

## The time has come for hybrid meetings

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### Story Highlights

Meetings managers no longer fear virtual event technology. Together, online and physical meetings components drive business engagement and create new revenue opportunities.

North American meeting planners expect to hold more meetings in 2011.

Paraphrasing Mark Twain, "Accounts of the death of face-to-face meetings have been greatly exaggerated."

The Great Recession coupled with the AIG Effect not only led to millions of dollars in cancelled or deferred meetings, but also helped push corporate America into the use of new technology as a means of replacing those meetings.

However, the advent of "hybrid" meetings—online presence complementing and enhancing physical events—is putting to rest concerns that face-to-face meetings might be reduced even further or possibly become obsolete.

And there is significant evidence available now to support that statement.

"Meeting professionals no longer fear that virtual event technology will cannibalize their physical programs," wrote Maxine Golding in [Conference Direct Meeting Mentor Online](#), April 2011. "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."



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A good example of hybrids already in place was the annual meeting in Las Vegas earlier this year of the Professional Convention Management Association. PCMA 365—its virtual experience—featured live interviews, general, plenary and selected session streaming and moderated chat. The event concluded with many of the meeting manager attendees staying on for the co-located virtual summit.

"We've reached the tipping point," said Michael Doyle, executive director of the Virtual Edge Institute. "It's now a given that you need online presence with your physical event. Together they drive business engagement and create new revenue opportunities."

Doyle cautioned they were still in the early stages of developing this "powerful tool."

This merging together of online components with traditional face-to-face meeting formats bodes well for the future of off-site business meetings—the mother's milk for so many group-oriented hotels, resorts and conference centers.

### A look inside the numbers

And where would hotels be without face-to-face meetings?

Let's not forget, despite the hard times, the U.S. meetings industry contributed more than US\$350 billion of direct economic contribution to the economy in 2009, representing 250 million roomnights to the hotel industry, according to a PricewaterhouseCoopers survey of 3,510 professional meetings managers.

Corporate and business events were responsible for nearly three out of four (71%) of the 1.5 million events held at U.S. hotels in 2010. Corporate and business travelers—52% of all meeting participants—are the driving force of the U.S. meetings industry, according to the PwC study.

### More meetings industry good news

North American meeting planners expect to hold more meetings in 2011 following two years of challenging times, and they expect to work with higher budgets and enjoy higher attendance, according to the 2011 Meetings Market Trends Survey, published by Meetings Focus.

The survey, conducted among nearly 700 professional meetings managers,

indicated respondents "Also expect prices to increase."

And one other national survey conducted by Colliers PKF Hospitality Research found "optimism rising" among 148 professional meetings managers interviewed.

"Overall affordability" was rated as the most important criteria when selecting an event destination. Of special note, 71% of planners surveyed identified "room rates" as the No. 1 item hoteliers are "willing to concede." Conversely, hoteliers are less willing to budge on reductions in service and cancellation fees, according to the study.

Other highlights of the survey completed in early September 2010:

- 37% of the planners believe attendance at their events will rise in 2011;
- only 6% foresee a decline in attendance—down from 18% year over year;
- corporate and association budgets for meetings and exhibitions appear to be growing;
- more than 50% indicated the economy is no longer affecting destination and meeting venue choices;
- 30% stated they will not have to cut any costs in 2011; and
- 53% expect cost cuts in food and beverage, while 34% expect them in off-site events.

### **Holding out hope**

Let us hope these new hybrid meetings flourish; they're a win-win for hotels, groups, suppliers and customers. And please, let us not hear again that physical events and face-to-face meetings will be "gone with the wind."

And let us hope, too, hotel sales associates have learned from their tough selling experiences of '09 and '10 and are smarter, better prepared and eager to solicit, capture and satisfy this anticipated increase in meetings and event demand.

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