



10 Years of CMEpalooza with Scott Kober and Derek Warnick

Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 360

Scott Kober: [00:00:00] In the early days of CMEpalooza, I often thought, “Could we replicate this in other fields, other industries, and create meetings in those spaces?”

Celisa Steele: [00:00:13] I’m Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:14] I’m Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast. Competition from free and low-cost offerings is a reality for many learning businesses. But it’s also true that most learning businesses do offer—or should offer—free or low-cost options in their own portfolios. CMEpalooza offers an interesting case study to examine both for competitive insight and as a potential model to emulate. Scott Kober and Derek Warnick produce CMEpalooza, a free biannual virtual conference for CME and CE professionals. CMEpalooza is a side gig for these fearless co-producers. By day, Derek Warnick works as a grant officer on the global medical team at Pfizer, and Scott Kober is managing director at Excalibur Medical Education. Scott and Derek are return guests. I spoke with them way back in episode 83, which aired in May 2017. In this episode, number 360, Celisa talks with Scott and Derek about how COVID did—and didn’t—impact CMEpalooza, how competition does—or doesn’t—factor into their thinking, how producing the conference provides them with invaluable market insight, and how their value proposition has evolved organically over the years but has always been guided by three principles: high-quality, easy, and free. Celisa spoke with Scott and Derek in April 2023, and the interview begins with Scott talking about what CMEpalooza is.

Scott Kober: [00:01:59] So we have two annual, virtual, free online meetings—one in the spring and one in the fall. We’re talking today just a few days after our spring 2023 meeting. We are in our 10th year. Derek and I had a long debate on whether this was our 10th birthday or our 10th anniversary, but I actually let him win this one. I agree that this is neither our 10th birthday nor our 10th anniversary although it is our 10th year of CMEpalooza, correct.

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Celisa Steele: [00:02:29] One of the obvious things that has happened since you were last on the podcast is the pandemic. As a free online conference, it seems like CMEpalooza was probably really well positioned for the spring of 2020. But talk a little bit about how COVID has impacted CMEpalooza.

Scott Kober: [00:02:49] March 2020, obviously that's when the pandemic first appeared on everyone's radar screens. We were about a month out from our spring meeting. So we had our agenda. We had our faculty. We had everything in place to do what we usually do. Then, when the pandemic hit, most of our speakers and faculty suddenly weren't working. They weren't doing very much, so they had time on their hands. We pushed forward with our spring 2020 event and pivoted a little bit with some of the content and some of the focus of what we were talking about. But, at the time, it became our most highly attended event ever because people didn't have a lot to do on a day-to-day basis, and this was the one thing that was out there that was something that they could relate to or that was reliable and that was still on the calendar. Obviously, after that pandemic in the first year or two (I think we'll talk about this a little bit more), everything moved online. It wasn't just CMEpalooza that was now online education for our industry. But we have always stuck to our schedule of spring and fall. We really were not disrupted, in that sense, by the pandemic like so many others were.

Derek Warnick: [00:04:10] The pandemic itself and the impact that it had on us—other than what Scott talked about for viewers, etcetera—really didn't impact what we do almost at all. We do pretty much everything the same now as we did before the pandemic, during the pandemic, and after the pandemic. It was basically business as usual because it's our virtual conference. In fact, if anything, it's made our jobs with CMEpalooza a little bit easier because everyone was forced to learn how to operate with a virtual conference and to figure out how to get the hardware that they needed and how to work with the software, etcetera. Now we have to educate a lot less than we used to. Everyone seems comfortable with it.

Scott Kober: [00:04:56] One of the things we used to do before the pandemic, we used to always do AV tests in the weeks or two before our live events, just to make sure everyone's technology was working. At least, from my perspective—I think Derek does it every now and then—I don't even do them anymore just because we don't run into issues from that perspective.

