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How to Make a Splash at SXSW

It seems as if every company is looking to create buzz at SXSW in Austin this week. Here are some strategies for making a memorable impression.

By Christine Lagorio | Mar 15, 2010

While known as the live music capital of the world, Austin is making serious inroads as one of the most social-media savvy cities in the country. The famed SXSW festival isn't just about the music anymore – a film festival and an esteemed technology and innovation conference have been added to the mix.

In recent years, SXSW Interactive has been a particularly important venue for social media companies to debut new technology. Three years ago, Twitter launched there. The microblogging site was the talk of the event and grew quickly from there. Similarly, the location check-in app Foursquare debuted at SXSW last year. The resulting buzz helped founders Dennis Crowley and Naveen Selvadurai bring in \$1.35 million from investors.

Inspired yet? Even if you're not angling to be the breakout product of this year's SXSW, there are ways to maximize your time at the event by building future partnerships and exposing your product to a core audience of enthusiastic early adopters. Here are some tips.

Your Guide to SXSW: Getting the Lay of The Land

At SXSW Interactive, you're going to have to do more to get noticed than simply handing out business cards. In fact, business cards are pretty archaic; at SXSW, iPhone apps such as BeamMe, Bump, Handshake, and Fliq have become the vehicle of choice for sharing contact information. And, anyway, we all know how to find each other on Twitter, Facebook, and Tumblr, right?

Still, you should know before you go whom you'd like to meet face-to-face – and make a point of doing that. Other networking will come naturally if you're a social person, thanks to the glut of activities, from the panel presentations to the cocktail parties.

Additionally, if you're representing your company, you'll want to do some formal things to be recognizable and omnipresent.

- *Attend the trade show.* Everyone from Samsung to O'Reilly Media to AOL will be there. Take a walk through the exhibit space with an eye toward finding potential future partnerships.
- *Enter the Microsoft BizSpark Accelerator competition.* If you're just starting out or want to debut something new, enter the Accelerator competition, where you'll pitch, demo, and distribute your product. Everyone's there looking for the next big thing, remember – and here's where the demos show 2,500 attendees what you're up to. The exposure from the Accelerator can also help you learn about funding opportunities and take advantage of the SXSW media presence.
- *Take part in the screen burn.* This arcade of gamers' delights is a great place to meet people—and the ideal venue for a company to demo a new game.
- *Mingle at the Interactive parties.* Nightlife is an important part of SXSW. Established companies and even some start-ups host evening mixers not only to have fun, but to get their names out. Choose your nighttime schedule just as carefully as you choose your daytime itinerary. RSVP for your top-priority events, but remember that getting your name on the list doesn't always ensure entry. Overcrowding can be a big issue at SXSW's hottest events – so remember to arrive early.

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Your Guide to SXSW: Speaking on a Panel

Even if you're fresh to the start-up world, you're an expert in something, right? To gain both industry cred and street-level exposure, you should be billing yourself as such. Typically, panel-based talks are at an academic level, for an insulated audience. At SXSW, by contrast, panels are open to any attendee – so a speaker can reach an opt-in audience that's also fairly diverse. It's like every marketer's dream come true.

Of course, even if you're a growing company's online security guru, you're not going to get on the "Securing Web Behemoths" panel with Twitter, Facebook and Microsoft. But there are other opportunities; you simply need to plan ahead.

First, submit your name to SXSW's online PanelPicker. Making an edgy and innovative case for speaking is important; remember, hundreds of other entrepreneurs are doing the same thing as you. Chris Brogan, a social-media expert and author of *Trust Agents* and *Social Media 101* didn't, for instance, pitch a panel called "Social media basics." Instead, his panel is called "I don't trust you one stinkin' bit" – far more intriguing.

Public votes count, though only for 30 percent of the formula for choosing panels. SXSW's advisory board (40 percent) and staff (30 percent) comprise the rest. If you have something fresh and coherent to say, you'll have a solid shot. For next year, think ahead: the PanelPicker opens in June.

