

The Kingbridge Story

Redefining How Organizations Meet: A New Perspective on the Role of the Conference Centre

Based on a presentation to IACC, October 2002

John E. Abele

Founder Chairman, Boston Scientific Corporation

Owner, Kingbridge Conference Centre and Institute



You are guinea pigs today...

I have no background in the hospitality field (except as a customer). Nor do I have experience in the “conference business” (except as a user). But now I own a conference centre... just north of Toronto.

And there are a number of influential people in a wide variety of fields and professions who are enamored with this place and its philosophy...scientists, educators, business-people, doctors, lawyers, politicians, etc.

That leads to a number of questions:

Who is this guy?

Why is he doing this?

What is the vision of Kingbridge?

What is it about Kingbridge that might produce such a positive reaction?

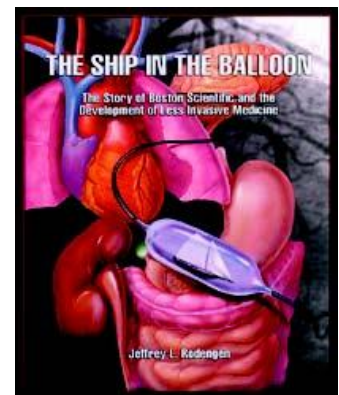
That is what I will talk about... Let's start with my background.

Who am I?

I come from pretty modest circumstances. My Dad was lost in WW II and my mother was a violin teacher who raised my two brothers and myself. We all had jobs from an early age, working on a farm and even had our own business, making jig-saw puzzles for the local school system.

At Amherst College, I majored in Physics and Philosophy. When I graduated, I learned that I didn't have the skills or attitude to be a physicist, and philosophy was not particularly good as a career. I rejected the idea of law school, medical school and business school.

So, in 1960, I finally ended up going to work as a sales engineer for a small medical technology company. I've always loved gadgets and this company was full of them. The field was small at that time, but there were a lot of small companies and the rate of technological change was high. That was particularly fascinating to me.



The history of Boston Scientific published in
2001 (Write Stuff Enterprises Inc.)

To survive or thrive in a world of rapid change, it is necessary to develop educational programs that are as efficient as possible.

It's critical to keep both employees and customers up-to-date. But the challenge is that advances in technology are accelerating exponentially. It's not hard to see why. Access to knowledge has been democratized, both by media generally and particularly by the Internet.

The traditional powerhouses of research and development, the academic centers, large corporations and the government can no longer hoard knowledge. Access to experts, powerful tools for analysis or making models, and new and better materials for making just about anything are empowering endless numbers of small organizations as well as individuals with the capability to create, solve problems or make products that once required enormous organizations and resources. As a result, organizations have to focus on being continuous learners and there is a much higher percentage of people who are involved in creative occupations.

The successful company must not only be a technological innovator, it must also be an innovative communicator and educator. And the measure of success is not results on a test. It is a body of "students" who understand the topic, are enthusiastic about its benefits and are capable of using, applying and teaching it. A lot of the technology we developed was disruptive, so we frequently dealt with hostile audiences with the challenge of converting them or at least leaving them neutral and respectful of our approach.

Reasons for the Acceleration of innovation

Improved access to information

Easier access to experts

Better materials for modeling & analysis

More powerful tools for testing

Easier to learn new skills faster

As a result, even as a small company, we spent a great deal of time participating in professional symposia and organizing small training conferences...all over the U.S. and all over the world. It was a significant and costly investment that took a substantial percentage of our total resources in both financial and management-time terms. It started out at 10 to 20 events per year and has now grown to over a 1,000. And it isn't just "training." It's problem solving, conflict resolution, brainstorming, strategizing, policy-making... a lot of productive dialogue.



The exercises are not simply "classes." And the subjects are not just technical. There is a great deal of interactivity. The learning is bi-directional and multi-dimensional. "Teachers" learn from "students." Students learn from each other. And the topics include a great deal of ethics, philosophy, psychology, law, strategy and politics, as well as the hard basics of the topic. The goal is to understand the "Zen" of the topic and for the students to become "masters" who can apply that knowledge in a large variety of different situations and who can teach others who have varied backgrounds and cultures. And, as in many fields, being good in a field is only a ticket to continued learning opportunities. The goal is also to create a continuous learning organization, which is only possible by creating a culture of a learning environment.

One of the key tools for learning in the medical world is the "Live Demonstration Course." It's been around for 100s of years in the form of a

Theodor Billroth at work in a Viennese surgical theatre (painted by Adelbery Seligmann, c.

surgeon/teacher operating on a patient and explaining to medical students or interns (looking over his shoulder) what he (usually a he) is doing and why. But there were obvious problems:

Not very many people could see or hear what was going on. That's been solved by special television cameras and microphones, and projecting onto large screens multiple views of the patient, doctor, operating site, physiological data, as well as views of the inside of the patient using different technologies... ultrasound, x-ray, etc.

