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Topic CREA-CULT-2022-COOP-1

Network Eastern European Design

The Organiser's Playbook

Table of Contents

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01.
Introduction

Intro

This guide was created as part of the Network Eastern European Design project, realised between 2023 and 2025 in Warsaw, Vilnius and Kyiv.

The project brought together organisers of design conferences, festivals, lectures and workshops from across Europe to share their experiences, problems and solutions.

Everything in this playbook comes from real conversations, real lectures and real workshops held during those meetings. Nothing here is theoretical.

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These are the voices of people who do the work, who have made the mistakes, and who are still figuring it out. If you organise design events or are thinking about starting one, this is for you.

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02.

A practical guide for organisers of design conferences, and festivals

Intro

This is the practical part. We took everything that was said during the lectures, panels and workshops of the Network Eastern European Design project and reorganised it by topic, not by speaker.

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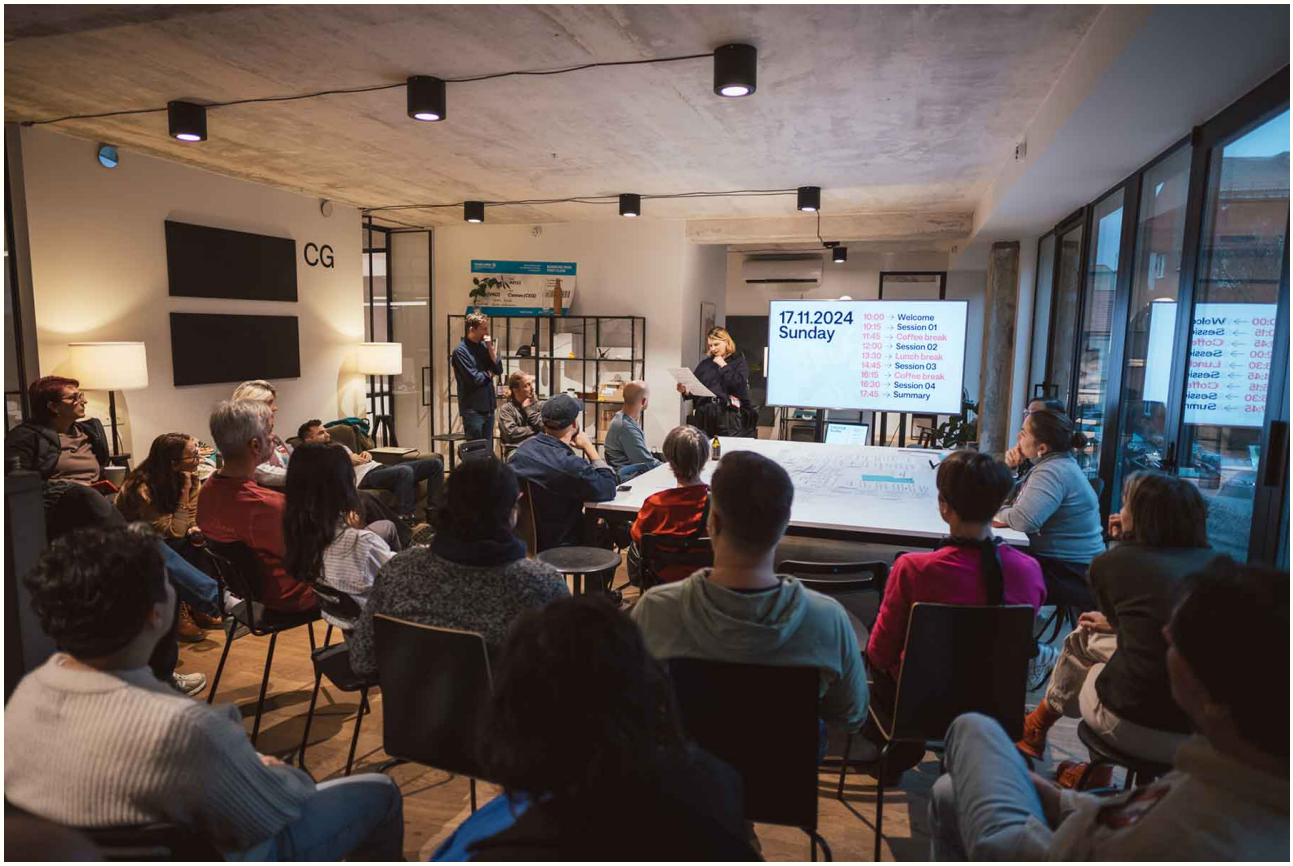
If you need advice on finances, you go to the finances chapter. If you need help with audiences, you go there. No names, no cities, no specific organisations. Just the lessons, stripped down to what is useful for any organiser in any country.



Part 01

How Design Events Grow

Every design event starts the same way. Someone discovers a topic that excites them, looks around and sees that others feel the same. And they decide to meet. That is how the world of creative events has worked for decades, and it still works that

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way today. But the way these gatherings grow, change and reach people has gone through a massive evolution. There are seven models that events tend to follow. Not every event has to go through all of them. But every organiser should know they exist.

→ Gathering around a topic

This is ground zero. A group of people share an interest in the same thing, typography, poster design, motion graphics, creative coding, and they decide to meet.

Nobody plans a festival. Nobody writes a grant application. There is a topic, there is energy and there is a need for conversation. Most events that now attract hundreds or thousands of people started exactly like this, a handful of people in one room who wanted to talk about what fascinated them.

→ The travelling organiser

At some point the event outgrows its city and the organisers start wondering what comes next. One answer is to pack the whole format into a suitcase and recreate it somewhere else.

The core team travels with the programme, the brand and the know-how. It takes enormous logistical energy and a willingness to live out of suitcases, but it gives you

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something you cannot get any other way: international recognition built on direct contact with local communities.

Some festivals pick a different city every year and adapt the entire visual identity to match, so the place itself becomes part of the experience.

→ Core team plus local people

Not everyone wants to travel with their event in person.

Another approach is to keep central control over the brand and quality, but hand part of the programme and production to local partners. The headquarters watches over standards and brand consistency. The local people bring context, audiences and energy.

Organisations with international teams can naturally hold events in multiple countries, with local creators contributing their own work in each city. This model lets you grow without losing your character and without having to clone yourself.

→ Licensing the brand

Licensing goes even further. Instead of travelling the world or building local teams, you let organisers in different countries use your brand to create their own editions.

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The brand grows globally while the core team does not have to grow proportionally. The risk is obvious: not every local edition will be at the same level as the original. But the impact on the whole industry is huge.

Many organisers who now run their own events started by going to a big festival abroad, seeing that it was possible, and coming home with the thought that they wanted to do something similar.

→ Open format for communities

The most radical model is to make the format fully open to everyone.

A simple formula, a morning meetup with coffee and a short talk about creativity, is released to the world. Anyone can download the handbook, organise a meetup in their city and join a global network under a shared brand. You do not need a budget, a team or experience. You just have to want to do it.

This model removes the barrier to entry entirely and turns event organising into something as accessible as starting a book club. And the brand does not weaken. On the contrary, the more people use it, the stronger it gets.

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→ Conference meets nightlife

In recent years there has been a clear trend towards combining the programme with a party in one place and one continuous timeline. The event starts in the afternoon, moves through talks and conversations, and by evening it seamlessly turns into dinner, music and dancing. Nobody leaves, nobody splits up, everything happens under one roof. People walk out at four in the morning.

For many organisers this is the most desirable format today, because it builds something that talks alone cannot: a sense of community and shared experience.

→ Your own space

This is the model for organisers who think in decades.

The event matures to a point where it needs a permanent home and transforms into an institution with its own building. Museums that grew out of poster festivals. Creative technology centres born from festivals in partnership with local government.

This path is not for everyone. It requires years of building relationships with public institutions. But for those who pull it off, it changes everything, because the event stops being something that happens once a year and becomes a place that lives all year round.

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Part 02

Strategy and Organisational Identity

→ How to define why you exist

Most design event organisers do not have a strategy. They have a programme, a schedule, a speaker list and a sense of mission. But they do not have a clear model that lets them answer the questions: who are we really trying to reach, what can we realistically give them, and who should we work with to make it count?

The classic business model canvas, a tool designed for companies selling products at a profit, does not work for cultural organisations. Trying to fit into that format leads to frustration and grant applications that promise to change the world on a budget that barely covers one exhibition.

There is an alternative: a model called the Social Profit Canvas, designed specifically for organisations with a social mission. It works in concentric circles. At the centre is your organisation. On the outer ring is context, the world you operate in and the problems that drive you. On the other side is impact, the distant goal you want to achieve but cannot guarantee.

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Between context and impact are layers over which you have increasing control. Result is what you can count and promise in a grant application: skills, inspiration, knowledge, encounters. Outcome is what will probably come from your work, but you cannot promise it.

The key is not to mix up these levels in your applications, because when you promise impact on a budget that only covers results, the person reading it sees through it immediately.

→ Choose your audience and cut your target groups

One of the most valuable decisions you can make is to reduce the number of target groups. Trying to talk to five different audiences, each requiring a different language, different materials and different events, scatters your energy.

If you want to build visual awareness, do not start with people who do not want to learn. Start with those who still do. And to reach them, do not try to convince them directly.

Find a stakeholder who already has access to them. One teacher equals thirty kids. Schools need what you offer, because their curriculum has no room for visual education.

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You need what they have, which is organised groups. It is a partnership where both sides give each other something they lack.

→ Changing your name can set you free

If what you do has long outgrown a single discipline or a single city, a name that suggests otherwise holds you back. Funders may actually welcome the change, because the old name may have felt too narrow for what you actually do.

Changing your name is a chance to better describe what your organisation is really about. Several organisations have been through a name change, and every time it was a turning point.

→ Regularity matters more than grand gestures

Schools cannot plan field trips to an event that happens once every two years on shifting dates. But if they know that every spring they can come and see something worthwhile, they put it in the calendar and in the budget.

Switching from a biennial festival to a year-round programme can be harder to organise, but it gives you more stable relationships with partners, schools and audiences. Regularity builds trust.

