

CONVENTION CENTER TECHNOLOGY, ON-SITE
COMMUNICATIONS, AND VIRTUAL TRADE SHOWS

EXHIBITIONS

CHAPTER

5

Convention and congress centers have truly embraced the use of technology from the exhibit floor and throughout meeting spaces. In many cases, show connectivity can even be expanded citywide, linking through guest rooms and the convention venue. Conventions are indeed a good



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business, and the push to gain competitive strength has been a driver for equipping these venues with leading-edge technologies. By extension, virtual trade shows are slowly emerging among certain industry segments.

Business travelers need to stay connected with clients and colleagues through corporate networks. With the increasing popularity of hand-held devices — pagers, cell phones, hand-held computers, and personal digital assistants (PDAs) — and the coming realization of multi-functioned devices, convention centers must be able to offer a range of connectivity options.

Today's state-of-the-art facilities provide a wide range of applied technologies, making it easier, faster, more secure, and more flexible to enable networked services from show floors and meeting spaces — even the ability to broadcast wherever a client has a requirement.

What are the technology options available for use at tech-savvy convention centers?

>> **High-speed connectivity.** This provides secure, reliable, and fast connections, which also allow corporate users access to Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) — private networks that connect remote sites through a public network such as the Internet. Users can access VPNs to facilitate training, view online demonstrations, and conduct e-commerce — all while on site at a convention. VPNs also can provide authorized users access to needed files or programs when off-site.

>> **Design flexibilities.** Centers that have lodging affiliations or citywide connectivity can provide either a wired or wireless network, with possible connectivity back to guest rooms. Clearly, the trend is towards wireless networks. Without a doubt these wireless networks allow for much faster setups on site, reducing labor costs and providing connectivity that is twice as fast as a T1 line and 23 times faster than older

ISDN lines.

>> **Bandwidth.** Unfortunately, not all users have network cards installed on laptops, so a facility should provide flexible bandwidth that allows access for even low-bandwidth users. If this is only a bank of payphones with data ports, it's still an on-site requirement.

>> **Information kiosks.** Such kiosks allow show and meeting information, sponsor messages, and industry news or world news to be broadcast to attendees throughout a facility.

>> **Dedicated recording facilities.** As needs grow to provide live or archived program content, access to dedicated recording rooms to facilitate both audio recording and session duplication becomes an important feature of convention centers.

>> **Videoconferencing functionality.** Such functionality, including voice- and video-over IP and broadcast-quality lighting, is also an essential need for Webconferencing or Webcasting.

>> **Availability of "dark fiber" cabling.** This fiber-optic cabling remains inactive until hardware is connected, and it is a state-of-the-art feature that allows companies to establish private networks outside of the convention center network.

>> **Event boards.** Plasma or LED event boards located throughout the center and connected to a local area network give organizers a real-time ability to promote sponsors and communicate information to attendees.

>> **Guest room connectivity linking back to the convention center.** Certainly this feature is a must have for citywide gatherings.

>> **Cyber cafes and kiosks.** Multifunctional kiosks can provide information such as product locators for trade show booth locations, session locations, attendee management, e-mailing, message centers, Internet phoning capability, on-site surveying to provide general event information for handling technology needs, PDA download stations, and hand-held computing synchronization.

>> **Audience response.** Can the facility provide this capability in meeting spaces?

>> **Wireless lead retrieval and tracking systems.** Thanks to the growing number of wireless networks, options for processing leads and communicating with show attendees have come into fashion. Bluetooth Technologies, for example, provides availability to these process-saving technologies. Also research 2-D barcoding when reviewing lead retrieval systems.

>> **Fully equipped business center with extended operating hours.** Often, such centers can serve as backup to services offered on site.

>> **Wireless LAN network access.** This may not be available in smaller meeting rooms due to sound-proofing requirements. In these cases, a hard-wired network should be available. This is certainly a detail to confirm during a site visit.

BUDGETS AND COSTS

Just having access to these state-of-the-art technologies does not assure a successful event. In order to implement a high-tech presence, a realistic budget and adequate spon-

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sorship are paramount.

On-site services using these technologies are expensive. For the most part, convention centers have provided a sophisticated infrastructure for on-site suppliers, contracted suppliers, and/or your organization's IT staff to tap into for service delivery.

Be certain to identify all technology and connectivity needs well in advance. Careful coordination between service suppliers is essential.

In addition, the locations of the services must be very carefully mapped, so that attendees stay within the flow of the event, and bottlenecks don't result. There is nothing worse than offering on-site Internet e-mailing capabilities without enough service areas to handle the demand. I strongly recommend a site visit during a similarly networked show.

Make certain that refreshment breaks don't collide with service access. And ensure that sponsors are strategically located among service areas.

A service map is also important in order to identify the intersection of cells providing wireless LAN and hardwired networks. If you are outside a cell's coverage area, depending on the facility and the location of the system antenna, a wireless device may lose connectivity.

