

Meeting Planning Software:

TOOLS & TRENDS

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From three-dimensional virtual meetings to slick event scheduling applications for your mobile phone, technology for the meeting planning industry is advancing at a fast pace. Your meeting budgets can benefit from software tools that reduce paper consumption, negate travel costs and trim staff hours. Here's a sampling of the latest trends.

Virtual Meetings

While many planners argue that virtual meetings eliminate vital face-to-face customer interaction, they can be used to supplement a live event and create a longer lead generation time post-event. The event host can keep product information fresh with easy online updates and at-

tendees can go back to the online system and review their products as many times as they want, thus extending the sales cycle. Show organizers can build a one-on-one relationship with their customers by integrating online chatting and video conferencing components.

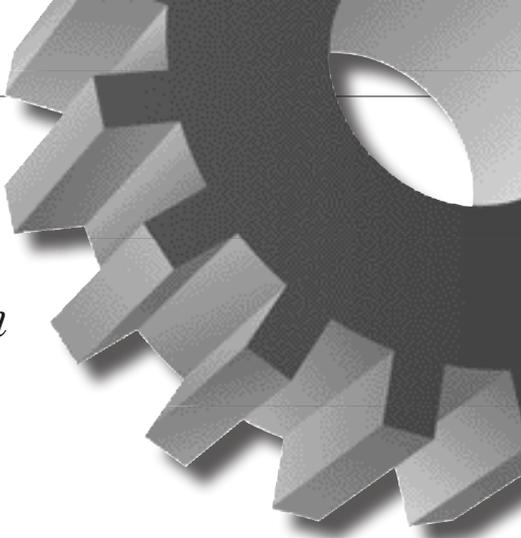
While producing an online event may seem daunting when it comes to the technological knowledge required, software companies are making their applications easy for the average user. iCongo Live produces virtual trade show and online event management software that allows the event organizer and exhibitors to update content without the use of a Web programmer. Their Content Management System allows for easy insertion of text, graphics and Web site

links and includes a virtual "help desk" for questions.

Virtual events are especially conducive for geographically dispersed audiences who may not have the travel budget or time to attend cross-country or international programs. A three-dimensional technology allows attendees to view all sides of an exhibitor's booth and product display. They get the same 360 degree experience without having to physically walk a crowded trade show floor.

InXpo's virtual event software includes "visitor metrics" that tell the exhibitor who visited their booth, how many times and what products they viewed. Leads can be further qualified by integrating information from virtual business-card exchanges, live chats, blogs, message forums and surveys.

Virtual software then provides a complete solution from production of the show to registration of attendees to lead generation analytics.



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Mobile Technologies

With the birth of smart phones — mobile devices with e-mail and Web browsing capabilities — efficiency for business travelers increased, allowing for real-time communication with customers and clients. This need for efficiency and instant updates has carried over to the exposition industry. Technologies such as a2z Inc.'s Chirp E mobile application provides attendees with show updates delivered to their mobile phone.

The technology is also environmentally friendly since it can replace paper show directories by allowing attendees to access the trade show layout and session information on their mobile devices. Attendees can create personalized session agendas and receive a reminder from a ChirpE “buzz” or text message that their session is about to begin.

The software also integrates with social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. Updates posted to the show's Web site will be updated at the same time on the event's Facebook page and can also be sent as an alert to the attendee's phone.

Mobile technologies will eventually benefit the meeting planner performing

a site visit and researching group venue options. Recently unveiled in the Netherlands to identify real estate for sale or rent, Layar is a mobile phone technology that uses GPS mapping data to provide information about the buildings around you. Mobile devices with a camera can be pointed at a structure, which will add a layer of information indentifying the building and providing a Web link for contact information. As this technology expands to include public places of interest, meeting planners can reduce their research time by determining venue availability and pricing with the point of their phone.

Hotels are also using mobile technologies to increase the speed of room service ordering. Run Triz and GB-Cblue are two applications that provide touch screen ordering from the guest's mobile phone. Menus are posted online and orders are billed directly to the guest's room or credit card. The technology allows the guest to bypass phone chat with hotel staff and frees hotel staff from telephone time. Some hotels have expanded the technology to allow for online scheduling of wake-up calls and housekeeping service.

Strategic Software

While using online applications to organize the logistical operations of your meeting is not new, customizing software to determine return-on-investment (ROI) for your program is a developing idea. In the past, meeting planners have used traditional “desktop” software such as Excel or Word to provide an overview of meeting successes.

From a budget analysis of cost versus revenue to attendee demographics and purchasing potential, the determination of ROI has largely been a manual process. Even when a company uses online meeting management software to manage their budget, meeting space and rooming lists, they do not always have an integrated capacity to channel this information into a quantitative analysis.

MeetingMetrics offers an online system of ROI reporting where meeting data is calculated and formatted into a summary report of benefits received and revenue generated. The report can be aggregated into demographic groups and brings measurements down to an individual level. This is especially important for associations that need to provide their members with value and justification for their investment.

Exhibit Surveys Inc. has developed a Trade Show Planning and Measurement Tool to establish a database of all trade show results that can be turned into planning documents, calendars and reports. The tool includes a forecasting and results-tracking capability to manage annual budgets. Smaller companies that participate in a limited number of shows can benefit from a self-paced version of the tool while a more sophisticated version is available for corporations participating in large shows with many planning variables.

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