CONTINUING ADVANCEMENTS IN TECHNOLOGY DRIVE NEW, ACCESSIBLE OPTIONS

AUDIOVISUAL ADVANCES

Creating an environment that fosters excitement, learning retention, and interaction within the meeting space as well as throughout a geographically dispersed audience has never been as accessible as it is today. Thanks to continuing advancements in technology that drive audiovisual impact, meeting professionals have many options available to them. The only limiting factor is available budget, accessibility within an area, and know-how!

CHAPTER 8

Leading Audiovisual Trends and Breakthroughs

WIRELESS TECHNOLOGY

The impact of wireless technologies is significant — they can materially reduce staging time, while enhancing interaction in a meeting environment.

Driven by radio wave technologies, wireless networks, and component miniaturization, audiovisual equipment manufacturers and other suppliers have provided a steady flow of new equipment for business and personal use. And wireless technologies will have a continued impact on virtually all aspects of our business.

Both Bluetooth and WiFi (802.11b standard) technologies are leading the way. However, the benefit that the newer WiFi technology provides over Bluetooth is a faster and wider signal transmission distance.

A meeting professional has much to come to grips with: from the changing technologies in PDAs, cell phones, and pagers, to newer appliances that combine these functions.

Why consider introducing wireless connectivity into a meeting's plan?

1 In many cases, the installation of wireless networks is much faster than wired environments. **The result is better performance at a potentially lower cost.** Thanks to radio technologies, the line-of-sight requirement is no longer a limiting factor to using wireless systems.

2 A compelling reason is **customer convenience.** By transmitting session locations, conference agendas, and session descriptions, you give attendees the ability to quickly scan a program, as opposed to fumbling with papers.

3 **Providing exhibitors with the added options** of beaming information and collecting contact data in an electronic environment is a time- and cost-saver.

4 Applications driving the wireless market also allow you to **introduce the venue to your meeting attendee,** offering yet another source of both sponsorship revenue and attendee convenience.

Clearly, the greatest progress in adopting wireless technology has come in lead retrieval systems, electronic distribution of conference material to select wireless devices, and conversion of traditional tools like microphones, laser pointers, and audience response transmitters.

By using wireless networks with existing industry applications, show sponsors and exhibitors can seamlessly communicate with attendees, electronically disseminate material, and validate lead data instantly. Salespeople spend less time processing information and more time building relationships with customers. Attendees receive targeted information electronically.

GRAPHIC SWITCHERS

In the not so recent past, it was impossible to integrate computer signals, video, and graphics. With newer switchers, signal integration is at one's fingertips, resulting in high-end, high-quality professional presentations.

The video/computer switcher can switch between two different sources without loss of synchronization. It also has the ability to direct a consistent frequency on the output. Other features may include the ability to mix, fade, and dissolve different sources.

These units will convert all video and/or computer signals at the same high-resolution output, resulting in a cleaner, clearer picture. Outputs can be directed to data projectors or plasma screens.

DIGITAL OVER ANALOG

Digital is here and analog is fading out! The audiovisual and broadcast industries are both migrating to the digital world. Virtually all new products in the marketplace are designed for digital output.

NETWORKED PROJECTORS

This technology — a convergence of information technology (IT) and audiovisual technologies — is just starting to emerge in the industry.

The benefits of using a networked projector are numerous. These intelligent units allow users to share files and access printers without a built-in computer. Administrators of these projectors can check on the status and troubleshoot any networked unit from their desktop computer via Web access through an IP address. With the development of the new 802.11 wireless standard, these units can also provide full-motion video, a function simply unheard of in the recent past.

In a few short years, one in four projectors sold will be network-able. These smart projectors will actually e-mail the IT director, should maintenance be required of the unit! Primary markets for this device are corporate training rooms, university labs, and state-of-the-art conference centers.

A SHARPER POWERPOINT PRESENTATION

Now, thanks to creative development, both streaming video and audio can be incorporated into a presentation. One application, SofTV-Presenter, provides functionality for the user to record, encode, broadcast, and synchronize the multimedia presentation all within the same application. While SofTV is geared to commercial use, there continues to be a wealth of utilities available for PowerPoint users.

