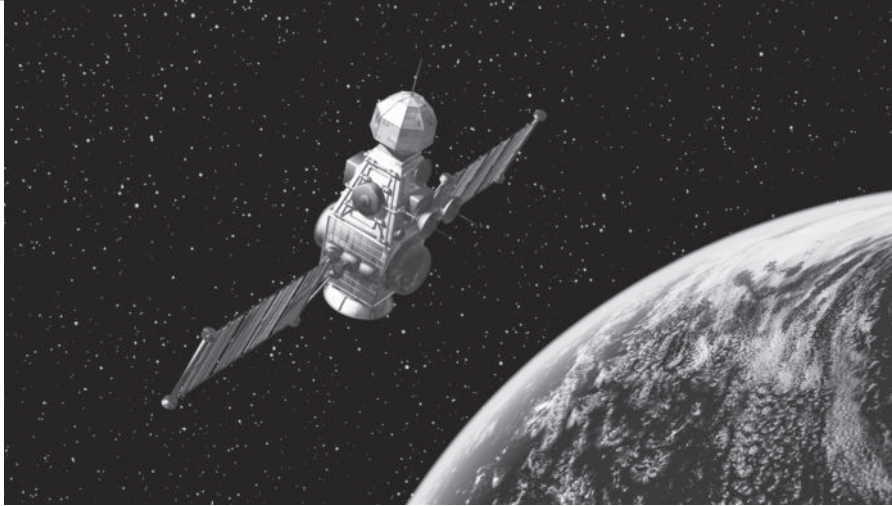


# Technology and the Meeting Professional



Satellite technology is used to beam MEEC programming to remote locations.  
*Tsuneomp/Fotolia*

## Chapter Objectives

After reading this chapter, the learner will be able to:

- Recognize how technology currently impacts meeting professionals
- Identify new technologies that support meeting/event marketing and communications
- Understand the critical technology terms that apply to the hospitality industry
- Recognize the best Web portals for researching industry information
- Understand how social media is impacting the meetings industry

## INTRODUCTION

Advancements in technology over the past five years are creating seismic shifts in how meetings are marketed and produced. It's not that rates, dates, and space aren't still the key negotiation items, nor is it that technology has eliminated the need for face-to-face meetings. In fact, both of these components remain as true today as they did 30 years ago.

What has radically changed, and exponentially increased, are the tools at the disposal of the meeting/event professional. **Social media** and mobile devices have become an inextricable part of the event landscape. Event and guest bandwidth needs continue to grow in importance and in many cases become a tipping point in the site selection process.

Conference attendees, in large part due to the increase of generation Y attendees, are now demanding a less passive, more interactive experience at the event. Meetings that preach "turn your phones off" in the meeting space now find that attendees believe this is an antiquated model. Attendee engagement through social media and mobile devices are the lifeblood of most successful events.

## Chapter Outline

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From mature to late breaking technologies, this chapter will provide the information required to be knowledgeable about what technology is impacting the MEEC industry and how it will help ensure success.

## BEFORE THE EVENT OR CONFERENCE

Technology-savvy meeting professionals have more tools than ever before to help research, promote, and organize their event. While this “pre-event” use of technology was once the primary use of technology in the MEEC, it still can be said that technology applications are of great support to the conference planner in this phase of the event’s lifecycle. From desktop uses to virtual site selection support, not to mention the ubiquitous Web-based marketing tools, the planners certainly have plenty of choices in making the process work for them.

### Virtual Site Selection and Research

**ONLINE RFPs** As the World Wide Web developed in the mid to late 1990s, one of the first tools available, both through convention and visitors bureau (CVB) Web sites and hotel and third-party planning sites, was the one that allowed the planner to create an efficient online RFP (Request for Proposal—the tool many planners use to distribute information to hotels about potential meetings). The model continues to shift from a fee-based RFP to a free approach, from the sites of hotels and CVBs to those of third-party organizations. The idea remains the same: Allow the planners to input their specifications (specs) easily, and allow the Web to be the conduit for distributing the information to potential cities and hotels.

Without standardization, each RFP has its own nuances, which could cost the planner time in completing each one. Planners still need to determine which vehicle (CVB-based, hotel-based, or third-party-based) is best to distribute their meeting specs.

