

Technology - How to Use It Better

Ten Meetings Technology Trends to Watch for 2010

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Meetings and tradeshow technology continues to advance with technology products becoming better, cheaper and easier to use. Innovation is bubbling with new options. Here are some of the major technology trends to watch for this coming year.

10. Mobile phones are morphing into advanced mobile meetings technology platforms.

The advent of the iPhone two years ago was a game-shifter. Rich mobile web browsers with wireless broadband internet access (in the iPhone and its multitude of clones) are now common with most business travelers. This is opening up a range of mobile applications for meetings and tradeshows including:

- Exhibit hall guides (Core-Apps GPS based) and mobile conference programs (www.a2zinc.net and www.core-apps.com).
- Mobile phone platforms for mobile surveys, group brainstorming, the ability for attendees to submit questions during a presentation, conference agenda, speaker bios, attendee messaging, and group announcements (www.visiontree.com).
- Text message receipt of exhibitor product information, the conference agenda, speaker course notes and just about any other paper distributed at events (www.snipp.com).
- A mobile phone concierge allowing hotel guests to order food, drink, guest services, transportation, entertainment, wake-up calls, and more (www.runtriz.com).
- Electronic ticket, micro payments and lead exchange (see Trend 9).

These are just a few of the hundreds of emerging mobile phone applications to improve the meeting experience.

9. Social networking technology finds numerous meeting applications

Meetings are the original social media. Facebook, LinkedIn, and dozens of other social networking sites are helping to bring people together before, during and after meetings events and to enrich the meeting experience. Many associations, specific meetings and most hotels have their own Facebook pages. Facebook Connect allows people registering online to invite their Facebook friends with everyone getting a discount. LinkedIn brings groups of like interest together around events. Conference managers and attendees are sharing their event photos on Flickr. Meetings specific versions are also developing (www.i-meet.com, www.crowdvine.com, www.zerista.com, www.intronetworks.com, www.pathable.com) often with integration with the Facebook and others. This area is exploding with innovation.

8. Micro-Blogging (Twitter) is proving particularly well suited for events.

Twitter allows people to communicate 140 characters at a time at www.twitter.com. This forces people to focus their messages and makes it idea for a mobile platform. This mobility makes it a natural to use at meetings. Attendees are using the Twitter back-channel to connect at meetings, to share event epiphanies. Tweet-Ups (face-to-face meetings of groups of Twitter users) are popping up at events. Exhibitors are tweeting to promote their offerings in their booths. Conference managers and hotels are monitoring the tweets for problems or opportunities to exceed expectations.

7. Social review sites are moving to meetings

The model provided by TripAdvisor, where guest hotel reviews help guide purchasing decisions is moving to meetings. Several sites have emerged providing peer reviews of meeting facilities by and for meeting planners. Included are MeetingUniverse (www.meetinguniverse.com), Meetings Intelligence Exchange (www.meetingsintel.com), MeetingsCollaborative (<http://meetingscollaborative.com>), Elite Meetings (www.elitemeetings.com), i-Meet (www.i-meet.com) and ReviewEvents (www.reviewevents.com).

6. Strategic meetings management program (SMMP) options are increasing.

SMMP allows companies to track meeting spend with a range of meeting approval, sourcing, event calendaring, and spend analysis tools. This can save a large corporation millions of dollars annually in meeting spend. StarCite has had a relatively clear playing field since they merged with the second largest SMM company (OnVantage) in 2006. At the time, it was the meetings technology equivalent of Microsoft merging with Apple. There are now more options for companies to choose from providing a wider range of services at lower costs. These include Cvent (www.cvent.com) Certain (www.certain.com -- with the addition of their Certain Sourcing product), and SignUp4 (www.signup4.com).

5. More video to promote and improve the meeting experience.

Video options are multiplying to help create a richer meeting experience. Speakers, exhibitors, meeting planners, hotels, and attendees are loading videos of events and tradeshows to YouTube and other video sharing sites. Remote speakers are presenting to their audiences via Skype. Interviews of speakers and meetings attendees and presentations themselves are available via web video. HD screens are becoming common in guest and meeting rooms. Flat panel, interactive displays are replacing standard signage. Attendees will be seeing much more video and of higher quality before, during and after events.

