Lots of Tech but Few Breakout Hits at SXSW Confab

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AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — For all the talk of space travel, the wearable gadgets, marketing stunts and lavish parties, something was missing at this year's South By Southwest Interactive Festival: the next "hot app."

The brainy tech jamboree held each year in Texas' capital city is known as the place where Twitter soared from obscurity to the world stage in 2007. It's where the location-sharing app Foursquare came out in 2009.

This year, though, chatter focused on hardware rather than software, and on big ideas rather than coming out parties. The most-used mobile app was the festival's own application, which helped attendees keep track of South By Southwest's barrage of panels, talks, meet-ups and parties. The star of the show wasn't the next Twitter but an ever-reluctant Grumpy Cat, whose frowny face has become an Internet sensation. Hundreds of people lined up outside the tent of tech blog Mashable to get a photo with the cat, whose actual name is Tardar Sauce.

South By Southwest appears to be experiencing a bit of Yogi Berra syndrome: "Nobody goes there anymore. It's too crowded."

"I don't think it's indicating that there is less innovation," said David-Michel Davies, executive director of the Webby Awards. Rather, he believes there may have been fewer companies breaking out because there's just so much noise that entrepreneurs are choosing not to launch products here.

To be fair, attendance at the interactive portion of this tech, music and film festival has grown each year since it got its name in 1999. Attendance at the interactive gathering hit 30,621 this year. Big brands from Yahoo to Amazon have an increasingly large presence, which can drown out small startups. Chevrolet, for instance, provided a fleet of cars to shuttle attendees between event venues.

Google Inc. made a splash when it showed off new apps for its Google Glass interactive, Internet-connected glasses on Monday evening. Timothy Jordan, senior developer advocate at Google, demonstrated a handful of apps for Google Glass, including a news headline app from The New York Times and ones from Gmail, Evernote and social networking startup Path.

"We are the pioneers who get to decide how this fits into our lives," he told a packed auditorium of programmers, bloggers, Google fans and tech luminaries. Glass, he said, is about technology that's "there when you want it and out of the way when you don't."

Jordan stopped short of letting attendees try out Glass for themselves. Even so, Google — hardly a scrappy startup — was among the most-talked about companies at the event, not just for Glass but for demonstrating a talking, interactive pair of Adidas sneakers that, as it turns out, are not actually going to be sold anywhere.

So is the SXSW breakout a thing of the past for hot startups? Andy Kahl, product strategist at a Web privacy startup, said his company Ghostery got a sudden, unexplained spike of downloads of its privacy tool in March of 2010. The company didn't attend South By Southwest that year, but someone mentioned them during a talk on Internet privacy. After that, the company resolved to go every year. While Kahl believes the festival is still worth attending, he said "it is fairly difficult to not get lost in the noise."

The festival's "noise" includes hundreds of panels, discussions and lectures on topics as wide-ranging as space travel, toddlers & technology and the future of grocery stores. PayPal co-founder and venture capitalist Peter Thiel spoke about the future, startups and the concept of luck.

Former Vice President Al Gore talked about the future too, as did Cindy Gallop, the founder of "MakeLoveNotPorn" who's on a mission to rethink pornography. Gallop, who champions "real-world" sex in all its funny, awkward glory, asks regular people to submit videos of their sex lives to her website. She charges $5 to view a video and shares half the revenue with those who share videos.

"Gen Y in porn is like Gen Y everywhere else," she told a giggling crowd. "Entrepreneurial, challenging the status quo."

Foursquare founder and CEO Dennis Crowley, meanwhile, displayed an impressive number of data-tracking bracelets during his talk and laughed about the scale that tweets his weight every week. Elon Musk of Tesla Motors, SpaceX and PayPal fame talked not just of life on Mars but said that he checks his email while spending time with his five kids.

To attendees like Chris Hwang of the New York-based stock-media startup Pond5, South By Southwest is as much about serendipity and chance meetings as it is about the scheduled events. He'd signed up to a mentoring session with venture capital firm Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers that ended up being canceled — but instead of moving on, the startups began talking with each other.

"Honestly, it's an excuse to come to party, to catch up, make relationships on a happenstance basis," he said while waiting in a long line to hear Thiel speak. "You come to get inspired, recharged."

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