



A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO CREATING OUTSTANDING CONFERENCES

How to design a day people stay engaged in and can't stop talking about



[Shannon Jenkins](#) | Moderator, Stage Host & Content Design Partner

A NOTE FROM ME

I hope a few of these ideas help you design the conference you are looking for.

This matters more now than it used to. In the age of AI, **information is everywhere. Transformation is not.**

A room full of people, in real life, for one day, is one of the few things that cannot be replicated. That is the edge. I would argue it is now a necessity.

Everything here comes from days I have designed and hosted. There is no right order. Skim it, take what is useful, and use the checklist at the back when you are building your next agenda.

Good luck with it.

Shannon



WHY LISTEN TO ME

I am Shannon Jenkins. Moderator, stage host, keynote speaker and content design partner.

I have hosted and moderated tens of conferences and trained hundreds of speakers.

That combination is the reason I see events the way I do. I know what makes a speaker excellent, and I know what a room does when they are not.

I have worked across every shape and size of event, from internal leadership conferences at companies like Nestlé and Nespresso through to multi-day public-facing industry conferences. Here are some of them:

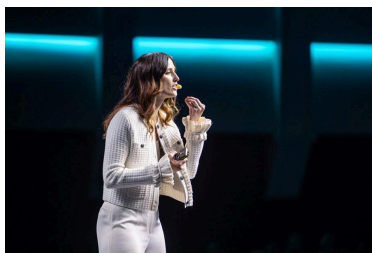
- Startup Nights, 9,000+ attendees
- START Summit, 7,000+ attendees
- GITEX AI Europe, 20,000 attendees
- Health Tech Global Summit, 5,900+ attendees
- Sales Formula Lithuania, 2,000 attendees

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- Nespresso Management Conference, an intimate gathering of 150 leaders
- Nestlé Healthy Longevity Summit, an intimate high-level gathering of 70 leaders

I have interviewed many high-level speakers on stage, including Guillaume Le Cunff, CEO of Nestlé Europe, British astronaut Tim Peake and entrepreneur Tobias Häckermann. I also host the RESONATE podcast: more than 150 episodes, listened to by over 68,000 people across 148 countries.

Whether it's an exhibition hall turned into a stage in front of 20,000 people or an intimate summit with 70, **these guiding principles do not change.**



THIS GUIDE IS FOR YOU IF

- You are designing a conference, a summit or an internal event
- You are responsible for the outcome and you want the day to be a success
- You want people still talking about it months later

01 WHERE MOST CONFERENCES GO WRONG

I recently hosted the Healthy Longevity Brands Summit, a collaboration between Nestlé and Brand Innovators. At the networking drinks, a senior leader from Google approached me and he said:

“Gosh, it was outstanding. I’ve never been so engaged. I don’t know what happened.”

I smirked and said: **“It was all very intentional.”**

Nothing about that day was luck. It was strategically considered, carefully prepared and flawlessly executed.

Here is the problem I see again and again. Most conference formats are built around an incentive to over-pack the schedule. But it does **not** work.

You see immediately because:

- Phones come out.
- There’s silence during the Q & As.
- By mid-afternoon they are answering email with the session still running.

Panel fatigue is real.

My position is simple. The day people talk about six months later is the day that brings you the next partnership, the next client and the next invitation.

Engagement is a commercial asset. You must design for it.

FROM THIS



TO THIS



02 BEGIN WITH THE END IN MIND

To run a successful event, you must start by actually defining success. Then **work backwards from the outcome before you get stuck in the details.**

On my first call with a client, I do not ask about the agenda. I ask the following:

Success

This event is a success if, by the end of the day ...

Main message

What is the one thing you most want this audience to remember? (One sentence. The sentence they repeat in the taxi or over coffee the next day)

Mindset shift

What does this room believe walking in? What do you want them to believe walking out?

Positioning

How do you want your organisation to be seen in this space afterwards, and by whom?

Tone

What is the energy of the day? How do you want the room to feel, and how do you want your organisation to come across?

Choose words a host or a speaker could actually act on. For example: enthusiastic, dynamic, warm, playful, joyful, serious, credible, understated, urgent, celebratory.

Three words. Just three.

THE ANTI-BRIEF

Think of the worst conference moment you have personally sat through. The point you checked out, reached for your phone, or wished you had left.

What caused it?

This is my favourite question to ask a client. People go quiet, then they get very specific. They usually say things like:

- Panel fatigue. Another hour of listening.
- Back-to-back panels with no change of pace.
- Zoning out and not being able to get back in.
- Needing to move after sitting down for hours.

Every organiser has sat through it. Very few have designed against it.

03 CHOOSE THE SHAPE OF THE DAY

I also ask clients to choose the “style” based on the two formats below:

Option A: A substantive conference. A sequence of speakers and panels delivering depth and credibility. Interaction happens over lunch and networking. Content-rich, serious, expert-led.

Option B: A designed experience. A mix of formats. Panel, fireside chat, short keynote. Active moments built in: movement, interaction, reflection, gamification etc. People feel the topic as well as hear it.

