

## SPACEUP UNCONFERENCES AS A NETWORKING PLATFORM FOR THE NEW SPACE GENERATION

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Since the first occurrence in 2010, the grassroots SpaceUp unconference series has grown into a leading global networking platform for a new space generation. This paper describes the history of SpaceUp and its core principles, and looks at how SpaceUp quickly grew from US-only to a global success, almost in a viral way.

The success of SpaceUp as a concept can be explained by several factors, making it an interesting example for other grassroots NGOs and larger space outreach organizations alike. One of the biggest success factors is the creative use of online media to spread news about space and events. For example, SpaceUp was one of the first platforms to widely use live online broadcasting of events, attracting worldwide audiences. The mix of space enthusiasts, students, young professionals and influencers from the online space community, in combination with free, or almost free, participation, is another powerful factor that is analyzed in some detail.

The paper has two intended objectives: First to showcase the SpaceUp unconference series as an opportunity for the industry to engage a young and online generation with the professional space sector, and second to highlight important new success factors for public engagement with space in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### II. WHAT IS SPACEUP?

SpaceUp is a space unconference where participants determine the program. Since its inception in 2010 it has grown out to be the leading space unconference brand, with events held in locations all around the world every month. SpaceUp aims at bringing the networking part of traditional conferences onto the main stage. It provides a low-key platform for anyone who would like to discuss the past, present and future of space exploration. SpaceUp event organizers provide a venue, rooms, timeslots, food and drinks, even t-shirts and space goodies, but no speakers. Attendants fill in the unconference grid while the event happens. They determine the topics, do the presentations and discussions, and form the audience at the same time. At SpaceUp there are no spectators, only participants.

The SpaceUp Foundation is the brand owner of SpaceUp. It is a non-profit organization registered as a charity in the State of California in the United States. The SpaceUp Foundation does not organize events itself, but rather encourages and facilitates local organizers all around the world to organize an event under the SpaceUp concept. The Foundation maintains a website with information for organizers and an event calendar for potential attendees. It also manages the social media channels that are important for promoting participation, and for reporting live on ongoing events. The Foundation also ensures that local organizers comply with the two very simple 'rules' of a SpaceUp event: 1) it is an unconference and 2) it is about space.

The 'unconference' rule means that the event should be open to anyone interested and that there is room for any attendee to contribute to the program. This contribution could be a presentation, a question for which she/he is looking for an answer or opinion, a demonstration, a brainstorm, a panel discussion, a workshop, or whatever fits the venue and schedule. The 'space' rule means that all activities at SpaceUp are related to space. This ranges from space exploration, astronomy to space applications and spin-off ideas. The context of this can vary from engineering, scientific, legal, economic, business, societal, outreach or even artistic angles to the topic.

The open format also means that attendees can bend the format to better meet their requirements in real time. If there aren't enough timeslots they can create additional slots, if timeslots are too short they can combine multiple slots into one, if it is nice weather they can decide to have a talk on the terrace with a cold drink. All is fine, as long as the two SpaceUp principles are not jeopardized.

The first SpaceUp event was organized in the context of an increasing need for open platforms and a dissatisfaction with existing traditional conference series. Conference attendees increasingly required open networking opportunities, something that traditionally only happened during the informal parts of conferences,

during coffee breaks and receptions. SpaceUp intends to bring these coffee and water cooler talks onto the main stage, and make this perceived most valuable element of a conference the core of the event.

SpaceUp also fills a gap in the conference world, by offering a platform that is traditionally not well served. By charging only a very modest conference fee, which is only there to prevent no-shows, it provides a platform to those unable to attend the big commercial conferences. SpaceUp aims at the local space community, giving people that normally do not speak at conferences an opportunity to share their expertise or opinion. This community includes (aerospace) students, young professionals and space enthusiasts. With this, SpaceUp fills the gap between university or student association events and the big commercial and very international events like an IAC.

### III. BRIEF HISTORY OF SPACEUP

“The first SpaceUp – held in 2010 in San Diego – grew out of the populist, participatory "maker" culture of California's technology community over the last decade. SpaceUp follows the Open Space format of BarCamp and other technology unconferences; at these successful gatherings, participants create the program – the session grid – spontaneously on site. Every participant is welcome to give a presentation or lead a discussion. SpaceUp brought the same setting to the space community.” (Hornig et al, 2013)

The success of the first SpaceUp triggered others in the US space community to organize events in their city too. The second SpaceUp was held in Washington DC, about six months after the first event in San Diego, followed another six months later by events in Houston and again in San Diego.

