Åsa Sandberg

TEDx – A Global Platform for Sharing Local Ideas

Lessons learned from the community in Gothenburg

If anybody knows how to make video go viral, it is the TED Community. With 8.2 million subscribers on YouTube, and the most popular video having over 17 million views, it is quite the video-culture phenomenon. But why has it become such a popular organization; why do so many people engage in the TED community?

TED was born in 1984 out of the American architect, designer and author Richard Saul Wurman’s observation of a powerful convergence among three fields: technology, entertainment and design.

It took a few years until the world was ready.

The TED Conference\(^1\) became an annual event in Monterey, California, attracting a growing and influential audience from many different disciplines united by their curiosity and open-mindedness, as well as by their shared discovery of an exciting secret. Secret, because back then, TED was an invitation-only event. It is not now, you’re welcome and encouraged to apply to attend.\(^2\)

Over the years, the roster of presenters broadened to include scientists, philosophers, musicians, business and religious leaders, philanthropists and many others. For many attendees, TED became one of the intellectual and emotional highlights of the year.

In 2001, Chris Anderson took over as curator for TED. In taking the conference non-profit, Anderson stood by the principles that made TED great: the inspired format, the breadth of content, the commitment to seek out the most interesting people on Earth and let them communicate their passion. It soon became clear that the ideas and inspiration generated at TED should have an impact well outside the city limits of Monterey.

The first six TED Talks,\(^3\) which included one by the Swedish Professor Hans Rosling, were posted online on June 27, 2006. By September, they had reached more than one million views. TED Talks proved so popular that in 2007 TED’s website was relaunched around them, giving a global audience free access to some of the world’s greatest thinkers, leaders and teachers.

The emergence of the local TED

In 2009, TED decided to launch its successful concept globally and released licenses for people to arrange TED events locally. The events were called TEDx, where the x stands for “an independently organized” TED event.

Today, more than 5 similar TEDx events take place around the globe, each day. Over a billion videos are on the platform, available for anybody to watch. The concept attracts and brings people together from different countries and continents.

The difference between TED and TEDx is the local aspect.
TEDx means that it can be found locally rather than in the biggest cities (in the US). We in the local communities work on a local level at first, for example, with the community we have here in Gothenburg. Thereafter, the videos are available worldwide, for the global community.

**TEDx core values**

In Gothenburg, the second-largest city in Sweden, the TEDx community consists of a dedicated team of 30 talented volunteers. We come in all ages, nationalities, and professions. What is more, we come together in our genuine passion for ideas worth spreading and making these meetings come to life.

Our volunteers work in four different teams with separate responsibilities, each team with their own manager. The marketing team takes care of all marketing material and activities, social media, press and web. The partner team liaise with all partners contributing to making the event happening. The speaker team does all the research and coaching of the speakers. Finally, the production team handles everything around the events, from logistics to staff.

We gather around our core values:

1. We are curious.
2. We welcome different viewpoints.
3. We see change as a good thing.
4. We are intrigued by the unexpected.

TEDx, as well as TED, ties into the open space society, and the contemporary media landscape we see today.

We look for different ways of communication and a willingness to meet and discuss important topics with people outside your own silos. And the TED community transcends the boundaries between people, allowing people from different businesses, including academia and researchers, to meet in a dialogue.

In Gothenburg, there are numerous examples over the years on how these dialogues have sparked new business models, new collaborations and new ideas after people having seen an interesting talk on the stage.

We even see a changed behavior in schools, where teachers now use videos and TED Talks to educate their students on different topics. And as the TED videos keep coming in on a regular basis, there is a continuous source of...
knowledge added to the platform each day around different topics.

I see TED and TEDx as the world’s biggest platform for learning, where everybody with access to the Internet get free access to a scientific community and learn about new ways of seeing the world. It is democratization of knowledge.

To me that is unique and inspiring. You can watch the videos pretty much everywhere, and the knowledge travels fast. The videos produced by TEDxGöteborg are seen in Australia, Vietnam, Germany, Canada – all over.