YOUR BLEND

A % B %

Each choice commits you to something.

Heavy on A and you need speakers who can genuinely hold a room, tight time discipline, and fewer of them. Depth only lands when it is delivered well.

Heavy on B and you need someone designing and running the transitions.

Most organisers pick the shape after the agenda already exists. By then the shape has been picked for them.

04 THE ENERGY MAP

This next guideline makes a HUGE difference to overall engagement.

MY RULE

People get out of their seats every 30 to 60 minutes.

It does not need to be elaborate. Here is one I use. I put a question like this(below) on screen, then ask people to stand up, introduce themselves to someone they do not know, answer it together and sit back down.

**What's one idea from this morning that
really resonated with you, and what action
might you take as a result?**

Healthy Longevity Brands Summit, Nestlé x Brand Innovators

It takes three minutes. Something changes in a room when people use their voice, and they come back sharper.

It also makes the networking afterwards much easier. People have already had a guided conversation with a stranger, so the ice is broken before the break starts.

Format mix

Tick what you have. An empty column means a flat day.

- ☐ Panel
- ☐ Fireside chat
- ☐ Short keynote, 15 minutes or less
- ☐ Film or video
- ☐ Live demo or product moment
- ☐ Tasting or sensory moment
- ☐ Movement or breath
- ☐ Gamified moment
- ☐ Structured table conversation
- ☐ Audience questions captured live

The key rule: mix the order of formats across the day. Panel, then fireside, then keynote, then an interactive moment. Changing the pace is what keeps a day dynamic.

Where energy drops

Plan an active moment for each of these before you plan anything else.

1. Straight after lunch
2. The third session of the morning
3. The final session before close



A breathing exercise to reset energy

05 THE DETAILS PEOPLE FEEL AND NEVER NAME

Nobody walks out saying the transitions were well produced. They walk out saying they were engaged and they do not know why. The details are the why.

Sound

Music can shift the energy in a room faster than almost anything else you control. Choose your walk-in music and your jingles carefully.

- Play something as people arrive. It sets the temperature before anyone speaks.
- Use a short sound cue for recurring moments. People learn it after two uses and it moves the room without anyone explaining anything.
- Use silence on purpose, so it means something when it arrives.

Slides

- One idea per slide.
- If a slide needs reading, it is a document or a report. It is not a presentation on a stage.
- Use visuals as much as you can. A strong image does more work than a bullet list.
- On a big stage, a black background looks more elegant than white. It is also much easier on the eyes.
- Keep the design consistent across every speaker. Mismatched decks make a day feel assembled instead of designed.

Multimedia with intent

Every film, every image, every demo should earn its place. Ask what job it is doing. A change of medium is also a change of energy, so use it at the dip points on purpose.

Surprise

Build in at least one thing nobody saw on the agenda. Novelty resets attention. It does not have to be big or expensive. It has to be unexpected and it has to fit your message.

Designed connection

This is the one most events get wrong. Connection gets saved for networking, which is a word that makes a lot of people quietly dread the break. Standing in a room holding a glass, trying to join a conversation, is hard for most people and genuinely awful for some.

So design the connection instead of leaving it to a coffee break.

- Give people a specific question, not an open invitation to mingle.

- Give them a specific person. “Turn to your neighbour” beats “find someone new.”
- Keep it short and bounded. People relax when they know it ends.
- Do it early, so the first conversation of the day is already behind them.

When you design the connection, the networking that follows gets easier for everyone. People have already spoken. The ice is gone.



A designed connection moment, not a coffee break

06 DOES YOUR DAY DO WHAT IT SAYS?

When I was designing the Healthy Longevity Summit, I said this to the team early: it would be ironic to talk about longevity all day and then sit in our seats staring at slides without moving.

So we designed it into the day itself.

- We thought about the food people ate.
- We did a breathing exercise together.
- We did a movement exercise with music.

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- We built in a moment designed to get people connecting, because connection is part of longevity.

People did not just hear about the pillars of longevity. They practised four of them before lunch.

THE TEST

Imagine a journalist described your day using only what people did. No speaker names. No session titles. Nothing anyone said.

Would that description match your main message?

If it would not, your content and your design are pulling in opposite directions. A room feels that even when nobody can name it.



07 THE PEOPLE

Great sessions are prepared, not hoped for.

Briefing your moderator

Your moderator is running your message, not just your clock. Brief them properly and brief them early.

They need:

- Your answers to the questions in section 02
- The strategic context. What is really at stake for the business
- Who is in the room and what they came for
- What each speaker is there to represent
- What you do not want said, and any sensitivities
- The run of show, with agreed flexibility on where to cut if you run late

Send this a week out. A moderator who gets the brief the night before can host your day. They cannot shape it.

Preparing panellists

- Hold a short pre-call with each one, individually.
- Send questions in advance. Nerves make people over-prepare or under-prepare, and both hurt the panel.
- Agree one story each. A real example beats a general opinion every time.
- No opening monologues. Straight into the conversation.
- Agree the timing out loud, so nobody is surprised when they are moved on.