Celisa Steele: [00:05:12] I'm thinking about what you guys offer, and competition is something that we talk about a lot on the Leading Learning Podcast. You are the competition that a lot of our listeners have to deal with—not directly, but people like you. They have to deal with low-cost or, heaven forbid, free offerings. They have to make that case to their learners to come and

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learn with us. I'm just curious to know, as producers of this twice-a-year, free conference, do you think about how you complement and potentially compete with the other folks out there providing education to your audience, which are CME providers?

Derek Warnick: [00:05:56] I don't think that we really look at the others who are doing education for the same audience that we are as competitors. I don't know how they look at us necessarily, but, while we're both offering educational services for the same type of audience, we offer different things. We can't replicate that in-person conference experience that others can. I don't think we really try to, necessarily. That's not our role. That's not our goal. But, at the same time, we offer something that they can't, which is free education. And so I think our audience, at least when we started CMEpalooza, we thought of our audience as those who were not able to go to in-person conferences, which was the main educational offering for them, because, for whatever reason, it's too expensive, too hard to travel, too many people from their department are already going, that sort of thing. So we always thought of this as an opportunity for them and others as well. I'm well aware that there are others who go to all the different offerings. I would never think that all you need to do is watch CMEpalooza, that you're fine for the year, and that you can get all of whatever you need, all your learning from that. I think that there are things that you can learn, regardless of who's offering it from different ways. I don't think of it too much as a competition with the others; whether they think of us that way, I don't know.

Scott Kober: [00:07:25] I think one of the nice things is that we do have collegial relationships with all of these other big groups who do these live meetings. We'll often cross-promote each other's events. We'll have them come speak during CMApalooza. We will contribute something during some of their live events. While, yes, in a sense, we probably are competing for eyeballs, we both recognize that we offer some different things, and, fortunately, we're able to get along in the sandbox.

Celisa Steele: [00:07:54] That question that I just asked was, in some ways, about the competition that you might be to other providers. I'm wondering if you all have had a sense of any increased competition for the audience that you serve. We talked about COVID. We've talked about how COVID pushed so many folks exclusively online for a period of time. So then organizations that weren't necessarily offering learning online at all suddenly started offering it. Did you feel that at all in your viewership? Or did COVID actually impact you from a competitive standpoint that you're aware of?

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Scott Kober: [00:08:32] There was definitely one organization that coordinated and introduced a virtual online conference within the first few months of the pandemic. They've since shifted. Now I think they're doing their first live, in-person event this summer. Again, we know all those people. We were happy to talk to them and offer what limited advice we could. But I don't think that Derek and I have ever positioned CMEpalooza as we want to come in and overtake groups A, B, or C. We know what we are. We're confident in what we've been able to develop, and we're happy to help other folks because we both think that what we've been able to build resonates with our audience. Our personalities have always been able to shine through, and that's something that others can't really replicate. You can replicate the education. You can replicate the delivery platform. You can replicate the cost, perhaps. But I think what has always set CMEpalooza apart, in a sense, a little bit, is our personalities and the way that we approach our educational events.

Derek Warnick: [00:09:43] I'd say too that there was maybe a moment or two, when everything was shut down during the pandemic, where I did think it's like, if everyone is going online, I wonder how that will impact this? With that initial offering, we were so well situated to be able to just keep doing what we were doing. Scott talked about how our numbers went up for that, but then they did come back down to regular levels, and it did make me think a bit about it. But, even throughout that, we still had a good amount of participants, and now everyone who had made that transition from "We're live, in-person, we have to go online," they've basically gone back to being live, in-person meetings, and maybe they'll have a couple of sessions that are an online option. But I don't think there's anyone out there right now who's doing the same thing that we are doing, so I don't think we really think about the competition too much.

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Celisa Steele: [00:11:42] What I'm hearing from you is that, in part, you don't really have to think about competition because you have a unique offering. You have a unique value proposition. You're Derek and Scott, and nobody else can bring that part to a CME providers educational offering. But talk a little bit about that value proposition. What's in it for you, what's in it for the attendees, what's in it for the presenters and the sponsors, whomever you all might consider your key stakeholder groups?