4. Audience response technology gets cheaper and more diversified.

Audience-polling systems are a great way of finding out what the audience is thinking and engage them as well. The challenge for many planners, however, is that it has been expensive to rent these systems – often more than US\$10/per person per day.

The good news is that the price is dropping. As the technology advances, the units are getting smaller, cheaper, and easier to use making it possible to rent them rather than hire specialized staff to set-up and manage. Companies, such as Turning Technologies (www.turningtechnologies.com), are providing these units for as low as \$3 per unit. Additionally, text message polling (American-idol like phone voting) and mobile web polling using phones are coming into use including: www.polleverywhere.com, www.quickmobile.com, www.zukuweb.com, and www.validar.com at even lower costs.

3. Low cost, two-way, mobile lead retrieval options for meetings and tradeshows attendees are emerging.

Traditional lead retrieval involves exhibitors renting high-price scanning units. The information flow is one-way (attendee contact information is received by the exhibitor) and booth bound (forget about the contacts made at the reception, hallways or meeting rooms). A number of mobile options are becoming available and may replace the antiquated method we are now using opening electronic lead retrieval to everyone at the event. They include:

- Near field communication: A telephone communication standard designed for micro-

payments in Europe, with the potential to exchange contact information in a standard manner as simply as tapping the phones together (www.itn-international.com).

- Quick-response (QR) codes: 2D bar codes designed to be displayed and read by current mobile phones. 250 characters fit into a postage-stamp sized image. QR codes have been approved by the TSA for electronic boarding passes.
- Bump (www.bumptechnologies.com) provides contact information exchange between I-phones simply by “fist bumping” with the iPhones in hand. Although not everyone is carrying an iPhone, it is yet another indication that mobile phones will eventually replace “last-century” lead retrieval technologies.

2. Telepresence is finally gaining a foothold at hotels for virtual meetings.

Telepresence is video conferencing on steroids: life-size, high-resolution, eye-to-eye with excellent audio designed to simulate face-to-face interactions. Unfortunately, these installations are pricy often well in excess of US\$100,000. Fortunately, telepresence rooms are opening to the public for rent. Marriott and Starwood Hotels have just announced they will be installing Cisco telepresence technology in many of their hotels. More hotels are likely to follow. This will be ideal for small groups (generally 20 people or fewer) for high quality video conferencing – the next best thing to being there.

1. Despite the economic downturn and the increased use of virtual meetings technology, face-to-face meetings and tradeshow remain viable.

Virtual meeting and web conferencing usage is up and conference attendance is down in these economically challenging times. However, meetings and tradeshow can still provide the best value for your education, networking, and sales budgets. Events offer unparalleled opportunities to bring buyers and seller together, to build relationships, to brainstorm, to network. For an exhibitor, it is often the best way to meet so many qualified buyers in such a short time. For buyers, it is a great chance to meet vendors of interest – all together in one location, categorized and mapped for your choosing. The events, tradeshow and hospitality industries are relationship-based and events and tradeshow are some of the best ways to build these relationships.

Although webinars are good for short information exchange, meetings offer a much richer learning experience. What happens in the meeting room is important – people have made the commitment to be there and are not as distracted as in the office. However, the conversations in the hallways, receptions and exhibit hall contribute greatly to the information exchange. Meetings provide a vastly richer, more targeted, and more focused learning experience than any virtual meeting. There is no such thing as a “virtual beer!”

The attendance drops at many association events may not be a negative if you can still make it to the event as the decision makers (both on the buyer and seller sides) are still coming. When the quantity of the attendance goes down due to economic pressures, the quality of the attendees goes up.

These innovations in meetings and tradeshow technology are just a few in this rapidly growing field. All will help improve efficiency, reduce costs and/or make for a better meeting experience.