And the phenomenon is fascinating. Speakers share their knowledge for free, to contribute to an open society and to get the ideas out to the world.

Even though the society today have exploded with selfies and Instagram Stories where people are used to being in front of the camera, most of our speakers have never been on stage before and therefore get trained to stand in front of the video camera.

When you are on stage, it is not sufficient to be up there and just speak. You need to also engage the audience and the viewers, by sharing your idea in the best way possible.

The speaker needs to trigger the emotions so much that the listener wants to share the videos over and over again. And for that, one needs practice and coaching.

**Different types of events**

Each year, we come up with a different theme for the events.

For several years, we focused on doing just one big event. However, last year we also organized some smaller events during the year to keep the engagement and the dialogue in the community active.

Those events are called salon events and gather around 100 people. The focus is not necessarily just the talks but the dialogue between the guest and the audience.

If you listen to a talk, what do you actually take away from that talk? We let our moderators spark the conversation and lead the guests into deep discussions around a topic or the talk they just heard.

For the salon events, we can only charge a ticket fee if we put live speakers on stage, but a salon event can also include watching a TED talk or another TEDx talk and converse around these.

We also put on a big annual event. This year we gathered 400 curious and open-minded delegates around the theme “The Brave New World”. The audience got to listen and watch twelve thought provoking acts, which inspired to new thinking and deep dialogue.

Now, we plan to do the same thing again next year, but with a new mind-boggling theme.
The local importance of TEDx events

TEDxGöteborg loves the local innovative spirit of Gothenburg and the possibility to create a platform for change makers. We want to be part in lifting the great ideas and the people behind them, really showing the strength in the local community.

On a bigger scale, we are also showing the world that Gothenburg is a place for innovation as we have people all around the globe following the events and talks we put online.

We have delegates saying that they have learnt more in a few hours than what they have ever done on a normal conference day.

This makes me proud and I see the potential for more companies and organizations to follow the same format when organizing their conferences and meetings in the future.

Filming the talks and sharing them online...
after the conference gives more people the opportunity to learn. In my opinion, more conferences should do that, sharing them with people that did not have the opportunity to attend.

Work against boredom
Watching a video afterwards – after a conference, seminar or another event – and having a dialogue around it internally in an organization could mean coming up with great solutions to a problem, even more so than just listening to the talk as part of an audience.

It is, in fact, tiring to sit a full day on a conference listening to long speeches. You need to create an experience and interaction, shorter talks, breaks to mingle and meet new people and not to forget the entertainment.

As TED, as mentioned before, stands for technology, entertainment and design, each of our events need to include all of those elements. And that is what makes them engaging: we do not let our guests get bored.

We work a lot with the content, which speakers should we put after the other, what entertainment act will leave our guest speechless and what interactive activities will thrill the minds of our guests in the breaks.

In our more and more hectic society, we want to have easy access to information. We no longer have as much time to prioritize a good book or a documentary on an interesting topic. The 18 minutes or less that the TED videos take is an attractive length for any person to listen to, not to short and not to long.

I believe TED and TEDx are here to stay, as the videos are part of a bigger picture: A world with a free access to knowledge. A generous platform that sparks discussion amongst people in different parts of the world and where sharing is caring.

Examples of TEDxGöteborg Videos

Mikael Fogelström, Professor at Chalmers University of Technology, gives a talk about graphenes, one-atom thick carbon structures, in a TEDx Göteborg event in 2014. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=eh3dA8xnZ4Y.

Tina Glenvik, a music pedagogue educated in Gothenburg, talks about nervousness on the stage in a TEDx Göteborg event in 2016. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UPDxCzcO5U0.

Yomi Abiola, the first African face for Maybelline, addresses inclusion in the fashion industry in a TEDx Göteborg event in 2015. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W_Qa_EklwYo.

Notes
1. See https://www.ted.com/about/conferences.
2. For upcoming TED conferences, see the webpage https://www.ted.com/attend/conferences.