Scott Kober: [00:12:11] I think our value proposition has grown organically. I don't think, when Derek and I first joined forces, we didn't sit down and say, "This is what we want to become." It has evolved over time. But I think that we have been able to always bring a very creative bent towards our education that we provide. As much as our spring and fall meetings are popular, our marketing and blog are also very popular, and people always like the way that we have our banter back and forth and some of the humor that we inject. We don't really market CMEpalooza the way that a lot of conferences do, like, "Here is the agenda," or "It's early bird registration." We have sponsor events that are game-based, and we offer cash prizes. For the last two CMEpaloozas, we had what we call our "STEptacular Challenge," where, instead of a virtual 5K, we did a step challenge. We've always been able to bring a little bit of fun. Then, with our actual events themselves, our sessions can get a little bit strange sometimes. Or it's not just a panel sitting down and talking about topics X, Y, and Z. We've definitely done some creative things over the years that people seem to enjoy, both from a presenter and from an audience perspective.

Scott Kober: [00:13:38] The sponsors of CMEpalooza are often the kinds of people who are our panelists and who are our audience. These are mostly CME providers. So providers of education for physicians, nurses, pharmacists, and other healthcare professionals—these are people who don't generally sponsor other events. While they're attending these live events, sometimes they're sponsors for their events but often not. So, often, CMEpalooza is the event that they sponsor because we're not charging a huge dollar amount, necessarily, for sponsorship, and we're pretty inclusive of everyone.

Derek Warnick: [00:14:15] I think from a value proposition standpoint, for us, it's fair to say that it's raised our profile in the CE community. Not something I'm entirely comfortable with, but it has its benefits, to some degree. For attendees, they're getting high-quality education that directly relates to their profession, what they are working in, that they can access anytime, and it's free. There are not a lot of opportunities like that. So I think there's a lot of value in finding something that.... There are other resources that indirectly relate, but to find a resource that directly relates to what they're doing, there's a lot of value in that. For presenters, I think, at

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least in the way we try to present it to them, it's a fairly low-stress environment for them to experience presenting. We try to encourage first-time presenters or those who don't do it a whole lot to come and participate when they can because they are not standing in front of a crowd of 100 or whatever. They're seeing me, Scott—that has its own issues—and then whoever they may be presenting with, if they're on the panel. It's pretty low-stress.

Derek Warnick: [00:15:27] People still seem to be a little nervous when they come on, so I try not to tell them how many are actually [there]. There are actually 200 people who are actually listening in. "I don't know. There are a couple on there." And they can be creative—Scott talked about that too—creative and innovative, as well. It's a good opportunity for them to test some of their ideas. Then, for sponsors, I think that their main value is that they get their name in front of a very select, targeted audience, which, again, can be a challenge in other ways. I think as of last week, [there were] 900 followers for the blog, which I know—in the grand realm of blogging—is not a huge number, but, when you consider that it's a pretty selective audience who is following us and that's the area you're working in, that's pretty good, I would say. I think it does get their name [out]. And, just from the feedback we've heard, it does seem like they're reaching people.

Celisa Steele: [00:16:26] A couple of things in what you all shared. One is you mentioned, Derek, anytime/anywhere access. And so I just wanted to make the point that people can attend the sessions live when they're happening, but then you also record them and make those available, so then people can go after the fact.

Derek Warnick: [00:16:43] Yes, because we're using StreamYard, the platform we use, and it uses YouTube. Once you end a session, it is automatically archived on YouTube. We have it set up ahead of time so that you can access the archive immediately. There's a link right there that you can go to. So pretty much five minutes after a session ends, you can go in, and everything is archived on the Web site. They can be accessed at any point once it's finished.

