

Recommendations for Local Groups Based on the Austin 2011 Design Community Survey

In 2011, 103 people responded to a survey sent out to the mailing lists of IxDA Austin, Austin UPA, Austin UX and Refresh Austin. The survey asked 27 questions about their experiences with local groups, and the following recommendations were provided to local group leaders based on the results.

Ten recommendations

1. Schedule events Monday through Thursday evenings, somewhere in the Central/North/Northwest corridors. Don't schedule them South. Don't schedule them in the heart of downtown unless they're *right* after work. Don't schedule them as lunches, except maybe on Fridays. Don't schedule anything for the weekend.
2. Don't schedule events that conflict with major web-related groups. Austin's a web town and those groups will have larger turnouts than specialist groups, and people go where people are. If you're Austin PHP, you can probably safely schedule opposite Austin Python, but not Austin JavaScript. If you're Austin Drupal, you can probably safely schedule opposite Austin WordPress, but not Austin MySQL. It hurts the community when people have to "choose sides." Also: 60% of people say they also attend Refresh Austin, which means you basically can't ever schedule opposite them or you'll lose. You can find good references like the door64 calendar and the GeekAustin guide: <http://door64.com/event> and <http://geekaustin.org/guide-austin-tech-meetups>. <http://www.austintechevents.com/> is a new calendar that may be promising, too.
3. Have *people* give talks and be on panels, not companies. Companies can sponsor the event, but it shouldn't be an entire panel filled with people from that company. Attendees *will* walk out. No-one does hands-on workshops, but they can be a big

draw; you should do them. “Field trips” to related industries can be interesting, I’m guessing for the most engaged folk, but maybe not 9-5ers, but I’m just making that reason up. Lunches and happy hours should be way down on your list, because while Austin has a lot of bars, it’s because it’s a college town, not necessarily because it’s an adults-go-out-drinking-a-lot town. Open tabs also aren’t a panacea: free food/drinks/coffee doesn’t dramatically affect turnout.

4. Lots of people want to learn the basics. This might frustrate senior practitioners, of course, but they might not be showing up anyway, so if you’re looking for just raw attendance that’s a good way to go.
5. Advertise. Advertise until you’re blue in the face. If your potential attendee doesn’t have ten-plus years of experience, they apparently don’t have any idea what events are going on. Irregular schedules are group-killers. Be reliable: hold your meetings at the same place, same time, same day, every single month. Give people every possible way to find out what’s going on: mailing lists, Twitter feeds, calendars, text messages, personal phone calls, letters mailed to their office. I’m totally 100% serious about this: I personally text messaged every person who ever attended a design workshop, every two weeks, to invite them to the next one. Personal invitations are the best way to get people to show up. Personally take someone’s hand and ask them to show up, and then ask them to ask a friend or colleague to come with them.
6. Personal invitations are also the best way to break people out of their “work shell.” If they talk usability research with four other researchers all day long, they live in a happy little bubble and never think to find an opinion outside of the office. It’s the same for programmers, and designers, and everyone else. But, if you show up at their office and ask them to come to your researchers meeting, there’s a *way* better chance they’ll do it. It might be the only way.
7. Give people something they can’t get anywhere else. The 2011 community survey provided a huge list of things that people aren’t getting out of their jobs. Maybe you can provide some of that. The survey results stuff at the end of this email reviews it.
8. If you’re interested in improving how people find jobs through your group, you have to get people talking with each other. Not networking events (that only worked for 2%), but making the personal introductions, one at a time, that get people to become friends.

9. People are looking for validation (critiques and mentoring ranked pretty well, public/private recognition not so much, but perhaps due to wording). Consider advanced classes and competitions in the areas people say they have the most skill in. At the last consulting company I worked at, I had the tightest, simplest HTML of anyone, based on a “build this same wireframe” thing we all did, and had the second or third best CSS. There’s value in being able to see your worth outside of the confines of your job title or salary. The survey results stuff at the end of this email reviews skills, too.
10. Think hard about what you, the group leadership, want to get out of running this group. The 2011 community survey results suggest that most people, perhaps expectedly, just aren’t that engaged in their local community. What do *you* want to see? Raw attendance? Focusing on newbie material will help with that. Job hunting? Lots of handshaking and personal introductions in your future. Deep conversations between experts to advance the industry? Maybe a public group isn’t the right thing for that at all, but a private, invitation-only meeting somewhere. Offering things that people don’t get in their jobs? Perhaps educating your audience on the standards they should be demanding and essentially unionizing them is the way to go. Do you just want it to feel more like a community? More regular events and more advertising will get people thinking about it more often.

