

Reaching The Summit

With a distinctive vision, Adobe has dramatically grown its conference without losing its soul.

VENETIAN MEETINGS LAS VEGAS

Tech conferences are big business. But as the calendar gets more crowded—and the conferences themselves more popular—what does it take to both stand out and scale up? Adobe's corporate events team knows. Adobe has created and planned one of the biggest digital marketing events for the past 11 years. Adobe Summit, which takes place over five days at The Venetian and Sands Expo Las Vegas, consists of more than 250 keynotes, panels, and workshops. But it started out modestly, "as just a user conference," says Mike Stiles, senior corporate event manager. "Our initial goal was to train and educate our customers on how to get the most out of our products."

Over the years, Summit has grown to reflect the software giant's stature, and attendance has grown in kind: More than 13,000 people attended this year's Summit, which relocated three years ago from Salt Lake City to The Venetian to better accommodate the burgeoning number of attendees and to create a distinctive event.

"In some ways, the blank canvas [that The Venetian Las Vegas offers] is great," Stiles says. "But you have to create everything else. So, we looked for a venue that fit what we needed. The Venetian is such a beautiful property. We didn't have to do anything to really dress it up. It's designed for a lot of breakout sessions. Plus, it's one of the largest hotels in the world, and the staff understands what we're trying to do."

With the help of The Venetian, the Adobe experiential marketing team



The key to continually growing an event is combining discipline with creativity, says Adobe's Mike Stiles: "Don't change for the sake of change...change to make things better."



Three years ago, Adobe moved its Summit event from Salt Lake City to The Venetian Las Vegas to accommodate more than 13,000 attendees.

has mastered what confounds many event planners—the art of expanding a conference without losing what made it attractive in the first place.

SERVICE IS IN THE DETAILS

All conferences feature keynotes, breakout sessions, and the obligatory concert, but the best of them focus on service as much as content. "We

try to anticipate what you need or want or expect, and have it ready for you," Stiles says. "There's nothing more frustrating to an attendee than having a work emergency midway through the day with unreliable internet, no battery, and no power." The wide range of configurable areas at The Venetian allowed Adobe to optimize individual spaces for productivity throughout the venue. "Attending a conference can take people out of their normal routines, so we look for ways to help our attendees feel more comfortable and relaxed," Stiles explains. "There were a few [Venetian] ballrooms we weren't using for meeting space, so we did some brainstorming with the team at The Venetian around experiences we could add to the event. [Repurposing the ballrooms] for yoga and meditation created a peaceful, quiet place to relax and re-center during the busy week of Summit."

Food is another point of differentiation, although the solution isn't necessarily premium spreads. "There are very specific dietary needs for people with restrictions," Stiles says. "We want them to know that they're recognized and



Shantanu Narayen, CEO of Adobe, welcomes attendees to this year's Summit.

valued." Adobe worked closely with The Venetian culinary team to create deconstructed offerings that allowed attendees to choose what would best suit their diet. And while Summit makes a point to set up coffee and portable snacks in high-trafficked areas during the inevitable afternoon energy slump, they take things further with custom breakfasts. "We think about what state of mind attendees are in," Stiles says. For instance, "you're probably going to want something different—maybe even a little more substantial—for breakfast the morning after a concert."

MAKE SURE BIGGER IS BETTER

When you're growing ten-fold, as Summit has, the challenge is making the production impressive while remaining intimate. Relocating to The Venetian proved crucial. "It has fantastic accommodations, which minimizes the number of hotel blocks we need to get, and a myriad of amazing celebrity-run restaurants," says Stiles. "And there's a direct flight to Vegas from almost everywhere in the world."

For a business-to-business event, it's also important that the venue offer plenty of options for smaller dinners and receptions, along with spaces that can accommodate all sorts of creative experiences, such as the Summit-based extension of Adobe's six-year-old cycling program. The Venetian helped create custom bike routes for group rides around the conference, allowing attendees to both meet and engage with other attendees through a non-traditional—and more memorable—experience.

The size and the breadth of amenities creates, in effect, a city within a city. "The Venetian and The Palazzo take care of everything," Stiles says. "We don't have to worry about where guests are going to stay, and where they're going to eat. There are very few cities, let alone venues, that can offer that level of convenience and quality."

MEASURING FOR SUCCESS

Tech conferences today are anything but subtle. Deep pockets can mean a lot of celebrity-focused programming aimed at generating buzz. "It's challenging to stay ahead of everyone else," Stiles says.

Adobe adheres to a more customer-focused approach, concentrating on what resonates with attendees. Its pre- and post-event surveys produce invaluable metrics. They tell Adobe's corporate events team

that concerts may score well on satisfaction, but they rank low in importance. Consequently, Summit focuses on education and high-yield networking, a priority for attendees. "Our goal is to connect and educate people, and if we fail on that, it doesn't matter if the food was great, or if we have an awesome band," says Stiles. "If they don't leave feeling like a better marketer and feeling better about the investment they made in our event, we've completely failed."

In fact, he recommends that a company put its attendees' needs ahead of its own. "Find out what they want, give it to them, and they'll keep coming back," he says. "No one wants to spend a week at a sales pitch."

SMALL CHANGES, BIG RESULTS

Both The Venetian and Summit teams are constantly on the lookout for innovations and improvements—even subtle ones—finding inspiration in gadgets such as ticket scanners and beer taps. "We don't want to mess with what works. People like the routine, the schedule we've built for them," he says. "But it's those little things that you tweak. How do you keep finding ways to make it just a little bit better?" In that sense, he says, Summit is evolutionary rather than revolutionary: "We don't change just for the sake of change. If something isn't broken, we don't try to fix it. But if there's a way to make Summit better, we jump all over it."

The Venetian takes a similar approach with their Honest Food Program, which focuses on cultivating relationships with local producers to improve food freshness while also reducing their carbon footprint. Their team conducts a waste-tracking analysis after every event in order to see how consumption measured against their projections, allowing them to continually adjust future purchases to ensure the least waste possible. (They also donate leftover items to local food banks.)

All the little decisions, all the details, add up to a positive overall experience, one that works so well as a whole that it can be hard for attendees to single out just one element. For Adobe, that's the ideal reaction. Adobe wants attendees to come away saying, 'What a great experience! Summit was educational, inspiring, and fun and I can't wait to attend next year.'

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