PLASMA SCREENS

One of the best benefits of plasma screens is their greater viewing angle. A plasma screen allows an angle of 160 degrees, versus 40 degrees for LCD and 120 degrees for rear screen projector. Translated, that means more of your attendees have a better seat. As well, additional throw distances disappear, freeing up more floor space and providing a new level of staging

Practical Audiovisual Guidelines:

10 Questions to Ask

1 **Ask your audiovisual vendor for a copy of the Pre-Quote Worksheet.** This form walks a vendor through the necessary hardware, connectivity, and staging needs a client may require. Think of this as a pre-planning checklist of your needs. Thorough checklists will provide general project information, as well as criteria covering video, audio, projection requirements, and other staging requirements.

2 **If you use slides** instead of PowerPoint presentations, how are your slides formatted — horizontally, vertically, or both? How many slides in a tray?

3 **What format video do you plan to use:** VHS, SVHS, 3/4-inch, Beta SP?

4 **What video standard:** NTSC, PAL, SECAM?

5 **Are your presenters using MACs, PCs, or a combination?** If you supply PCs or MACs for presentations, make certain to **preload all presentations** and schedule rehear-sals. Most speakers are only comfortable using their own hardware.

6 **Will you require an Internet connection?** At what speed?

7 **Do your presenters have backup copies of their presentations?** And what format do they use: CD, tape, floppy, Zip, or JAZ disk?

8 **Are pillars, chandeliers, or posts obstructing the view?**

9 **Can windows be blacked out, if needed?**

10 **Watch out for all those hidden charges:** 24-hour holds, reset fees, security, power access, on-site rigging, and union labor.

If you have the need to stay on the cutting edge, or if you advise trainers of presentation techniques, **consider bookmarking these sites:** www.knewsnewsletter.com and www.presentersuniversity.com

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flexibility and creativity. Plasma screens are also able to handle digital technology and can co-exist with large sound systems. (Older technologies were affected by the magnetic fields thrown off by a closely located sound system.) In all cases, these screens deliver clearer images and better color treatment and contrast than traditional counterparts.

TIPS AND GUIDELINES

>> Most important: Plan your technical system carefully and test all communications channels in advance in order to avoid potential device and channel conflicts.

>> Hand-held devices vary greatly in available memory, so drive to the lowest common denominator of your user base. This may put a crimp on what you provide electronically, but more attendees will be able to take advantage of the technology.

>> Knowing your market is extremely important. Unless you are providing devices for on-site use, the operating systems and device types in use by your conference base will vary. Therefore, planning ahead will go a long way towards a successful experience.

>> Consider offering on-site education in using the latest round of technology and teach attendees how to navigate the electronic documentation.

>> Select a staging company that stays on the cutting edge of technology by investing into newer hardware. And maintain good communications throughout the planning of your session.

IS YOUR MEETING ROOM READY?

The best-laid plans can often fall apart at the scene. Consider these items as you move through the event area.

Lighting and equipment. Your attendees are there to see and hear the presenters, not the multimedia. Strike a balance. Make certain to use adequate equipment, light your presenters, and have a back-up plan.

Glare on the screen or chiming sounds. Bulbs can be unscrewed or removed. And with chandeliers placed in front of air conditioning vents, there's nothing like their chimes when the air flows. I actually have had to use Scotch tape to steady these wind chimes!

Setting screens correctly. Avoid the keystoning effect by properly adjusting the screen and using the appropriate screen type.

Presenters using their own remotes. Did they change their batteries just before they did their walk-through? If not, fresh batteries are well worth the small investment, and not just for the remote. Make certain batteries are fresh in all devices being used in your session.

Sound feedback. Check for this from areas where microphones will be used.

