

#30hrsInAustin – Diary of a SXSW Rookie



By Todd Smith, Executive Director of Media Relations, [Cox Communications](#)



Historic theater marquees add character to the city and are used for many SXSW events

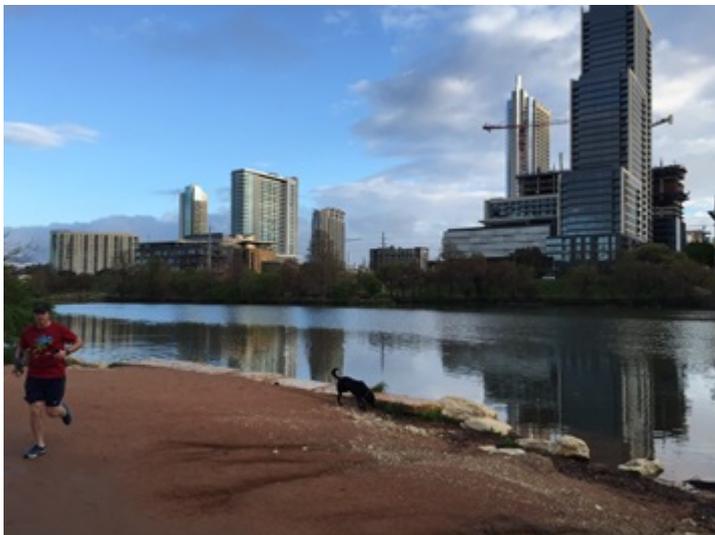
When I entered the Atlanta airport to start my South by Southwest (SXSW) sojourn, I was met with the longest security line I've ever seen and boarded my plane with only 11 minutes to spare. A dramatic kick start to my 30-hour visit to Austin, but it prepared me for the planned serendipity that characterizes the unique event.

This was my first visit to Austin and I was quickly told by my

Uber driver (prompt arrival at airport, they seemed to be prepared for the volume) that the city was uniquely diverse and traffic-congested for its size. I was spared mass congestion due to a centrally located hotel, but the city clearly holds residents and visitors from all walks, and SXSW is an extension of this diversity, mixing established and emerging brands, musicians and filmmakers on an eclectic urban canvas. Austin reminds me of Athens, Ga. and Seattle: artistically independent, yet welcoming, confident, but not pretentious and a balanced mix of old and new.

A river runs through it

Downtown Austin rests on the Colorado River with a green space running trail that offers simultaneous views of the city and the water, pedestrian bridges, water fountains and static exercise equipment. A brief jog was a great way to gear up for the day and this would have been a big miss if someone hadn't recommended it to me (at a SXSW event).



Why am I here?

Cox Communications was in town to capture [SXSW](#) highlights to share with customers and employees and Cox Business sponsored two past Get Started winners (a Shark Tank-like pitch event – we've held 18 and given away more than \$250K) to attend the show for the first time.

This included a conversation with Alex Taylor, Cox Enterprises

EVP and Cox family member. Taylor, who previously worked at Cox-owned *Austin American-Statesman*, was there to observe and assess trends that could impact the company. Cox Enterprises partners with the Atlanta branch of Techstars business accelerator and we caught up with their national director at SXSW as well.

While waiting in the Comcast lounge to see the livestream of Obama's session, I observed a Q&A on their mini-stage with Danny Meyer, CEO of Union Square Hospitality Group, who shared why he is eliminating tipping from their NYC restaurants and how it benefits employees, investors and society. Imagine a meal where tips are built into the full experience, rather than your server's performance, providing equality to the front and back of the house.

The President challenged tech leaders to make government better, gave a lengthy non-answer on Apple v. the FBI and expressed concern about the digital divide, something he has been working hard to address along with many in the private sector (he's previously recognized Cox for their \$9.95 low income Internet program).

At a Cox Automotive gathering, I met the founder and CEO of Peddle, Tim Yarosh. He aspired to escape from his family's salvage business via tech education, but returned with an idea to create a complementary online portal and analytics company to make getting rid of junk cars much easier and more profitable. Now he's global with more than 100 employees and contractors.

In addition to private brand events, SXSW offers dozens of panels each day with industry experts. I attended two and they were extremely interesting and informative.

An anesthesiologist and orthopedic surgeon spoke about how healthcare lacks the customer value-driven approach of other industries that innovates to deliver better service for less

cost. They pleaded with the audience to help them develop technology and systems that measure outcomes that matter most to patients.

UNICEF and Frog Design shared how they are using mobile technology for social good in the third world. Text messaging to 1000 local journalists helped UNICEF quickly confirm a rumored epidemic of students trading sex for grades in Liberian schools and Frog Design partnered with the Red Cross to design fire detection systems for what will be a population of 1 billion living in slums by 2050.



Plenty of options to recharge in Austin, including local coffee spot Jo's

Whether it's connecting with traditional [brand](#) partners or learning about how technology can change the world, a lot is happening at SXSW Interactive and Austin has fully embraced it. If this event is not on your schedule for 2017, add it now.

Todd's Top 5 Takeaways

Line leader

I prefer short lines at the DMV, in traffic, coffee shop and I'm thankful that technology exists to severely reduce and even eliminate them (Starbucks Mobile Order & Pay and Instacart are game changers). It quickly became apparent that lines are part of the SXSW experience – for branded events, popular sessions and even badge pick-up was an hour long adventure for some. **Come with patience and a granola bar.**

Infinite gatherings, but you don't have to choose

From sunrise to sunset and beyond, there are multiple panels, events, food and drink happenings, all taking place simultaneously. A popular strategy among attendees is to sign-up for everything that looks interesting in advance to hold their places and then make real-time decisions about where to go and how long to stay. I also met many executives who had group dinner reservations but didn't confirm attendees until hours before, based on who they bumped into during the day. I call this Serendipitous Scheduling – it doesn't work everywhere, but it is modus operandi at SXSW. Live audience tickets for President Obama's session worked this same way – recipients were informed the night before. **Stay flexible.**

Work the room, restaurant and the street

People from all parts of the tech industry (I was focused on SXSW Interactive) are in attendance and legitimate connections are made, at events, sessions and moving to and from them. For example, hundreds of top influencers cycled through the Comcast social media lounge when I was there one afternoon. **Keep your eyes up**, you may see that top influencer, potential business partner or hero you'd never get 60 seconds with otherwise.

This year was presidential

If the President thinks SXSW is worth his time, it's probably a good indication that technology brands should prioritize this event. Even if you're not planning an "activation" or

making a hard media pitch, being present to listen to the conversation is a good idea and a low cost way to **observe trends and spark ideas** for next year. This was part of the reason I attended and I'm glad I did.

Look, a unicorn

Shiny objects dominate the conversation at SXSW – virtual reality, a giant Ferris wheel, a life-sized Tie Fighter and, yes, a woman riding a unicorn through the streets. If attempting a “stunt” activation, it is better to have some sparkle or it will get lost in the competing noise.



Example of a “shiny object,” USA Network constructed a Ferris wheel to promote Mr. Robot, a show I watched for the first time on the flight home.

About the Author: Todd Smith is executive director of media relations at Cox Communications, the largest privately held telecommunications company in the U.S. He serves as general

spokesperson for the company across all product lines, is responsible for national media and analyst relations strategy and manages the life cycle promotion of B2B services and corporate social responsibility programs. For more information on Cox Business and the Get Started series referenced above, please visit <https://www.coxblue.com/>.