



Had Myself a Ball in a Small Town

A conference focused on social media and technology takes root in oft-marginalized small-town America.

BY STEPHANIE DURHAM

THE SIZE OF AN EVENT ISN'T ALWAYS PROPORTIONAL TO ITS SUCCESS. Small-scale conferences can cost less and foster stronger personal and professional connections—and are often better tailored to their audiences—than their larger counterparts. Organizers of the 140 Conference learned these lessons and more when they launched 140 Small Town in 2010.

Small Town has roots in the much larger 140 Conference system, founded in 2009 by techpreneur Jeff Pulver, best known as co-founder of voice-over IP service Vonage. The system consists of international events that allow Twitter users to connect, collaborate and examine how the social network,

WHO:

Jeff Pulver

Founder

140 Conference

Becky McCray

Organizer

140 Small Town

EVENT:

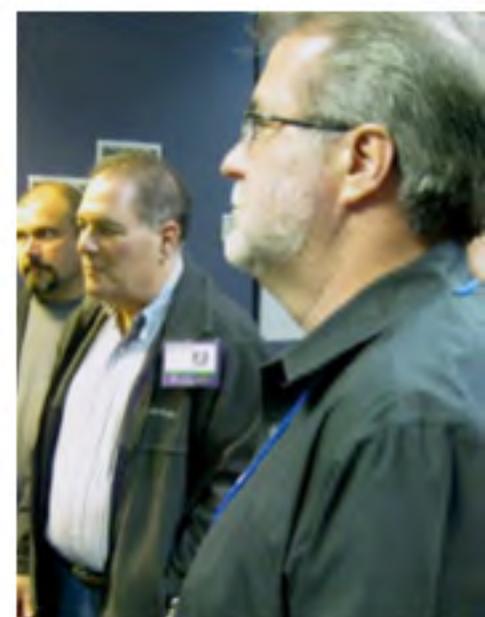
140 Conference Small Town

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Hutchinson, Kansas



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and technology in general, affect business. Small Town takes that model and tailors it to benefit a more rural audience, which for the past two years has been in Hutchinson, Kansas.

Organizer Becky McCray attended ten 140 conferences in 2010, and she's known Pulver for years. She suggested 140 expand outside the big-city marketplace to small towns, which have their own distinct sets of issues. And a key to the success of 140 Small Town is its understanding of its audience's needs and delivery of personalized content.

Event speaker Sheila Scarborough compares the demographic's need for technology to its past need for electricity.

"Before rural electrification, small towns

needed power lines to join the modern world, something a more developed area took for granted," she says. "Internet access is the modern version of electrification; the same argument can be made about rural broadband."

The connected 140 Conference atmosphere fit perfectly a demographic that Scarborough says feels marginalized socially as well as geographically.

"If you're one of the few in your community on Facebook, and then suddenly you're in a theater surrounded by nerds all tweeting and speaking the same language, you feel less alone in the world," she says. "140 Small Town helps ag-nerds, like blogging dairy farmers, connect with other ag-nerds."

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Attendees know what technology and social media are; they want information on how to make them work in their lives. The schedule includes audience-specific topics ranging from “farmmy bloggers” to the creative class in small towns to raising media-literate kids to surviving incest in a small town.

Last year’s conference attracted 214 delegates from 12 states. This year, organizers expect an audience of 300 from the U.S. and Canada.

“There is a tendency for meeting planners to go for mass and measure the success of events by bodies in the door,” Scarborough says. “But just as the Web is powerful because it allows niche interests, conferences like this are powerful, too. There are a whole lot of people who say, ‘I can’t make connections in the middle of a maelstrom.’”

But niche doesn’t mean limited. Scarborough notes that although the number of conference attendees may be small, at digital conferences each delegate spreads influence through larger online networks such as

blogs, Facebook, Twitter, video channels and podcasts.

Then, there’s the issue of cost-effectiveness—a reward for planning small-town conferences. Hutchinson, Kansas, is a good deal less expensive than Manhattan.

Small town service and lower costs don’t necessarily limit creative options, either. The conference is held at Hutchinson’s historic Fox Theatre, and receptions are held at the Kansas Cosmosphere and Space Center and the Kansas Underground Salt Museum.

Scarborough first saw the Fox Theatre on a blog tour.

“It thrills me to no end that the ‘grand old lady’ gets some Wi-Fi, and now it’s a techie destination,” she says.

It seems Small Town couldn’t have been more local; even Hutchinson’s police department participated and learned new technology ideas. The food vendor was located across the alley from the theater and everyone stayed and played in town.

Most of all, thinking small fosters long-lasting connections and personal growth.

“There was one person who was a timekeeper at a 140 Conference, but was too shy to talk,” McCray said. “She then went to a local 140 and told a little bit of her story and felt courage to do that because of how she felt at the event. Her topic is how she survived incest in a small town. If we had hauled her to New York, I don’t know if she could have had that courage.” **one+**

STEPHANIE A. DURHAM has written for the *Dallas Observer* and *The Austin American Statesman*, and is a frequent *One+* contributor.