In addition, set up a private area for speakers, board members, and other VIPs with the necessary hardware such as 10baseT or 10/100 Ethernet Network cards configured, networked, tested, and ready to use. Unfortunately, there is still a group of seasoned industry professionals and

corporate leaders who either can't or don't use technology solutions. However, this very same group can often influence sponsorship or funding. During this transitional period, such private areas can prove very beneficial.

If you establish access to a VPN, make certain to test all connections and authorizations ahead of time. Don't wait until the day before. Your organization's IT department may be required to change settings at the networked server.

Every organization manages its on-site and off-site connectivity and firewall settings differently. While technologies do exist for remote site administration, don't assume that your organization has the capabilities to provide such access. Bottom line, make certain an appropriately authorized member of your IT department is included in your advance setup team.

We are indeed in a transitional period in the use of on-site technologies. Some of our members will be comfortable using these services, and some will not. Support personnel knowledgeable about the technology in use should be readily available to assist attendees. Unfortunately, despite integrated electronic signage, adequate signage directing people to sessions is still required for large shows. An essential on-site service reproduces smart cards that replace lost or outdated cards used for e-mail or service access.

Offering seminars on these technologies also can be beneficial during this transitional period. Such courses serve to educate your attendees, while

also providing exposure to sponsors of these services. Ultimately, a well-educated attendee will allow you to reduce the level of support services either you or your vendors need to provide on site.

VIRTUAL TRADE SHOWS

The jury is still out on virtual trade show acceptance. However, I strongly feel that virtual trade shows will grow in popularity and will be recognized as an additional marketing channel for select industries.

These virtual spaces offer 24/7/365 exposure to a global marketplace for exhibitors to showcase products, distribute literature, and streamline lead processing while providing attendees with ease of use and the ability to preview appropriate products — possibly making for a more efficient and productive physical trade show experience.

Clearly, with the use of 3-D animation and video walls, virtual reality, plasma screens, multi-functioned kiosks, and high quality sound and lighting modules in the traditional exhibit space, a virtual trade show has a hard time delivering sensory and emotional perceptions. But as broadband connectivity is expanded, users and developers will be able to optimize these sometimes cumbersome sites.

If you are game, here are some guidelines to consider:

>> First, benchmark the services provided by a physical trade show in your industry sector. Many of these features should be offered online depending on the needs of your audience. If the expectations of your audience aren't

clearly met or exceeded, then your virtual experience will be less than rewarding.

>> If available, also benchmark any virtual sites within your industry niche.

>> Consider simple and easy design with useful and intuitive site navigation.

>> Don't go overboard with graphics. Not only do these slow transmission time, they quickly grow old and can be annoying. Keep the site simple and attractive.

>> Do capture and qualify users especially if a need of the site is to generate revenue.

>> Offer exhibitors a range of value-added services, such as the ability to stream audio and video, the option for providing on-site demonstrations and training, and preferred locations on the virtual show floor.

>> Provide attendees with value-added features, such as e-mail and chat rooms.

>> Apply basic marketing concepts and cross-promote your virtual site with members, exhibitors, traditional advertisers, etc.

>> Provide online giveaways or discounted promotions.

>> Offer online credit card processing.

>> Clearly state your privacy policy on handling names and personal data captured on the site.

>> Make absolutely certain you secure all transactions.

>> Provide a database of vendors who are exhibiting online.

>> As with any implementation, be certain to outline your requirements of the virtual space and carefully select suitable applications and/or service providers. Virtual sites require a great deal of ongoing maintenance. ■

SAN DIEGO TECH

Convention Center Beyond Compare

San Diego's "smart" convention center is one that others emulate.

Its capabilities are truly state-of-the-art and cutting-edge. That means meeting planners will get what they need.

Its management knows how to double the size of the convention center and further expand its technology — on time and on budget. That means meeting planners will get service, turnaround, and pricing that works for their events.

"The expansion gave us the chance to review core functions of the building and make them more effective and efficient," said Joseph Psuik, convention center director, San Diego Convention Center Corporation. Even the kitchen, its layouts, and elements were totally rethought to make production faster.

"We changed the infrastructure of voice, data, and Internet so we can plug upcoming technology into our baseline backbone. This should stand up well for the next eight to 10 years," he added.

Smart City Networks powers the San Diego Convention Center infrastructure. Here are the highlights association meeting planners will want to know:

>> The "Star Network" features network cables installed from edge points through the facility to one central point.

>> Fiber-optic "backbone" cabling connects strategically located "closets" (intermediate distribution frames or IDFs) within the facility to the "core" (main distribution frame or MDF). Back-

The Specs

>> **Exhibit Hall:** 525,701 gross square feet on ground level; 90,000 square feet on upper level.

>> **Meetings/Events:** 72 meeting/banquet rooms with 204,114 square feet, including two ballrooms totaling 80,706 square feet.

>> **Prefunction:** 284,494 square feet.

>> **Parking:** 1,950-car garage.

>> **Access:** 50 loading docks with eight direct drive-in accesses to exhibit halls

>> **Electrical:** 120, 208, 227, 480 V.

>> **Telecommunications:** Voice, data, and Internet services via CAT 5 wiring, multi-mode, and single-mode fiber; fiber connectivity with headquarters hotel.

