

SUITE AND ENTERPRISE-WIDE REGISTRATION SYSTEMS,  
BADGING AND TICKETING, ONLINE HOUSING SYSTEMS,  
AND ADDED-VALUE DESTINATION SERVICES

# REGISTRATION, HOUSING & DESTINATION MANAGEMENT

The application of technology should be easy for attendees, and save time for meeting managers. To optimize results, you need to understand your processes and your attendee needs, and apply the appropriate technology.



# Registration Management

Recent industry polls show that registration management is currently the third most frequently used technology among meeting professionals. Only e-mailing and site/vendor research outpace it. Use of this technology, however, ranges widely.

Unfortunately, most meeting professionals are unaware of numerous industry-designed applications, or have chosen to create an internal application. Plus, custom-created applications will always have to maintain the pace of technology, which is significant and can be costly.

Current approaches used by meeting professionals include:

>> Creative use of suite-based applications, such as Microsoft Office.

>> PC-based software.

>> Online registration systems, which range from deploying simple forms to highly secured themed event Web sites.

>> Integrated enterprise-wide applications.

For the majority of organizations, a blend of the first three methods is required to handle the myriad details involved in meeting management.

The common denominator among all of the available approaches is that there are considerable cost efficiencies gained by properly applying relevant technology to the meeting registration process. As a rule of thumb, the more registration transactions — including travel and housing — made throughout an organization, the greater the potential savings.

For the largest associations and corporations that are able to integrate meeting management processes including registration, housing, travel, vendor relations, and e-commerce, enterprise-wide solutions offer the greatest opportunities for cost-savings through process efficiencies.

For small-to-medium organizations, cost and time savings are also possible when the appropriate technologies are applied.

Selecting the right technology for an organization involves a core understanding of your internal registration process, the cost of the current process, and how your prospective attendee will interact with the application. If your customers' requirements, internally as well as externally, are not carefully assessed, the resulting system will not deliver the expected results.

Technology-based options can be segmented into four categories: over-the-counter (OTC) solutions, PC-based software, industry-specific applications, and highly customized applications.

**OTC suite.** This approach is widely used within the meetings industry. Applications within a suite will often include word processing, a relational database, spreadsheet program, and e-mail management utility, along with calendar and task management functionality. Integration among the components enables the entire suite to be easily applied to general meeting management. This strategy provides a low-cost and user-friendly option, but does not easily achieve process cost savings.

**PC-based meeting management software.** Numerous software-based systems are in use throughout the meetings industry. Many product vendors have evolved by providing front-end Web interfaces in order to compete with dedicated Web-based applications.

The functionality of most PC-based systems is well advanced and more stable than most Web-based solutions. PC solutions often provide a relational database structure, with core interfaces for session tracking, registration, speaker management, budgeting, and financial management. Most offer predefined reporting, custom report capability, and badge and ticketing options. Unfortunately, most of these systems require a degree of customization in order to optimize housing, travel, and e-marketing functionality. Their strength is in the logistical aspects of managing

registration and meeting details.

With this class of product, your application can reside on a network and be shared throughout an organization.

**Web-based e-marketing and front-end registration applications.** This category of product can provide strong e-marketing abilities from design to implementation and analysis. Most solutions of this type provide for event-based, Web-site integration for handling online registrations, e-market tracking and analysis, and real-time reporting. The strongest benefit results in both cost and time savings within marketing creation, distribution, and analysis cycles.

This class of product provides a template-driven interface for designing branded campaigns, including electronic marketing content and a themed Web site seen by the prospective attendees. All of these applications have both a maintenance interface and a registrant interface, and can be implemented within days.

Strong in their marketing aspects, these solutions often fall short in addressing the general meeting management functionality — such as room setup requirements, audiovisual specifications, food and beverage planning, event budgeting, and speaker management — offered by PC-based systems.

**Enterprise-wide applications.** This category of product is often managed from a centralized department and distributed at an enterprise-wide level. As a result, incorporated planning tools, such as site selection, registration, travel, and housing, are easily available to all who need access to the application.