The professor/doctor had a limited and biased point of view. That's been solved by having a panel of contrarian experts comment and ask questions... and to provide simultaneous summaries of the latest research and trial data on adjacent screens.

Some students aren't familiar with the technology being used. That is addressed by having experts simultaneously explaining (separate channel, but multiple screens so you see everything at once) the new technology with lots of graphics and interactive demonstrations. It's understandable by both novices and experts.

It was hard to tell if the students really understood what was going on because the Professor would intimidate and embarrass anyone who didn't have the right answer. That is addressed by having the entire large audience equipped with Audience Response pads and constantly asking them questions (in parallel with the lecture/demonstration). Because the responses are anonymous and displayed only in graphic (e.g. pie chart) form, one can quickly gauge the level of understanding of the audience. The moderator and teachers can adjust their material to improve the results and the "students" can assess their level of understanding relative to their peers. Even more important, additional questions can be asked to dig deeper, to clarify and to measure the effectiveness of the teaching response.

It is hard to gauge the honesty of the presenter. That is addressed with the contrarian expert panel and the audience response for the entire audience. This represents two levels of peer review! It's more powerful and reliable than that "bible of truth," the peer reviewed journal. The latest courses tend to be rather complex multimedia extravaganzas, but they are viewed by physicians as the most productive educational and decision-making forum they can attend. This is only a quick overview of 25 years of evolution of this teaching process, but it has been profound and dramatically improved the speed and quality of the educational process. I might add that it has been very controversial and, at least in the beginning, strongly opposed by the professional societies and academic institutions.



Live demonstration course at the International Symposium on Endovascular Therapy (c. 2001)

It is the evolution of that teaching process that enabled Boston Scientific to change the practice of medicine and grow to what it

is today. It is also what has inspired me to expand on what we've learned over these last 25 years, continue to improve it and try to apply it to many fields outside of medicine.

Boston Scientific Corporation (BSC)

14,000 employees

15,000 catalog items, 60 categories

\$3 billion+ (USD) in sales

2,000+ patents & applications

23 plants in 8 states, 4 countries

Sales subsidiaries in 29 countries

Why am I doing this? What is the vision?

Remember that old saying "War is too important to be left to the Generals"? I am convinced that big changes in any field never come from within that field, but outside of it. Establishment hierarchies are threatened by change and will resist it.

I see this as an opportunity to create a new discipline of "Responsive Conferencing;" to capture the many innovative ways that different groups use to get a group of people to be more productive in their discussions, to develop a clearing-house of different techniques and strategies, to create a menu of tools and techniques that different groups can use to address their needs, to experiment with clients and measure how well they did, to continuously learn... and to document it all.

Sometimes there is a great need for explaining the obvious.

In some ways this sounds obvious. When one reads "The 7 Habits of Highly Successful People," there is not much there that you didn't hear about in second grade. But it is explained clearly and eloquently and has attracted a large number of people to read the books, hear Covey's lectures and watch his videos. Sometimes there is a great need for explaining the obvious.

Ironically, there really isn't a specialty of "conferencing." Yes, there are centers that cater to conferences, but they focus only on ambience and environment. The logistics are managed by "event planners" and the overall content strategy is left to the client, sometimes with the aid of facilitators. The strategy of "good conferences" is different from one field to another and there is not much cross-fertilization.

And there are lots of different types of facilitators who assist organizations to develop a program to address a problem. But any one of them specializes in only a few different strategies for achieving their goal. It's very difficult to get an overview of the myriad of strategies and techniques that are available, or the real nature of the task the client would like to tackle.

There are lots of names for what a conference is all about: symposium, colloquium, congress, forum, convention, etc. If you look at the dictionary definitions, you will find a great deal of overlap.

The goal of a conference is... to leverage the minds and thoughts of everyone in the group.

Here's my explanation: The goal of a conference is to exchange knowledge. More specifically it is to leverage the minds and thoughts of everyone in the group. It is not about lectures (although it may include some), or about the response to a lecture (Q

& A, although there may be some of that at well).

It is about broad interactivity between and across everybody present. One goes to a conference with the belief that they will gain more knowledge than if they read a book or paper, watch a video or listen to a lecture. The more quality connections made, the better.

How is Kingbridge going to achieve this goal?

Through: Environment, Atmosphere, Networking, Programs, Research.