>> **Audiovisual:** Complete production capabilities.

bone speed is 100Mbps Full-Duplex.

>> Clients are attached to the permanent network infrastructure via Category 5 "temporary" cabling, according to show needs.

>> Internet connectivity operates at 45Mbps (a normal dial-up modem is 0.56Mbps or 0.12 percent of the center's Internet connection).

The San Diego Convention Center is also "truly a customer-driven facility," Psuik said. "We deliver building blocks and arrange them as our customers want."

This advanced and connected facility enables meeting planners to select exactly the core services that best meet their event's requirements:

✓ Wireless customers connect to the facility network utilizing the lat-

est in wireless LAN protocols.

✓ The service most in demand is shared Ethernet, selected by 80 percent of clients.

✓ Dedicated bandwidth allows customers to select an amount of bandwidth for their exclusive use.

✓ A network can be designed to customer specifications (often required for increased security), utilizing the existing Smart City hardware and physical cabling.

✓ Advanced services for such applications as Webcasting are also available.

MEETING EVALUATION TECHNOLOGY

Audience response systems provide many options for soliciting feedback from attendees. The method you deploy in evaluating a meeting will depend on the goals and objectives you've established for the meeting, and the requirements of your attendees.

Certainly, the electronic capture of meeting evaluations can provide instant feedback for any meeting or session. Despite robust handset design, efficient analytical processing, and enhanced graphics for illustrating responses, they unfortunately can't capture lengthy text responses.

WHAT ARE THE OPTIONS?

>> **Form scanning.** The price point on this approach can vary greatly and depends on whether you need to use specialized optical-scanning forms and the quality of the scanner being used. The use of pre-printed forms is highly dependent on the type and model of scanner to be used. Scanners are very sensitive to both color intensity and paper weight. The benefit of using specialized paper is that scanning can be very efficient.

In all cases, specialized software is required to create the form, so that the scanner can read and process the format. Once scanned, software can be used to tabulate and process information. Humidity, paper weight, color intensity, paper sizing, and marking instruments all play a factor in creating an error-free process.

>> **Web-designed surveys.** Many of the same applications used to e-market to your attendee base can be used to solicit feedback from your attendees. An e-mail message to attendees can feature a link to a Web-designed evaluation form or the actual survey. You can ask ranking, rating, multiple-choice, or open-ended questions.

Once responses are received, summaries including graphical illustra-

tion can be produced with little effort. Since the e-mail address is used as an identifier, follow-up responses can be easily processed.

>> **On-site polling kiosks.** Depending on budget and the process adopted, kiosks can be set up on site to conduct market surveys or gather meeting evaluations. Responses can be stored on a local network or posted on a dedicated Web site. The technology can be tied to smart card activation or to member IDs, as required.

Using such an approach requires that kiosks are well placed throughout an area and that their use is promoted throughout the meeting. In most cases, valued-added giveaways or product discounts can be used to encourage kiosk use. Kiosks can be an excellent source, as well, for added sponsorship revenue.

>> **Audience response systems.** These highly interactive devices can be used virtually anywhere on site — from a small workshop to a plenary session. Besides convenience, this technology provides instant feedback and, at the same time, the capability to edit questions. Text responses, however, are limited. Meeting hosts can quickly assess and re-direct questioning in real time, as needed.

All of the above evaluation options can be done in concert with one another to increase response rates.

The design of the evaluation or survey and the wording of the questions will go a long way in delivering useful information. The goals of your meeting will determine your survey questions, so how should they be formulated?

>> **Be clear about the mission of your meeting.** What specific feedback are you gathering? Are you measuring retained learning, attendees' rating of the meeting or conference, perceptions on an issue, or organization directive?

>> **If you are asking the audience for opinions, make certain your questions are**

straightforward, with answers that are easily captured on the device or form you use to gather responses. With audience response systems, keypad design varies among suppliers, thus dictating the type and variety of questions you can ask. Your evaluation's design and formatting should be tested with the response device or format.

>> **What reporting formats will you use?** Do you require graphs such as a bar chart, pie chart, or scatter diagram? The report format clearly drives the type of question.

>> **When using audience response devices, questions must be worded so as to request a single response**, which could be: Yes/No, a numeric response rating, or perhaps a selection from multiple pre-worded answers.

Example:

Incorrect: "Choose the three most important items ..."

Correct: "Choose the single most important item ..."

>> **Remember, the audience typically has only seconds to read the questions and respond. So, keep wording short and simple.** Make your questions no greater than three to four lines. Imagine reading three-plus lines in a couple of seconds!

>> **Don't use unfamiliar or arcane terminology** that only a subset of your audience will understand.

>> **Accept the professional assistance of your audience response vendor.** Your partner has worked with hundreds of clients and can ensure your questions will provide credible results that take advantage of system strengths.

The technology and sophistication of surveying techniques can provide statistically significant results with small samples of data responses. You may not need to obtain feedback from a majority of attendees, but only from a statistically significant sampling. ■

EDITOR'S NOTE: The team at Meridia Interactive assisted in compiling this checklist.