Highly dependent on meeting volume, these multi-functioned applications provide degrees of functionality within travel, housing, e-marketing, and meeting management areas. The more widely these applications are used within an organization, the greater the time savings, the more enhanced the data for negotiations,

# Weighing Your Options: OTC, PC, Web, or Enterprise Alternatives

Using this grid, answer each question and add up the points for all responses. Match your total with the appropriate technology option below.

**OTC = 15-30 points**  
Over-the-counter (OTC) suite is ideal for the smallest of meetings. Achieves little in process savings unless highly customized.

**PC = 25-50 points**  
PC-based systems (PC) can help achieve savings for a few critical processes. Geared for smaller departments with core meeting responsibilities.

**WB = 35-65 points**  
Web-based front-end with PC application (WB) can bring savings in registration and marketing and provide one-stop shopping for registrants by linking to travel, housing, venue information.

**EPW = 60-80 points**  
Savings through process optimization can be substantial, though investment high, with enterprise-wide systems (EPW). Ideal for centralizing all meeting-related functions and cost centers.

Questions	Answers	Score
<b>I. GENERAL ADMINISTRATION</b>		
a. Is your meeting planning function centralized?	YES= 5 POINTS      NO=1 POINT	
b. Are you responsible for travel management?	YES= 5 POINTS      NO=1 POINT	
c. Are you responsible for housing management?	YES= 5 POINTS      NO=1 POINT	
d. Do you share meeting data with other locations?	YES= 5 POINTS      NO=1 POINT	
e. Where are your meetings held?	1. Primarily held at on-site facility (1 POINT) 2. Mostly done using off-site facilities (5 POINTS)	
<b>II. REGISTRATION MANAGEMENT</b>		
a. Do you process payments for your meetings?	YES= 5 POINTS      NO=1 POINT	
b. What is your total annual meeting attendance?	1. Up to 1,000 people (2 POINTS) 2. 1,000-4,999 people (3 POINTS) 3. 5,000-14,999 people (4 POINTS) 4. More than 15,000 (5 POINTS)	
c. Total payroll for meeting department?	1. Less than \$100,000 (1 POINT) 2. \$100,000-\$300,000 (3 POINTS) 3. More than \$300,000 (5 POINTS)	
d. Total volume of phone calls and faxes processed?	1. Less than 1,000 (1 POINT) 2. 1,000-5,000 (3 POINTS) 3. More than 5,000 (5 POINTS)	
e. Functions provided by department?	1. Site selection (2 POINTS) 2. Registration (3 POINTS) 3. Registration and travel (4 POINTS) 4. Registration, travel, and housing budgeting and finance (5 POINTS)	
<b>III. MARKETING YOUR MEETINGS</b>		
a. Do you use printed materials?	YES= 5 POINTS      NO=1 POINT	
b. Do the majority of your prospective attendees have Internet access?	YES= 5 POINTS      NO=1 POINT	
c. Where does your attendee come from?	1. Staff or on-site employees (1 POINT) 2. Organization members (2 POINTS) 3. Known suppliers (3 POINTS) 4. General public (4 POINTS) 5. Combination of the above (5 POINTS)	
d. Estimated print and mailing cost used for recruiting a registrant?	1. Less than \$5 (1 POINT) 2. Less than \$10 (3 POINTS) 3. \$10 or greater (5 POINTS)	
e. How many printed brochures will you distribute requiring postage?	1. Up to 5,000 (1 POINT) 2. 5,000-25,000 (3 POINTS) 3. More than 25,000 (5 POINTS)	
f. What is your annual print marketing budget?	1. Up to \$25,000 (1 POINT) 2. \$25,000-\$200,000 (3 POINTS) 3. More than \$200,000 (5 POINTS)	
<b>TOTAL SCORE:</b>		



and the more stringent the travel and meeting policy adherence.

From a management perspective, enterprise-level deployment allows an organization to truly assess spending levels. For the largest associations, these systems can bring the greatest ROI.

#### HOW TO RATE YOUR NEED

The grid on page 17 will help you determine the most appropriate solution for your organization. Answer each question, add the points for all responses, and match this score to the technology option. Remember, organizations vary greatly in their ability to absorb expenses. Before investing in a solution, do a thorough cost analysis of current processes and set a savings target to be achieved. Your ROI should be attainable within 18 months.