Celisa Steele: [00:17:08] I feel like I can't let you guys get away with talking about strange sessions and creative sessions without asking for an example or two. Does something jump to mind—that you've done in the past or that a presenter has done in the past—that would qualify as strange or creative?

Derek Warnick: [00:17:24] One of my favorites was—there was a series of two—even before I started CMEpalooza, I had a different blog that I would write on, and I sometimes was pressed for ideas. I, at one point, wrote something about a CME detective named Jake Powers. Jake

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Powers, the CME detective. It was silly and ridiculous, and someone took that and actually converted it into a CMEpalooza session that was complete with role-playing and the people who would come in. It was like an old-school detective—a Sam Spade-esque kind of guy—who was drinking bourbon at his office while he moaned over the difficulties of the CME world. It was appropriately ridiculous and also funny, and I think people enjoyed it. There were even a couple of things that they learned, hopefully, from this as well.

Scott Kober: [00:18:15] I think the challenge with those types of sessions is to not just be silly and kooky but to also have some educational value in those. I remember we did one. I did *The Masked Provider*. Basically, it was a spoof of *The Masked Singer*. We had panelists come on with their cameras off, and they had to give clues about who they were. Then we had judges who had to guess who the actual person was. Then we turn the camera on to show who they were. And then they'd give a five-minute talk, back and forth, with the "judges" on how their organization was adapting to the pandemic. I think this was probably in the fall of 2020. So it takes some planning to be able to figure out, "Okay, how do we do this in a live virtual setting?" But we've done a bunch of different sessions like that, where Derek and I have to figure out how is this going to work? And how is it going to be of educational value and also of entertainment value?

Celisa Steele: [00:19:26] As we've mentioned in this conversation already, as we're talking, you guys have just wrapped up your spring 2023 offering. You celebrated not a birthday, not an anniversary, but you're celebrating 10 years of CMEpalooza. I'm guessing that over those 10 years, there's been some pressure to change. Maybe pressure from yourselves, maybe pressure from others—I'm thinking things like pressure to spend more money, to hire more help, offer more sessions, use different technology, build a really big e-mail list, and have a stronger, more formal marketing arm of this. First, am I right in assuming that there's been some of that pressure? And then, B, are you giving in? Where are you changing things?

Derek Warnick: [00:20:15] I would say yes, but not a huge amount. I'd be curious to hear what Scott thinks about this. When we first started doing it back in 2014, the number one thing we used to get—we got a couple of people who came and were trying to convince us to use a different technology. Generally, it meant using their technology, their resources, or whatever. At that point, we were using Google Hangouts on air, for anyone who may remember. Rest in peace, Google Hangouts. That is no longer an option. But that's what we used for our first couple of years. And, at the time, the point of CMEpalooza was to show how you could do something like we were doing so cheaply but still putting out good quality. We didn't necessarily want to use some of the more expensive platforms, but, also, we didn't want to lose

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the control that we have. I think that is a big part of it, and we still basically have total control, not in a domineering way, but it just makes it easier for us to not have to rely on other people to manage whatever aspects. I think that's what helps make it as effective as it is. Beyond that, we still go by the same three foundational principles that we started with, and that's quality education, easy, and free. Easy for faculty and participants to be able to use, easy for us to manage. And free. I don't think there has been a lot of pressure about that.

Derek Warnick: [00:21:49] Some of the common questions that we still get are things about start time. It's a virtual conference, so everyone is spread out all around. We always start at 9 am Eastern time. Reasonably, our colleagues on the West Coast often ask, "Can you start a little later? I can't get up at 6 am" or whatever. At one point, we did try going to two days, smaller, starting at 10 am and just going for a couple of hours and spreading it out over two days. And it was work. We had less people who participated. I think we just decided we live on the East Coast. Honestly speaking, the majority of our audience is on the East Coast or Central, and that's what's working, so we're just going to keep staying with that. Sometimes there are complaints that we should have more breaks included within, so there's more time. I think our decision is that it's hard enough for us to fit in everything in the time that we give, and adding in more breaks would just make it even more difficult. So it's recorded. You can go back and see what you missed if you're worried about taking a break. Then there are things like asking our faculty to wear mics and headsets and to have better equipment. Again, they're volunteering their time to do this. It just makes it more complicated and more frustrating for them to require them. And the quality that we get by letting them do what they want is fine. And so we've never made that—we've recommended or suggested it, but we don't make it a requirement.

