

the CAT and Perfect Strangers

White Paper



The leadership mission for the coming years is to interactivate participants of any and all gatherings with CAT.

flip the script to skyrocket value from gatherings

- Maarten Vanneste -

The Key Component of Gatherings, Organised by Leaders

In an era when organizations invest significant resources in convening leaders, teams, and industry professionals, the core asset of any meeting, conference, or event remains strikingly underutilized: the attendees themselves. Traditional designs prioritize speakers, programs, venues, catering, audiovisual support, and objectives—elements that, while important and often necessary, prove dispensable in thought experiments and real-world situations. Some gatherings without pre-organised catering can adapt through local resources and those without planned use of technology can still self-organise with low-tech alternatives. Even most presentations without speakers or predefined goals can generate value through emergent dialogue. Yet without participants, no gathering exists. And moreover, it is the participants that generate the most potential value for the other participants. The mission for the coming years is to interactivate participants of any and all gatherings.

Participants alone create (post-event) value. They translate insights into action, forge relationships that drive innovation, and generate measurable returns on investment (ROI). All subsequent impact—behaviour change, organizational results, and financial outcomes—flows exclusively through them. As Kirkpatrick, Phillips, and Hamso ROI-frameworks illustrate, effective gatherings build from participant satisfaction and learning toward action, impact and ROI. Yet conventional formats often fail to maximize this potential. Moreover, they mostly underestimate or underdeveloped the potential of meeting new people and the immense value that could create. Only participants generate ROI and are indispensable.

Participant Needs and Limitations of Traditional Approaches

Participants attend gatherings for three core reasons:

- motivation (energy, engagement, community, inspiration)
- learning (knowledge acquisition, sharing and application)
- networking: most of all say 60% (starting and building relationships with peers, potential partners, future friends or mentors).

These align with foundational ROI levels yet traditional presentation and meeting formats are mostly sub-optimal in all of these value creating segments.

Motivation benefits from the event atmosphere, yet external factors (work environment, leadership, incentives) often exert stronger influence. Passive attendance at events can energize temporarily but rarely sustains intrinsic drive or peer-supported momentum.

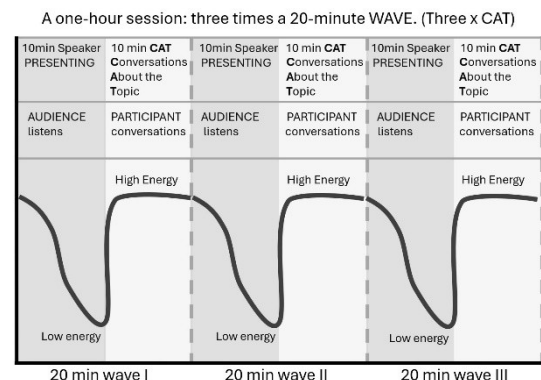
Learning from presentations often underperforms. *Top-down delivered content could be consumed asynchronously via recordings, articles, or books. So why do we retain the same top-down, one directional, lecture approach at live, face-to-face sessions?* Peer-to-peer exchange, by contrast, reinforces retention through active processing, but traditional designs allocate minimal to no time to it. Result: limited depth, transfer, and application.

Networking during breaks proves inefficient. As Ib Ravn (Lector Emeritus, Aarhus University) states: *“Networking is far too important, to leave it to coffee breaks and lunches”*. Attendees gravitate toward familiar faces, replicating office dynamics rather than expanding connections. Random encounters yield superficial exchanges often with low “conversation-based screening” which is the rapid mutual assessment of two strangers on compatibility, expertise, and potential relation value that occurs in topic-based dialogue. Research on familiarity and attraction (Reis et al., 2011) shows that repeated, meaningful interaction accelerates liking and relational quality far beyond brief small talk.