Leading-edge organizations wishing to apply current technologies will be required to re-invest every 18 to 36 months into their infrastructures. This might include expenses for hardware enhancements, ongoing training, and general system maintenance. So it is important to evaluate your rate of return on investment. How many months will it take to pay for the investment in terms of process improvement, higher registrations, lower marketing costs, shorter sales cycles, and shorter collection periods, among other criteria?

The reasons you adopt a new technology should be driven by measurable goals or required outcomes of a process. Each process, in return, should have a few measurable metrics in order to monitor how well the new technology is meeting the needs of your process. These and other metrics can be useful in assessing your internal costs, as well as identifying the effect of a new technology on a process.

These are some metrics you may want to track:

- How much time do you spend researching a new meeting site?
- How much time do you spend writing a meeting contract?

- How many travel tickets are processed per month?
- How many room reservations are processed per month?
- How many itinerary changes occur each month?
- Average cost of an airfare?
- How much time to process and approve a contract?
- Number of meetings held each month?
- Number of registrations processed each week?
- Cost per marketing piece?
- Handling cost to process a registration?
- Attrition charges per month?
- How many meetings do you cancel each month?
- Cancellation cost per month?
- Average cost per attendee, including F&B, audiovisual, and the like?
- Average time to distribute marketing pieces?
- How many e-mail addresses are stored on your system?

The Pareto principle applies here — 80 percent of cost redundancies will occur in less than 20 percent of your process. The key is to recognize where in the process these opportunities exist and to apply the appropriate level of technology. The greatest problem when introducing new technology is that you can apply improved technology to a bad process. However, the greatest gain and return are made when both process and the applied technology are optimized.

What to look for in selecting a registration technology:

- >> Flexible pricing options for setting and tracking registration fees.
- >> Options for branding marketing messages and event sites.
- >> Ease of importing and updating your marketing list.
- >> Protection of your data.
- >> Ability to segment and re-sort your marketing list or list of registrants.
- >> Ability to analyze return rates, bounce rates, and conversion rates.
- >> How the cost is set and calculated

- by user, by transaction.
- >> Cost for credit card processing.
- >> Availability of support when you need it.
- >> Cost for customization.
- >> Wait list management.
- >> How registrations acquired through offline channels are to be processed.
- >> Ability to personalize e-mail messages.
- >> Ability to process multiple credit card accounts.
- >> Knowing which version and Web browser will work with an online application.
- >> Annual support policy.
- >> How many simultaneous users can the site handle?
- >> Does the system trap for errant or duplicate entries, i.e. can someone register for more than one session held at the same time?
- >> Can you integrate the solution with your internal databases?
- >> How long does it take to get up and running?
- >> Can you create sessions and combined event packages?
- >> Can multiple pricing levels be set?
- >> Can you print name badges in the format and for the hardware you utilize?
- >> How does the system manage vendor information?
- >> Will the budgeting interface support your needs?
- >> How are hotel blocks managed?
- >> Is there sub-block management?
- >> How are cancellations and changes processed?
- >> Can the system be integrated with third-party services?
- >> Can you check out a meeting to manage while on site, or will you need ongoing Internet connectivity when using a system on site?

#### SEARCHING FOR THE SOLUTION

The above are only a few of the items to consider. You need to spend upfront time to carefully identify what a solution will do for you. If you are searching for a solution to

reduce time and expense within a process, then you need to assess how the technology will help you gain in these areas. Above all, be thorough and honest in collecting data.

More than 400 meeting industry products are in the marketplace, and several hundred over-the-counter solutions are available. The greatest return comes only after learning where in a process technology should be applied. To assure a gain or ROI, measurable metrics need to be identified and tracked. Consider searching PCMA's Meeting Technology database ([www.pcma.org](http://www.pcma.org)) for available products.

## Badging and Ticketing

### TRADITIONAL PAPER PROCESS

**B**adging and ticketing are often the very first areas meeting professionals look for technological assistance, and with very good reason. They are required at virtually any type of gathering.

