



MASTERING THE ART OF SPARKING CONNECTIONS

*HOW TO BUILD AN EVENT THAT MATTERS MORE
DEDICATED TO A WOMAN WE LOVE: JULIA CHILD.*

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Recent years have seen a significant rise in the number and variety of industry events: South by Southwest, Renaissance Weekend, Sun Valley, Disrupt, The New Yorker Festival ... you can likely name a dozen others. The growing popularity of these events reflects a real and deepening hunger among participants for meaningful professional development and networking.

This makes a lot of sense given the way jobs have evolved. The 20th Century's neatly-zoned, 9-to-5 dividers between personal and professional time and space have started to disintegrate. We live in an increasingly mixed-use world, carrying our offices around in our pockets. And so we increasingly crave professional experiences that offer not only career fulfillment, but personal enrichment, genuine connection to people whose values we admire, who challenge and inspire us and whose ideas spark our own.

Done well, events are the best way we know of to create those connections.

But as events proliferate, formulas creep in. Experiences that once seemed dynamic and enriching become rote, familiar, mass-manufactured, factory-scale. Our world views shrink as we see the same people talking about the same topics, again and again. We're both experiencing and seeing evidence of a growing event fatigue, with little on the horizon to replace the meaning and intellectual nourishment that a great gathering can provide.

We think Spark Camp can help buck that trend.

A few years ago, the four of us — Amanda Michel, Amy Webb, Andrew Pergam and Matt Thompson — along with Jenny 8 Lee, launched an experiment. We held a modestly-sized weekend-long event. We called it Spark Camp,

and we focused it on a theme ("Real-time"). We were startled by the outpouring of appreciation from attendees, so we held it again, at a different venue, with a different theme ("Data"). The reaction was even better, so we held it again ("Money"). We've now held five Spark Camps (2013 brought us "Design" and "Storytelling"), and the power and impact of the event on its attendees has grown every time.

Far from fatigue, the response to Spark Camp has been a loud call for more. And so we've decided to do more with Spark Camp.

But first we wanted to take stock of what we've learned. But as we did so, we realized something that surprised us: a lot of what we did with

[Spark Camp] is the only conference of any sort I attend, because it is the only one that has ever lit me up, puzzled me, excited me.

— David Plotz (editor, Slate)

Spark Camp actually cut against our instincts, and the conventional wisdom that fed them. Instead of a precision-tuned formula, for example, we've striven for more invention and iteration. We ignored the impulse to just scale to larger venues and broadcasted presentations. Instead of tailoring the event to a particular industry, we've

curated an increasingly diverse mix of participants from a variety of backgrounds — statisticians, Broadway playwrights, Pulitzer-winning journalists, seasoned entrepreneurs, museum curators, urban planners, computer scientists, rappers.

And so we've written this statement of our core values and learnings. We hope that conveners big and small, across all industries, will share their own lessons and reflections with us. We are sharing this with the broader community because we believe strongly in collaboration. And because we know that expanding our personal and professional networks with diverse voices will beget a more enlightened, enlivened and inspired society.



WHAT WE'VE LEARNED FROM SPARK CAMP

1. PEOPLE ARE THE KEY INGREDIENTS.

Every Spark Camp has, at its core, a meticulously composed list of invitees. Having started with more than 120 attendees at our first camp, we now aim for 70 or so, using a process that requires nearly two months of deep research and vetting.

Finding great guests takes time, and a lot of work -- months of work. We collect hundreds of names of potential guests in a sprawling spreadsheet with notes and biographical details. We debate amongst ourselves. And then we vote. (To help maximize diversity, we have a rule that none of us can nominate or vote for someone we work with regularly.)

Spark Camp seeks out the unusual suspects. We survey experts in related industries for information on the geniuses of the field. We look for books and papers and stories about and by people who are innovators in their respective fields. We scour social media channels to find who's participating in sharp, interesting conversations. We ask bosses to tell us about employees whose talent and potential has yet to be publicized. Spark Camp alumni are encour-

aged to recommend attendees, too, since they generally know what makes a good camper.

We aim to find people who've pushed forward innovative ideas and practices. We invite people for what they can contribute, not for whom they represent or how well they promote themselves. Personality is a key component of this. While it's relatively easy to view potential invitees' work portfolios by visiting their LinkedIn profiles, the hardest work comes in evaluating how they might interact with other guests. Are they constantly promoting a pet project or theory and interested only in how others' ideas align with theirs? Or are they generous with their thoughts and interested in the insights of others?