This trifecta of shortcomings is synergistic because in-session networking increases both learning and motivation. Classic Q&A activates only a tiny fraction of participants (often around 1% in larger groups), and with zero interaction it delivers no networking and very limited learning gains. Voting or app-based input improves activation rates up to 90% but remains largely individual rather than interactive. The result is gatherings that feel productive yet deliver disappointing long-term impact.

CAT: Conversations About the Topic as the Foundational Technique

CAT is the suggested solution of this Paper: it is the acronym for ‘Conversations About the Topic’. After segments of presentation content, CAT lets participants form small groups (ideally 5 people) for discussions on what they just heard from the speaker. A standard ‘wave’- script connects 10 minutes of presentation to 10 minutes of conversations, repeated in three such waves for a one-hour session, and four times for a 90-minute presentation.



CAT excels because it directly addresses all three participant needs while leveraging gatherings’ unique strength: access to ‘Perfect Strangers’; individuals filtered on shared profession by the conference and more finely filtered on topical alignment by the session. ‘Perfect Strangers’ are not random contacts but high-potential individuals not available in daily work. This unique group of professionals exists briefly, only once, during only one meeting, and this group can benefit a lot by using CAT to **interactivate** them. To interactivate is a new verb: to activate people among each other. It is the participants that represent and generate the most value for other participants

“CAT is the most effective, zero-cost intervention to create value from presentations”.

- Motivation rises intrinsically. Most professionals enjoy sharing knowledge, helping peers, and learning from others — effects amplified for introverts and GenZ through the small group safe space effect. Participants report higher energy and engagement; sessions often feel short and dynamic rather than interminable.
- Learning improves through active peer processing. Less presentation time yields more retention and application as participants now get time to digest, challenge, and personalize the chunked content. Peer learning complements top-down input without replacing expert insight.
- Networking numbers multiply. With CAT (Conversations About the Topic) in groups of five everyone meets four Perfect Strangers. Scaled across a 10-session conference, each single attendee might engage meaningfully with (10 x 4=) 40 perfect strangers instead of a handful of random encounters — an order-of-magnitude increase in quantity. In this way, a 500 person conference with 10 timeslots for sessions with CAT, the group can collectively form a theoretical maximum of 2.000 new connections per session and up to 20.000 for the event. This eclipses the number in standard Q&A formats and the Serendipity break-encounters. Based on that 10X networking number alone, it is plausible that the value, derived from a presentation with CAT, for any attendee on average doubles. Serendipity is overrated, and certainly not good enough to justify going to a conference.

To CAT or not to CAT is a contemporary, existential consideration for organisers: CAT solves the Gen-Z attention span issue without killing content in short sessions and drowning content in panel sessions. And best of all: CAT is scalable!

Networking quality explodes: With CAT, longer and topic-based conversations, in small groups of perfect strangers, accelerates the progression from “know” to “like” to “trust”. This is supported by research showing that 10–30 minutes of focused interaction substantially boosts liking and relational potential (Boothby et al., 2018; Reis et al., 2011; Sunnafrank & Ramirez, 2004).

CAT achieves near perfect interactivation : close to 100% participant activation among small groups at the highest intensity through conversation or debate.

Conclusion: CAT improves the Networking, the Learning and the Motivation of all participants.

Potential Impacts of CAT Adoption

Even modest adoption—replacing Q&A with one CAT—has a predictable increase in overall gathering value through compounding effects on learning, networking, and motivation, which cascade into greater action ROI, but also retention for paid events like conferences. This is perceived and real value for participants and organisers alike.



Empirical anchors reinforce this. Studies on interaction duration show that 30–60 minutes of conversation with strangers dramatically increases liking and follow-up likelihood versus 5–10 minutes of small talk (Dunn et al., 2022). Networking research links quality connections to career and business outcomes, with longitudinal data indicating positive effects on growth and satisfaction (Wolff & Moser, 2009). A single high-impact conference connection can generate substantial business value; scaling CAT across industries and nations suggests billions in aggregate economic potential.