Scott Kober: [00:23:19] I think the big thing is CMEpalooza is essentially Derek and I, and it has been from the first year. So, when there are issues that come up, we're not having to sit down in a room with six or seven different people to hash these out. We'll e-mail or call each other. Derek will offer his perspective, I'll offer my perspective, and we'll go with my perspective. But, really, there haven't been a whole lot of hard choices to make. As Derek said, there are people who will ask us for things now and then, and we'll consider their perspective. And, if we want to try something different, we'll try something different. If not, we'll say, "Look, this isn't the right fit for us" and move along.

Derek Warnick: [00:24:00] We don't require people to register. We don't require them to fill out an evaluation form or anything. We do have a survey at the end. We used to ask on the survey, "What did you like about CMEpalooza? What did you not like about CMEpalooza?" Eventually, we just took out the question "What did you not like about CMEpalooza?" because

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we figured out we didn't really care. That's not quite accurate, though. But sometimes the things that they were complaining about, we can't fix that. We can't change that. This is how it's going to be. It's free. And we do ask if there are recommendations for things that could be improved, etcetera. So we're not quite that mean about it. But it works. It works for us. It works for our audience. So we just keep doing it and try to make little improvements along the way as we can.

Celisa Steele: [00:24:44] Derek, you mentioned three fundamental points around quality education; making it easy for yourselves, for attendees, for presenters; and then keeping it free. And then, Scott, you talked about the value proposition being organic. I'm just curious, were those three tenants there from the beginning? Or is that something that also evolved with more clarity over those first few years?

Scott Kober: [00:25:10] I think those have actually been there from the start. That really hasn't changed. We really have never had to question that. I think that people will look at this and say, "Well, why is this worth your time if you're not charging people anything to attend?" Fortunately, we do accept sponsorships, which offset some of the cost of our time. I think if we were to suddenly change it and say, "Okay, people are going to have to start paying \$200 to access CMEpalooza," that probably would not go over so well with a lot of our audience. It goes against the whole spirit of what we've been able to develop.

Celisa Steele: [00:25:51] So you've got 10 years under your belt at this point, and it sounds like there are no plans, at least currently, to stop CMEpalooza. When you look ahead, are there changes that you're considering or already planning for CMEpalooza? Or are there trends or developments that you're watching that you think might impact what CMEpalooza looks like in the next 10 years?

Derek Warnick: [00:26:15] I don't know that there is a whole.... It's small things, it really is. We don't have this vision of expanding into some megacorporation or whatever. One of my goals is to enable a live chat feature during CMEpalooza, which we've never been able to do and which I think would be beneficial for a number of reasons. There have been some updates that have been made to StreamYard that I think it would be beneficial to us to try and incorporate. They came out like a month or so before, and we were like, "Yeah, let's not do that right now. Let's wait until after we get through CMEpalooza, and then we'll take a look." From my perspective, there's nothing big. One thing I should have actually mentioned during the last question about pressures or questions we've gotten from people that may be related here a little bit is that one of the things that we have been approached by a number of different people, and it often comes

up, is about doing an actual live, in-person conference, CMEpalooza Live, which we've actually kicked around a little bit and considered from the perspective of how can we do this a little bit differently than it gets done now? We have ideas and some thoughts, but I think a big hurdle for us is that everything at CMEpalooza has been free so far, and to do a live in-person conference—not that it'll be free but maybe even at a discounted cost—it's hard. That's a big challenge. So we have not done too much with it at this point. In general, I think we'll just continue as we are and make improvements as we can to make the experience better but without major hurdles to overcome.