We'd be thrilled if we could hit on a way to create a strong Spark Camp guest list that was more open and less intensive — more self-assembling and less invite-only. But experience has consistently led us in the opposite direction: the more carefully and thoughtfully we craft the invitee list, the better the event.



2. THE MORE VARIED THE GROUP, THE MORE VALUABLE THE CONNECTIONS AND OUTCOME.

For us, having a diverse group of attendees is about hosting a better event. When people bring together a true variety of backgrounds and experiences, they also bring a variety of ways to frame issues, find opportunities and identify solutions. Our mix of Campers was once perfectly described as “Everyone I never knew I always wanted to meet.”

Before we decide on our individual invitees, we create what we call an “attendee matrix,” which describes our desired composition of the group, their industries, experience levels and backgrounds.

More than fifty percent of the attendees at every Spark Camp we’ve hosted have been women. Roughly a third are people of color. Campers have been associated with a vast range of institutions and companies, from large news organizations to scrappy tech startups. Some are individual achievers — playwrights, poets or project managers.

Some approaches to further increase each camp’s diversity have been unsuccessful. At our first two Spark Camps, we asked attendees to suggest a “+1.” We thought this approach would necessarily introduce us to new people, and help organizers break out of their own professional networks. Instead, Campers tended to invite friends or former colleagues. People often doubled themselves demographically. For example, white men almost always invited other white men.

We also found that attrition almost always comes disproportionately from groups that are underrepresented at media events. So we plan for it, and adjust our invitee list accordingly.

As we’ve said, finding great guests takes a lot of work. Assembling a diverse group of great guests takes more than double that work — and it’s well worth it.



3. TO FOSTER A SPIRIT OF IMPROVISATION, CREATE A COMFORTABLE ENVIRONMENT.

When you want strangers to be open and creative with each other, you need to make them feel at home.

By the time Campers arrive at Spark Camp, they've met a dozen other Campers over email, via Google Hangouts and on the phone. They've been paired with an organizer who they can call anytime before or during Camp to troubleshoot travel or logistical issues, and who greets them by name. They arrive knowing the topic of the first session on Saturday morning, which will be led by that same organizer.

We've learned that asking Campers to introduce themselves during opening-night festivities can be nerve-wracking, so instead we, the organizers, deliver a highly personal, whimsical introduction for each person, ending with his or her name. We ask Campers to stand when they recognize themselves.

We seek homey venues with intimate-feeling rooms and relaxing outdoor spaces, where attendees can feel comfortable arranging the space according to the needs of each session. Austere hotel conference rooms don't work, and lecture halls prompt lectures — not conversations.

And great snacks are never far from hand: We treat attendees to food from beloved local food vendors (local Texas BBQ in Austin, clam chowder in Boston, and Japanese tea cakes in Palo Alto). These small details in aggregate are one of the many ways in which Spark Camp differentiates itself. Memorable experiences matter.



4. WE VALUE DISCUSSION OVER PRESENTATION.

When event organizers put a speaker in front of a podium, they presume that the speaker has access to a unique and timely body of insight that the rest of the crowd is there to hear. The presentation model is valued for its efficiency — it allows a single person to dispense their latest learnings to an unlimited number of people in an hour or less.

But because we put so much work into bringing together people with unique perspectives, we find discussions to be a much better fit than presentations. We're not gathering to merely trade conventional wisdom or share best practices. The value of having all the different voices around the table is that it affords a better, stronger platform to debate, discuss and build on each other's assessments, to enable conversations we can't (and don't) easily have online and in public.

And so at Spark Camp, we set only a schedule in advance, not the session topics. Instead, we carefully help the participants form their own sessions collectively using a convening framework that we developed.



5. EACH CAMP IS A SERIES OF SMALL AND LOOSELY JOINED EVENTS.

We've learned the hard way to divide Spark Camp into distinct activities and guide Campers through each one — introducing it and explaining its function and purpose.

The first evening of Spark Camp goes: Welcome, happy hour cocktails, opening session, dinner, session ideas brainstorm, and lastly, Story Hour (our very own variety show). If we are doing our jobs right, each mini-event feels self-contained and purposeful.

At the first few Camps we asked attendees to brainstorm ideas for Saturday's sessions over Friday night's dinner. But understandably, people focused instead on enjoying the food and company. So we no longer combine dinner and brainstorming into one event. Now we set aside time specifically for brainstorming after dinner. We start by sharing best practices of pitching sessions: a thoughtful idea, clever and concise wording, and clear handwriting. Then we give each attendee two cards and twenty minutes to draft a session pitch, discuss it with their tablemates, and redraft it. Pitch cards are laid out on a table, and attendees get another chunk of time to cast votes for their favorite ideas.