The above-mentioned ROI-frameworks demonstrate that CAT will increase ROI significantly as more value in the lower two levels (Motivation, learning and networking) through CAT will lead to; more action, more impact and higher ROI.

CAT on its own, requires no budget, minimal preparation (a simple slide inviting groups of 5 or less to discuss the topic for 10 minutes), and works across formats—on-site, online (eg. via zoom-breakout rooms), or hybrid. CAT replaces Q&A as the default closer, transforming passive attendees into active participants. Organizations that institutionalize it as standard practice can expect - Quod erat demonstrandum - more enjoyable, productive gatherings that drive measurably increased progress in Learning, Networking and Motivation.

Upgrading CAT for even More or Targeted Value

The base version of CAT (Conversations About the Topic) demonstrably increases value with a minimal effort. Yet, thoughtful tweaks, additions and enhancements amplify and improve outcomes:

- Room setup and logistics : Tables for groups of 5; horse-shoe arrangements even around square and small tables suffice (or even five chairs with no table). Splitting pre-existing friend groups at entry maximizes perfect stranger exposure.
- Task integration: Add specific prompts—e.g., “Generate one recommendation” or “Text one question for the speaker”—to harvest participant input while preserving conversational flow. This evolves into C&I (Conversations and Input), enabling bottom-up strategy development or directed feedback, etc..

- Facilitation and technology: Facilitation for more specific goals and complex tasks will improve outcome; note-taking apps or shared documents capture output from CAT without disrupting dialogue. AV cues (music or lighting shifts) signal transitions smoothly.
- Strategic design: mixing participants for quantity or fixed groups for depth. E.g. a one day training with 3 sessions of 2 hrs with 5 CATs per session: do you leave people at the same table of 5 for all 3 sessions so they meet 4 people during 15 CATs or do you swap places every session so they meet 12 in 5 CAT?
- Hybrid formats extend reach while preserving local CAT. CAT at dinners or extended sessions with a slow ending: permission for continued conversation after the official end, optimizes potential of new connections.
- Existing formats like Cafe sessions, Open Space, etc. already include conversation-based activities, in one form or another. CAT defines the precise activity: Conversations (talking in small groups) about the Topic (from the Presentation) and as such maximise the perfect stranger potential.

These and other upgrades can be tailored to your objectives, turning CAT into a versatile platform for cocreation, consensus, innovation and progress.

Conclusion: CAT, A New Standard for Gatherings

Transitioning from Q&A to Conversation About the Topic or CAT is a mission for leaders of groups, organisers of gatherings and meeting professionals. By centring participants and deploying CAT as the default mechanism, leaders unlock gatherings' latent power. More perfect strangers become high-potential connections; passive sessions become dynamic exchanges; organizational investments yield compounded returns in knowledge, relationships and impact. The CAT technique is neither complex nor costly—it is a tiny adaption with substantial positive impacts.

Adopting CAT does not devalue speakers, venues, or programs; it optimises them by ensuring the indispensable element—participants—receive maximum value. In doing so, it elevates meetings from time-consuming obligations to engines of progress, innovation, and competitive advantage. Organizations that make CAT the new standard will not only improve individual events but also accelerate broader success in an interconnected world.

Our responsibilities go beyond direct (business) results and carry on in our Social Responsibility. The physical and mental health impact (addendum I) should also drive us in adopting CAT as an active and inconspicuous therapy against the growing loneliness in younger and “Social” media generations.

CAT is scalable and CAT time per day or per session is its KPI (Key Performance Indicator) that tracks “CAT Minutes per Participant”. Set a minimum CAT standard like 24 minutes of CAT per hour of presentation. This can become an SOP (Standard Operating Procedure) and a KPI for event budget approval and permission to organise.

