session content. Some said the content was very good, both from a learning and personal development perspective. Others commented that the content was too “surface level” and wanted content that would help them “push boundaries” and “understand disruptors” in the industry. They wanted to know “what tools do I need” and “how do I find out what we aren’t doing”.

Individuals and groups often lingered after sessions ended. Some speakers had people approach them after the sessions - usually 3-8 people.

Participants said the ‘Mix Lounge’ was helpful in previewing a session before committing to see if they liked the speaker and content being delivered. It was also used to switch between sessions they wanted to see but were scheduled at the same time.

People who remained in the space were typically doing individual email or text; most groups left, but small pockets of 2-3 people stayed to talk.

Some participants desired better session descriptions and information regarding what would be recorded on the PCMA app to better identify which sessions to attend in-person.

“PCMA doesn’t take it to a high enough level in terms of emerging trends—this content isn’t disruptive or controversial; these conversations happen more in one-on-one dialogues—which is why my time is better spent networking.”

“Like spaces with multiple screens when deciding what to attend—to see if I like the topic and speaker.”

“Learning Session

“We all get together in the morning and take a divide-and-conquer approach.”

“It isn’t inexpensive to be here, so coming back with something valuable to share is important.”
Social Impact Activities

58
Participant engagement in social impact activities appeared to be moderate to high during peak times (mid-morning & afternoon). During slower times (early in the morning, during keynote sessions, etc.) these spaces were empty or sparsely populated.

59
Central location of one of the spaces (next to PCMA Connect) brought traffic and visibility to this space and likely positively impacted engagement. Spaces that were less visible (in the PSAV Inspiration Café) appeared to have much lower/no activity at the times observed.

60
Participants were observed meeting and interacting with other volunteers during activities. The atmosphere appeared positive and upbeat.

61
Linking social impact activities to a keynote speaker/session appeared to significantly increase participation post-session (i.e., assembly of PERIOD menstrual kits was observed as being the most active activity at the conference).

62
Spaces/activities were relatively easy to navigate. Staff assigned to these activities were helpful in explaining and guiding attendees through the activity.

63
Participants felt the Braindates sessions that brought people together around shared interests were a valuable forum for learning and networking. Sessions used to position or market a product or services were deemed significantly less valuable, however it wasn’t always possible to know which it would be ahead of time.

64
Some participants desired more description of each Braindate so they could determine if it was truly a networking and sharing conversation, a presentation on a particular topic, or a sales pitch.

Braindates

“Braindates are good when they are people getting together to discuss a shared interest, not good when it is someone there just to pitch or sell something—you can usually tell when it’s going to be the latter, but not always. You don’t always know exactly what you will be discussing.”

“Some Braindates are great, while others are just sales pitches. It is nice that it is an open forum, but if they could be screened somehow, that would be beneficial. Or, if they had to identify what kind of Braindates it would be, like ‘sales presentation’, ‘casual chat’, ‘knowledge share’, that would be helpful.”
Additional Observations

**General**

63  There is a strong need for quiet and pull-away zones, perhaps not far removed from the action.

64  People will sit anywhere, whether a chair is present or not.

65  Signage and displays seemed an effective mix of analog, digital, and video media and were placed along main pathways for high visibility.

66  Many people were observed alone (standing, sitting, eating, working), usually looking at their phones, and often using a collaborative setting “alone together”.

67  Demographics seemed 70%+ women and predominantly over 40 years old.

68  Many people were observed in uncomfortable or awkward places/positions to find privacy, separation, or shielding.

**The Event App**

69  Amount of info in the app was overwhelming.

70  The UX could be updated to a more visual format.

71  The maps seemed too discrete, lacking reference points like "bus drop off", opening ceremony, reception.

72  Title and descriptions of small sessions didn’t accurately describe content presented in the app.

73  Had useful features but took time to find them. Location, destination, and wayfinding seemed good in theory, but underutilized, with most navigating by signage.

**Wayfinding**

75  Noted desire for better and/or more signage to support wayfinding.

76  Naming of spaces appeared to be inconsistent and didn’t always match with the map.

77  People were looking for signage but couldn’t find what they needed.

78  Volunteers were not always able to provide directions.

79  Wayfinding and getting to the right sessions was confusing and time confusing, especially on the first day.
Creating soft connections and organic networking is what PCMA does best.

“This is the first time I could really identify how the topics are fitting with the theme, which is really cool.”

“This year’s PCMA really couldn’t be any better.”

“We come here because these are where our best clients are.”

“This has been the best year yet and I’ve been coming to PCMA for quite a few years.”

“I come to see people I know, to learn something, and to get excited about what we do.”

“Networking is what sets this event apart.”