Some planners eschew the RFP forms, and just use e-mail and the Internet to save time in their process by allowing an Office-based spec sheet to be distributed. No matter how one looks at it, the technology is saving significant time in helping planners distribute their meeting requirements.

**VIRTUAL TOURS** Industry stats have estimated that over one-half of all meetings are booked without a formal site inspection, a number that continues to grow. While there is no substitute for visiting a hotel or destination, the Web’s visual capabilities have allowed planners to at least get a sense of a facility if time or budgetary restrictions prevent their physical inspection.

The concept of a virtual site inspection has morphed over the years, from its meager beginnings in using only pictures of meeting rooms. Videos and 360° panoramic tours of meeting spaces and sleeping rooms are now the norm, and at a significantly lower cost than ever.

### Technology and Site Inspection

While **virtual tours** offer the planner a feel for a site, it can never fully replace the actual site visit. In addition to the visit confirming (or not) the virtues of a hotel or event facility, a new critical component is in the inspection of the property’s technological capabilities. This is both in the meeting space as well as in the guest room.

The thread that applies to both meeting and guest room technologies is in the bandwidth requirements. Bandwidth will be extensively covered later in this chapter.

While bandwidth hogs much of the tech site inspection conversation, it is not the only part of the site analysis. How a property integrates technology into their on-site experience is another consideration. Hotels are using tablets and smartphones to enhance the guest experience. From a downloadable hotel app to an in-room iPad acting as a virtual concierge, this guest room enhancement is becoming more heavily used. Perhaps in a few years, we won’t even need to discuss this, as it will be a standard part of the guest experience.

There are plenty other tech features that can enhance the value of the hotel to the planner, by creating a better on-site experience for the guest. Mobile hotel check-ins expedite the guests’ arrival. Strategically placed device charging stations are always appreciated. A well thought out hotel app can make for a better on-site experience.

So, it is clear that while the event professional needs to continue to do their due diligence with the traditional site inspection elements, they should now add technology to that list.

### **Meeting Industry Information Portals**

While less elegant, but still enormously useful, industry information **portals** continue to thrive. While search engines are incredibly useful for general research, the MEEC industry has a great deal of information at the fingertips of the savvy Web users who can find resources and tools at their disposal in a few clicks. There are many sites that have great information, but their discussion is focused only on where registration (or paid subscription) is not a requirement of entry.

Any discussion of information portals for the hospitality industry begins with the Web site of Corbin Ball. From his home page, linking onto his favorites page presents the viewer with nearly 3,000 industry-related Web sites, organized categorically. Ball keeps the site updated frequently and has plenty of additional information of value for the meeting professional.

A newer Web portal, also designed for planners, is the Meeting Pool. It is on a smaller scale than Corbin's site; this site includes the "Event Tech Decision Engine," designed to facilitate choosing of tech vendors for the event.

## **MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS**

Are event Web sites obsolete? Perhaps not yet. However with the enormous growth of social media tools for event information and conversation, coupled with the mobile devices becoming the go-to tool to connect to the Web, an expensive, "old school" Web site, without a leaner mobile version, isn't going to serve the audience as well in the coming years.

### **Web Sites and Strategic Communications**

It used to be all about one-way communication: Information sent from the event organizers to the (potential) attendees. In the past few years, as social network sites have become synonymous with real-time communication, the model of event communication has clearly become a two-way model.

Web sites are still an important part of the communication conversation. Not only do they need to integrate a two-way communication model, but they still must serve the purpose of efficiently providing critical information to the conference attendees. The best online event models have both successful social media and mobile strategies and are easy to find, navigate, and even make purchases from the event Web site.

### **Event Web Sites**

Overshadowed in the social media revolution is that one-way tools still have some importance in MEEC. The event Web site is to today what the conference marketing brochure was a generation ago: a place to provide information, create interest, and, hopefully, offer people one way to register for the conference.

The best Web sites integrate a two-way strategy (such as including Facebook and Twitter feeds), but having that site that can allow people to find out everything they need to know about the event is of critical importance. The core rules of a successful conference Web site include:

- The need for a clear, easy way to find information.

- Focus on the 5 Ws about the conference or event (who, what, where, when, and why).

- The ability to make the sale (in the MEEC industry, the payment process on the registration form).