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Part 03

Finances And Sponsors

→ Do not give away free tickets

If your conference is expensive to produce, say so openly.

Instead of inviting people with a casual "I have a few spare tickets, just come", be upfront: we do not make money on this, the ticket price covers what you will experience and eat. It turns out that this honesty is far more effective than generosity.

When people know the ticket costs what the production costs, they take the event more seriously.

→ A free event does not mean a full room

When one organiser made her conference free, two hundred spots were gone in two hours. But half the people who registered never showed up.

Introducing tickets at thirty euros was not about making money. It was about forcing people to decide whether they really wanted to come. Thirty euros is an amount that does not hurt, but it makes you take your registration seriously.

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→ Start talking to sponsors a year ahead

Companies plan next year's budgets in the autumn. If you call in May with a pitch for September, the money is long gone. But starting early is only half the strategy.

The other half is offering brands ready-made creative ideas for how they can be part of your festival. Treat the sponsor like an agency treats a client: listen to the brief, come up with a concept for integrating the brand into the programme, and present it.

Companies do not have people to dream up what to do at a creativity festival. When you hand them a ready idea, the decision becomes much easier.

→ Sponsors can be a trap

Chasing sponsors is a waste of time if you do not know the decision-maker on the other side.

Cold emails to marketing departments get you either nothing or small amounts. And once you have a sponsor on stage, you need to ask yourself whether their presence is worth a slot in the programme.

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If half the room walks out during the sponsor talk because the audience is not interested, that is one slot you will never get back. If you only have six speakers a day, every slot is precious.

→ If you have no budget, ask honestly

There is nothing wrong with asking a speaker whether they can cover their own flight. Some can, because they work at institutions that fund it. Some cannot, and that is fine too.

The key is not to pretend you have a budget you do not have. Speaker fees for workshop leaders can be covered from the workshop ticket sales.

And if at the end of the event you have not paid anything out of your own pocket, that is a success.

→ Combine commercial work with your own programme

A festival alone will not feed an organisation. But if you can combine both sides, projects for commercial clients and your own programme, both benefit.

Commercial projects can involve local creators in meaningful ways and do not have to be pure advertising. Selling posters after exhibitions is a real source of income. A magazine with interviews from speakers across different years is a product

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for attendees, a knowledge archive and a distribution channel for partners, all at once.

→ Crowdfunding from the design community is harder than you think

An open publication where designers could buy a page for a hundred euros or a small ad for ten brought plenty of enthusiasm and far fewer payments.

After six months of work the project raised around seventeen thousand euros including sales. Declared engagement and real engagement are two different things, and you need to be prepared for that. Buy the equipment you need, use it, return it after the event.

For organisations without a budget, the return policy of many shops is a real survival tool.

→ European projects can save you in a crisis

Even if you do not want to get into grant projects at first, partnering with multiple organisations and working within a grant gives you new skills and contacts you would never get on your own.

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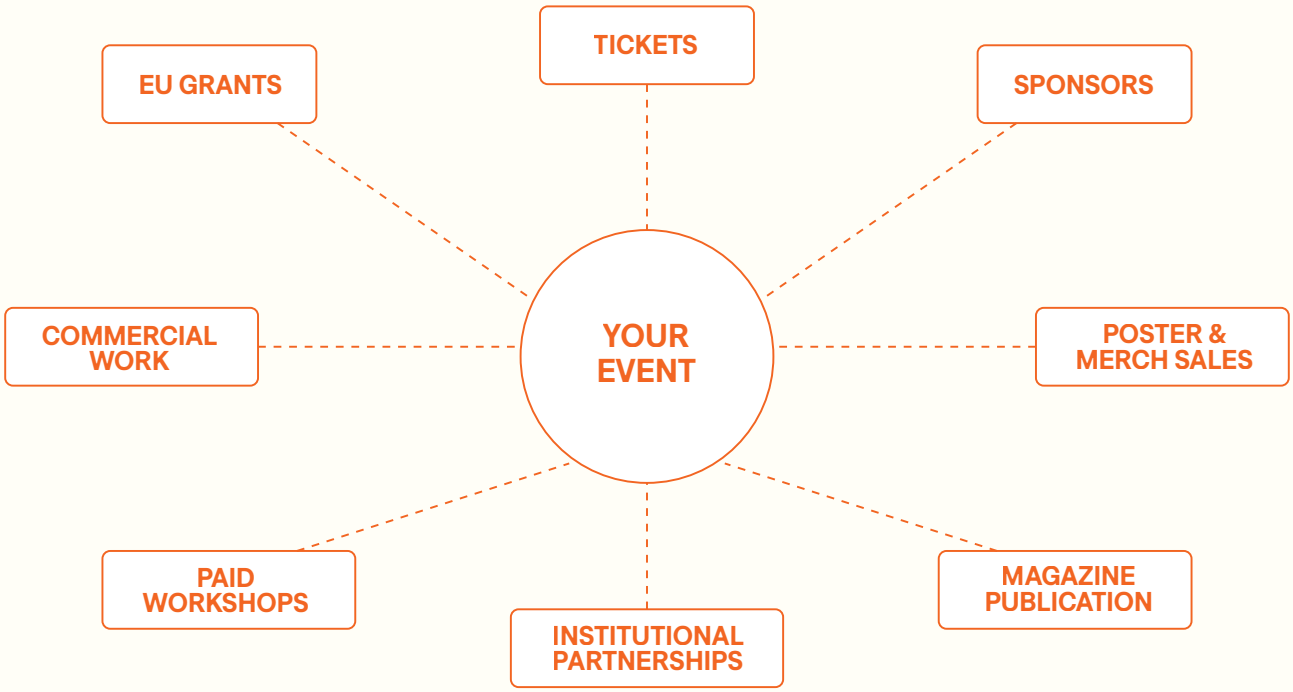
One organisation was invited to join a project, said no, was talked into it, won the grant, and that project kept them alive through the pandemic.

FESTIVAL FINANCIAL ECOSYSTEM

A festival cannot live from one source. Diversify.



The more streams you have, the less dependent you are on any single one failing.

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Part 04

Team And Workflow

→ A manifesto for small teams

Find the "why" and the "how we work together" for every team member. Everyone needs to understand their role.

Create rituals and celebrate successes. Respect working hours, because your team is not you, and you should not be working non-stop either.

Visualise the work cycle over twelve months so everyone knows when the peaks are coming. Volunteers are not employees and you cannot treat them like full-time staff. And shrinking the team can also be growth, if it means greater efficiency.

→ Delegation starts with the person, not the system

No project management system will help if the person delegating does not have the right qualities.

You need someone who breaks rules but also understands them. Who has broad rather than deep competencies, because they need to understand everything that is going on

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around them. Who can share their vision in a way that makes sense. Who builds trust and team spirit.

Before you delegate, check four things: does the person have the skill, do they understand the context, do you have the budget for it, and is there enough time. If the deadline is next week and the task needs two, do not delegate.

FOUR QUESTIONS BEFORE YOU DELEGATE

All four must be yes. If any is no, fix it first or do not delegate.

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→ Task management does not have to be complicated

After twenty years of organising events and trying every project management tool out there, the simple solution turned out to be a shared document.

Task management needs two things: a calendar and the ability to assign a task to a person. Everything more elaborate kills the team if you are not a big corporation.

→ Document everything and plan ahead

Every conference needs a roadmap: what should happen when.

If the plan is only in your head, you will miss something. Always set deadlines and assign responsible people, because a task without an owner will not get done.

Plan the budget with a margin. Have plan A, B and C for the important things. Think six to twelve months ahead, not week to week.

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Part 05

Programme And Event Format

→ Test the format until it works

One event went through three versions of its format before finding the right one.

First a talk, then a film, then a discussion, but after the film everyone was tired and nobody wanted to talk. They flipped the order and it worked better. But a monologue from the stage was too stiff, so they switched to a moderated conversation. Only then did the audience feel like they were part of the event.

There is no single correct format. There is a process of getting there.

→ Too frequent events stop being special

If you run an event every month and see attendance dropping each time, the problem is not quality but frequency. An event that happens too often starts competing with everyday life. When you space it out, people come back.

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→ Do not redesign the whole identity every year

Treating every edition as a chance to design everything from scratch is a great creative exercise, but it eats into the time you need for logistics and organisation.

A consistent visual identity saves enormous amounts of energy, and the constraints force you to be more innovative with campaigns within the existing system.

→ Physical and digital audiences are different groups

A digital festival is cheaper, more accessible and does not require attendees to fly somewhere and take a week off.

Digital workshops work better for digitally focused outcomes, because everyone uses their own connection and their own laptop, instead of a hundred people fighting over one WiFi in a building.

It is worth running both formats in parallel. Do not cut video presentations entirely, but do not make them the main attraction either. If the speaker is online and everyone else is in the room, the audience can feel it.

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→ How to find speakers

Do not rely on one method. Follow key players in the industry to know the stars.

Browse visual platforms, but do not trust algorithms blindly, because they show you what is trending, not what is valuable. Run open calls, because they bring surprises, but be ready for a lot of promotional work. Ask gatekeepers, the people deeply embedded in local scenes: curators, magazine editors, award jurors. And travel, because meeting people in person is irreplaceable.

None of these methods works on its own. This is not a part-time job. It is a lifestyle.

→ Stop inviting stars who recycle their talks

After years of organising events you discover that some celebrated speakers show the same material that is already on YouTube. So it is worth giving the stage more often to lesser-known creators who prepare content specifically for your event.

Mix big names with fresh, unknown innovators who have two hundred followers. Every time you discover one of these people, it is a thrill, and it builds your programme's reputation.

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→ Exhibitions deepen the relationship with speakers

If you invite an artist just for a talk, they fly in, speak and fly out. If you tell them to arrive three days early and prepare an exhibition, they pour their heart into it.

By the time they step on stage, they are already part of the community. Adding exhibitions is a way to build a deeper relationship with creators, not just a transaction.

→ Give the tables to your attendees

On the last day of the event, let attendees, the same people who bought tickets, show their work at their own tables in an open market for local visitors. Locals understand the market format and show up. Attendees from abroad get a chance to present themselves.