Everyone can apply CAT or use the acronym CAT. Anyone can make this (part of) their own standard format or KPI. *No-one however should dismiss the serious responsibility, to maximise every perfect stranger's opportunity.* This white paper aims to encourage all leaders to replace Q&A by CAT

TOOLS:

1) The standard CAT SCRIPT for your speakers for a 1 hr session:

- Presentation part I 10min
- CAT 10min
- Presentation part II 10min
- CAT 10min
- Presentation part III 10min
- CAT 10min

2) The standard CAT SLIDE in at the end of each presentation segment:

- Form groups of (maximum) 5 people
- Discuss the content of the presentation
- Let everyone participate

3) many free tools like a video for speakers, a video protesting Q&A, the CAT-script, CAT-slide, CAT-sheet and more are available for free on payhip.com/meetingdesign. Copy and use them for yourself, your organisation or your clients.

Time to know – like - trust

- First Impressions and Relational Trajectories (Sunnafraank & Ramirez) – Journal of Social and Personal Relationships 2004
- Swift Trust in Temporary Teams (Meyerson, Weick, & Kramer) – Journal of Organizational Behavior 1996 (
- Interpersonal Trust Development in Networks (Gausdal & Hildrum) – Systemic Practice and Action Research 2012
- The Evolution of Trust in Professional Relationships (Lewicki & Bunker, updated in Tomlinson et al.) – Research in Negotiation (meta-analysis) 1996 (2020 update)
- Building Trust in Business Networks (Nielsen) – Journal of Business Research 2005
- Neuroscience of Trust in Professional Settings (Zak) – Harvard Business Review (with fMRI data) 2017
- Trust Accuracy in Brief Professional Contacts (Lount & Pettit) – Journal of Applied Psychology 2018
- Meta-Analysis of Trust Development (Dirks & Ferrin, updated in Colquitt et al.) – Journal of Applied Psychology 2002 (2022 update)

The value of a productive connection

- EventMB & PCMA (2024 Event ROI Study)
- LinkedIn Economic Graph (2022-2025)
- Wolff & Moser (2018, Intl. Economic Review)

Addendum I: The Population Health Effect of CAT

As CAT increases the number of new valuable connections from gatherings, it has an impact on people's lives too. Several types of relations (Business, sparring, friendship, ...) will come from the increase of new connections with Perfect Strangers, and that has a positive impact on business but also the health of those involved.

A substantial and growing body of research demonstrates that social relationships are a critical determinant of health and longevity. A landmark meta-analysis by Julianne Holt-Lunstad and colleagues, published in PLoS Medicine, synthesizing data from 148 studies and over 300,000 participants, found that individuals with strong social relationships had a roughly 50% greater likelihood of survival [from studied disease] compared to those with weaker ties. This effect size is comparable to established risk factors such as smoking and physical inactivity, underscoring the fundamental role of social integration as a health variable.

The evidence positions social connection as a social or psychological asset, and a core component of human health. As such, fostering strong, meaningful relationships should be considered a key pillar in strategies to improve population health and extending lifespan.

It is therefore reasonable to suggest that CAT, as a CATAList of human connection through gatherings of various kinds, may contribute to improved social integration and, over time, have a measurable impact on population health. This perspective highlights the growing responsibility of leaders and organizers of such gatherings, who play a role not only in advancing business or community objectives but also in supporting the well-being, cohesion, and overall health of their participants.

ADDENDUM II New concepts and Innovative Leadership Lexicon:

The Book 'Perfect Strangers', by Maarten Vanneste, CMM is the base of this White Paper and it introduces 13 new concepts of which some are used above. These ideas provide a fresh lexicon and toolkit for leaders and meeting professionals committed to evidence-based design.