A frequent issue with event organizers is not getting information on the Web site early enough. While there is no definitive time frame, it is clear that if you're running an annual event, information about next year's meeting should be ready to go live the day that this year's meeting concludes. It's just common sense. If people are pleased with the conference, why shouldn't you allow them to register for next year when their memories are still vivid from the past event?



Social Media  
 Odua Images/Fotolia

## Social Media

While the conference Web site is still the fulcrum of the online marketing presence, the usage of social media tools to enhance the traditional Web presence is an essential element of today's online meeting, marketing, and communications.

Do you want to know a sure-fire way to kill a conference? Make sure you don't use any social media. While the value of social media is difficult to accurately quantify (though there aren't a shortage of tools telling you how you should be doing that), the effect of social media in meetings and every form of communication today is undeniable. The quantity of social media options for the planners is staggering. The following are the ones making the greatest impact today.

**TWITTER** For many event professionals **Twitter**, and not Facebook, is the essential conference social tool. Twitter has become the real-time conversation place. While the amount of content flowing on Twitter is overwhelming, it can be fine tuned, and made highly useful, for the event professional.

At the core of the Twitter value is the hashtag (#). Used before a keyword, such as the event's acronym (e.g., #MPIWEC14), the hashtag provides a way for posts to be threaded and aggregated. It has become standard for many planners to establish their event hashtag at the start of the event's promotion and marketing cycle, allowing the organic conversation to take place and keep the conference dialogue going.

Aside from events, hashtags also allow the event industry to share fantastic content with one another. Many industry professionals agree that both the quality and quantity of content on Twitter surpasses any traditional media designed for the MEEC industry. One such example is the #eventprofs tag, which all meeting professionals need to follow.

**CURATION TOOLS** Due to the extreme amount of content coming at us (which can be referred to as the Social Tsunami), we need tools to help filter this flow. Social and mobile curation tools are designed for that purpose. Meeting professionals can (and should) be effective content publishers about their event. Two spectacular tools to help this include Paper.li and the mobile app Flipboard. Planners, as well as suppliers, can use the tools to create their own event magazine at no cost.

**FACEBOOK** The 600-pound gorilla of social media is indeed Facebook. With over 1 billion users, its reach cannot be denied. Event specific Facebook pages are becoming more frequently used, though many say the value of those aren't as great as they had hoped.

Facebook does have excellent meeting communities for people to share and follow industry content. At the apex of this is the MeCo (Meetings Community) Group. This is the Facebook extension of MeCo's popular Google Group list (also an excellent meeting professional online destination). This group offers an excellent peer to peer industry conversation.

In early 2014, Facebook released its first curation app. Called Facebook Paper, it is designed to transform Facebook's news feed into a richer content, story telling, and sharing platform. Time will tell how valuable a tool this may become to event planners.

**YOUTUBE** It is surprising, with the amount of video on the Web, that every conference and organization does not have its own YouTube channel. Stats continually show that video posts have better traction and response than text and/or photos. A conference YouTube channel can include event promotion, speaker and attendee interviews, and other snippets of valuable content for the attendees. In our industry, Collinson Media marketplaces (Connect, Collaborate, and Rejuvenate) have continued to use their YouTube channel and videos in a "best of class" approach.

**LINKEDIN** LinkedIn may be more rolodex than true social media, but many planners, especially baby boomers, find it to be their go-to social tool. LinkedIn has a content curation service (called Pulse), though many users find their greatest value to be the groups and high level communities hosted on LinkedIn.

**GOOGLE+** Google's social media offering is not the ghost town that critics claim. In fact, many people believe that the level of professional interaction is greater here than any other social media. Google+ also spawned one of the best tech tools of the past five years. Google Hangouts (now an independent app) allows anyone to host free video conferences for up to 10 people. It also has seamless publishing of these videos out to the user's YouTube channel.

### Other Social Tools

Over the past few years, visually based social media has exploded onto the scene. Many planners (especially special event and wedding planners) use Pinterest as their essential social tool. With its focus solely on images, it has a very passionate following.

Mobile/social tool Instagram has seen great adoption in the MEEC industry, as planners can get attendees to be involved in the documenting of their meeting. Combining the power of the visual image with the content threading of the hashtag, it's becoming a frequently used meeting tool.

Another facet of social media usage in our industry is the meeting's customized social community. Frequently integrated within conference apps, these services allow a private social channel for conference goers. Companies such as Pathable and IntroNetworks can design and customize these experiences for events.