The event stops being one-directional and becomes an exchange.

→ A competition with zero budget is possible

A jury working for free. A free exhibition venue. Bilingual communications. A catalogue funded by voluntary contributions.

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The key is defining the rules from the start: independence, professionalism, openness and transparency.

Organisers and jury members cannot submit their own work. A diverse jury, people from different fields, genders and age groups, gives you the best shot at objectivity. The award does not have to be yet another transparent block on a shelf.

Wooden blocks carved to the exact dimensions of the winning books, with the title on the spine, can sit on a bookshelf next to real books and nobody will notice they are trophies.

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Part 06

Audience And Engagement

→ Do not look for a broad audience, look for your audience

Random passers-by are not interested.

If you deliberately set tickets at three hundred euros, you want people who will stay for five days, not drop in for one talk. If you do not know who you are making the event for, you are making it for nobody.

Change the terminology: say participants, not audience. Make them co-creators, not listeners.

→ Reach new audiences through stakeholders

Instead of targeting a new audience directly, find a stakeholder who already reaches them.

If you want students, convince one teacher and they will bring thirty. If you want people outside design, find an organisation working on a problem where design can help.

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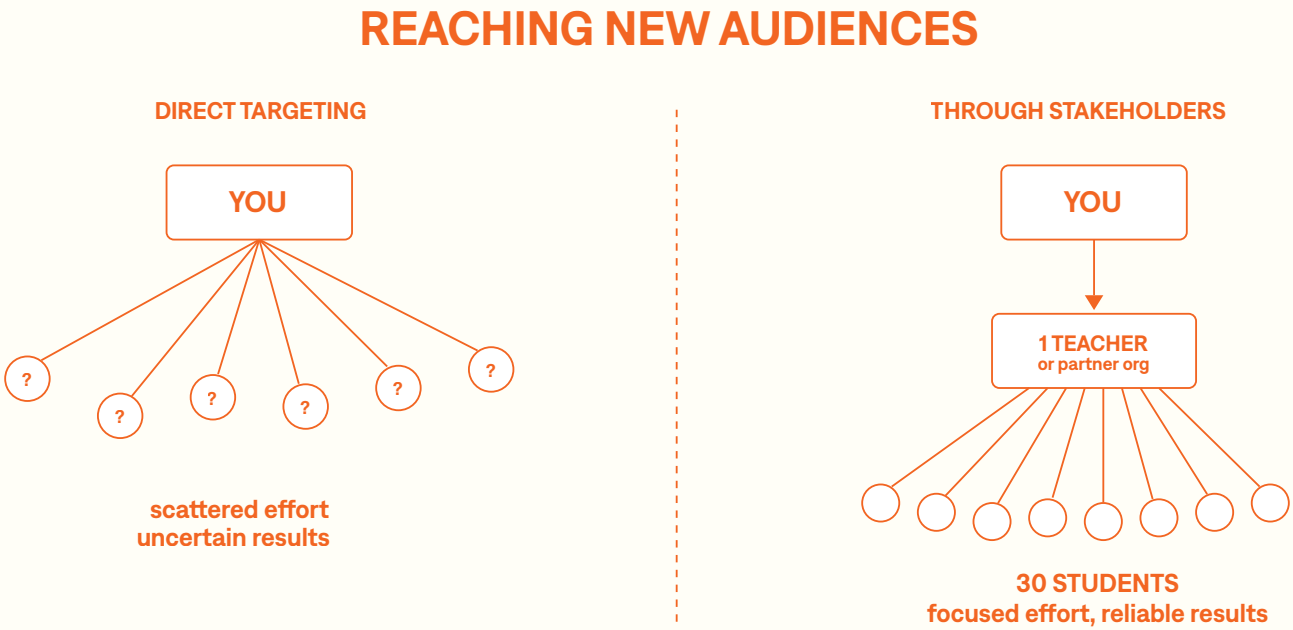
Look for partners outside your industry, because that is where the most untapped ground lies.



Find stakeholders outside your industry. That is where the most untapped ground lies.

→ Family vibes come from physical closeness

A small venue. Food on site for everyone. Organisers who personally moderate every panel and know attendees by name.

When people write in the feedback survey that the best thing about your conference is the family atmosphere, it means small size is not a limitation. It is a strategy.

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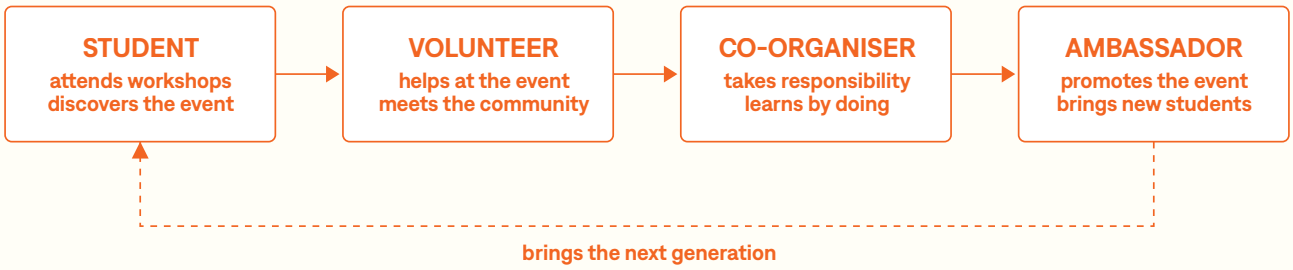
→ Build a pipeline for young people

Start engaging them early.

Create a path: student, volunteer, co-organiser, ambassador. Give them motivation: the chance to be selected, access to funding, certificates.

Invite speakers from their communities. Instead of competing with other festivals for the same audience, share it.

PIPELINE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE



Motivation at each stage: chance to be selected, access to funding, certificates, community.

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Part 07

Marketing And Visibility

→ Newsletters beat social media

You can have hundreds of thousands of followers on a platform that changes its algorithm or simply dies. But a newsletter, written personally, signed with your name, telling a story instead of dry announcements, still works. Even if the content is similar year after year, the personal tone makes people read it. This is a channel you own.

→ Aim at topics, not at media outlets

Do not try to convince journalists that design is interesting. Instead, find where your festival's DNA overlaps with a topic the media in your country already cares about, and build a project around it. An open call for posters about a hot political issue will attract every newsroom, not because they care about design, but because the topic is on the front page.

→ Find individual journalists, not editorial offices

A big TV station may send someone who does not care about your topic. They will shoot a piece, say a few words, and nothing will come of it.

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But if you find one journalist who genuinely cares about design, even if their outlet is not interested, that person will fight for the story, because people want to work on things they are passionate about. Nurture those personal relationships, because they produce the best coverage.

→ Connect with topics that are already popular

If design is not a popular topic in your media, find connections with topics that are. Cinema, sport, architecture, fashion, anything that already has its own media audience. Every famous director has a set designer and a poster designer. Invite someone who bridges design and a field the media already follow, and suddenly you have a speaker they want to write about.

SOCIAL MEDIA CHANNELS BY AUDIENCE

PLATFORM	AUDIENCE	USE FOR
Facebook	35+	reach, organic visibility
Instagram	under 35	visual content, engagement
LinkedIn	professionals	digital design, industry
Behance	design community	visual content, portfolios
YouTube	all ages	archive, content (not promo)
BlueSky	early adopters	news, announcements
TikTok / Twitter / Threads		skip for now — low return for this audience

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Part 08

Space And Infrastructure

→ Show work where people already are

Parks, libraries, churches, car parks. An exhibition in the entrance of a parking garage, where changing the show every three months gives you over a million visitors a year, because everyone who parks walks past. Develop cheap, repeatable display formats. Lightweight powder-coated construction fences that stack, transport easily and let you set up a poster show in an hour.

→ Owning a space can be a trap

One team opened a design centre and quickly found that instead of programming exhibitions and inviting guests from around the world, they were spending their time running the bar and fixing the toilet. When the pandemic gave them an excuse to close, they felt relief. A space demands more energy to maintain than to programme. Renting space for specific projects is often smarter than owning one.

→ If you do not have a big enough venue, split the event

If your city only has halls for twelve hundred and you have fifteen hundred people, run three events of five hundred

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instead of one big one. It is simpler, cheaper and often creates a better atmosphere.

→ A difficult location can be an asset

Being hard to reach can be a point of interest. If the event is in the mountains or in a remote town, add a retreat and recovery element to the programme. People who made the effort to get there are more motivated and more engaged than those who pop in for an hour from a nearby office. Only motivated people will travel to a difficult place, and that is a strength, not a weakness. If you cannot hold the event at home, host it in another city under your own brand.

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Part 09

Accessibility And Inclusivity

→ How to invite a deaf person on stage and into the audience

A deaf person presenting in sign language needs two interpreters. Not one. Interpreting is exhausting cognitive work. If the speaker wants not only to give her talk but also to watch the other sessions, that is seven hours of continuous work. One interpreter cannot sustain that without losing quality. Sign languages are not universal. Every country has its own. A speaker cannot simply work with a local interpreter, because they will not understand each other.

Organisers often assume that captions are enough. For many deaf people who grew up with sign language, written language is their second language. Captions help, but they do not replace sign language interpreting. The grammar of sign languages is fundamentally different from spoken languages. It is not a simplification. It is a different linguistic system.

Four responses a deaf speaker hears most often: it is too expensive to bring three people instead of one. Why two interpreters when your talk is only thirty minutes. Can you not use local interpreters in the host country. Maybe you could give the talk for free so we can use that money for the

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interpreters. Every one of these responses makes her feel less valued than other speakers.

A speaker and sign language interpreter rider is a document the speaker sends to organisers before the event. It covers everything from microphones to stage positioning. Read it and take it seriously. When a deaf person is on stage, they need to see their interpreters. When they are in the audience, the interpreters cannot stand in a dark corner. They need a spotlight. Provide live captions created by a human, not auto-generated. Captions give a deaf person the freedom to move through the programme. They also help everyone who does not speak the conference language fluently. Do not be afraid to ask what we need. We are not special. We need a few specific things, and when those needs are met, we are participants like everyone else.

