

All Aboard the Meeting Technology Train; Are You Ready?

How do you prepare to economically accommodate the technology needs of your meeting planners? How much technology should be built-in and how much should be portable? These and related questions and issues will be explored in this month's column.

Presentation and collaboration technology is advancing quickly; there is no doubt about that. As an Owner or Manager of a hotel or conference center that has flexible function spaces, you must continue to provide competitive services and facilities. **Here are the strategic elements of an intelligent and cost-effective approach.**

First, consider the future when planning the much-needed refurbishment of existing function spaces. New or painted ceilings, new carpet and wall vinyl, refinished millwork, and new or refurbished lighting fixtures and dimmers are on everyone's agenda nowadays. These are obvious and habitual improvements, however, I know many recently-renovated properties that now want to refurbish their audiovisual and sound systems. Often, after surveying the facility, I must break the news that behind those fresh finishes is an outdated and deteriorated cabling infrastructure that must be replaced.

SO, if you are planning an eye-wash renovation, now is the PERFECT time to refurbish your systems infrastructure. While the walls and ceilings are exposed, update your audiovisual and telecommunications conduit, cabling, connectivity, show power, controls, etc. It will NEVER cost less nor be easier. Now let's look at some of the strategic elements of good, cost-effective planning for advanced meeting technology.

The Envelope. By this, we're talking about the interior architecture. Technology can only go so far to compensate for poor room acoustics, poor lighting, "technically unfriendly" wall finishes, etc. It's far better and less expensive to fix the envelope problem rather than try to mask the symptoms.

If you are anticipating more audio teleconferences such as those being promoted by Microsoft in their "Live Meeting" technology, you will want to have good room acoustics including: *low background noise* - work on those HVAC air handlers, diffusers, and vibration isolators while you have the ceiling open; *low reverberation*; and most important, the wall finishes. For rooms that will be used for Internet web-conferencing and collaboration, consider acoustically-absorptive wall finishes such as fabric-wrapped panels. These can be had for as little as \$4/sqft, if you're practical in your product selection. Typically, this will be for

meeting rooms and break-out rooms of 2,000 square feet and smaller. The improvement in guest experience is dramatic, for all types of meetings.

The Infrastructure. This is the service and show power, telecom and internet services, cabling, connectivity, and rigging and hang points. We encourage providing four-packs or six-packs of Category 5e cabling tie lines to all function spaces; with multi-mode fiber to the larger rooms as well. These should be brought back to the A/V room and landed at patchpanels so any connector can be re-purposed for any service in any room at any time; a very cost-effective and flexible approach.

It is also important to provide **wired** high-speed internet services, in addition to the ubiquitous wireless WiFi. ANY presentation or meeting function that is internet-based must be wired; do NOT rely on wireless. And, there are many corporate clients and government agencies that do not permit the use of wireless in their meetings.

This cabling infrastructure must be able to provide telephone services as well. Corporate LANs can be securely accessed via dial-up switched services and the current best practice for video teleconferences is still via switched-services such as ISDN and T1 lines; this will be the case for at least the next few years.

The Systems. Finally, of all of the possibilities for audiovisual systems, start with a high-quality sound system (for voice) that is based on an array of ceiling speakers. All meetings need voice reinforcement, and there is no better way to provide high intelligibility in the typical flexible function space than this approach. I'm not saying NOT build in anything else; but start with the sound systems.

And again, if you're planning a remodeling or renovation, DO IT/AV NOW...All Aboard!

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