Analyzing the survey results

If your group is design, usability, research, tech or web-related in any way, the results probably apply to you, because it turned out there wasn’t any statistical difference between the designer and not-designer groups.

The “Austin Designers Survey 2011” PDF contains the survey as users saw it.

The “Austin Designers Survey 2011 - Response Summary” PDF contains the aggregate results.

Here’s what those aggregate results mean, if you follow along with the PDF:

“Where do you live” puts people predominantly in Central, Northwest, North and South Austin. “Where do you work” puts people predominantly in Central, Northwest and North. When Dr. Paine and I looked at the raw data, there was a definite relationship between where people live and where they work. Maybe that’s obvious, that people don’t like to commute if they don’t have to, but notice that “South” isn’t in the double digits on the “where do you work” list. People are going to be more likely to attend events if they don’t have to travel far for them, so that means Central, Northwest and North need to be your primary targets for locations.

“When are you more likely to attend events” had people answer this question for every day of the week. Evenings, Monday through Thursday, dominated the responses. Friday lunches were bigger than any other lunches. Over 40% said the weekends were off-limits.

“Where are you more likely to attend an event” picked venues. Supposedly, it doesn’t matter, but we don’t really trust the result of this question because of the way it was worded. What I can tell you, based on my experiences with my own group, and with attendance between sponsored and not-sponsored IXDA Austin happy hours, is that an open tab at the venue doesn’t affect how many people will show up.

“What sort of events do you like attending” we do trust, because it reflects behavior we’ve seen in actual meetings. Presentations and panels by peers, and hands-on workshops, dominated the list. Presentations and panels by companies were way down there, and we’ve seen people walk out of talks they felt were thinly veiled sales pitches. Happy hours and lunches also ranked surprisingly low.

“What sort of topics are you interested in learning about this year” showed mostly design-related subject matter, but, again, there wasn’t any difference between designers and non-designers’ responses, so it’s a good rough measure of things people are interested in.

“What other groups will you attend this year” was kind of a biased question and so we’re disregarding the results from it.

“What major events will you attend this year” basically showed only SXSW.

“If you don’t generally attend events, why is that” is super interesting, I think. In the write-in responses (not shown), transportation issues (e.g. I don’t have a car), convenience issues (e.g. it’s too far out of the way of my commute) and laziness (I know I should go to these things but I just don’t care enough) racked up high single-digit percentages. In addition, people who reported having 10+ years of experience were also likely to say they just didn’t have time to attend things, and people with less than 10 years of experience were likely to say they didn’t know what was going on in town. This suggests advertising problems, and maybe suggests that most of the people who do show up are junior people.

If you’re not a design-related group, the next two questions might not be that interesting, but it’s worth noting that if someone can regularly collaborate with as few as two other people, that’s enough for them to be a “group” and perhaps find a sense of community there, and not feel the need to come to public community groups. Any agency, consultancy or product company with large teams is going to fill that need for people and it requires extra effort to get people out of there.

“How do you rate your experience level relative to the designers you work with” is a biased question we’re disregarding the results from.

“What are you missing in the design practice in your workplace” says “design” but again, there wasn’t any difference in the responses from non-designers, so if you take out the words “design” and replace them with “research” or “programming” or whatever, it might still represent what people are missing professionally, and maybe a local community group can fill those needs somehow.

“Do you do design work in your free time?” and “Do you study design?” were attempts at measuring engagement, but they didn’t really work out right, so we’re disregarding them for the purposes of this email.

“What type of organization do you work in?” and “Full-time or part-time?” were not relevant for this email.

“What is your title” is how we figured out the designer/non-designer breakdown, but that’s all we used it for.

“How much of your work is web-related” says that 86% do at least half web-related work, which is why I’m comfortable saying these results apply to most groups in town.

“How did you find your current job” might be interesting to you if you want to improve how companies use your group for recruitment.

“How many years have you worked in this field” says there’s a lot of experienced people out there, except as we saw before, they’re not necessarily ever showing up to events.

“What skills do you have” was taken directly, I think, from an ALA survey question. As expected, it skews very web-related.

The last three questions might also help you plan recruitment events, but remember that just because you just started a job, doesn’t mean you just started on the ground floor, so use all three together.

Following up

Eight groups were provided this data, and asked to take a look at the 2012 survey and consider contributing customized responses, as well as to use event response cards in their regular meetings.

If you decide to distribute the 2012 survey yourself (explained in another document) or use the event response cards for your local group (also explained elsewhere), do let us know how you make out. You can find my contact information through the Distance essay which this analysis is a result of: <http://distance.cc/>.

I'm Vitorio, it's February 5, 2012. Thanks, and good luck with your local group.