→ Gender balance and LGBTQ+ support

Pay attention to gender balance among speakers. Invite more women, give them support and a platform. Work with sponsors who support diversity. Design can be a tool for social change. A communication guide on a sensitive social topic, created by a collective of designers and journalists working with psychologists, can end up being used by a presidential office, by corporations and by newsrooms. Everything can start with a small gesture.

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Part 10

Sustainability In Event Production

→ Start with what you already have

Going green does not start with big investments, certifications or a strategy written by a consultant. It starts with looking at what you already have. What does your team know. Where is your venue and can people get there by public transport. Who in your surroundings already works on this topic and can help.

This is not months of research. It is one team meeting with the right questions on the table. The biggest mistake organisers make is planning huge changes instead of starting with things they can do tomorrow.

→ Everyday production decisions

No plastic bottles or cups. Replace them with water dispensers and reusable containers. Plant-based menus. Donating leftover food to community fridges instead of throwing it away. Double-sided printing. Reducing the amount of printed promotional materials and designing them so they do not become waste after a week.

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Choosing cleaning products and writing ecological requirements into contracts with cleaning companies. Each of these things seems trivial. At the scale of an event, they make a real difference.

→ Programme and format

Not every speaker has to fly in. Hybrid and remote talks exist and they work. The pandemic forced a conversation about how much energy we use on streaming, storing data and sending emails. How many attachments does that message really need. Does every team meeting have to be recorded and archived on a server.

The digital carbon footprint is real and growing every year.

→ Communicate your decisions

Every decision you make as an organiser is about something.

Dropping meat, dropping printed flyers, dropping international flights for speakers. If you do not tell your attendees why you are doing it, you lose half the value of that decision. People come to your event because they trust you. When you explain your choices, you are not lecturing them. You are giving them a tool to make similar decisions in their own lives. An organiser is someone who leads by example.

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Sustainability in event production is not a project with an end date. It is a process, and the most effective changes are the ones so simple that nobody can say they are impossible.

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Part 11

Design In A Social And Political Context

→ Projects that connect design to real-world context have more energy

Travel is a source of content and perspective.

The visual language of a city is a direct reflection of its political context. Street signs in a refugee language placed under local ones as a welcoming gesture. An alphabet monument as a symbol of national identity. Each of these observations ends up in a publication, a talk or a project.

A study trip or an international collaboration does not have to cost much to produce material for months of activity.

→ Students and education are not an add-on to the programme

One poster a day for an entire semester, each linked to a current event.

When a group went abroad for a workshop and chose gentrification as the topic, they knew they were part of the

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problem themselves. They printed the posters cheaply and pasted them on the walls of gentrified buildings at night. This kind of intervention in public space, illegal, cheap and direct, generates an educational experience that no lecture hall can replace.

Education is a separate line of work that can outlive the festival itself.

→ Honest admission of limits is more credible

The decisions that shape the world do not belong to designers.

Cycling infrastructure, transport investment, social policy, these are not design problems. They are political problems. But a designer can talk about them, show them and force people to think.

Honestly admitting helplessness is paradoxically more credible than promising to change the world on a ten-thousand-euro budget.

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Part 12

International Collaboration

→ A network of organisers needs a clear purpose

If you are building a network of organisers, first answer the question of why the network exists. Who is in it and why. Does it serve organisers, audiences or media. Without a clear purpose, the network will turn into an annual conversation about the same things.

The informal character of a network is something everyone values, but how do you create an officially informal organisation? That is a paradox worth pausing on.

→ Practical tools for collaboration

A shared portfolio of events that can be presented to potential partners as one offer.

A shared calendar platform. A speaker database with recommendations, not just who has a good portfolio but who actually delivers well on stage. A database of potential partners and grant programmes. A collection of creative ideas for cutting costs and generating income. A joint approach to cultural institutions. Media channels negotiated together, not separately. Coordinating international speaker invitations so

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that one transatlantic flight serves several conferences and costs are shared. A pass that gives entry or a discount to events across the entire network.

→ How to support a creative community hit by crisis

Do not look at people from countries affected by war as people who need help to survive. Look for partnership, not charity. Commission work, especially from young freelancers. Invite creators to speak and give them space not only for the topic of the crisis, but also to show who they are beyond it. Organise poster exhibitions, auctions, guerrilla campaigns. If you want to reach the diaspora in your city, look for them where they go for language classes, not at cultural events. Artist residencies, even one month long, give people breathing room.

→ The best medicine for crisis is engagement

The best medicine is not uplifting music or warm words, but engagement in something concrete. When an educational institute launched online courses in the second month of a war, people themselves pushed to start studying, because they needed something to think about besides the news. If you are a designer and want to help, help them make better visuals and better campaigns.

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Part 13

Working In The Toughest Conditions

→ You can run a conference in a war zone

Half the team on the front line. No grants. A venue that must have a bomb shelter. A schedule that has to account for air raid alerts lasting from thirty minutes to three hours. Speakers cancelling two days before because they were called to the front, then showing up after all. Tickets sold out in days. All proceeds donated to military equipment. If anyone says you cannot organise an event in difficult conditions, let them hear that others have done it.

→ A pandemic does not have to mean the end

Some organisers switched their entire format to online in two weeks. The return to physical events was slow and not everyone made it back. But those who survived discovered new formats and new audiences. A digital festival is not a worse version of a physical one. It is a different product for a different group of people.

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→ The hardest thing is sending the first email

Someone wrote to their hero at three in the morning. The reply came after five minutes. Then two months of silence. No answers to questions about flights, talk topics, anything. Friends said the speaker would not come. The dean of the art academy said she was naive. The speaker came. The lesson is that naivety and persistence are underrated tools for any organiser.

Do not wait for the perfect moment, the full budget, the certainty. Send the email.

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03.
Practical solutions for every challenge

Intro

During the project workshops, organisers were split into groups and asked to work on specific problems they face in their daily practice.

This document collects twenty-four of those problems and the solutions that came out of the room.

The format is simple: here is the problem, here is what the group recommended. Not everything will apply to you. But somewhere in these pages is probably the exact problem you are dealing with right now.

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Finances And Sponsors

Problem 1

No local sponsors

Local organisations and brands do not see value in sponsoring your festival.

→ Create a Partners Deck, a clear, professional offer for sponsors.
→ Define exactly what you offer: media coverage, audience statistics, event scouting.
→ Treat sponsors like clients. Offer them creative services such as reports, scouting or PR.
→ Communicate your currency: media coverage plus audience statistics equals what sponsors want.
→ Start talking early. October to December is peak negotiation time.
→ Be consistent with pricing. Do not change the offer for every sponsor.
→ Invite a potential sponsor to a shared event. Show, do not tell.
→ Collaborate with other festivals in your region. Together you are stronger.

Problem 2

No international sponsors

International brands and organisations do not know your festival and do not see it as worth their attention.

→ Build a network with other festivals. Together you have a bigger reach.
→ Create a database of potential partners from Creative Europe programmes. This is the official route to funding.
→ Use the travelling festival model. One event in multiple cities means bigger scale for a sponsor.
→ Approach cultural institutions as a group, not solo.

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→ Act together with other festivals. You have more negotiating power.
→ Talk to Erasmus+ about partnerships. It is a funding source for international events.
→ An event abroad is great PR even if the reality is underwhelming.

Problem 3

No financial resources

You have no money to organise the event.

→ Zero budget does not mean no budget. You are investing your time, and your time has value.
→ EU grants through Creative Europe and Erasmus+ take time to build but the value is enormous.
→ No freebies. Everything has value. Everything can be sold.
→ Invite a transport company in exchange for promotion. They solve the logistics, you give them visibility.
→ Invite cultural institutions as partners. They have budget.
→ Relationships equal money. Build trust and financing will follow.
→ Data mapping of events plus an online calendar shows the scale of your network. That attracts sponsors.
→ Treat the event as a service for brands. Scouting, reporting, documentation. That earns money.

Problem 4

Small budgets

You have some money but not enough for everything you want to do.

→ Decide how much time and energy you will invest. That determines the budget. Not everything has to happen at once.
→ Buy things you need, use them, return them after the event. Do not throw anything away.
→ Use unique tracking links for different channels. You see what works and reduce waste.

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→ Collaboration means splitting the budget. Invite another festival and share costs.
→ Split the audience if you do not have enough space. A smaller event can be a better event.
→ Use public space for exhibitions. You do not have to rent a venue.
→ A strong portfolio plus a good reputation means lower costs. People want to work with you.

Operations

Problem 5

Small team

The team is too small to handle all the tasks of the festival.
A manifesto for small teams:

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→ Find the why and the how-we-work-together for every member. Everyone must understand their role.
→ Create rituals and celebrate successes. It builds the team.
→ Respect working hours. Your team is not you. And you should not be working non-stop either.
→ Visualise the workflow. A twelve-month cycle with peaks.
→ Everyone must know when the crunch is coming.
→ Delegation is a skill. Acknowledge your own limitations.
→ Responsibility and autonomy in onboarding. People must know what they can decide on their own.
→ Assess and develop personal skills. Investing in people equals loyalty.
→ Trust your guts. Sometimes you can be tough. Sometimes you have to be.
→ Volunteers are not employees. Do not treat them like full-time staff.
→ Growth takes many forms. Even shrinking the team can be growth if it means efficiency.
→ Change equals chance. Treat changes as opportunities, not crises.

Problem 6

Planning and coordination problems

Hard to coordinate the team, no plan, chaos in execution.

→ Visualise the workflow. Create a twelve-month timeline and show the peaks.
→ Plan A, Plan B, Plan C for important things. Always have a backup.
→ Anticipate risk. Identify what can go wrong before it does.
→ Psychological readiness to delegate. The team must be prepared to take on tasks.
→ Long-perspective planning. Not week to week. Think six to twelve months ahead.
→ Knowledge, expertise, budget and time. All four determine what is possible.

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Problem 7

Delegation problems

Hard to delegate, the team does not know how to do certain things, chaos in responsibilities.