Panel or fireside

Panel when you want range and contrast on one question. Three voices is usually the limit. Four is a queue.

Fireside when you want depth from one person, or when one guest is the draw. It is also better when the person is senior and the topic is sensitive, because it lets you follow up properly.



Panel prep is what makes a panel look easy

08 PLAN FOR WHAT GOES WRONG

Something always does. The difference between a professional day and an amateur one is whether anyone thought about it in advance.

Brief your speakers on the small things

Tell them about the microphone. A face mic sits next to the ear, and dangly earrings hit it.

I watched a speaker jingle her way through an entire presentation because nobody had mentioned it. Once she was on stage there was nothing anyone could do.

Also worth covering in the brief: no lanyards over the mic, no phones or keys in pockets near a belt pack, avoid fine stripes and busy patterns if you are filming, and check what colour the backdrop is before choosing an outfit.

Agree what happens when

Decide these before the day, not during it.

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The tech fails. Who speaks, what they say, and how long you hold before you move on. Every deck should exist as a PDF on a second machine.

A speaker is late. What gets moved forward, and who makes that call in the moment.

A speaker does not arrive at all. Have a replacement segment ready. A prepared audience conversation or a Q&A works well and costs nothing to hold in reserve.

A keynote finishes ten minutes early. This happens more than people expect. Your host should have questions ready rather than sending everyone to coffee early and losing the room.

A panellist will not stop talking. Agree the signal in advance, so it is not a surprise or an insult.

Your host is the person who absorbs all of this so the audience never feels it. That only works if the plan existed beforehand.

09 THE CONFERENCE DESIGN CHECKLIST

Everything in this guide, in one place. Tick the boxes as you build your day.

1. CLARITY OF PURPOSE

- ☐ Success defined: what has to be true by the end of the day
- ☐ Main message written in one memorable sentence
- ☐ The shift named: what the room believes now, what you want them to believe after
- ☐ Positioning outcome named: how the organisation should be seen, and by whom
- ☐ Tone agreed in three words
- ☐ The thing you are designing against is written down

2. SHAPE OF THE DAY

- ☐ Balance agreed between substantive conference and designed experience
- ☐ Agenda built after that decision, not before
- ☐ Number of speakers cut to what the day can actually hold

3. ENERGY

- ☐ People leave their seats at least every 30 to 60 minutes
- ☐ Format order mixed across the day so the pace keeps changing
- ☐ At least four different formats across the day
- ☐ Active moment planned straight after lunch
- ☐ Active moment planned for the final session
- ☐ Audience given something to say out loud in the first hour

4. CRAFT AND DETAIL

- ☐ Walk-in music chosen
- ☐ Sound cue agreed for recurring moments
- ☐ Slides consistent across all speakers
- ☐ No slide that has to be read
- ☐ Visuals used instead of text wherever possible
- ☐ Dark backgrounds used on large screens
- ☐ Every film and image has a clear job

- ☐ One planned surprise in the day

5. CONNECTION

- ☐ At least one connection moment designed, not left to the coffee break
- ☐ A specific question given, and a specific person to talk to
- ☐ Time-bounded so people know when it ends

6. ALIGNMENT

- ☐ The day does what the day is about
- ☐ Food, room layout and movement all considered
- ☐ If you described only what people did, it would match the message

7. PEOPLE

- ☐ Moderator briefed a week out, with strategic context and not just a run sheet
- ☐ Pre-call held with every panellist
- ☐ Questions sent in advance
- ☐ One real story agreed per speaker
- ☐ Panels capped at three voices
- ☐ Speakers briefed on microphones, earrings, lanyards and pockets

8. CONTINGENCY

- ☐ Every deck saved as a PDF on a second machine
- ☐ Agreed plan for tech failure
- ☐ Agreed plan for a late or absent speaker
- ☐ Reserve segment ready if a session finishes early
- ☐ Signal agreed for keeping a speaker to time
- ☐ One named person making live decisions on the day

WORK WITH ME

I design and host summits, conferences and internal events. Content partner, moderator and MC. That means I am involved before the agenda exists, rather than booked to read it out. I help you decide what the day is for, shape the run of show, prepare your speakers and panellists, and engage the room on the day with dynamic energy, sharp questions and strong adaptability if anything goes wrong.

See how I work

shannonjenkins.co/moderation

Email: hello@shannonjenkins.co

★★★★★

"Outstanding! Best MC I have ever seen!"

Prue MacKenzie, Director of Luxury, Retail and Consumer Goods, Google

★★★★★

"The summit was a real success, and Shannon's creativity, positivity, and flawless execution played a massive role in making it happen. The feedback has been fantastic!"

Melanie Brinbaum, CMO Nestlé Europe

★★★★★

"Shannon is an outstanding speaker. On stage, Shannon captivated the audience with her professionalism and infectious energy, creating an engaging and dynamic atmosphere. Highly recommended."

Timo Glasbrenner, Head of Speakers, Startup Nights

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