Both over-the-counter solutions (with a word processing function) and industry-written, PC-based solutions provide from one to several reporting templates to handle badges and ticketing. The downstream market — such as paper suppliers — also offers both laser-ready stock and thermal stock for printing badges, tent cards, and tickets.

For the most part, Web-based solutions offer at the very least an ability to export a delineated file to a word processing program to achieve this same reporting feature. If the function is directly integrated into the program, then template badge stock is often pre-designed for printing on off-the-shelf paper product.

The print quality, size, design requirements, and type of data shown on these items vary greatly within the industry. Here are

some tips for you to consider when using the traditional paper process:

>> **How will your attendees wear their badges?** Deciding this will determine the paper stock and size specifications.

>> **What is the purpose of the badge or ticket?** Providing recognition for networking requires much less pre-planning than identification for security control. The latter requirement will call for use of smart card technology (see below). A badge utilizing today's technology can be much more than a badge:

- It can serve as a unique ID for photographic recognition.
- It can be a credit or debit card.
- It can be used for lead retrieval.
- It can be used to track an individual through an exhibit hall.

>> **What is the badge's purpose?** The purpose will determine both stock type and size, as well as what type of printer you use. A 1-up badge template



Traditional basic bar code



Two-dimensional bar code

wastes no paper, while 6- to 8-up templates can waste stock. Thermal-printed badges often used in 1-up designs require specialized printer and stock.

>> **What branding requirements and colors will be used on the badge?** Print vendors can pre-print and perforate badge stock, as needed.

>> **Will the badge provide lead or contact information?** If so, you will want to use a one- or two-dimensional bar code (see above). Bar coding technology provides the ability to pass basic data to vendors for lead fulfillment purposes.

Be careful of both stock and ink selection. The bar code reader manufacturer will require a minimum specification for both ink and paper stock.

>> **Which type of bar code is needed?** In general, the type and amount of data you want to record will set the type and style, so carefully research which bar code is best for you.

>> **How will you handle last-minute badge requests or on-site needs?** This process may be different than the one used prior to going on site. Use a separate printer for badge processing when on site during peak registration hours. This may be mandated if using bar codes.

>> **What fields do you need on a badge?** These may include company name, nickname, member number, division, bar code, ticket number, or a name and two-dimensional bar code, etc. Will these fields need to be in caps or upper and lowercase?

>> **Can you incorporate a two-dimensional bar code field?** Using two-dimensional bar codes allows you to transfer valuable data to exhibitors usually at a lower cost than moving into smart card technology.

>> **How should you export data for merging into a badge?** One export file should be defined to handle any type of document merge you may need. You can specify which fields and the field format on the actual merge document.

### SMART CARDS

This is where technology really can be applied. Thanks to the microchip and embedded math co-processors, these smart cards not only speed on-site registration, but manage tracking of continuing education units (CEU), session attendance, payment processing, lead retrieval and processing, and data transfer from a "name badge" to a vendor or organization's affinity program.

Smart badges can serve many purposes. They can hold a person's demographic information, buying interests,

## The Meetings Technology Resource

FLASHpoint Technologies Solutions Database on the PCMA Web site at [www.pcma.org](http://www.pcma.org) is a comprehensive meetings technology resource. It offers product overviews, articles, and links to vendors and service providers.



contact data, company, or product information. When read by an on-site reader, new program information can be sent automatically via e-mail or page, while a thank-you note or product information goes to the attendee.

Today, an organization's membership card can be a smart card. Affinity program information — from frequent flyer credits to discount product offers, for example — can be embedded. The application of this technology makes it a necessary area for further education.

Now, if we could only standardize with the banking community so that one card could be used for both industries! The major roadblock here is in data ownership and privacy mandates. But imagine this: you enroll in an

organization's branded credit card program, which provides a banking interface and pre-approved transactional data, such as your membership profile and buying interests.

Smart card technology also can be used for maintaining high-level security. Holographic images and embedded chips can store a wealth of information, while also emitting radio signals for tracking the whereabouts of an individual or for transmitting data to PDAs and hand-held computers.

Suggestions for deploying smart cards:

>> **Outline specifically what you need to achieve** using this technology.

>> **Options** range from security to lead processing and e-commerce applications, among many others.