→ Expertise. Does the person have the skill? If not, train them or find someone else.
→ Knowledge. Does the person understand the job? They need to know the context.
→ Budget. Do you have money for this task? You cannot delegate without resources.
→ Time. Is there enough time? If the deadline is next week and the task needs two weeks, do not delegate.
→ Ask for help by asking specific things and setting clear borders. People want to know exactly what to do.
→ Responsibility and autonomy in onboarding. Everyone must know what they can decide on their own.
→ Trust your team. If you hired them, trust them.

Problem 8

No infrastructure for cultural events

No tools, platforms or systems for organising.

→ Create a digital museum, a platform for collecting and sharing resources.
→ Start small. Airtable or Notion with a speaker list, event list and partnership database.
→ An online speaker database saves time finding speakers.
→ An online calendar and platform for data mapping events.
→ Everyone can see what is happening in the network.
→ Create a client portfolio. Show your reach. It attracts new partners.
→ Archive, catalogue, website. Without these, people do not know you exist.
→ An educational platform open to design schools. Crowdsource the knowledge.
→ Think of organic interconnecting patterns rather than rigid categories.

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Geography & Logistics

Problem 9

Poor transport access

People cannot easily get to your festival. Bad connections, bad roads.

→ Invite a transport company in exchange for promotion. They solve the logistics.
→ Create a meeting point. Everyone gathers in one place, then transport to the event from there.
→ Hybrid event. Part physical, part virtual for those who cannot get there.
→ Travelling festival. The event in several cities. Not everyone has to go to one place.
→ Difficult access is a feature, not a bug. It is hard to get there and that is why it is interesting.
→ Be prepared for security measures. Trouble equals intrigue.

Problem 10

Airport far away

International guests have to change three times or ride a bus for four hours.

→ Train or bus instead of flying. Solve it in your communications.
→ Invite a transport company as a sponsorship deal. They organise the transfers.
→ Hybrid event. Some sessions online, some on site.
→ Travelling festival. Instead of everyone coming to you, you go to them.
→ Split the event across two cities. Part in a well-connected hub, part in your home city.

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Problem 11

Unfavourable geography

Small town, remote area, hard to reach.

→ Make the difficulty a point of interest. It is hard to get there and that is why it is interesting.
→ Virtual plus physical hybrid. Does everything have to be on site?
→ Travelling festival model. If people do not come to you, you go to them.
→ Network with other cities. Each city runs an event, people decide where to go.
→ Local context. Think about how your location can be an asset: nature, architecture, atmosphere.
→ Merge with another festival. Two brands, two cities, bigger reach.

Problem 12

Geographically dispersed network

The festival network is spread across many cities and countries. Hard to coordinate.

→ Network model. A loose network instead of a single hierarchy.
→ Interim meetings. Digital or physical gatherings to stay connected.
→ Travelling festival. Every year the event is in a different city.
→ Shared online database. A museum platform so everyone has access to resources.
→ Decentralisation. Each region does things its own way, but together you are a network.
→ Exchange model. People visit each other, meet, and share knowledge.

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Audience & Engagement

Problem 13

Spectators instead of participants

People come, listen and sit. They do not engage, discuss or build anything.

→ Change the terminology. Say participants, not audience.
→ Create a great experience. Professional, honest, engaging.
→ Invite speakers who bring their own audience. Influencers bring people.
→ Engage through stakeholders. Instead of targeting the audience directly, reach them through people they care about.
→ Make the audience co-creators and then ambassadors. Not listeners, but makers.
→ Visibility and accessibility. Show the venue, the workshops, be transparent about what is happening.
→ Entry-level tasks. An easy start for newcomers.
→ Have a clear purpose. What makes you different from other festivals?

Problem 14

No repeat visitors

People come once and never return. New audience every year.

→ Create a rewards or recognition system. For example, a priority list for next year.
→ Early access to information for returning attendees. A VIP feeling for those who come back.
→ Archive, catalogue, website. Show that you evolve. Give them a reason to return.
→ Professional and sincere communication. Be transparent about goals and processes. People see it is serious.
→ Make them ambassadors. Then they will promote you to their friends.

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→ Invite speakers with their own following. If their favourite speaker returns, they will too.

Problem 15

No new or young audiences

Your audience is ageing. Young people do not come. You do not know how to reach them.

→ Engage from a young age. Programmes for children, workshops for students.
→ Student pipeline: students become volunteers, volunteers become co-organisers, co-organisers become ambassadors.
→ Motivation: the chance to be selected, access to funding, certificates.
→ Targeted social media. Instagram for under 35, Facebook for 35 and over.
→ Invite speakers from their communities. TikTok influencers, Instagram creators.
→ Identify multipliers. Do not target directly, work through influencers.
→ Instead of competing with other festivals for the same audience, share it.

Visibility & Marketing

Problem 16

No media attention

The festival happens but the media does not cover it. Nobody knows you exist.

→ Cultivate relationships with key personalities in the media who are genuinely interested in the topic.
→ Identify topics of national importance that overlap with your brand.
→ Pamper your media contacts. Invite them, listen to them, make them feel valued.
→ Create a media list. Craft your outreach. Do not spam.

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→ Popular industries have their own media attention. Find connection points and leverage their attractiveness.
→ Be annoying. The main point is to be heard, not to wait until someone notices you.
→ An event abroad is great PR, even if modest. It is still news.

Problem 17

Weak marketing

You do not know how to promote yourself. You try but nothing works. No strategy.

→ Budget. Decide what you can spend.
→ Audience targeting. What makes you different? Who wants this?
→ Content. Create a prompt library for AI. Use visual content from your speakers.
→ Localisation. Every market is different on social media. Test what works.
→ Platforms, tools, channels. Test different approaches. See what works for you.
→ Be an influencer yourself. People listen to authenticity.
→ Use Behance for visual content. The design audience is there.
→ Unique tracking links for each channel. Analytics show you what works.

Problem 18

Social media confusion

You have social media but do not know which channels to use or what to post. No strategy.

Age-targeted channels

→ 35 and over: Facebook for reach and organic visibility.
→ Under 35: Instagram for visual content and engagement.
→ LinkedIn: for professional and digital design audiences, not for everything.
→ Behance: visual content for the design community.
→ YouTube: archive and content, not for promotion.

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→ BlueSky: news, the new Twitter.
→ Skip TikTok, Twitter and Threads. Low return for this audience.

Content strategy

→ Test channels. See what works for you.
→ Adapt to the rules of each platform. Every platform has different algorithms.
→ AI helps. Create a prompt library for your brand.
→ Analyse subscribers and interaction metrics.
→ Use content from your speakers. Turn their work into your content.
→ Be an influencer yourself. People listen to authentic voices.
→ Do not edit posts after publishing. It stops the promotion.
→ Put links in comments, not in the description.

International

Problem 19

No international partners

Hard to find international partners. They are closed off and do not respond.

→ Build an international events network, not individual events.
→ Small events with focused topics are invisible to large organisations. A network makes them visible.
→ Create a database of potential partners from Creative Europe programmes. The official route.
→ Act together with other festivals. You have more negotiating power.
→ Approach cultural institutions as a group, not solo.
→ Appoint a coordinator for international speakers. Someone who manages the connections.
→ Build a client portfolio. Show your reach and partnership history.

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Problem 20

No international recognition

The festival is known locally but internationally nobody cares.

→ The East-West iron curtain still exists in people's minds. Break it together.
→ Think beyond the East-West box. Define regional alliances: Nordic, Balkans, Mediterranean.
→ Share cities annually. A travelling festival, different city every year.
→ Work on your DNA. Find your edge and communicate it.
→ Do not look for recognition. Make yourself heard.
→ Be annoying. That is the main point.
→ An event abroad is great PR, even if the reality is underwhelming.

Problem 21

Limited offers for partners

You want partners but do not know what to offer them in return.

→ Create a Partners Deck with a clear list of offers.
→ Media coverage: number of people, reach, audience statistics.
→ You do their work: event scouting, reporting, documentation.
→ Explore new topics, countries and communities. For them that is value.
→ A diverse audience and diverse topics are your advantage.
EU funding possibility, if relevant.
→ Creative services. Offer them creative work in exchange for money.
→ Be consistent. The same offers for everyone.

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Content & Topics

Problem 22

Balancing avant-garde and mainstream

→ You want to be artistic and avant-garde but you also want an audience. The two seem to clash.
→ Focus on positioning. What makes you different?
→ Distribution should be wide. Do not limit yourself to a niche audience.
→ Invite speakers who bring their own audience, even if small but loyal.
→ Create an entry level. Not everything has to be hardcore. Some parts should be accessible.
→ Base themes on a knowledge base, not on geography or trends.
→ Invite motivated speakers who believe in your vision.

Problem 23

Innovation challenges

How not to fall into routine? How to evolve? How to stay relevant?

→ Change equals chance. Treat changes as opportunities, not crises.
→ Growth can take different forms. Bigger is not always better.
→ Start small and see where it goes. A micro museum instead of a mega one.
→ Network exchange. Ideas from other festivals.
→ Invite speakers with trending topics.
→ Document everything. An archive helps you see what came before.
→ Test different formats. It does not always have to be a traditional festival.

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Problem 24

Difficult topics

→ You want to address difficult topics like sustainability, marginalised communities or war, but you worry it will drive the audience away or cause controversy.
→ These topics should be your advantage, not your problem.
Invite motivated speakers who believe in the topic.
→ Be honest. Be transparent about why you are addressing this topic.
→ War and conflict: people may not be ready. Keep the context in mind.
→ Create a safe space. Discussion, not attack.
→ Invite diverse voices. Not one point of view.
→ Document everything. The archive will be historically important.
→ Partner with NGOs and institutes that work on the topic.

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04.
Lecture summaries for design event organisers

Intro

These are summaries of talks given during the project meetings.

Introduction

Unlike the practical guide, here you get the full stories with names, places and context, because sometimes the story is the lesson. Each summary ends with a list of practical takeaways so you can quickly see what applies to your situation.