The result? In every session block the next day, Campers are torn between great choices for what to attend.



6. WE VALUE INTIMACY OVER PUBLICITY.

We've learned that there's a trade-off between in-person sharing and social buzz — the more publicly attendees share what they learn during an event, the less inclined they are to disclose valuable pieces of private knowledge. We want attendees to feel safe discussing failures as well as successes, to talk in real detail about processes and outcomes in their work.

At the start of each Spark Camp we ask attendees to consider what they hear as protected by 'FriENDA' (an informal non-disclosure agreement we discovered at Tim O'Reilly's NewsFoo). The FriENDA equates to a social pact — the understanding that conversations are meant to be private. We also ask attendees to shut off their devices and

focus on the conversations at hand. Instead of a trail of tweets, we ask Campers to write down flashes of insight on cards and post them in a prominent place during the event.

There are certainly drawbacks to this approach. We miss the rich online buzz that builds around events that are fully on-the-record. And it reinforces a perception of exclusivity we're not trying to foster.

But because of this policy, numerous attendees have told us that they gleaned unique insight and understanding from Spark Camp, knowledge that likely wouldn't be shared if everything were public.

Just as it takes a tough man to make a tender chicken, it takes skilled facilitators/organizers to make an unconference go smoothly and generate productive conversations. You folks at Spark have mastered that art; somehow you pulled out people's best insights and raised the signal-to-noise ratio to an unusually high level.

— Esther Dyson (philanthropist and Spark Camp Counselor)



7. PRODUCTIVE DISCUSSIONS HAPPEN MORE EASILY WITH THOUGHTFUL, INFORMED FACILITATION.

Over time, we've changed the role we as organizers play in each discussion. At our first few Spark Camps each session's facilitator was, by default, the person who pitched the session. This is not a best practice. Some people were too attached to their own agendas to facilitate. Others didn't have the knack — or the interest.

So every session is now facilitated by a Spark Camp organizer, who helps structure the discussion. Typically, we begin by having the person who pitched the session idea begin by briefly describing his or her interest in the topic and asking some questions to the group. The dynamics of each conversation are different, so we help to guide and organize the discussion. A packed room on a controversial topic can easily devolve into an exchange of people talking on top of each other, in which case we might opt to track and enforce a list of who's been waiting to speak.

If you can recognize a discussion's natural format, you can better facilitate it. Size is often helpful in determining which format would work best. To make a large session (more than 20 people) interactive, we might steer the group towards a "list" discussion, where everyone in the room can offer answers that fit a theme. Jodi Kantor convened a session of this type at Spark Camp::Storytelling, called "How to not be boring," in which Campers shared examples of things that instantly hooked them in stories, as well as elements that instantly turned them off.

Small conversations are organic, and don't need much steering. Early on, we mistakenly thought a session's "success" could be measured roughly by how many people attended and stayed for it. But when we began comparing notes and reviewing feedback, we realized that some of the best sessions had fewer than ten people in attendance.



8. END — DON'T START — WITH A TRUST FALL.

Among the loveliest aspects of Spark Camp are the palpable changes in state that the group goes through as the event progresses — from the tentative chatter of Friday afternoon to the joyful cacophony of Saturday night.

The reward for our work is an irreplaceable feeling of satisfaction and connection that builds to the very last hour of Camp. By the time Sunday morning rolls around, Campers have settled into a state of playful camaraderie, often asking each other to sit at the front of the room and answer questions in a format reminiscent of Reddit's iAMA.

During the very last session of the weekend, attendees offer one another favors, ideas and resources; we call this the Spark Swap. People don't just share tools and recommendations — they actually volunteer their time to each other, or even a place to stay when a Camper is in town.



9. THE BETTER THE PLANNING, THE SMOOTHER AND MORE SPONTANEOUS THE OUTCOME.

If you attended a Spark Camp, you probably didn't know about the time that a food truck broke down in the driveway. Or the time that the AV malfunctioned. Or when we forgot our lanyards back at headquarters.

Something will go awry. The question is how you've prepared for that inevitability. We've learned to dedicate people on-the-ground to handling logistical issues that crop up. We've also learned that buses take time to load and unload, and that a buffet for 70 people means two lines are better than one. (Also, caterers, please put the cutlery at the end of the buffet, not the beginning.)

To make an event that feels productively chaotic and spontaneous, we spend a lot of time choreographing the weekend in weekly calls, email threads and Google Docs. We know what's supposed to happen during the weekend, so all the logistical work that remains when we get to the venue is troubleshooting problems and taking care of setup and cleanup. The sense of seamless flow during a great weekend is aided by the fact that the small stuff was sweated months in advance.



