

By [Laura Blanchard](#)

This week, I achieved a personal goal of mine, which was to speak at [SXSW Interactive](#). What an honor! I've been a fan of the conference since it started with music in the late 80s and it's still one of the only conferences that lets its participants vote on who will be speaking.

Coincidentally, I have a client right now who's working on creating a better experience for people attending events like SXSW. So in addition to preparing for my talk, I was taking notes on the complete *user experience* of the conference. I know my experience as a speaker was different than that of an attendee, but for the most part I will be talking about things common across both user types.

For me it started with creating a simple profile at [social.sxsw.com](#) so that I could add a picture and a bio. This helped us market our session. The experience was pretty simple and included a very straightforward way to build a directory of contacts from all of my social networks. Great!

`sxsw_social_web`

My SXSW social profile.

I forgot about my social account until a couple of weeks ago when getting ready for my trip to the conference. Turns out this is a common occurrence for event go-ers: Making plans in advance is important in order to avoid the potential anxiety that comes from crowds and an unfamiliar location.

I wanted to see who was speaking at the conference so I could fit in some great sessions after our talk was done. First I went back to the website on my laptop, and tried thumbing through the schedule. In years past I remember having a really hard time wading through all the different

alphabetically listed talks. Again this time, even after making use of the filtering, I found the experience highly frustrating.

So, I gave up on the web and downloaded the mobile app. Voila! What an awesome experience. It was super simple to enter my credentials, get a few bits of information about how my phone can help me navigate the conference, and provided the best discovery experience I've had in a long time. I was presented with a grid of images color-coded according to interactive, film, or music, and it was simple to build my own itinerary including adding reminders. Just for fun I quickly checked to see if my itinerary was also immediately available from my laptop and it was.

I would encourage the folks at SXSW to incorporate some of these awesome mobile features into their web experience next year (which launches far in advance of the release of the native app).

IMG_0337

Welcome screen for the SXSW mobile app.

IMG_0339

The app alerts you to what's nearby with iBeacons.

IMG_0342

Color-coded content informs users if sessions are for music, interactive, or film.

IMG_0352

Our session detail page for UX & The Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle.

IMG_0479

Creating a personal schedule through the app was remarkably simple.

Fast-forward to landing in Texas where I would say the "UX of Tex" is also really top notch. Everyone we meet and talked with was genuinely friendly and helpful. We got a spot-on recommendation for cocktails that first night that included a walk along the Colorado River, a trip through the perfectly crafted Rainey Street historic district, and the evening ended with us getting a sneak peek at the room where we would speak the following day. Maybe, by the end of the week and with half of their city being overrun with people, attitudes would be different, but I was really impressed. It makes sense; the volunteers at the conference itself get free passes to the events after 40 hours of service. That's a great deal that clearly incentivizes the volunteers to do a top-notch job.

Now the downsides: There is and has been a lot of noise on the Internet about how SXSW is just too big. I long ago decided that I missed my chance at seeing true breakthrough artists in the music part of the festival, and if I hadn't been selected to speak, I know I wouldn't have spent the cash to attend SXSW Interactive this year.

My colleague Jeff Alpen and I on the way to present at SXSW 2015.

That said, I was prepared for an enormous crowd, did as much up-front planning as I had time to do, and was more focused on my own talk than trying to see specific speakers.

Almost immediately upon entering our venue, the JW Marriott (one of eight festival locations), I noticed a UX problem: All the talks were upstairs and it appeared that the only way up was the escalators. How could that be, aren't there stairs? Where's the arrow to the elevator?

Throngs of folks jammed the lobby that was staffed by friendly looking hotel employees asking attendees if they needed help finding something. Attendees would mention a room and the employees would inevitably point at the packed escalator.

We knew that our talk was 'trending hot,' which meant that enough people had starred our talk in the app that it was one of the more popular choices for folks. Turns out our room held 170 people and we had to turn away more than 200... Seems like if you simply have participants pre-register for events they could have a) given us a larger room so more people could attend the talk, b) avoid having that many people queue up for 90 minutes only to be told they cannot get in.

This situation wasn't specific to the people who wanted to attend our talk; it seemed to be happening everywhere. We felt really bad for people or companies that had spent \$\$ to attend and were perhaps only getting to see a portion of what they really wanted to see.

To sum it all up, there are some really great aspects to SXSW and SXSW Interactive in particular — one of the best conferences around. I just think they'll need to embrace their middle-aged status as a place that attracts giant crowds and look to experiences like Disneyland to make things more enjoyable for the people who do pay to attend. I can think of a few things off the top of my head that would make this a more awesome experience:

- Encourage pre-registration for talks.
- Use something like Disney FastPass+ to give people who plan the ability to run right up to the door at the time of the talk.
- Make the line-waiting experience more useful or entertaining.
- Instead of badges, give participants a smart wristband that checks them in and tracks their activity throughout the venue.

Missed the presentation of [UX & The Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle](#)? Slides are up on [Slideshare.net](#).

Laura does product strategy, interaction design, and visual design at Blink. Black Messiah by D'Angelo, Clark by Clark, and Muchacho De Lujo by Phosphorescent are currently on heavy rotation....