Tips for Running an Online Conference

BY DAN LANGILLE

I began running conferences in 2002 when I helped with Open Source Weekend 2003. The next year, I started BSDCan. Three years later, PGCon started. I think I've run at least 32 conferences, two of which have been online: BSDCan 2020 and PGCon 2020.

There have been requests to share what we did, why, and how it went. This is, for the most part, a brain dump of everything I can remember. In general, I will refer to BSDCan, but unless otherwise noted, such references can also be to PGCon.
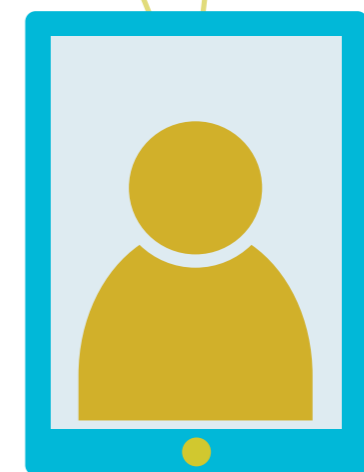
About the Conferences

Our choices were appropriate for our conferences but bear in mind that they may not work for yours. BSDCan and PGCon are Open Source conferences and they can be vastly different from other types of conferences. Here's how:

- some people are sent by their employers and others come just because they are interested,
- we are much less expensive than most conferences — $195 is the usual entry fee and half-day tutorials are $75 each,
- we have funding to reimburse speakers for travel and accommodation if they need it (this is a large budget item and we do understand it is not the norm),
- we provide catering (breakfast, morning and afternoon breaks, and lunch),
- we have fantastic sponsors.

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Zoom

We used Zoom, but nobody needed to have a Zoom client to attend the conference. We wanted to be sure of that. Not everyone wants to use Zoom and being able to view the talks via a standard web browser was important to us and to the attendees. For the Q&A sessions, some speakers dialed into the session using their phones, so even that path is an option.

A Zoom client was required to interact with some sessions, but the Q&A sessions via IRC (Internet Relay Chat) were available. Most open source users/developers are familiar with IRC and use it.

We used Zoom for:
- live sessions with Q&A for the speaker to respond — this was live streamed to ScaleEngine who broadcast it for us,
- tutorials run by the speakers — they wanted to do this live — 3 live tutorials are easier than 35 live talks,
- closing and opening sessions.

What We Did

We asked speakers to pre-record their talks to reduce the technical issues you need to solve on the day. We recommended speakers record using OBS Project. Our Speakers: recording your talk might be useful for your conference speakers.

Attendees watched free of charge without registration.

Nearly all of the previously offered sponsorship benefits disappear online. The "spon-sored-by" links remained but everything else vanished tee-shirts were not printed and tote bags were not distributed.

We tried to retain the same schedule as previous years:
- opening session,
- start at the usual time locally,
- three concurrent sessions,
- closing session.

We used local time. Someone was going to be inconvenienced no matter what we did, so we decided to make it easier for us by having the conference during our working hours.

All recordings were uploaded and made freely available later. The only thing non-attendees missed out on is submitting questions. We used ScaleEngine to broadcast the recordings. They were able to encode all the speaker recordings into various formats and resolutions. They creat-ed a schedule and broadcasts started on time.

The Q&A sessions were optional for the speakers in case theirs might not be at a good time for them locally. We had volunteers collect the questions and put them into an online repository for the speakers to read. Questions were submitted over an IRC channel, one for each of the three concurrent sessions. Sometimes the speakers were online and monitoring the IRC channel which made the question collection repo superfluous, but we did it anyway.

Speakers joined a dedicated Q&A Zoom meeting and we had one for each concurrent ses-sion. They knew how this would proceed and what to expect as we emailed them ahead of time and provided practice sessions so they could test their Zoom client. Speakers did not need a Zoom client and they could dial in via phone if they preferred.

The Q&A session was recorded and appended to the session broadcast recording. The ScaleEngine solution allows for layers or priority of channels and we chose, in order of impor-tance:
- broadcast recording,
- Q&A session,
- sponsor video.

If a broadcast started, it would play over top of any of the other two. When the broadcast ends, there is a short video of the sponsor logos. If the Q&A session runs over its time allot-ment, the next talk starts. However, the Q&A session continues to be recorded by ScaleEngine for later use.

Free

We decided not to charge because of the complexity involved with ticketing and then providing access. We might charge in 2021, but that is open to change.

We could afford not to charge because:
- we had sponsors,
- we did not have to live off the conference proceeds (which might differ for you, if conferences are your livelihood),
- our major expenses (catering, travel, accommodation, venue, tee shirts, tote-bags) were gone — vanished completely.

We had plans for how we could charge, and people would have paid. The charge would have been in the $5.00-$25.00 range. We were not worried about people sharing tickets. It could happen. No big deal. We trust people not to abuse the service.

Record or Live?

We chose recording to reduce problem solving. Our speakers live in varied locations and not all have great internet service. There was also the time-zone issue. Speakers recorded at their leisure and we broadcast at our convenience.

What Can Sponsors Get?

Our privacy policy does not permit us to provide sponsors with attendee details. Even if it did, we did not require registration, so there was no way to know who they were anyway. In our case, we created a few IRC channels specific to the sponsors and drove users there.

Things to Be Aware Of

Don't post meetings to Twitter. Bots will attend. Things will go very badly.

Let speakers cancel without penalty. Recording is different. Things go wrong. There's a pandemic. The speakers and their families always take priority over the conference. It's just a conference. If they cancel, thank them, and wish them well.

We posted URLs for the web-based sessions well in advance and only on our website. We had one page for each room with links to the two other rooms.

We posted URLs for Zoom sessions only just before the Zoom session. Communication with attendees was mostly over IRC. You can post updates to Twitter, but don't post Zoom meeting URLs there. As I mentioned, you'll get bots.

On IRC we had channels:
- one admin channel mainly for the volunteers running the conference,
- a main channel named after the conference) (e.g. #bsdcan),
- one IRC channel for each concurrent session — think one channel for each room at the conference venue.

DAN LANGILLE has been using open source since 1998. With a background as a software developer, Dan now works full time as a sysadmin. With his background in writing how-to guides, you are sure to find something useful, if not at least amusing. When not documenting his computer adventures, he occasionally attends a conference as opposed to running it (sometimes the two overlap). Having started his computer antics in Ottawa, he earned his first open source badges in New Zealand, and now resides near Philadelphia, where he works from home.