

PCMA's Successful Experiment With Hybrid Meetings

David M. Brudney, ISHC, February 2012

I wrote in a column last year ("*Hybrid meetings: an idea whose time has come,*" April 2011) meeting managers no longer fear virtual event technology and online and physical meeting components are driving true business engagement while creating new revenue opportunities.

From that same column: "Meeting professionals no longer fear that virtual event technology will cannibalize their physical programs," wrote Maxine Golding in *Conference Direct Meeting Mentor Online*. "Instead, they project that online components of meetings will help organizations and corporations broaden market reach and deepen value to all constituents—members, customers, suppliers, (and) partners."

Online, virtual event technology - - what does that mean for all of us technology challenged? Well, it's a meeting wherein speakers, suppliers, and participants join in via online at the physical, face-to-face venue. Those connected to the event can be anywhere - - from Montana to the Moon, for that matter.

I used PCMA's (Professional Convention Management Association) 2011 annual meeting's format as the basis for that column. And since the 56th annual meeting, "Convening Leaders," was being held here in San Diego last month, I decided to drop by and check on the progress of PCMA's further commitment to hybrid meetings.

Progress, indeed, is being made, based on both participant feedback and record-breaking attendance figures. "The 2012 meeting proved PCMA's continued pursuit of innovation and willingness to take risks has been embraced by both its face-to-face and hybrid engagement attendance. Additionally, the 2012 meeting realized a year-over-year 9% increase in professional planner participation," according to PCMA's post-meeting press release.

Total attendance for PCMA's San Diego meeting was estimated to be 3,750, just less than 11,000 rooms, and a total economic impact for San Diego estimated at US\$13.3 million, according to Andy Mikschl, Sr. V.P. Sales, San Diego Convention Center Corporation.

Virtual meeting participants influenced to attend face-to-face

PCMA boasted that it has "dispelled the virtual cannibalization of face-to-face audiences myth." More than 300 registrants this year indicated "they were influenced to attend face-to-face by their previous participation in a PCMA virtual or hybrid meeting."

Of those 300, according to PCMA, 112 had never attended an annual meeting before or had not done so in the past six years.

PCMA credits its event's success to expanded hybrid broadcast coverage. This year's

program included multiple general sessions, a master's series, two-hour long learning lounge sessions, plus daily interviews with conference speakers and industry leaders.

Nine of the 64 concurrent sessions became hybrid broadcasts. Based on PCMA's expanded content, time spent by participants engaged in 2012 hybrid events increased greatly: 225 users spent more than 10 hours compared with 109 the year before. Total hours spent by participants in sessions increased by 60% (from 3,123 in 2011 to 5,123 in 2012), according to PCMA.

The Virtual Edge Institute's Summit, another sales and marketing event, also was integrated this year, with VEI's sessions running parallel to PCMA's regular sessions. As testimony of virtual's appeal, more than 33% of "Convening Leaders" registrants indicated their intent to incorporate VEI sessions into their schedule, thus reinforcing the value of providing meeting professionals with virtual and hybrid education.

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Attendees were able to customize their education experience due to VEI and Learning Lounge sessions running for a variety of lengths, from 15 to 90 minutes in duration.

"It's now a given that you need online presence with your physical event. Together they drive business engagement and create new revenue opportunities," said Michael Doyle, executive director of VEI.

"We're very fortunate our leadership feels strongly that the association has to be on the leading edge of meeting trends and that our members allow us to continue to take risks," said Deborah Sexton, president and CEO of PCMA. "If attendees leave here excited about trying something new - - changing it up - - that's what it's all about."

No doubt host city San Diego had something to do with both the attendance and the success of PCMA's event. And just as Indianapolis should benefit from hosting scores of future conventions thanks to Super Bowl XLVI, so should San Diego benefit from PCMA. "We identified 600 future definite bookings over the next 6 to 8 years due, in part, to PCMA meeting here in 1996," Mikschl said.

Trickle-down effect

Is there a message here? Absolutely. PCMA's bold adventure and success should serve as nothing less than a call to arms for all hotels that cater to and benefit from conventions, conferences and small meetings. What PCMA has experimented with at its large annual gathering may soon, if not already, become a standard for all hotel venues.

More and more meeting and event planners - - mindful of the PCMA's example and success - - will begin introducing hybrid models in order to enhance and improve upon meeting experience results.

Hoteliers need to be prepared. Learn what you can, identify virtual, online event suppliers and make certain your property is receptive, adaptable and hybrid meeting friendly.

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