1. **Conversation-based screening:** Rapid mutual assessment of two strangers on compatibility, expertise, and potential relation value during topic-based dialogue
2. **Session as a filter:** Gatherings and individual sessions naturally concentrate professionals with shared interests, creating unique networking environments.
3. **Super strangers:** Attendees at the same conference that share industry alignment
4. **Small group safe space effect:** Max 5 people in a conversation for maximum inclusivity
5. **Perfect stranger:** Participants in the same topical session: the finest filtered strangers.
6. **Calculating / predicting networking quantity:** (CAT-group size -1 x sessions/participant)
7. **Interactivation:** The activation of Participants among each other
8. **To interactivate:** To have activities that maximize interpersonal contact
9. **CAT** (Conversations About the Topic): The core technique—small-group, topic- dialogue
10. **CAT-Waves** / Wave script: Multiple timed conversation intervals in a single presentation
11. **CAT-Slide:** A simple visual cue inserted after presentation segments, instructions
12. **CAT KPI** (Conversation Minutes): A metric to assess networking across events
13. **CAT Sheet:** A spreadsheet Calculating monetary value for participants through CAT
14. **The currency for interactivity** is Minutes: Time allocation to CAT as a primary metric

Addendum III: SCIENTIFIC AND OTHER RELEVANT STUDIES

Intrinsic motivation

Helping as a Source of Intrinsic Motivation at Work. Grant & Berg (2011)

Peer learning

- 2009 M. K. Smith, et al. Why Peer Discussion Improves Student Performance on In-Class Concept Questions
- Value-Based Virality: Why We Share Relevant Info. Danielle by Cosme & Emily Falk (Annenberg School, UPenn) 2022 (Journal of Experimental Psychology: General).
- Three Diverse Motives for Information Sharing. Multiple authors (Communications Psychology) 2024 Lab experiments: LinkedIn Workplace Learning Report 2025
- Deloitte Global Human Capital Trends 2024

Introverts and group size

- How Introverts versus Extroverts Approach Small-Group Argumentative Discussions (Nussbaum)
- In the paper "Stress Varies Along the Social Density Continuum" (Front Syst Neurosci, 2020), Jay Love and Moriel Zelikowsky develop "a theoretical model on psychogenic stress in response to social density."

Chunk education volume

- Ebbinghaus (1885/1913) – The original forgetting curve
- Meister & Jehle (1990) – "The 20-minute rule" in lectures
- Giles & Edwards (2004) – Meta-analysis of lecture length
- Bradbury (2016) – Review of 230 medical-education lectures

Duration of networking

- Dunn et al. (2022) - experiment (1,500+ strangers at events)
- Boothby et al. (2018) – "Shared attention amplifies liking"
- Reis et al. (2011) – "Getting to know you" experiments

The Author:

Maarten Vanneste, CMM has been active in the meeting and conference industry since 1982. His background is Meeting Design, Production and Technology. He started his company ABBIT at the age of 18 and soon started giving back with speaking, training, and publishing. He is the author of "Meeting Architecture, a manifesto" (2008), "Multi-Hub Meetings" (2017), The meeting architecture workbook (2019) Perfect Strangers (Not published at date of this paper) and several other publications on meeting design. He coined the term 'Meeting Architecture', 'Multi-Hub meetings', the 'Session as a filter' and 'Perfect Strangers' and he invented the 'Interactivation Ratio' for measuring participant engagement in meetings. He developed the comprehensive Meeting Architecture Matrix and a 5-day training in meeting design. A new 2-day masterclass based on 'Perfect Strangers' was introduced in South Africa, in 2025.

He is the founder of a movement and a conference around meeting design aiming to advance the effectiveness of meetings and conferences.

He was the recipient of the 'IMEX Academy award' in 2005 and 'the MPI Rise Award' for Industry Leadership in 2011. In 2022 he was appointed by MPI members as one of the 50 most influential people in the global meetings industry.

Born in Belgium in 1963, lives in Belgium, speaks Dutch, English, French and German, formally retired in 2025. But volunteering for training and lectures.

Editorial input & support: Tamsin Treasure-Jones, UK & Gerrit Jessen CED, CMM, CMP, Germany.