In 2012 SpaceUp went international, with events in Canada and Belgium. The first SpaceUp in Europe, aptly called ‘SpaceUp Europe’ triggered a fast expansion of SpaceUp over the European continent. Stuttgart and Warsaw followed that same year, in addition to the first SpaceUp in Asia, with SpaceUp India. In 2013 a total of 11 SpaceUp unconferences were organized, in three continents. In 2014 there were 12, in 2015 there were 9, in 2016 there were 12, and the counter for 2017 stands at 7 and counting. SpaceUp events have now been held at all continents (with South America being added in October 2017), except Antarctica, although the latter was linked into SpaceUp Europe, with one attendee calling in live from the icy continent.

With this many events organized and still being organized, SpaceUp has grown into the leading global space unconferece brand. Several thousands of people have participated, while many thousands more have learned about the discussions online, as social media is an important channel for SpaceUp information. Several event organizers will live broadcast some of the sessions, engaging even more people worldwide.

### IV. SPACEUP IN 2017

Although still true to its two simple basic principles, many SpaceUp traditions have evolved out of the events around the world. Most SpaceUp events will include all or at least some of these traditions, that certainly have made SpaceUp a richer concept, not in the last place for its sponsors. The most important of these traditions include:

*Volunteer organizing team.* Nobody in the SpaceUp community gets paid. Events are born out of passion for space and the people in the community. SpaceUp is a not-for-profit organization, and fully depends on volunteers and sponsors to stay alive. All costs related to the foundation and event organization is born by sponsors. Sponsoring is often in-kind, by donating a venue or donating merchandise. The real costs are kept as low as possible, and often only consist of costs for food, drinks and printing event-specific items. In exchange for publicity and visibility at the event, sponsors are usually willing to cover these costs.

*Modest participation fee.* It is very important that SpaceUp is accessible to anyone. However, it has been found that making the event free of charge causes a lot of no-shows. To avoid that, and encourage maximum participation, most events will charge a modest fee to participants. In Europe this tends to vary from 10 to 30 Euro. High enough to make people think before booking, but low enough to not discourage.

*SpaceUp t-shirts for all attendees.* This is an important tradition, as it offers a lot of value to sponsors, especially since SpaceUp t-shirts gained some ‘cult’ status over time. Past attendees proudly wear their SpaceUp t-shirts to other space events, making them a very visible tool that helps expand the SpaceUp brands, and its sponsors.

*Space goodie bags.* Again, something where sponsors add a lot of value, and an appreciated element of the experience by attendees, is the bag filled with space items. These are usually stickers, pins, flyers and corporate merchandise, donated by sponsors.

*Free coffee and lunch breaks.* A good conversation requires good coffee and food. SpaceUp organizers are expected to arrange food and drinks during the breaks of the event. This doesn't include dinner or accommodation, but a nice coffee in the morning, a good lunch and refreshments in the afternoon help a lot to get the debate running.

*VIP talks.* For marketing purposes, and to get the debate going, it often helps to have one or two pre-planned plenary talks by 'space VIPs'. It is against the principle of an unconference to pre-book slots, but experience has shown that both attendees and sponsors like to have one or two 'big names' in the program.

*Session grid.* The session grid is the heart of an unconference. It is the physical representation of the unconference schedule, where all time slots and all available rooms are represented. The grid should offer capacity for at least 70 to 80% of attendees to claim a slot. Experience shows that not all participants actually want their own slot, but there should be enough capacity for all who wish. A slot can be claimed by putting a stickie note with talk title and name in one of the available slots. Using stickie notes allow organizers or participants to easily move talks between slots, if there are schedule conflicts, or last minute changes. The average SpaceUp has two to four parallel sessions, depending on number of participants. The average timeslot is 10 to 20 minutes, again depending on number of people and length of the event.

*Creative presentation concepts.* Nobody likes 'death by Powerpoint', so at SpaceUp attendees are encouraged to use creative presentation formats. These include T-minus 5 talks, a shortened Pecha Kucha presentation where 20 slides auto-forward every 15 seconds, limiting presentation time to exactly 5 minutes. It also includes the 1-minute to land videos (introduced at SpaceUp Stuttgart), where people unable to attend can send a one-minute video presentation that is played before all attendees. Participants are also encouraged to do panel debates, hands-on workshops or live demonstrations. But of course, it is perfectly fine to prepare a traditional Powerpoint slide deck.