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Seven Models For Growing A Design Event

Thomas Dahm, Neon Moiré

From a room to a movement

Every design event starts the same way. Someone finds a topic that excites them, looks around and sees others feel the same. They decide to meet. No festival planned, no grant written. Just a topic, energy and a need to talk. The Polish poster biennale, the Brno graphic biennale, the first typography conferences, they all started like this. In 2001 a student at an art academy organised a one-day conference that ended with a DJ masterclass and techno in the school halls. Most events that now draw hundreds or thousands began as a handful of people in one room.

Seven ways events grow

The first model is the travelling organiser. The core team packs the format into a suitcase and recreates it in a new city. Some festivals pick a different city every year and redesign the whole identity to match. It takes huge logistical energy, but it builds international recognition through direct contact with local communities.

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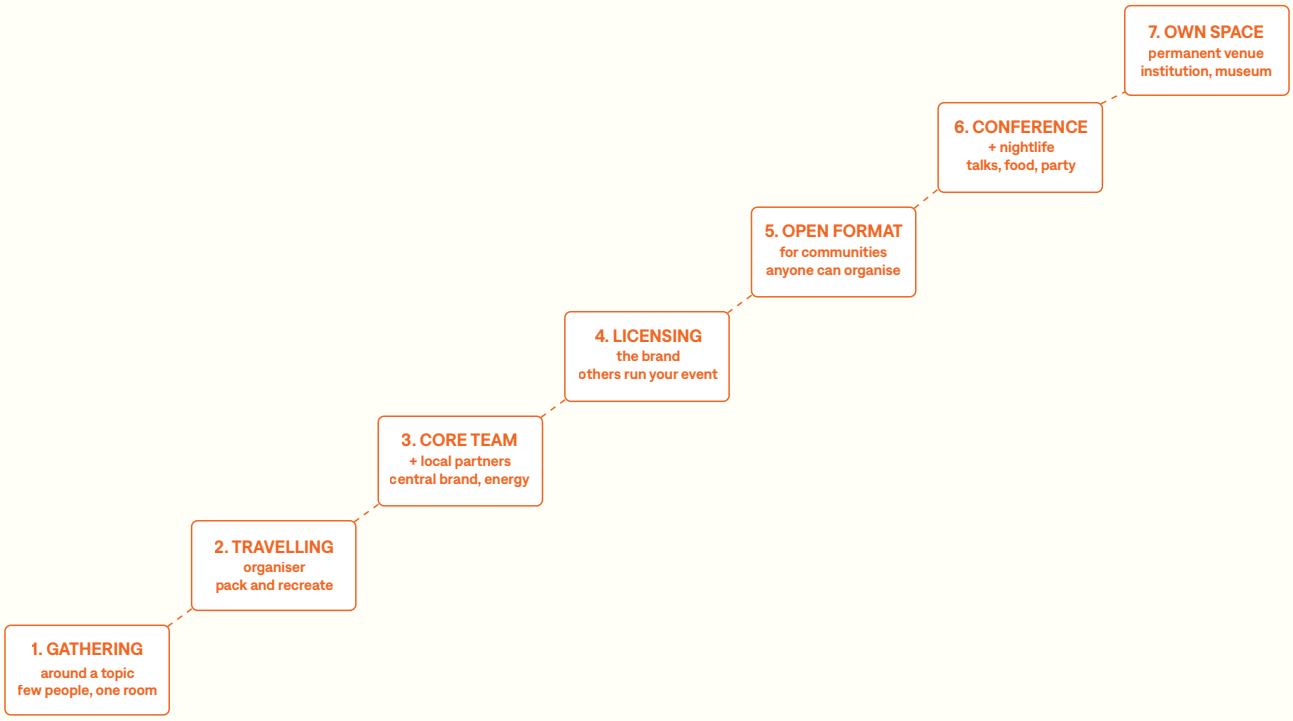
The second model is a core team plus local partners. The headquarters controls the brand and quality. Local people deliver context, audiences and energy. An organisation with an international team can naturally run events in multiple countries, with local creators contributing satellite programmes. You grow without losing your character.

SEVEN MODELS FOR GROWING A DESIGN EVENT



Not every event must go through all stages. Know where you are and what your next step could be.

The third model is brand licensing. You let organisers in other countries use your brand to create their own editions. The brand grows globally without the core team growing proportionally. The risk is uneven quality. The reward is massive influence. Many organisers running their own

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events today started by attending a licensed edition abroad and thinking they could do something similar at home.

The fourth model is the fully open format. A simple formula, say a morning meetup with coffee and a short talk, is released to anyone. Download the handbook, organise it in your city, join the global network. No budget, team or experience needed. The barrier to entry disappears completely. The brand gets stronger the more people use it.

The fifth model is conference meets nightlife. The event starts in the afternoon, flows through talks and conversations, and by evening turns into dinner, music and a party. Everything under one roof, nobody leaves. One event built on this model grew by a thousand people every year. Attendees walked out at four in the morning. It builds something talks alone cannot: a sense of shared experience.

The sixth model is having your own permanent space. The event matures into an institution with its own building. Museums born from poster festivals. Creative technology centres built in partnership with local government. This path takes years of relationship-building with public institutions, but it turns the event from something that happens once a year into a place that lives all year round.

Not every event must go through all seven stages. But every organiser should know they exist. Knowing the models helps

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you recognise where you are and what your next step could be.

Practical takeaways!

→ An event does not have to be big to matter. Neon Moiré started as a weekend project born from one person's frustration at missing a conference in Barcelona.

→ There are proven expansion models, from travelling teams to brand licensing, and it is worth studying them before reinventing the wheel.

→ Combining the programme with social and nightlife elements creates stronger community bonds than talks alone.

→ The pandemic proved that format flexibility is essential, and streaming technology has existed since the mid-1990s.

→ A permanent space is a natural direction for mature events, but it requires institutional partnerships and long-term thinking.

→ Open models like CreativeMornings show that giving your format away does not weaken the brand. It makes it stronger.

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Going Green Without A Big Budget

Krzysztof Bielaszka

Start with what you already have

Green change in event production does not start with big investments, certifications or a consultant's strategy. It starts with looking at what you already have.

A cultural activist who has spent years helping institutions and NGOs make environmental changes puts it simply: the biggest mistake organisers make is planning huge changes instead of starting with what they can do tomorrow.

The first step is an audit of your resources. What does your team know. Where is your venue and can people reach it by public transport. Who in your surroundings, local organisations, businesses, activists, already works on this and can help you. This is not months of research. It is one team meeting with the right questions on the table.

Everyday production decisions that matter

No plastic bottles or cups, replaced with water dispensers and reusable containers. Plant-based menus, which just a few years ago were still a novelty even at major city events. Donating leftover food to community fridges instead of

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throwing it away. Double-sided printing, which at one cultural institution in 2016 was still considered revolutionary. Reducing printed promotional materials and designing them so they do not become waste within a week. Choosing cleaning products and writing ecological requirements into contracts with cleaning companies.

Each of these things seems trivial. At the scale of an event, they add up.

The programme and the digital footprint

Not every speaker has to fly in. Hybrid and remote talks exist and they work. The pandemic forced a conversation about how much energy we spend on streaming, data storage and email. How many attachments does that message really need. Does every team meeting have to be recorded and archived on a server.

The digital carbon footprint is real and it grows every year.

Communicate your decisions

Every decision you make as an organiser is about something. Dropping meat, dropping printed flyers, dropping international flights for speakers. If you do not tell your attendees why you are doing it, you lose half the value of that decision. People come to your event because they trust you. When you explain your choices, you are not lecturing them. You are giving them a tool to make similar decisions in their own context.

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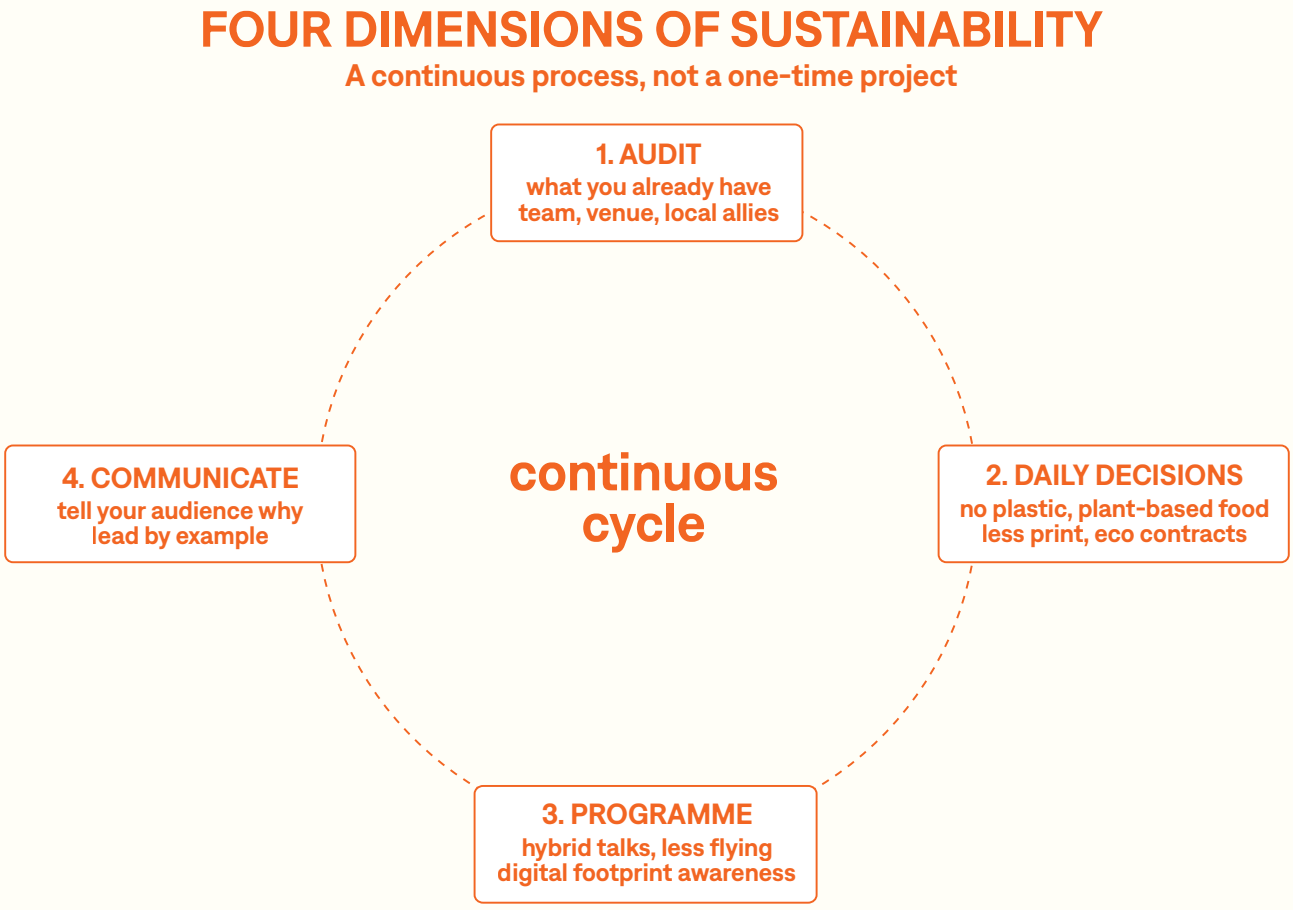
Sustainability in event production is not a project with an end date. It is a process, and the most effective changes are the ones so simple that nobody can say they are impossible to implement.