Internet connections. If linking to the Internet, set up and test all connections ahead of time. Above all, make certain the staff who know how to set up

ISDN, DSL, or other connections are on site for your meeting. And double-check your language: High-speed can mean as low as a phone line running at 56K, which is not great unless you're just checking e-mail. As the planner, clearly identify what connection speeds are included in your agreement and what are available at added costs. Also find out how long they take to install. A great tool for testing connection speeds for differing file types is: www.world-com.com/us/tools/simulator/

Stick to your staging game plan. Don't make last-minute changes that affect equipment positioning or electrical loading. There is nothing worse than taking 36 hours or more to stage and test the audiovisual and then make a last-minute, untested change.

House sound. Take control of the house sound system — even if you don't use it — as the quality and ability of these systems vary greatly. Even with smaller meetings, know how to adjust sound and lights if you don't have a technician in the room.

Wires. Tape down all wires to prevent trips, disconnects, and lawsuits.

House engineer. Make certain the house engineer is included in your pre-con meeting if you are using extensive audiovisual and electrical loads. Know the people to contact and how to reach them off-property.

Testing. Rehearse and test, test, and test. If using computers, re-boot them between sessions, as this dumps unreleased memory and improves a computer's performance. Many programs still have memory leaks: when applications use memory to run part of a routine, they may not release the memory; after a few hours, this can cause a PC to run slower and possibly to freeze all together. Cold-booting, powering off, and then turning a computer back on will reclaim the lost memory. ■

SAN DIEGO TECH

Technology Showcases

When San Diego wants to show just how deeply technology can integrate into a meeting, it has no better showcase than the San Diego State University Electronic Boardroom.

"When we took our advisory boards to SDSU, we learned just how valuable it was to hear from everyone — at the same time — in order to resolve issues," said Reint Reinders, president and CEO of the San Diego Convention & Visitor Bureau.

This collaborative research facility, funded by the Department of Defense, hosts SDSU College of Business courses, along with business and community activities. Each place at the round, 20-seat conference table conceals a powerful computer, flat panel display, and Internet connection via a fast Ethernet local area network. A sophisticated three-screen projection system controls multiple computer and video input and output sources.

The Boardroom's magic, though, comes from team-based, decision software tools (from www.GroupSystems.com) that enable participants to communicate, submit ideas, analyze options, and evaluate alternatives — anonymously and simultaneously, yet face-to-face. The results are immediate: increased meeting productivity and participation, parallel communications, automated record-keeping, and sharpened structure and focus to the meeting.

Such technology sophistication shows up throughout San Diego's extensive hotel facilities, as audiovisual requirements of meetings become ever more complex.

For Town & Country Resort & Convention Center, an in-house audiovisual provider "can be the most affordable and the most convenient solution. As an arm of the property, they know about the facility, and as a partner, they know how to work with meeting planners," said James Oddo, vice president-marketing.

The Sheraton San Diego Hotel & Marina also works with an audiovisual partner with its own on-site management and technical staff, noted Joseph Terzi, Starwood's regional vice president, operations, Southern California. "We manage the relationship closely, dealing with them as a department within the hotel. But planners are not required to use that service, and can use the companies they work with around the country."

The new meeting space at the Manchester Grand Hyatt San Diego, after expansion is completed in mid-2003, will boast of the most advanced technology to support audiovisual requirements — guest rooms and meeting rooms wired for Internet access and wireless networking anticipated for the entire hotel. Indeed, with technology changing so fast, "you don't want to buy capability now and be locked into something that will be antiquated," said Rob Cameron, director of sales and marketing.

The San Diego Marriott Hotel & Marina has learned that the volume and type of equipment available is critically important; when the meeting is too large or complicated, a third-party provider or Marriott partner needs to take it on. "Customers want to hire a third party for its equipment, back-up, and on-site staff," said Harold Queisser, market director association sales.

On the cusp of everything is wireless technology, with planners attempting to gauge potential usage of hand-held devices. With compatibility no longer an issue, said Robert Colvin, vice president of sales at PGI, sending meeting, exhibit, and travel information and a personalized calendar to a hand-held is definitely the wave of the future.