

NMBA's "Son of iSummit" promises to be a blockbuster sequel

Ontario's New Business Media Alliance is marking a coming-of-age for its annual event, now in its second year, with a new venue, a different approach to agenda-building, and a name change from the once-used iSummit to Interactive Content Exchange 2007 (ICE 07).

"Rebranding the event this year gave us another challenge, which is to make sure that this was the continuation of iSummit, the son of iSummit if you will, or the sequel," says Ian Kelso, ICE 07 executive producer and president of NMBA.

"'Summit' really implies just a very high-level, idea-driven event, and we definitely want to start people thinking about coming together, especially in the cross-media space," Kelso adds. "There are some value chains that are very well-established, but we want people thinking about potential partnerships and alliances outside of some of these regular industry paths that they're used to working in."

"Last year, we learned that people...thought MaRS [Centre] was a terrific change from the typical conference venue," Kelso says of the iSummit venue on Toronto's College Street. Consequently, he adds, "we couldn't see ourselves going to the basement ballroom of a hotel somewhere." With support from Telefilm Canada and the Ontario Media Development Corp. (OMDC), the NMBA has the wherewithal to put on a bigger and broader event this year, moving it down the street to the upscale Carlu venue, which offers double the capacity of MaRS.

Even at first glance, it's apparent that the agenda has been aggressively expanded, with four concurrent sessions running in parts compared with last year's three. The conference's focus is broadly grouped along four verticals: broadband, games, mobile, and social networking. "It was really more to help people self-identify that they belong at this conference," Kelso says. "There are so many things happening in the in-between spaces it's sometimes hard to program it directly as streams, [but] the value chains that are established in those industries are still fairly vertical."

ICE 07 offers a business track – dubbed ICE Market – running throughout the event, replete with a vendor marketplace and sessions specific to the money side of new media. Sponsored by OMDC, "it's really a discussion about two things: financing, and business development," Kelso says. For instance, one of the case studies presented as part of the market will be last year's \$2.25-million acquisition of Bubbleshare, a Toronto-based online photo-sharing service, by kids-and-family portal operator Kaboose Inc., also based in Toronto. ICE Market also features an interactive tool that lets delegates manage their profile on the ICE 07 site to include a bio and a "wish list" of the types of prospective partners they'd like to meet at the event.

It seems almost obligatory to hold a pitching competition at any event targeted at production professionals, but ICE 07 will feature two such opportunities for hopefuls to showcase their ideas as part of the ICE Market stream. The CHUM Ltd.-sponsored U-Pitch session aims to reward three promising ideas for user-generated content initiatives catering to fashion, music, or news and information with a total of \$10,000 in development funding, while Telus Corp.'s Multi-Screen Challenge offers another \$10,000 – this time, it's winner-take-all – for the best pitch proposal that leverages multiple screens, with at least one featuring interactivity. Both sessions will be juried and held in front of an audience.

"Pitching is so much a part of a market experience," says Kelso. "When you know you're going to get up in front of a jury of your peers, or people you're potentially looking to sell to, it's intimidating and it makes you really do your homework and hopefully learn for yourself exactly what it is about your project that's going to be appealing to the partners that you're looking for."

Another feature of ICE 07 is a speed-dating-style initiative, where attendees are given the opportunity to book 10-minute meetings with some of the higher-profile speakers such as broadcast media executives and noted new media thinkers. "A lot of the time it's hard for people to nail them down and get five minutes to get their ear," Kelso says, adding that the 10-minute blocks "can be an elevator pitch, they can be a get-to-know-you session, they can kind of be whatever you want to make of them."

While ICE 07 is organized by a provincial new media industry association, it's definitely had an international flair from its inception. With our relatively low population density, Canadian firms would quickly run out of room to grow if they focused solely on domestic markets. And while there is a national imperative to produce Canadian content and preserve Canadian culture, "there's no such thing really [as] a national market" when it comes to Canadian interactive media, Kelso says. "I think the market we're in is a global market, and I think that it's really important we get as many people [as possible]...over to our house to hear first-hand what their thinking is, what their strategy is, what kinds of partnerships they've created and what kinds of partnerships they're looking for."

The international presence is also important from a networking perspective, Kelso says, because despite the geographic magnitude of Canada, there aren't too many strangers in Canadian new media. "We are a fairly close-knit industry," he says. "We see each other a lot and we know a lot about what each other is doing. It's harder sometimes to actually get that time to spend with somebody from elsewhere."

While last year's event featured speakers from Canada's closest English-speaking neighbors, the United States and Great Britain, "this year, I think we've definitely gone further," Kelso says. New to the event are attendees from other European nations – namely, Femke Wolting, co-founder and head of Amsterdam-based cross-media production studio Submarine and transplanted Canadian Alana Reid, founder of Sweden-based all-female gaming team Girlz of Destruction – and a sizable Australian contingent. Since a Canadian delegation made a trip to Australia in March 2005 (CNM, March 14/05), ties between the two countries have been strengthening. Indeed, Decode Entertainment VP of interactive Dan Fill decamped for Sydney later that year, becoming the Australian Broadcasting Commission's head of development, new media and digital services. Fill will be part of ICE 07's Australian contingent, along with mememe productions co-owner Cate McQuillen.

That's not to say that the US and the UK don't still figure prominently on the ICE 07 agenda. Returning from the US is Jim Griffin, managing director of Virginia-based digital content consultancy OneHouse LLC, while new attendees this year from south of the border include: Joseph Pilotta, VP of research at Worthington OH-based online marketer BIGresearch LLC; Fred Franq, executive VP of publishing at Qmobile Inc., a mobile entertainment services firm based in New York; and Christopher Coppola, president of LA-based production house EarsXXI Studios and scion of the famed Coppola film-making family.

British institutions are also making a significant appearance at ICE 07, including UK Trade and Investment, the foreign trade development arm of the British government, which sponsored both the NMBA's sophomore and freshman events. "We had four speakers come over from the UK last year – this year, I think there's going to be about nine or 10 different government organizations and companies coming over." The UK contingent is represented on the agenda by Ken Anderson, managing director and founder of Edinburgh's Red Kite Animation.

"There are a lot of potentials that are untapped right now in terms of partnering with the UK," Kelso adds. What's more, the two nations' new media industries have traditionally emphasized different platforms and distribution networks, making them a natural complement to each other. "Where they've been strong in mobile, we've been strong in broadband," he says. "We have things that we can learn from each other, and we can benefit from alliances."

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