The most effective changes are the ones so simple nobody can say they are impossible.

Practical takeaways!

→ Start with one team meeting and a simple audit of what you already have: knowledge, location, local allies.

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→ Replace plastic with reusables, switch to plant-based menus, donate leftover food, print double-sided, reduce promotional materials.

→ Question whether every speaker needs to fly in. Hybrid formats work and reduce your carbon footprint.

→ Question your digital footprint too: how many emails, attachments, recordings and archived meetings do you really need.

→ Always explain to your audience why you are making sustainable choices. The communication is half the value of the decision.

→ Sustainability can be a team-building tool. Shared values around how you work strengthen the organisation.

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Making Your Event Accessible To Deaf People

Marie van Driessche

What happens when you invite a deaf speaker

A deaf UX researcher and designer who regularly speaks at conferences shared her experience of what happens every time she is invited.

The pattern repeats. She applies to an open call, the topic is accepted, the organisers invite her. Then the discussions begin. As a deaf person she presents in sign language and needs two interpreters. Her government covers the interpreters' working hours, but not travel, accommodation or food. When she tells organisers this, she hears one of four responses. It is too expensive to bring three people instead of one. Why two interpreters when the talk is only thirty minutes. Can you not use local interpreters in the host country. Could you give the talk for free so we can use that money for the interpreters.

Each of these responses makes her feel less valued than other speakers. And each comes from not understanding a few simple facts.

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Why two interpreters and why they must be yours

Sign language interpreting is exhausting cognitive work. If the speaker wants not only to give her talk but also watch the rest of the programme, that is seven hours of continuous work.

One interpreter cannot sustain that without losing quality. Sign languages are not universal. Each country has its own. They have different grammar, different signs, different structures. A speaker cannot simply work with a local interpreter because they will not understand each other. The grammar of sign languages is fundamentally different from spoken languages. The English sentence “would you like to have lunch with me” becomes “you, me, lunch, go” in sign language. This is not a simplification. It is a different linguistic system.

What organisers often get wrong

Many organisers assume captions are enough.

For many deaf people who grew up with sign language, written language is their second language. Reading captions is comparable to reading a foreign language. Captions help, but they do not replace sign language interpreting.

The speaker and her interpreter team have created a rider document that they send to organisers before the event, covering everything from microphones to stage positioning.

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The key is to read it and take it seriously. It has happened that organisers ignored it and the interpreters had to solve technical problems on the spot, wasting everyone's time and energy.

What good access looks like

When a deaf person is on stage, they need to see their interpreters for eye contact and pacing cues. When in the audience, the interpreters cannot stand in a dark corner. They need a spotlight. Deaf attendees need seats close to the interpreters, not because they are special guests, but because otherwise they simply cannot see what is being said. If there are multiple deaf attendees, two interpreters are not enough, because during networking breaks each person needs their own access to conversations.

One of the most important things an organiser can do is provide live captions created by a human, not auto-generated. Captions give a deaf person freedom to move through the programme without pre-arranging with interpreters which talks to attend. And captions help everyone: people who do not speak the conference language fluently, and anyone who encounters a speaker with unclear diction. Other speakers can help too. Good contrast in slides. Captions on embedded videos. A natural speaking pace.

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Practical takeaways!

→ Budget for two sign language interpreters, not one, if you invite a deaf speaker. Factor in their travel, accommodation and food.

→ Do not ask a deaf speaker to work for free to cover interpreter costs. Pay them the same as any other speaker.

→ Do not assume local interpreters will work. Sign languages are not universal and each country has its own.

→ Read the speaker and interpreter rider document and take it seriously. Prepare in advance, not on the day.

→ Give interpreters a spotlight when they are working from the audience area. Dark corners mean zero accessibility.

→ Provide live human captions for all talks. This benefits deaf attendees, non-native speakers and everyone else.

→ Send presentation slides to interpreters in advance so they can prepare terminology.

→ Ask what is needed. Do not assume. The speaker's closing message: we are not special, we just need a few specific things, and when those needs are met, we are participants like everyone else.

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From Problems To Strategy

Dennis Elbers, Graphic Matters

Design belongs in public space

The founder of Graphic Matters in Breda spent fifteen years learning one thing above all else: how to turn problems into opportunities. He is not a designer by training. He studied painting and printmaking, became a curator, worked at what was then the only graphic design museum in the world, and eventually decided he preferred building his own initiatives. He runs a twelve-person team operating two organisations simultaneously, a design programme and a mural project with over 150 realisations in public space.

What sets his approach apart is a consistent commitment to presenting design in public space rather than in galleries. Not because galleries are bad, but because public space generates something white walls cannot: debate. When a Rotterdam studio designed a poster combining a fast-fashion logo with a controversial politician's face and put it on the street, people called the company to complain. Lawyers were sent, the poster was removed, the organisers pushed back, the poster went back up, and the national press arrived. In the middle of winter at minus five degrees, people queued for over an hour to enter a pink poo emoji installation and eat ice cream. When the team put heavy exhibition structures in a park, the first visitors were not design lovers but bootcamp

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participants who came to do push-ups. Every one of these situations could have been a failure. Every one became a story that attracted the next wave of people.

The Social Profit Canvas

The most important lesson from this talk is about strategy, not production. For years the team tried to fit into the business model canvas, a tool made for companies selling products at a profit, which is the exact opposite of what a cultural organisation does. They tried to communicate with five different target groups, each needing different language, materials and events. They tried to convince business owners that design matters and heard that those owners did not even know who designed their materials. They tried to reach the broad public walking past their installations and found that most people walked past without looking.

The breakthrough came with a model called the Social Profit Canvas, designed for organisations with a social mission. It works in concentric circles. At the centre is your organisation. On the outer ring is context: the world you operate in and the problems that drive you. On the other side is impact: the distant goal you want to achieve but cannot guarantee. Between context and impact are layers over which you have increasing control. Result is what you can count and promise in a grant: skills, inspiration, knowledge, encounters. Outcome is what will probably come from your work but you cannot guarantee. The key is not mixing these levels in applications,

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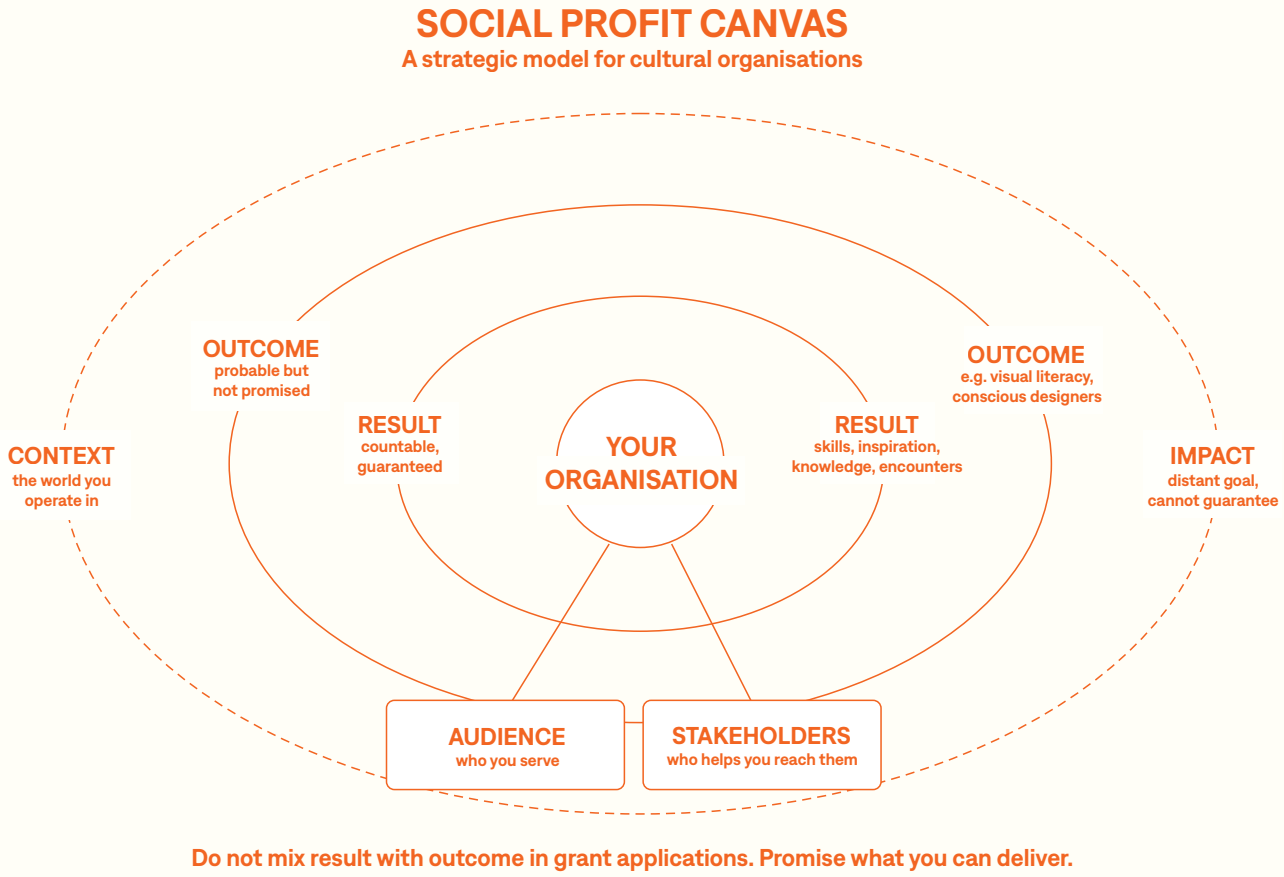
because when you promise impact on a budget that only covers results, the reader sees through it immediately.



