

MasterClass Summary: Turning Strangers into Valuable Connections – Fast

Based on the groundbreaking work of Maarten Vanneste and his book *Perfect Strangers*, this 90-minute session explored how a simple shift in meeting design can dramatically improve learning, networking and participant engagement.

Participants were introduced to Maarten's CAT methodology – **Conversations About the Topic** – an evidence-based approach that replaces passive audiences with active participants through short, structured conversations immediately following brief presentations. Rather than relying on chance encounters during coffee breaks, CAT intentionally designs meaningful interactions around shared interests, making networking a measurable and valuable outcome of every meeting.

Through interactive discussions and breakout sessions, participants explored what makes gatherings truly indispensable and why networking consistently ranks as the highest-value reason people attend conferences and events. The session demonstrated that effective networking is not left to chance but can be intentionally designed, measured and even predicted through thoughtful meeting design.

Participants discovered how CAT helps people better understand new ideas, build meaningful professional relationships and leave meetings with greater energy, stronger connections and tangible outcomes. Requiring no additional technology, budget or complex facilitation, CAT can be implemented in meetings and events of any size, whether online or in person.

10 Key Insights

1. **Networking should be designed, not left to chance** - Traditional coffee breaks rely on serendipity, whereas CAT intentionally creates meaningful professional connections around shared topics
2. **Small changes create significant impact** - A simple 7–8-minute conversation after every 9–10-minute presentation can dramatically increase the value of any meeting or event
3. **CAT is backed by research** - The science presented in *Perfect Strangers* demonstrates that Conversations About the Topic consistently outperform presentation-only formats in learning, networking and motivation
4. **Conversations drive learning and engagement** - Participants learn more by explaining ideas in their own words, hearing different perspectives, and actively discussing concepts rather than passively listening
5. **Topic-driven networking creates stronger relationships** - Presentations act as filters that bring together participants with shared interests and quickly connect with the people most relevant to them
6. **Small groups maximise participation** - Conversations involving no more than five people encourage everyone - including quieter participants - to contribute, creating richer discussions and more meaningful connections
7. **It's time to rethink traditional Q&A** - Rather than ending presentations with questions directed only at the speaker, CAT replaces conventional Q&A with participant conversations, allowing everyone to engage with the topic, exchange ideas and learn from one another
8. **Networking outcomes can be measured** - Effective meeting design makes it possible to intentionally increase - and even predict - the number and quality of valuable participant interactions
9. **CAT is practical, cost-effective, and scalable** - The methodology works equally well in virtual meetings, workshops, conferences and large-scale events without requiring additional technology or significant resources
10. **The greatest value comes from conversations** - While presentations introduce ideas, it is the structured discussions that transform strangers into valuable professional connections, deeper learning, collaboration and lasting outcomes

Final Reflection

The masterclass concluded by reinforcing a simple but powerful message: the true value of meetings and events lies not only in the content delivered, but in the quality of the conversations they create. By intentionally designing opportunities for participants to connect around shared interests through CAT, organisers can significantly enhance learning, networking, engagement and the long-term impact of every gathering.

Putting CAT into Practice

Challenge yourself to redesign your next meeting by replacing one longer presentation with a short presentation followed by a 7–8-minute Conversation About the Topic in groups of no more than five people. Even this simple change can significantly improve participant engagement, learning and networking, while creating more valuable outcomes for everyone involved.

Thank you for participating in **Turning Strangers into Valuable Connections - Fast**. We hope these insights inspire you to redesign your next meeting or event to create more meaningful conversations, stronger professional connections and greater value for everyone involved.

We had several questions during registration from our delegates - here [Maarten Vanneste](#) answers some of your questions: [Your Questions Answered](#)

Download your copy

If you want to dive deeper, the full book *Perfect Strangers* and the ready-to-use Speaker Version (a shorter why and how-to guide), as well as a FREE Executive Summary are available right now.

[Download here](#)

If you would like to be included in a “CAT’s up?” WhatsApp channel with Maarten – please email him on maarten.vanneste@meetingsupport.org

Please help us in the evaluation of this session – [Complete Feedback Form](#)

Thank you to: [Richard John](#), MESA Member for helping with the introductions to MESA, Maarten and wrapping up!

Thank you to [Maarten Vanneste](#), Author, Speaker, Consultant and President of the [Meeting Design Institute](#) for the overall session!



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