

Technology and its Impact on the Meetings & Conference Center Industries

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It has been decades since the Internet and World Wide Web first opened their virtual doors to the world, and although traditionally the meetings industry has tended to lag in adopting new technology, all of this is changing — and fast.

Today's world of Blackberry addicted executives, tech-savvy meeting planners and gadget-friendly presenters are forcing conference centers to provide state-of-the-art technology as a standard practice – or else risk competition taking their business.

Technology standards within the industry are advancing as quickly as new innovations emerge. Gone are the days when an overhead projector was considered high-tech; wireless connectivity has quickly become the standard. LCD Projectors, video conferencing and computers, once considered luxury pieces of equipment, are now customary.

Technology is here to stay

It's no secret that the trend is constant connectivity whether it's through our computers, cell phones or email—even when we aren't at work. The emergence of BlackBerrys has shown a record number of people reliant upon technology as they strive to be more productive, accessible and efficient.

A recent study conducted by Intel reveals that wireless users were able to complete 52 more minutes per week of connected activities during meetings compared to wired users, thereby increasing their productivity. Conference center locations have, as a result, seen an increased need to stay up-to-date with new, advanced technology as BlackBerry "addicts" demand connectivity on a 24/7 basis.

Conference centers managed by ARAMARK Harrison Lodging (AHL), a leader in the meeting and conference center industry, report an all-time surge in wireless usage, as corporations require executives and staff to get their work done even when they are in meetings. Wireless is not only requested, it's become imperative.

Catering to the technological needs of meeting planners and "BlackBerry addicted" executives can require some of the most advanced technology available on the market today. So what kinds of modern technology should be standard in all conference centers, and what's above the norm?

IACC sets the standard — going beyond is key

As technology is ever more important at conference centers, meeting planners and the conference center industry agree that it's not only about technology, but the right kind of technology and a trained staff who knows what they are doing.

The International Association of Conference Centers (IACC), a non-profit organization whose mission is to assist members in providing the most productive meeting facilities worldwide, requires technology standards—Universal Criteria—that conference centers must adhere to in order to qualify as an IACC-certified center. IACC facilities represent the highest-quality venues available to meeting professionals.

For instance, on-site standard conference technology must be included as part of the IACC conference package including flip charts, microphones, image and video display equipment. Additionally, conference centers must offer and promote a package plan that includes computer and video image display equipment in the main meeting room. IACC-approved conference centers must also provide skilled technicians who are thoroughly proficient in creative program consultation; equipment setup, operation and instruction; and who are available for immediate response to service needs.

However, I recommend that conference centers adhere to an even higher level of standard than required by the IACC Universal Criteria. For example, many of the AHL conference centers offer three projection sources, video conferencing in multiple rooms, easy-to-use touch panel controls, multiple forms of Internet access (wired and wireless), a centralized control room for easy technical assistance and two computers at each podium.

As new technology cures the traditional boring business meeting, meeting planners are making more tech-savvy requests. Provision of equipment such as rear screen projection, smart boards, photo documentation projectors, speaker phone technology with spider web sound system, integrated audio visual and sound system panels with smart touch podium technology and plasma build-in screens are now necessary to remain competitive.

Even more hip and new, Wikis, "shared online work spaces" or Web sites that let users easily add, edit or remove content, have been discovered in the meeting world. Wikis are being used both as a planning tool and as a forum for attendees to network and share ideas on the content before, during and after an event. Having the right equipment to support Wikis is important in a conference center's repertoire of technology offerings.

The R. David Thomas Executive Conference Center located on Duke University's West Campus offers advanced technological equipment and more. For example, pod-casting is available on-site, and Mimio boards – whiteboards that capture and can save written images from the desktop – also hang in conference rooms for presenters. Telesuite communication centers also make R. David Thomas Executive Conference Center a leader in technology.

When considering where to host your next meeting, you may be interested in knowing that meeting planners specify that IACC-approved properties provide a comfort level significantly better than at other meeting facilities. Additionally, professional planners want to establish a solid partnership and a higher trust level with staff at a facility that has all the latest technology for their needs, which frees them up to concentrate on the content of their meeting.

Conference centers versus hotels

Many hotels today boast that they have "cutting-edge" technology in their conference centers. So why would a group want to meet in a conference center that offers state-of-the-art technology rather than just your average resort with free wireless Internet service in its meeting room?

One of the biggest things that set high-tech conference facilities apart is their versatility. It is one thing to promote a facility as "state of the art," but if the client or guest is not prepared to use it, that won't matter. Preparation, service, and versatile technology options are the key to a successful and positive meeting experience.

The full-service Charles F. Knight Executive Education Center at Washington University in St. Louis, for instance, is high-tech, but the equipment is also easy to use. And most importantly, the center offers full-time, on-site trained audio visual technical support to assist presenters and meeting coordinators.

What also sets conference facilities apart – including the Charles F. Knight Executive Education Center – is the variety of items available. For example, the center features a versatile document camera instead of an overhead projector. This offers the presenter the convenience of using transparencies, plain paper, and 3-D objects. Another high-tech gadget available at the center allows the user the ability to display three sources at the same time. A hotel room with just one projector requires the user to switch back and forth from one source to the other, whereas the technology classrooms at the Charles F. Knight Center have three projection systems that permit instructors the luxury of showing three different sources at the same time.

Conference centers like the Chauncey Conference Center located in Princeton, NJ, offer packages designed specifically for group meetings that include the higher-end equipment not necessarily offered at hotels. Conference centers also have an inventory

of equipment, so if additional technology is needed it is readily available and meeting rooms are designed for meeting settings, rather than banquet space.

Keeping up with new technology

Innovations constantly bring technology to the next level, and conference centers such as those managed by AHL need to constantly renovate to maintain their high-tech capabilities.

Therefore, AHL conference center managers review available equipment regularly, sometimes on a monthly basis. Many AHL conference centers make small changes or upgrades every six months or at minimum, every three to five years. It is easier to make numerous small changes and upgrades gradually instead of re-evaluating every two years and then having to make massive upgrades.

As President, ARAMARK Harrison Lodging, Bruce Fears is responsible for ARAMARK's operations at over 50 conference centers, corporate training centers and specialty hotels in educational environments, as well as 14 state parks and other resort operations across the United States. He returned to ARAMARK in May 2005 as Executive Vice President, ARAMARK Parks and Resorts. He assumed his current position in October 2005, following the integration of ARAMARK's conference center and corporate training business with its parks and resorts business. Mr. Fears received his bachelor's of arts degree from Bridgewater College in Virginia and continued through programs at University of London's School of Economics and University of Florida's School of Management. He currently sits on the National Board of the Travel Industry of America and is a founder of the Grand Circle Association. He previously served on the California State Park concessioners board, has testified before Congress on National Park Concession Policy and was the sole U.S. presenter at the World Congress of Parks in Durban, South Africa in 2004. Mr. Fears can be contacted at 425-957-9708 or fears-bruce@aramark.com