*Livestreaming of presentations.* To extend the reach of the event, organizers often arrange for one of the presentation rooms to have livestream capability, so people not present in person may join online. This requires a lot of technical setup, although tools like YouTube livestreaming and Periscope have made this a lot easier.

*Pre-events.* Introduced by French space agency CNES, several SpaceUp sponsors have organized pre-events on the day or evening before the main event. These pre-events have included visits to space agencies, rocket manufacturers, astronomical observatories and satellite operators.

*Customized SpaceUp logo.* Organizers are actively encouraged to create their own version of the SpaceUp logo, customized to the local situation. Over time we have seen very creative versions of the logo, showing the world the versatility and unity of the global space community.

With all these experiences and add-ons, SpaceUp has grown into a very mature concept, yet offering a lot of flexibility for organizers and sponsors to tailor the event to the local requirements and customs. It is important to keep this flexibility into the future, to prevent the concept to go 'stale' and always embrace new ideas to make it better.

## V. WHY DOES IT WORK?

As mentioned before, SpaceUp has proven to be a platform that fills a gap between student conferences, like those organized by student associations, and the large commercial academic or industry conferences. The audience at a typical SpaceUp is a mix of (aerospace) students, young professionals, aspiring entrepreneurs, social media influencers and space enthusiasts.

This mix of mostly young people from different backgrounds has proven to be very powerful. SpaceUp has proven to be a very rich breeding ground for new businesses and new initiatives to connect the community. For example, several startup events were born at SpaceUp, as were several new startup companies. We have seen space agencies probing the SpaceUp community about new outreach concepts, and new collaborations being formed. Of course, SpaceUp is the perfect breeding ground for new SpaceUp events around the world too.

The key reasons why SpaceUp has grown so fast have been mentioned above. SpaceUp fills a gap in the conference world and fits the trend for open communication and networking. Then it is flexible to organizers and sponsors, making it easy to tailor to local requirements. But most important, SpaceUp has proven to be a breeding ground for lots of activity in the space sector. New events, new companies and new networks have evolved from SpaceUp. This breeding ground role will ensure SpaceUp has a place in the future of community building in the space industry.

## VI. THE FUTURE OF SPACEUP

SpaceUp is a living concept, constantly taking in new creative ideas. Over the years we have seen SpaceUp being integrated as an ‘open discussion element’ of traditional conferences. This started at the International Space Development Conference (ISDC) in 2013, but also at several International Astronautical Federation (IAF) events, like the SpaceUp GLIC, during the IAF Global Space Innovation Conference in 2016 (Albalat et al, 2016), and more recently during the IAF Global Space Exploration Conference 2017 (GLEX) in Beijing. By including SpaceUp into these conferences, new audiences will get the opportunity to network with conference attendees. It will be important to describe the rules of engagement for these merging of concepts, for example when looking at attendee fees. Nevertheless, this will be an interesting win-win for both SpaceUp and traditional conference organizers.

Another trend is evolving on the other side of the spectrum, where universities are embracing SpaceUp to organize student un conferences. Examples of this development are SpaceUp events at leading aerospace institutes like the International Space University in Strasbourg, ISAE-SUPAERO in Toulouse, Polytechnique in Paris, Cork Institute of Technology in Ireland, Technion in Israel and the University of Stuttgart in Germany. It is expected to see this trend continue.

In addition to SpaceUp events at universities, the concept could work very well in earlier education too. Although never done, there have been several discussions on how to make SpaceUp work in secondary education, aiming at a younger audience.

In a recent article in Ecsite Digital Spokes Magazine (Paca, 2017), SpaceUp was put forward as an opportunity for Science Centers and Musea to engage the local space community. Especially the success of SpaceUp Toulouse, at Cité de l’Espace in 2014 was a great example of how SpaceUp can benefit these places. Also SpaceUp Netherlands, held at Space Expo in Noordwijk is a good example of this collaboration.

Of course SpaceUp in its original format continues to spread across the globe. At the time of writing four SpaceUp are in the calendar for the next months, with five more being organized. 2017 saw the first SpaceUp in China, and will see the first two SpaceUps in Latin America. Early 2018 will see the first SpaceUp in Africa. SpaceUp is on a nominal trajectory to serve the global space community well into the future. A future that may see a SpaceUp in space one day...

## VII. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be stated that SpaceUp took off like a rocket. It grew from an experiment in 2010 to a leading global conference platform for the space sector a few years later. It continues to offer great opportunities to bring the space industry closer together and connect people in the global space community.

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