>> **Set a budget** that includes research, technical support, and infrastructure requirements. This technology and its implementation can be very expensive and take a great deal of time to execute.

>> **Set a realistic timeline.** Lower-tech smart card technology, such as magnetic stripes, has been available for years. However, embedded chip technology using contact (reader) and contact-less (wireless protocols) are constantly evolving.

>> **Hire a consultant early** to help you in gathering industry appropriate information, since no two implementations are exactly the same. ■

## Housing Management

Convention housing continues to improve in the scope of services available and in real-time access to inventory. As with all elements involving technology, ease of use, speed, security, and flexibility, along with the availability of various data inputs/formats, are essential elements of housing management.

Unfortunately, the adoption rate in supplying credit card information and

personal data online is still low. Wider use and acceptance are required for an online system to be the sole data conduit. Any housing solution, then, must offer alternative vehicles — calling center or fax — for processing this information.

All organizations that move to online processing need to clearly understand the abilities and requirements of their market space. While tremendous process cost savings can be

achieved by integrating registration, housing, and travel, without due diligence an organization can be caught providing technology options well beyond its market's comfort levels.

Unfortunately, not everyone has a personal digital assistant (PDA), a hand-held computer, or easy computing access — nor share the same comfort in using the newer technologies often required in the online transaction process. As a result, meeting professionals need to choose a technology solution that meets core requirements of their market space.

Corporations have a clear advantage in that they can set company-wide policy and provide funding for projects that can clearly show a positive ROI within an 18-month period, whereas association management will be limited to the support of their sponsors and member responsiveness.

Over the past year, the major players in online housing have made their application protocols available to several online registration companies, providing a meeting professional with the option for making available both housing and conference registration to end-users. The integration of these processes is clearly a benefit to the online user, streamlining data-entry and efficiencies in one-stop shopping.

The three critical components required for the successful acceptance of a housing solution are location, price, and brand identity of the lodging options as they are initially offered to an attendee when visiting a site. If your lodging options don't meet user needs, the technology will be bypassed!

#### WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN AN ONLINE HOUSING SYSTEM:

##### User Interface/Site Design:

>> Ability to search by property by location, brand, and price, plus the flexibility to choose check-in/out dates.

>> An easy-to-use interface and access to real-time inventory for online users. Multiple keystrokes required for entering a

booking should be kept to a minimum. Keep this interface simple and short.

>> Ability for confirmed registrants to edit their records after the initial registration.

>> E-mail address verification to reduce bad address entry. Many sites will require the address to be entered twice as a data check.

>> Ability to showcase conference/destination themes, attractions, and sponsor graphics.

>> Multiple credit card processing ability — personal/corporate, for instance.

##### Block Management/Maintenance:

>> Sub-block management, providing a function to block rooms for VIPs or to open and close blocks by all authorized partners, as defined by licensee. Housing managers may want the option to adjust or control their block's inventory between properties.

>> After cutoff date, control should switch to hotel(s), so the block can be managed up to the arrival date.

>> Scalability — the ability to separate housing, travel, and registration processes. While the ultimate goal is to integrate and streamline these process entries, some organizations aren't structured for this or require that housing and travel are managed by third-party vendors, due to limiting staffing. Can you purchase online functionality by module based on your organization's need and culture?

>> Secure administrative access to the system to manage pricing structures and inventory, communicate discount promotions, and adjust branding information.

>> Sub-block management for third-party processing. Many times, the local CVB will be the actual product licensee and provide the planning organization with access to all data, design, and reporting functions. With sub-block management, exhibitors can process their own room blocks, freeing up your time.

>> Pre-defined, yet editable business rules for setting price variations, cutoff dates, credit card processing,

confirmation verification, user-record edits, etc. Careful scrutiny is required here, as these integrated business rules control virtually every aspect of how data can be entered and processed.

>> Ability to electronically distribute your housing list or to provide secured data access to host facilities. Don't assume this; it is not an automatic. Depending on the service or application you ultimately deploy, this level of integration is not available at all facilities. The best approach is to assess where the majority of your housing transactions will be made and evaluate the housing system provider based on its ability to optimize these transactions. There is limited gain in the process if a facility needs to re-key data. The ability to electronically and seamlessly share this data is vital!