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10. WE VALUE EXPERIMENTATION AND EVOLUTION OVER PERFECTION.

Around the fourth or fifth Spark Camp, we realized something strange: the amount of time and effort we put into planning each event wasn't decreasing. We were more experienced and less focused on smaller details, and yet we were actually spending more time on each camp.

In our exhaustive post-Camp retrospectives, when we recap some of our favorite moments from the weekend, our tendency is not to say, "How do we do that again?" Instead, we find ourselves asking, "How might we do that differently?"

With many events, the prerogative of the organizers is to quickly refine the model – to hold versions of the same event over and over until the event essentially runs itself. And there is real value in repeating events the same way every time.

We place a lot of value on the idea that every Camp is a unique experience. Once, after gathering all the Campers together on Saturday night, we called attention to this fact. This will never happen again, we pointed out at the time. This amazing collection of people will never again be assembled.

(We don't say that anymore. It was kind of a bummer.)

But it's true: Each Camp is completely its own, and that's part of its power. By challenging ourselves to improve upon each Spark Camp, we've also come closer to our goal: creating scalable, meaningful and fun professional events.



HOW SPARK CAMP WILL EVOLVE.

After every Spark Camp, we ask attendees for feedback and to describe what impact the weekend has had on their lives and careers. Many of the things people report as outcomes of Spark Camp are tangible and immediate — some decide to leave their jobs or to forge new career paths, some launch new products. Multiple publications have forged new partnerships with other companies in attendance at Spark Camp. As just one example, a few of our alumni got together to help the nonprofit Texas Tribune news site livestream Wendy Davis as she filibustered what became an infamous abortion bill. From our alum, Rodney Gibbs:

I called on several friends I made at Spark Camp who are deep into video and livestreaming to discover how the Tribune can get smarter and faster at its own streaming. That livestream captured a massive audience in countries around the world, and globalized a local story that resonated with DC politicians, women's groups, activists, students and countless others. It also became the pilot for a larger Texas Tribune video Kickstarter project, which quickly surpassed financial goal.



But the most powerful outcomes — the benefits that endure long after the event is over — are Campers’ connections to one another. Our focus has always been on convening exactly the right people around a particular topic that causes action in the field and offers up forward-thinking, tangible outputs that affect real change in our society. At Spark Camp, we invite our Campers to imagine the world as they’d like it to be — and we provide the necessary intellectual space, and discussion framework for them to achieve that new reality, whether that’s via a public toolkit, or a new collaboration between organizations or a commitment among our Campers to work on a game-changing project together.

Now, after we’ve hosted almost half a dozen Camps, we’re beginning to answer What else can Spark Camp do? How do we more effectively document and share the ideas generated during the event? In what ways can we nurture the networks we’ve created towards realizing their ideas? How do we begin to affect change throughout multiple communities and industries?

The reason we wanted to step back and articulate our experiences hosting events is not because we want to perfect a Spark Camp formula. It’s because we’re interested in applying these lessons to new and different contexts, and hearing the lessons of others. We envision Spark Camp evolving into a next-generation collective — a pop-up think tank that fosters creative thinking and sparks real-world action.

Thank you for reading, and thank you for sharing.

Amanda Michel, Andrew Pergam, Matt Thompson, Amy Webb

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— Team Spark

Starting in 2014, we’ll begin iterating new formats, such as one-day Spark Summits. We’ll also be collaborating with companies, foundations and nonprofits to host discussions on specialized topics, such as reinventing education, reimagining how cities work and the future of work. We’ll also look to extend the impact of Spark Camp itself, hosting more Camps and adding alumni gatherings and ongoing alumni services. As we expand, our mission will remain the same: cultivating multidisciplinary professional experiences that produce both deep personal enrichment and powerful outcomes.

When we started Spark Camp, we described the ethos we wanted to create as “a weekend of wonderful dinner parties.” Over time, we’ve come to appreciate how apt that metaphor is. If there’s a muse for Spark Camp, it’s Julia Child. Preparing a great event shares many resonances with preparing a marvelous feast — the importance of great ingredients, the way chemistry and time work their magic, the balance between recipe and improvisation. Julia Child took something that for many Americans had become rote and formulaic, and turned it into something dynamic, meaningful and entertaining, which is exactly what we aim to do.

So as we expand our menu, we echo Julia’s advice as we solicit yours: “Try new recipes. Learn from your mistakes. Be fearless. And above all, have fun.” You can find us at **@SparkCamp** and **info@sparkcamp.com**.





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