Two audiences instead of five

The most powerful part of the model is choosing your audience. Graphic Matters cut five target groups to two: young people and designers. The logic is simple. If you want to build visual awareness, do not start with people who do not want to learn. Start with those who still do. To reach young people, do not try to convince them directly. Find a teacher, because one teacher means thirty kids. Schools need what you offer

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because their curriculum has no room for visual education. You need what they have: organised groups. Both sides give each other something they lack.

The model also drove another fundamental decision: switching from a biennial festival to a year-round programme. Schools cannot plan trips to an event that happens every two years on shifting dates. But if they know every spring they can visit and see something worthwhile, they put it in the calendar and the budget. Regularity turned out to be more important than grand gestures.

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Practical takeaways!

→ Present design where people already are: parks, libraries, churches, car parks, public transport hubs.

→ Develop cheap, repeatable display formats. Lightweight powder-coated construction fences can set up a poster show in an hour.

→ Sell posters after exhibitions. It is a real income source and people buy more than they planned.

→ Do not be afraid of provocative or guerrilla actions. They generate the media attention a press release never will.

→ Ditch the business model canvas. Use the Social Profit Canvas instead. Separate context from impact, result from outcome, audience from stakeholder.

→ Cut your target groups ruthlessly. Two focused audiences are better than five scattered ones.

→ Reach young audiences through teachers, not directly. One teacher equals thirty kids.

→ Switch from a biennial to a year-round programme if you want stable partnerships with schools and institutions.

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Design, Politics And Honest Helplessness

Lars Harmsen, Slanted

Admitting you feel helpless

Lars Harmsen runs Slanted, one of the most recognised independent design platforms in Europe. He also runs a branding agency, a silkscreen collective and teaches students. He opens his talk with a statement rarely heard on a conference stage: I feel helpless.

Not because he does not do enough, he does a lot, but because the decisions that really shape the world do not belong to designers. One city spends two euros thirty per resident per year on cycling infrastructure. Another spends thirty-five. That explains why cyclists die in one and thrive in the other. That is not a design problem. It is a political one. But a designer can talk about it, show it and force people to think.

Travel as a source of content

Travel is Harmsen's primary source of material. In Tbilisi he sees NATO flag graffiti on walls, something unthinkable in Germany, and understands that a city's visual language directly reflects its political context. He discovers a studio that placed Ukrainian street names under Georgian signs as a

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welcome gesture for refugees. In Yerevan he stops at a monument to the Armenian alphabet and sees how much having your own script means to national identity.

Every observation ends up in a publication, a talk or a project. For organisers the message is clear: a study trip or international collaboration does not have to cost much to generate months of content.

Design meets social action

A former student went to a favela in Brazil with scissors and glue made from eggs, made artwork with children and wrote a book with instructions on how to repeat the process. He later founded an organisation that engages local communities in creating work sold for specific causes.

Harmsen decided to support this organisation and Médecins Sans Frontières by creating an open publication where designers could buy a page for a hundred euros or a small ad for ten. He expected thousands of participants. He got plenty of enthusiasm and far fewer payments. After six months of work the project raised around seventeen thousand euros including sales. He talks about it honestly: partly satisfied, partly frustrated, knowing it could have been more.

Declared engagement and real engagement are two different things.

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Students on the streets

The 100 Poster Battle project with students means one poster a day for an entire semester, each linked to current events. When the group went abroad and chose gentrification as their topic, they knew they were part of the problem. They printed cheaply and pasted the posters on gentrified buildings overnight. This kind of intervention, illegal, cheap and direct, generates an educational experience no lecture hall can match.

Education is not an add-on to the programme. It is a separate line of work that can outlive the festival itself.

Practical takeaways!

→ Projects connecting design to real social or political context carry more energy than those discussing design in a vacuum.

→ Travel generates content. A study trip does not need to be expensive to produce material for months.

→ Crowdfunding from the design community is possible but takes far more effort than anyone expects. Plan for the gap between declared and real engagement.

→ Students and education are not a side programme. They are a separate strategic line that can outlast the festival.

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→ Honest admission of limits is more credible than promising to change the world on a small budget.

→ Books and publications that combine design with social causes can raise money, but manage expectations on timelines and amounts.

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Supporting The Ukrainian Creative Community

Anna Sarvira, Mariia Norazian, Mykyta Hrach, Oleg Gryshchenko, Olexander Tregub

Seventy exhibitions and counting

The panel on supporting Ukraine's creative community was not a lecture. It was a conversation between five Ukrainian organisers and creators answering questions from the room.

Mykyta Hrach represented Design Village Festival, Anna Sarvira the Pictoric Illustrators Club from Kyiv, Olexander Tregub the Projector Institute, Mariia Norazian the 4Block eco-poster festival from Kharkiv, and Oleg Gryshchenko the United24 platform. What came out of this conversation was more useful than most solidarity panels, because it focused on mechanisms, not declarations.

Anna Sarvira from Pictoric explained that her club had organised over seventy war poster exhibitions worldwide in eighteen months. All of them happened because people abroad reached out first. Illustrators, publishers and designers wrote saying they had seen the posters and wanted to show them. Pictoric agrees to everything, streets, schools, small villages, big cities, because the goal is not a prestigious location but reaching as many people as possible.

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How to reach the diaspora

When asked how to connect with the Ukrainian refugee community in his city, since previous attempts had drawn nobody, the answers were concrete. Sarvira said the biggest success they had was in language schools where refugees attend classes, the only place this community regularly appears. Tregub added that the Ukrainian diaspora is organised around Telegram channels and local aid organisations, not cultural events. If you want to reach them, find those organisations.

Someone from the audience described inviting Ukrainians to paste posters together in the city, and it worked because it was a simple physical activity that needed no language or cultural context.

Partnership, not charity

The most important moment in the panel came when Tregub from Projector Institute changed the tone.

He said directly: do not look at us as people who need help to survive. Ukraine has a strong business and creative scene, plenty of agencies, startups and freelancers who lost their domestic market and are now looking for global partners. Many do not know how to start working with European companies, how to build processes, how to communicate.

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This is a moment when partnership is profitable for both sides. Ukrainian services and companies are affordable, the skills are high, and the willingness to collaborate is enormous. Think investment and partnership, not charity.

Sarvira added something equally important. Ukraine needs not only war-related support but also the chance to show itself as a country, not just a conflict. Pictoric deliberately combines war poster exhibitions with exhibitions about Ukraine in general, because people in Europe often do not know basic facts. If you invite Ukrainian creators, do not lock them into the war topic. Give them space to show who they are beyond it.

Engagement as medicine

Tregub closed with an observation about mental health. Ukrainians operate in two modes simultaneously: some are on the edge of endurance, others are powered by the energy of action.

The best medicine for both is not uplifting music or warm words but engagement in something concrete. When the Projector Institute launched online courses in the second month of the war, people pushed to start studying because they needed something to think about besides the news. If you are a designer and want to help, help them make better visuals and better campaigns.

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The organiser of the Lustr festival from Prague shared a concrete experience of collaborating with Pictoric. They invited the war poster exhibition to their festival and held an auction at the end. The posters sold, the money went to Ukraine, and the festival got a beautiful exhibition with minimal effort because Pictoric delivered everything ready. He said it plainly: this was not charity, it was synergy, and he encouraged everyone to repeat it.

Practical takeaways!

→ If you want to exhibit Ukrainian war posters, contact Pictoric Illustrators Club. They have ready-made exhibitions and agree to any location.

→ If you want to reach the Ukrainian diaspora in your city, look for them at language schools and local aid organisations, not at cultural events.

→ If you want to invite Ukrainian creators, offer a residency, even one month. Men can leave the country with an invitation from a cultural institution.

→ If you want to support Ukrainian designers, commission work from them, especially young freelancers on Behance who struggle to find clients.

→ If you organise an event, invite Ukrainian creators to speak, online or in person, and give them space beyond the war topic.

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→ If you publish a magazine or run a platform, feature Ukrainian work. They need global visibility.

→ If you have posters from 4Block or Pictoric, you can organise guerrilla campaigns in your city. The materials are available.

→ If you want business partnerships with Ukrainian agencies and startups, contact any of the organisations mentioned. They will connect you with the right people.

→ The United24 platform enables one-click donations directly to Ukraine.

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05.
What comes next

Intro

This playbook is a snapshot. It captures what a group of organisers from across Europe knew, struggled with and figured out between 2023 and 2025.

Introduction

Some of it will age well. Some of it will need updating the moment you read it. That is the nature of this work. The problems change, the tools change, the funding changes.

What does not change is that somewhere right now, a few people are sitting in a room, excited about the same thing, wondering if they should organise an event. They should. And when they get stuck, they should know that every organiser before them got stuck too, and most of them found a way through by talking to someone who had been there before.

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That is what this project was. That is what this document is. Not a manual with all the answers, but a record of honest conversations between people who do the work.

If anything in this playbook was useful to you, pass it on. If you disagree with something, good. Write your own version. The best guide is always the one written by someone who just solved the problem you are facing.

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