

New Vision New Lifestyle

NEW LAND

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Tania de Jong,
Executive Producer

Ci 2013: Meeting of the Minds

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Tania de Jong is an extraordinary young lady who has founded many projects including *Creative Universe*, the *Song Room* and *Music Theatre Australia Pot-Pourri*. At the top of this list is the *Creative Innovation Conferences (Ci2013)*, which will focus on leadership, innovation, education and science & technology, interspersed with interactive challenges including music and the arts. As the executive producer of Ci2013, Tania shares her experiences with *New Land* in the twelve months of preparation leading up to the conference.

Interviewed by APRIL TIAN

NL: What is the criteria for choosing guest speakers?

TDJ: They have to be experts, leaders in their field and incredible presenters – not theatrical but stage presentations. They need to be able to impart knowledge, tools and strategies to the audience within a 15 to 20 minute presentation window and leave the audience inspired to return to the workplace to begin implementing what they've just seen. Many people apply to be guest speakers but we also approach many speakers ourselves.

NL: What's the theme of Ci2013 and why?

TDJ: The theme of this year's Ci2013 is *Racing to the Future*. Everyone is worried and uncertain about the future. Many companies want to understand what things will be like in one, two, five or ten years from now. So, it is important to show that across different industries. The E6-economy, environment, energy, entrepreneurship, education and ethical leadership are the

key areas in speaking with our advisory panels and our experts – the areas that have a lot of complexity and that need to show some innovative solutions – the environment, energy resources, food security, the economy, etc. Education is also an ongoing challenge, as in how are we going to educate the 21st century's citizens of the future. Speaking of entrepreneurship, quite often very bureaucratic organisations don't readily enable a cultural innovation and entrepreneurship to occur. We also don't support our local entrepreneurs very well which is why many of them commercialise their innovations overseas.

If everything is just about greed and making money for shareholders, then we'll never create a collaborative society. This conference is really about what I like to call *positive human collisions*; as in the idea that we bring together senior leaders

and emerging talent across a wide range of sectors from big and small business', academia, government, the not-for-profit sector and so on. They all come together and then solve problems and learn across sectors. So this is really about cross learning.

NL: Unlike other business conferences, Ci2013 integrates key note speeches with audio and visual arts – songs, graphic arts and video projections. Why take this unique approach?

TDJ: For most people, when they go to a conference, it's a conference that is industry specific – you see a lot of PowerPoint presentations and people talking. We wanted to create something that was more than just another conference, something that was more like an event or an experience, something that takes people into the right side of their brain. We wanted to connect with people's hearts as





well as their minds. We wanted to find a way to connect with the right sides of attendees' brains. It's easy to be separate, but what can we do to come together and to become co-creators of the future.

So we used artists in residence, like a poet in residence, a composer in residence and graphic recorders, because it stimulates people in a different way and connects to different parts of their intelligences. Not just the intellectual intelligence but to other parts of their brain and then their heart and then they actually absorb the information better and they remember it better because they felt something. You know if you don't feel that much then you don't act. So all change starts with how you think and then acting on it. If we can have out of the conference that people want to do things differently and act, then we have a chance to create some systemic change. But as long as people say that such-and-such isn't my problem, this is what we've always done and this is always how we've done it, then we'll never have a chance to make things better, to improve and to deal with the challenges that are coming.

NL: As an executive producer, so far are you happy with the achievements the conference has made?

TDJ: Yes, it's surpassed my wildest expectations. You know the first year, everyone said that we couldn't do it, that we wouldn't succeed and even the first year it was great. I've been to a lot of conferences as a performer or speaker. I felt really bored and would rather have been out in the corridor talking with someone and networking rather than sitting there because I'd feel that I wasn't getting enough from the content. At our conference, I think a lot of people are very engaged in the content presented, even the guest speakers. They all sit there, taking notes, listening, using social media and tweeting. We trended No.1 last

year on Twitter. I wanted people to be on the edge of their seats, wanting to be in the room. And then in the breaks we offer a lot of connection, a lot of ways for people to connect. As you know, the conference has many different components, so in addition to the two-day conference, we have twelve master classes, two deep conversations, and a gala dinner, at which there will be a hypothetical about the future of Australia in 2050 – the optimist and the pessimist. We also have hot spots so that people can get up close and personal with their favourite speakers and presenters. It is very cool.

NL: Every year, Ci conference is proclaimed "the best conference ever". Does this make it a challenge for you?

TDJ: Yes every year we think how we can make it better than the year before. Every year we ask for feedback and we listen to that feedback. We're always adding and taking out and we don't keep it identical. We're changing things and we look at the formula all the time. You can never please everyone. That's the fact of the matter. But if we can get 95% of delegates saying that it was great and many people also saying that this was the best conference they've ever been to and that they are going to take action as a result, well, we can't complain and we should be very proud.

NL: What happens to the ideas generated from the conference?

TDJ: We have a white paper, which gets published on our website and shared with the delegates, and we also send it to the government. A number of our partners have started new innovation centres as a result of the conference. Many people have started to build a culture of innovation in their business after attending the conference. Some people also change their jobs (laugh). A lot of emerging leaders come away with

new tools, skills and connections, and some people connect with new industries. There have been a lot of positive outcomes from the conference that are still ongoing.

NL: Any particular examples of this?

TDJ: Yes! Take Mondelez for example. About 15 people from different departments, including marketing, R&D, and strategy departments participated in the conference in 2012. The ideas that they picked up at the conference proved to be influential and they implemented some new initiatives from the conference, like the successful co-creation of different models between industry and government stakeholders.

That's why this year Mondelez has become the major sponsor of Ci2013. They really like the fact that Ci2013 brings together the themes of innovation and sustainability – two of the founding ambitions of Mondelez International – and it is a great fit as they embark on this exciting new chapter of innovation in their company.

PROFILE

NL: What are three words to describe the Ci conferences?

TDJ: Cutting-edge, future-shaping, dot-connecting.

NL: What are the three words that best describe yourself?

TDJ: Creative, passionate, courageous. (laugh, think)...Creative,

NL: How is the theme of each conference chosen?

TDJ: I came up with the theme early on and target the speakers to suit the theme. So we pick the theme that we think is cutting-edge and going to be very relevant at the time the conference occurs.