

Meetings enter a new dimension

13 June 2012 7:03 AM
By Jeff Loether
HotelNewsNow.com columnist

Story Highlights

The blending of physically present attendees with those who are virtually present is becoming much easier to accommodate and much more prolific.

The implementation of high-definition video teleconferencing solutions is growing substantially.

The use of robots who attend the physical meeting and are controlled by the remote attendee is gaining popularity.

This is the final story in a three-part series of articles from the International Society of Hospitality Consultants regarding the ever-evolving technological landscape. Read the first part [here](#) and the second part [here](#).

The future of meetings has arrived. It started a very long time ago and has been coming in converging waves of innovation and advancing technologies developed to facilitate communication and collaboration among both physically present and remote participants.

Originally, meetings happened in the "here and now," meaning folks got together and communicated ideas with each other around the campfire. As soon as the need arose to communicate across space and time, innovation arose in the form of smoke signals, letters and the Pony Express, the telegraph, telephone, etc. This shift in communications through time and space brings us into the fourth dimension and the world of virtual and hybrid meetings.

Recent new and converging communication technologies have created a surge in popularity and growth, including social-media networks and the availability of broadband as a ubiquitous commodity. Add to this a generation of tech savvy and enthusiastic users who are always on, always connected and can multitask better than any of us, and it's no surprise the future of meetings is now!



Jeff Loether

The blending of physically present meeting presenters and attendees with those who are virtually present is becoming much easier to accommodate and much more prolific. Hybrid events include streaming live and recorded events, teleconferencing, webcasting, etc.

Of telepresence, robots and avatars

Looking further down the path, we find technology developing to enhance the remote attendee and presenter's experiences during virtual and hybrid events. These include efforts to connect the remote attendee with the physical event in a more realistic and immersive way, as well as to enhance the remote attendee's presence and participation in the physical meeting.

The recent wave of telepresence systems was an attempt to create a more immersive experience to close the distance gap. Unfortunately for the hotel market, since the several major players each developed unique and proprietary systems, the lack of telecommunication industry standards for these systems has rendered inter-operability too challenging, and telepresence remains an interesting novelty. However, the implementation of high-definition video teleconferencing solutions is growing substantially.

Another technology being implemented is the use of robots that attend the physical meeting, driven by the remote (virtual) attendee who sees and hears through the robot's cameras and microphones. The robot also displays the remote attendee's face via the webcam attached to the robot. **And yes, the participants using robots pay a registration fee,** although they do not eat much.

Finally, virtual venues are being built as standalone and as reflections of physical facilities. This may be a bellwether for hotels to consider when contemplating additions or remodeling of their facilities. Advances in intelligent video cameras (smile-and-blink detection) as well as gesture control of avatars as demonstrated with Microsoft's Kinect technology for gaming, means using personal representatives (avatars) in virtual spaces

will become much more intuitive.

This means attendees and presenters will be more empowered to meet across space and time in physical and virtual venues.

How does this affect hotel event space design?

As we understand where the trends in meetings are moving, we understand denial and resistance is futile and the competitive advantage will be held by those facilities and operators who embrace, accommodate and ultimately welcome multidimensional hybrid meeting and events.

So, what can we do to accommodate the technologies used to produce virtual and hybrid events? It all starts with having a good room. The more we research the field of virtual and hybrid event production services and practices, it becomes more apparent meeting and event spaces that have good quality factors for physical human audiences and attendees also were the best equipped to host virtual technologies.

What we're learning is all these new technologies for virtual and hybrid events depend on video cameras and microphones to capture the live physical event for recording and for live streaming. The conditions that are ideal for these technologies also are ideal for the folks in the room. We want to start with a good room, and add the appropriate infrastructure and connectivity to accommodate the technologies.

Flexibility in accommodating the advanced technologies will require advance planning and programming for the power, communications, lighting and audio-visual technologies. Similarly, the interior finishes and heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems should be designed to be friendly to the anticipated technologies.

Like our eyes, video cameras depend on having good quality lighting and interior design. And like our ears, microphones work best in quiet rooms that are not reverberant. So, all of those qualities that make for good meeting and event spaces for people also make good spaces for virtual and hybrid technologies.

If there are plans for renovations, this would be an ideal opportunity to look at the space infrastructure, acoustics and interior designs to improve or optimize the lighting and acoustics qualities.

Let's go back to what we learned about design and building good quality meeting and event spaces with the confidence that by doing so, we're making our spaces "Future-Ready" for the next generation of technologies.

Jeff Loether is president and founder of [Electro-Media Design](#), Ltd. Before starting Electro-Media Design, Loether served as the manager of audio/visual systems design for the Marriott Corporation's Architecture and Construction Division from 1980 to 1990. Electro-Media Design, Ltd. is an independent technology design and management consulting practice that has provided design and consulting services to the hospitality industry for 22 years—from feasibility studies and systems design to project and AV operations management consulting.

The opinions expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect the opinions of HotelNewsNow.com or its parent company, Smith Travel Research and its affiliated companies. Columnists published on this site are given the freedom to express views that may be controversial, but our goal is to provoke thought and constructive discussion within our reader community. Please feel free to comment or contact an editor with any questions or concerns.