Scott Kober: [00:27:59] I think our challenge is that, for both Derek and I, this is our side job. In the early days of CMEpalooza, I often thought, "Could we replicate this in other fields, other industries, and create meetings in those spaces?" We don't have the contacts there. We don't know the people. Yes, while the general template and blueprint of what CMEpalooza does probably could work in all kinds of other industries, it would just be something that would take a lot of time and a lot of legwork, from our perspective. So we'll see where things go. Ten years. It does seem like it's been 10 years—well, yes it does. It's been a lot of planning, and it's been a lot of writing, but we're certainly not planning on shutting it down any time soon.

Celisa Steele: [00:28:48] This is the Leading Learning Podcast. We have a question that we like to ask of all of our guests, and that has to do with how you approach your own lifelong learning. That could be habits, practices, or sources that you turn to to continue to grow professionally and personally. I'd be curious to hear from both of you. Scott, would you want to start us off on this one?

Scott Kober: [00:29:10] Sure. We're just coming off of our spring meeting right now. Sometimes what I'll do is, as we're sitting through producing our various sessions, we're hearing from some of the people who are on the leading edge of doing interesting things in our field. Based upon their presentations, I'll delve into various areas and try to learn a little bit more about what they were talking about. We just had a session that was all about ChatGPT, and I poked around a little bit. But our presenters really gave some useful advice, and they've followed up on various social media platforms with other potential ways to use that technology. I'll follow their lead and do my own research from that perspective. Other than that, I think both Derek and I read all kinds of things. Probably not so much specific to our industry but just to keep our brains active, and, if there are tidbits that we can pull—from what we're reading for pleasure—into our professional lives, great.

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Derek Warnick: [00:30:12] Professionally, for me, one of the things that we should have mentioned during the value proposition section is that producing CMEpalooza gives us access to a huge personal learning resource. It's a lot easier to keep up with trends in the industry when you're producing a conference about them, to just being part of that. I don't know how Scott feels about this, but it's hard for me to go back and watch the sessions afterward because I just hate having to watch myself that often. But being part of them, helping develop them, and putting them together goes a long way. Also, I try to get to a good amount of the major in-person conferences as well, just to have those, not even necessarily for the sessions themselves, which are, of course, educational. But the hallway conversation, meeting with people in the industry, etcetera, is valuable to me. And then, personally, as Scott said, I read a lot. One of the things during the pandemic that I started doing was getting up a little earlier in the day, and then I'd dedicate 30 to 60 minutes, before starting work, to read both fiction and nonfiction, usually nonfiction. Nonfiction is for the morning, and fiction is for the evening. Probably the majority of my own personal learning comes from that.

Celisa Steele: [00:31:39] Well, great. I think that's an excellent point. A big benefit that you each get from your part in CMEpalooza is that it does help your own learning, gives you that access to trends and thought leaders, and just helps you stay on top of your game.

Jeff Cobb: [00:32:03] Scott Kober and Derek Warnick co-produce CMEpalooza, a free biannual virtual conference for CME and CE professionals. In the show notes for this episode at leadinglearning.com/episode360, you'll find a link to the CMEpalooza site, where you can learn more about the conference and more about Scott and Derek.

Celisa Steele: [00:32:23] Jeff and I would be grateful if you would rate the Leading Learning Podcast on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen, especially if you find the show valuable. Those ratings help us show up when people search for content on leading a learning business.

Jeff Cobb: [00:32:35] And please spread the word about Leading Learning, whether in a one-on-one conversation with a colleague or a personal note or on social media. In the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode360, you'll find links to connect with us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Celisa Steele: [00:32:52] Thanks for listening, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

[music for this episode by DanoSongs, www.danosongs.com]

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