>> Ability to electronically communicate with all or sub-blocks of registrants to facilitate ongoing, as well as emergency, communications with your attendee blocks.

##### Reporting:

>> Online reporting, including Microsoft Excel and Access portability, as well as exportability through delimited formats.

>> Standardized reporting availability for single- or multiple-property comparisons.

>> An ad-hoc reporting tool that will allow you to design and run virtually any customized report you may need to manage your housing efforts.

>> Real-time reporting of attrition tracking, pick-up reports, financial tracking, and rooming history by meeting, city, and property, across the chains — to be used by planning organizations, hotels, and sub-contractors, as required.

>> Access to historical data, invaluable in both the request-for-proposal (RFP) process and future negotiations. Access must be available to the planning organization and at the facility level. ■

# Destination Management

Venue information — from online reservation systems, expanded services of convention and visitor bureaus, and access to growing data warehouses — is a clear benefit to online users.

Whether attendees need to research historical attractions, local weather, museums, and city services; make a reservation at a local restaurant; or even reserve a tee time at a local golf course, many of these added-value services are now possible, thanks to technology's ability to harness data warehousing.

With the explosion in use of both wireless and hand-held computing devices, many of these same services now can be integrated into an online regis-

tration system. These options, along with photos, maps, and venue graphics, should all be available for use — without fee — by the planner organization.

If you choose to manage housing through the city's CVB, here are some features and services to check out.

>> Clear and concise manual for housing policies and procedures.

>> Customized, domestic toll-free reservation number for your group.

>> International phone and fax numbers.

>> Convenient methods for making a reservation including phone, fax, mail, and/or Internet.

>> Assistance with the design of an efficient housing reservation form for your delegates.

>> Design of a custom Web site page for your convention's online housing reservations.

>> Effective communications pre-, during, and post-convention.

>> Assistance with housing promotion materials (camera-ready artwork, hotel verbiage, etc.).

>> Critique of inventory breakdowns.

>> Comprehensive convention profile for the call center and hotel properties.

>> Online pick-up reports to you and your hotels.

>> Analysis of room pick-ups and proactive assistance for meeting planner and hotels to maximize blocks.

>> Location of additional hotel inventory, when needed.

>> Assistance in adding overflow hotels to the room block when needed.

>> Communication of any changes to the room inventory.

>> A post-convention report for you that includes contracted block, pick-

up at hotel cut-off, and actual reservations after departure.

>> A representative on site at your event to assist with any questions or last-minute requests. ■

## TOP 10 POINTS TO ADDRESS WHEN CHOOSING A GROUP HOUSING TECHNOLOGY VENDOR

**1** Ask the vendor what skill sets are needed to use and maintain the software. This is particularly critical if the software will be installed at your site (as opposed to an ASP model).

**2** Understand the company's overall business. Does it focus solely on meeting technology? Is housing technology a small component of overall revenue? If so, make sure that the provider is committed to maintaining, servicing, and enhancing the product.

**3** Don't decide solely on price. Certainly price is a crucial component, but the lowest cost solution may not have the most functionality. Also, the lowest cost may mean the company cannot afford to maintain and service the technology — or worse yet, may not be around in the future.

**4** Research the company. Ask the right questions. Does it build the product itself or outsource? How many engineers are working on the product? What upgrades have been added? You should have your IT people talk to the company's engineers. Where is the data stored? What back-up systems are in place?

**5** Ask also about the company's financial health. You don't want to sign up with a company that is not going to be around

## Tech Tips on Functionality

### LOOK FOR:

1. Shared access for all parties — meeting planners, hotels, and housing staff
2. Reports online 24/7/365
3. Detailed inventory control
4. Sub-block/room-type management
5. Data transfer capabilities
6. After-cutoff functionality
7. Attrition-fighting tools
8. Multiple permission levels
9. Ability to link to registration software
10. Data mining before, during, and after event

>> Can the attendee book online?

>> Can the attendee modify and cancel online?

>> Does the system support other methods of reservations (phone, fax, mail, room list)?

>> Can the system be customized to match your event's Web site?