Even if you can't get on a panel, it doesn't mean the exposure is closed to you and your company. You can always see what panels are relevant to your field and build a relationship with the presenters ahead of time. Show them what you've got, offer to kick off the Q&A, and maybe they will mention you in their presentation.

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Your Guide to SXSW: Hosting a Must-Attend Event

Even the most serious geekerati like to joke that SXSW Interactive is a drinking festival with a little innovation on the side. So, if you feel comfortable hosting an open bar, consider throwing a party. You can register the event with SXSW – and gain exposure by adding it to the festival's [interactive nightlife map](#), which lists parties at 44 local venues surrounding the Austin Conference Center. In doing so, you'll be in the company of big names such as Microsoft BizSpark, Volusion, Mozilla and Groupon. If the nightlife schedule seems too crowded for your taste, consider an alterna-event at a local bar. Groupon is hosting a "Recovery Breakfast" at the Cedar Door this year, for example.

In addition to a varying nighttime schedule of smaller gatherings, some companies sponsor week-long lounges or gathering places. This year, for example, Beaconfire Consulting of Arlington, Virginia, is hosting a lounge with free Wi-Fi.

If your niche has a possible event tie-in, by all means, use it. If you've designed an iPhone app for distributing Yoga instruction, for example, host a daily morning yoga session, or an evening quick-hit pose competition. Be inventive, because almost anything goes – and with such a diverse and layered schedule of events, you want your event to get added to a participant's calendar the first time they come across it.

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Your Guide to SXSW: Giving Away Memorable Freebies

When it comes down to it, SXSW Interactive is a convention. Everyone's got their tote bags, and is collecting goodies along the way. But, as we're moving toward post-business-card networking, consider that staying green is important, and extra junk is a faux-pas. If you are going to distribute cards, though, consider something innovative—such as [these](#). If getting your company's name or image out is more important than personal networking, consider gadgets that will end up on office desks, or stickers attractive enough to land on laptop covers.

If you don't have a booth at the trade show, or can't lug materials with you to dole out, you might consider landing some promo material in the signature SXSW tote bags, which every registrant – whether they're there to see music, film or participate in Interactive panels – receives. In 2008, Adobe included a cute Chinese food take-out box and fortune cookie. It was a fun and relatively low-cost way of making an impression.

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Your Guide to SXSW: How to Find People (and Be Found)

If you're on a panel, if you're attending or hosting a party, if you know where you will be ahead of time... let people know. Post your schedule on your website and let people know how to contact you in the case of missed connections. Or, if you're expecting to be bad at answering calls or email during SXSW, let people know that, too. Don't allow networking overload to set in.

If you're an avid Tweeter, come to sessions armed with their individual hash-tags. Incorporating them can make others in the room – or at the festival – aware of your presence, and what you're thinking, and thus establish instant connections.

Finally, Gowalla and Foursquare are great ways to spread information as to your present location. Both online services are widely embraced by the throngs at SXSW.

[Dig Deeper: How to Make Money on Foursquare](#)

Making a Splash at SXSW: Reaching Beyond Austin

SXSW can be a good place to try out small partnerships with an eye toward something larger. This year, for example, Gowalla has arranged a partnership with Chevy to put on promotions and host games throughout SXSW. And Foursquare is including partnership promos with companies such as *SPIN*, Pepsi and PayPal. Look for more collaboration between these brands going forward.

Amid the partying and the panel discussions, real work can also get done. For instance, Brian Drescher writes at *USA Today's* social media lounge that he arranged last year to meet up with Fark founder Drew Curtis to discuss how new media and traditional media might collaborate. "During this in-person get together, we were able to knock out several key details and develop a solid foundation for building a strong working relationship," Drescher writes. A partnership launched several months later.

Keep this anecdote in mind as you are racing around Austin. The point of the trip is not networking for networking's sake. Your ultimate goal is to channel the energy and activity you experience in Austin into tangible business results.

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