Environment

Physically, Kingbridge is designed for conferencing... space, acoustics, equipment, staff, High Ropes Course, ravines, trails History. It has been a series of dreams, starting with Murray Koffler's (Four Seasons Founder) King Ranch Spa with its Arthur Erickson architecture, then Hubert St.Onge's state-of-the-art CIBC Leadership Centre. And now another dream... Kingbridge Collection. There are images and exhibits that stimulate, provoke and challenge. They are designed to motivate you to "think different"... to develop new perspectives. There will be interactive exhibits that force one to think outside the box. Yes, these are things which stimulate me. You may not see them the same way. But, over time, they will help us understand each other better.

Atmosphere

"Welcome to my home!" This is not a generic or even a "professional" center. It reflects my personal philosophy, quirks and all. The service is top notch, but there are surprises all around. It's the Richard Branson theory of marketing. "Conferencing is my passion!" I tend to be self-critical. I like to know what is working well. And I like to know what's broken. And I always want to know how we can do it better. You never stop learning. This is a learning laboratory. We develop goals, processes to achieve goals, and measure our actual outcomes against expected outcomes. Every program is an experiment. We collect, document, share knowledge and try again. Great meetings are great theater. They involve surprise, humor, challenge... Stories. Although different people learn in different ways, there is something about stories that engage most people. They may be historical, a present situation or fiction. But they allow us to explore philosophy, values and many of the soft issues that determine the success or failure of most decisions.

Networking

My personal, professional, educational, medical, business and philanthropic network is already fairly extensive and eclectic. All my friends are potential clients... I will continue to speak and write to various groups. Any client is a potential member. What we are doing can be of value to almost anyone. The network will continue to grow. Guests. Every guest is a potential new guest... through different channels. Every guest will hear about "The Story" and "The Vision." Some will become members of our network. They will be a community of people interested in the research we do...and contributing to it. They will interact with us through news letters or our website... if they want. They will answer market research surveys, attend programs and help us develop new ones. We already have a start.

Programs

We will offer a menu of programs and courses that include Meeting Design Strategy, Moderating, Using Audience Response, Extraordinary Presentations, etc. Facilitation will continue to be offered through the family of providers we use now, as well as our own staff for those willing to experiment.

We will encourage clients to try experimenting and offer lots of tools for them to try:

Strategies for choosing participants... and “faculty” or leaders:

So many people pick names without a plan. Good meetings are like a great dinner party. It's the right people, carefully juxtaposed and an agenda (even the food and drink) designed to create sparks.

Preparation and follow-up techniques:

It's important to set the stage. What do they expect... of others and themselves? And, where appropriate, how does one create a community around the topic... that makes it last and grow? One of the masters is Elliott Masie (check out <http://www.masie.com/>).

Goal-based organization:

A conference is not an open enrollment course. It needs to be specific to the organizational needs and personalities present. Start with the goal, determine the process you wish to use to achieve it. Decide the desired outcomes you wish participants to leave with.

Adaptive learning:

How about a learning strategy that customizes itself to the learning style of the student? A former MIT professor has developed some very interesting computer techniques that have great value in the physical classroom as well.

Decision Support Room:

This is a tool that allows “parallel conversation,” and enables a group to talk about complicated and difficult topics faster with better results.

Super-interactivity:

This is what good moderating is all about, but good planning is essential as well.

Profiling attendees for learning style, bias:

When was the last time you were at a meeting where most of the hidden agendas and barriers to understanding were exposed beforehand? It's a great way to level the field. It's not complicated. It does use Audience Response Systems for protecting identities and privacy.

Squirt guns for neutralizing pontificators:

Sounds like a children's party, but it is very effective in the right situation.

Audio-visual studio for prep and distance learning:

A number of conference centers offer a service for documenting meetings. It doesn't have to be expensive and when the client does it, it can be a valuable skill to enhance.

Court jester techniques for breaking barriers:

Shakespeare employed this technique to ask the questions everybody wanted to ask, but was afraid to. It's still relevant.

Experiential learning (High Ropes Course):

Based on attendee profile and program goals, this can be a great way to humble people when needed.

Research

Kingbridge Institute. A research focus in any institution can have a salutary effect on most of the other activities that take place there. Conferencing research, although it sounds a bit strange, is no different. You ask better questions. You get better results.

Experimentation with clients. This sounds like doctors experimenting with patients. The truth of the matter is that every patient is (to a certain extent) an experiment. And so is every meeting. If you start out with a goal and a strategy, the difference between the experiment and the normal meeting is that you are more “planful” and measure the results in one and don’t in the other.

World-class techniques. These are lofty goals and hard to measure, but if you don’t strive to be the best you won’t be.

Learning Laboratory. A laboratory is where you do experiments to learn and understand. Enough said.

Information clearing-house. In a research environment, it is essential to know what everybody else is doing. Otherwise you’ll never know if you did it better. An extensive database is essential to advance a cause.

...and that’s the dream.