Don't decide solely on price. Certainly price is a crucial component, but the lowest cost solution may not have the most functionality.

for a while. Who are the investors in the company? Are they major companies or private investors? This information will help underscore the stability of the organization.

**6** Ask the company for vital statistics. How many customers use the product? How many events/reservations have been processed? What is the percentage of online bookings versus phone, fax, mail, etc.?

**7** Talk to current clients — your best resource. Talk to a client who has just started and one who has been using the software for a while. Ask about their best and worst experiences with the software. How does the company respond to requests for system modifications? Are there user groups? Are upgrades and system modifications delivered on time?

**8** Ask the company for a test drive. Many companies offer a demo on their Web site, but this is normally a pre-packaged slide show that does not show how the software works. If a company is serious about working with you, it will let you look around a training or demo site. It is important to test it not only from your computer, but also from a dial-up connection in order to see how the system performs. Keep in mind that you will be asked to sign a non-disclosure agreement to take this test drive.

**9** Research the functionality. Make sure that the functionality is a good fit for your business and that it will help your business reach its goals. Many programs include a multitude of bells and whistles. You may not need them all, so do your homework.

**10** Try to visit the company's facilities and meet as many of the staff as possible, especially the customer service staff — the most important resources for you and your customers, your attendees! ■

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Our thanks are extended to the team at Passkey.com for their assistance in creating this list.

# SAN DIEGO TECH >>>

## Answering the Tech Call

Whether meeting planners use their own housing systems or work with third-party providers, technology tools help ease the headaches for all partners in the process.

"The reason to work with a third-party provider is that planners do not want to deal with registration or housing themselves," said Robert Colvin, vice president of sales, PGI. "We know we're successful when we don't receive outbound calls from our partners."

PGI offers housing, registration, and travel management (at flat transaction fees) through the San Diego CVB, forming a three-way marriage with the planner. It's "one-stop shopping" for the planner, who gets an integrated database for all these components.

Real-time access to housing and registration data is a planner's goal, plus the ability to export reports and reformat these into other applications. Online tools for data mining and data warehousing are much more powerful and can report booking pace comparatives and weekly pickups. Just ask the San Diego hospitality community what they think.

"We can go onto third-party housing providers' Web sites, see the pick-ups, and use that information for forecasting," said Rob Cameron, director of sales and marketing, Manchester Grand Hyatt San Diego. "This has been a big step that saves a lot of time."

Such a development will certainly assist this downtown convention hotel as it undergoes a \$273 million expansion, ready Summer 2003, to encompass more than 125,000 square feet, 1,675 rooms, a 35,000-square-foot exhibit hall, and a

new 30,000-square-foot ballroom.

Not only does Town & Country Resort & Convention Center encourage planners to link directly to its Web site for information for attendees, but "we are getting to the point where we can provide secure, online reservations for specific conventions, accessed by code," said James Oddo, vice president-marketing. The Centers for Disease Control utilized just such a system at the property,

whose major markets are medical, education, and scientific meetings.

The needs of such groups can be extensive and complex, taking into account Town & Country's more than 165,000 square feet of meeting space that encompasses two ballroom complexes of 24,000 and 18,000 square feet respectively, an 80,000-square-foot exhibit hall, two executive conference centers, and 50 breakout rooms

supporting 1,000 rooms and suites.

Technology can keep apace of reservations and how they flow in. "You can see developing patterns, as associations overlay data year-over-year," said Cameron. This information will also help planners know their meeting's economic impact on the community — and gain real pickup numbers.

Attendees, though, still want to see, feel, and touch the product they want to buy. For the San Diego Marriott Hotel & Marina, that means 1,356 rooms, 100,000 square feet of function space, three ballrooms, an exhibit hall for 137 8x10 booths, and a variety of meeting rooms. The South Tower was refurbished a year ago, and the North Tower refurbishment starts in August, with completion in 2003.

**"We can go onto third-party housing providers' Web sites, see the pick-ups, and use that information for forecasting. This has been a big step that saves a lot of time."**

— Rob Cameron, Manchester Grand Hyatt San Diego



REGISTRATION, HOUSING, & DESTINATION MANAGEMENT

MAY 15, 2002