

CONNECTING PEOPLE IS AT THE VERY HEART OF A CONFERENCE. HOW EASILY THEY CAN CONNECT AND THE QUALITY OF THEIR EXPERIENCE CAN BE HELPED BY A NUMBER OF READILY AVAILABLE COMMUNICATION TOOLS. ORGANISERS ALSO WELCOME THEIR USE AS THEY SEEK TO MAXIMISE DELEGATE AND SPONSOR PARTICIPATION.



A LOOK AT THE TOOLS AND TECHNOLOGY

for connecting conference participants

Here are just some of the options, but the current pace of change means more tools will be arriving in the market every day. The challenge is identifying which tools suit your purpose. Remember the adage: 'just because you can, doesn't always mean you should!'.

APPS

Apps (application software) enable organisers to provide information to conference participants in a useful form. The apps make participants' lives simpler with the added bonus of communicating in an environmentally responsible way. To be readily adopted apps need to have a phone or tablet friendly interface and be optimised for display on mobile devices.

www.meetingapps.com lists over 1,000 apps in 26 categories for the i-Phone/i-Pad operating system plus a growing number for BlackBerry and Android. The apps cover a multitude of functions including online

registration platforms, personalised schedules, polls/surveys, attendee profiles linking to social networking pages, interactive floor plans and maps, real-time notifications and analytics for organisers and exhibitors.

Make sure that the apps you use enhance the participants' experience and are not provided for the sake of it or because they are the latest craze.

BROADCASTING CONTENT

Broadband access at reasonable rates, a variety of presentation management software and ready availability of video streaming encoders has opened up all sorts of possibilities. A reduction in the number of pieces and size of equipment required also means capturing multiple video feeds and consolidating them via broadcast software is considerably easier. Benefits include delivering content to a wider audience pre-conference, delivering content on demand

post-conference (a potential revenue stream), making sessions available to participants who were in other sessions and using highlights as a tool to market next year's conference.

HYBRID MEETINGS

There is a growing expectation that you can participate virtually if you can't be there in person.

Features of hybrid meetings include:

- + live audio or video streaming of keynote speakers or workshops plus their presentation material
- + online presentations (from webcasts to sharing of content)
- + creation of a live commentary or transcript of proceedings
- + online chat or discussion forum facilities
- + live blogs
- + photographs and video
- + integration of social media tools

Virtual attendees must be told what to expect (including whether participation qualifies for accreditation) and not be misled about the facilities that will be available or the quality of the production. Organisers should think about how virtual participants receive information and tailor their offering accordingly.

When inviting speakers make them aware that they are agreeing to present, not just to a live audience, but also to a virtual one which may be considerably larger and require more complicated online presentation techniques. They may, for example, need to be adept at dealing with questions from the floor while also remembering to answer the virtual audience's Twitter queries. Consider

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coaching for speakers who are unfamiliar with the dynamics of such sessions.

TRACKING TOOLS

Radio frequency ID (RFID) or Near Field Communication (NFC) transmit the identity of a person wirelessly using radio waves. Organisers use it for tracking entitlements to attend sessions or functions and exhibitors can ascertain which of their products generate the most interest. Potential uses include lead exchange, electronic ticketing and payments and many more once smart phones have NFC capability. However, all of these uses raise some interesting issues about compliance with privacy laws which organisers need to tackle.

BARCODES

One-dimensional barcodes have been with us for a number of years: on name badges for

scanning to verify entry to sessions and functions or for exhibitors to capture delegates' details.

The advent of two-dimensional barcodes which are readable by dedicated QR barcode readers and camera phones provides organisers with more powerful functionality. The QR Code (Quick Response Code) is a popular type of two-dimensional barcodes. A quick scan of a QR code on a printed flier or on a screen immediately downloads information to a user's mobile. This information might take the form of a link to a conference website, key conference details or conference dates for downloading to Outlook.

TABLET COMPUTERS

Lighter than a laptop and with a screen that is easier to read than that of a mobile phone, tablets such as the iPad are gaining popularity fast, but will enough attendees have them to make them a mainstream conference tool?

Meeting organisers have been early adopters using them to access data during meetings to give informed answers to questions, show potential exhibitors available stands and locate a room at a moment's notice for an unplanned meeting onsite. They are handy too for face to face evaluation interviews. While an interviewer can record answers, many participants offer to key in their answers making them more likely to add comments. Possibilities will certainly open up when these tools incorporate NFC (near field communication).

HOLOGRAMS

Developers are working on a technology that will let speakers and performers deliver speeches and entertain an audience without being there. Hologram video projection projects live images streamed through the internet for 3-D viewing without the need for 3-D glasses. The technology mimics the real world but at present is in its infancy and has limitations. Seeing just how it will develop to give life to virtual meetings will be intriguing.

AUDIENCE RESPONSE SYSTEMS

Not so long ago who would have thought participants would be asked to switch their mobiles on rather than off in a session? Text message polling and mobile web polling using phones are readily available. The cost of hiring response units is starting to come down and, as technology advances, these units are also becoming more sophisticated.

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