Trends in Meeting Technology

The design and operation of meeting facilities requires a clear understanding of the types of meetings and the communications technology required. There are distinct differences in the types of meetings held in smaller or high-end properties and purpose-built conference centers as compared to full-service hotels. Let's look at the differences.

The difference in meeting types is distinguished in collaborative-style meetings versus presentation-style meetings. The former involves smaller, higher-level management meetings that are typically held in conference centers, executive retreats, high-end hotels, and in corporate boardrooms. These participants are typically privileged to have healthy budgets for the latest technology, assistants trained in PowerPoint, and access to the corporate creative services department. They are also quite competitive and embrace communication technologies when it helps them advance their programs and agendas. By their nature, collaborative-style meetings use a higher level of technology and more of it, to equip and "empower" the audience to speak and present as well as the presenter, moderator, or facilitator.

Since these meetings involve a high level of interactivity and collaboration among participants, the technology tends to be distributed and flexible. Secure high-speed Internet access is typically required and increasingly, these meetings are using Internet collaboration (PlaceWare, MS LiveMeeting, WebEx, etc.) and standards-based video teleconferencing.

After these collaborative meetings, the results are re-worked at the corporate level and spokespersons for upper management and middle managers meet at larger hotels to present the results of these meetings to the rest of the company management in a presentation-style format.

Presentation-style meetings are typically given to larger groups and involve a minimal amount of audience participation or feedback, typically limited to questions from the audience. The information presented is one-way in that the majority of information flows from the presenter into the audience. Less technology is involved, but on a larger scale: bigger displays, bigger sound systems.

Across all facilities large and small, the attendees' needs for Internet connectivity are very high. The need to connect, both in the guestrooms and in public areas for laptop computers to access e-mail, etc. is critical. Hi-speed Internet access is now an assumed utility, and wireless Internet connectivity is becoming more ubiquitous. Airports, coffee shops, shopping malls, college campuses, even whole cities such as New York and San Francisco are building wireless Internet clouds, in some cases for free.

Each venue must have a plan to provide wired and wireless Internet access and understand that the revenue stream from these services is dwindling. The key issues in Internet access include cost, security, speed, reliability, and support. Wired Internet access will ALWAYS be more secure, higher speed, and more reliable, so all function spaces must be equipped to provide wired Internet access. Wireless Internet for public access is less secure; search the web on the term "Airjack" for more information. So, while hotels need to provide public wireless access, more secure private wireless network service can be provided on the same system, if planned properly.

As meeting technologies and meeting planners expectations increase, hotels must rise to the challenge or be left behind. The infrastructure of the facility may become a limiting factor, whether it is the quality of the power service, the room acoustics and lighting, or the architectural layout and finishes of the space. Any renovation or new construction project should consider the opportunity to improve these elements to accommodate the newer technologies.

Finally, for many meetings, the use of "low tech" presentation tools such as flip charts, white boards, and overhead projectors is still fairly consistent across all venue types. There are many trainers and presenters that want to spontaneously respond to the group's needs and interests and collect sketches, "parking lot" issues, questions, etc. on flip charts as the session progresses. So, while it is important to embrace the latest trends in meeting technologies, we must also keep a healthy inventory of the basics.

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