Regarding "legacy" social media, there still is a great value proposition for many groups. **Blogging** continues to be a great way to establish content expertise, as well as enhance search engine optimization. **Podcasting** still can offer great streamed educational content. **RSS** (Really Simple Syndication) feeds, somewhat supplanted by Twitter, Facebook, and other curation tools, still can provide the user the ability to aggregate and stream content to their followers.

What's next on the social media horizon for meeting professionals? The continued use of these tools is a given. The integration of social media with your mobile experience will also continue to grow. As for new tools, just wait a few days. We haven't seen the end of discovery and development in this area.

### Room Design Software

Another level of more efficient communications is how the planners can share information with the facility to ensure that their wants and needs are translated into the actions of the facility. Conference resumes create a very effective flow chart of what has to happen, and at what time.



Certain aspects of the event (themed parties, banquets, or just unique setups) are not as efficiently communicated by the written work. In these cases, planners use CAD (computer-aided design) **room design software** to enhance the communications.

The MEEC industry has many versions of this type of software. They tend to be simple to use but can greatly range in price. Some work better for meetings; others focus on special events. Two products that provide this capability include Meeting Matrix and Vivien.

The latest in-room design enhancements is the 3-D room tour. Once you create your room setup, a click of a button transforms it into a virtual 3-D tour, with the room setup precisely as the event professional diagrammed. In some cases, the hotel can enhance that by providing the actual room images (carpeting, windows, lighting, sconces) as part of the 3-D walkthrough. In this case, you may not even be sure if the image is real or virtual.

### **Selling the Show Floor**

Another way technology is enhancing the event communications and marketing is by assisting the trade show manager in selling the show floor. Traditional exhibit sales were focused on a document called the Exhibit Prospectus, along with a generic layout of the show floor.

By posting the show floor diagram on the Web, and using its interactivity, trade show managers can now offer potential buyers a better look at where they might want their booth. Advantages of this include updated layouts (as the show floor diagram is frequently modified when exhibitors buy space) as well as helping buyers locate a floor space that is either near or far from their competitors (depending on their approach). The use of colors to represent booths can help differentiate which ones are available, and the ones where premium costs apply.

Almost every trade show now uses some kind of virtual enhancement to the trade show floor selling process. These sites also include a downloadable version of the Exhibit Prospectus, as well as other information of use for the exhibitor. One of the better known vendors is Expodad.

### **Online Registration**

A few years ago, when discussing event technology, the topic of online registration would dominate the conversation. One of the first critical benefits of the technology to the MEEC industry,



3-D view of exhibition booth  
*Vege/Fotolia*

the ability to register for the event online, truly enhanced the marketing and communication of the event organizers.

Currently, the industry needs to look at online registration as a relatively mature technology, which most planners who need to use it do. It is interesting to note that some meetings still do not use online registration. Many meetings, especially internal meetings where attendance is mandatory, do not wish to incur the expense of establishing a professional online registration presence, preferring to use more traditional, or even e-mail approaches to handling meeting registration.

With this said, there are still a number of issues that confront planners when establishing the online registration process. The largest one for many planners is the integration of data. If it is agreed conceptually that even in the best of circumstances, 100% of the attendees will not use an online service, then the planners' challenge is to make sure that when they integrate the data, there are no inaccuracies or duplication of records. Ensuring that the online service can properly export into whichever tool you are using to maintain the remaining records (such as Excel) is a critical question to ask when considering companies to use.

Another issue that is raised by organizations using online services is in the added, unexpected expenses. One particular area of concern is in the creation of additional reports. The planner has two approaches to offset this issue. One is understanding all of the reports they might require and having this discussion negotiated into the package when purchasing the service. The other, more technology-savvy approach is to learn how to use the report writing feature. Many online registration services use the product "Crystal Reports" to generate reports for the client. For others, they still download content into Excel to manage the data.

Regarding online resources that can perform the online registration service, there are too many to mention. Research using an industry portal, such as Corbin Ball and his industry favorites, will give the user a plethora of options from which to choose.

## Desktop Applications

While there are dozens of industry specific software packages on the market, the clear leader in the MEEC industry is still the basic MS Office Suite. With Word, Excel, Access, and PowerPoint, the event professional has the tools on his/her desktop to manage all components of any event. However, it is important to note that the "desktop" of the planner is now less a traditional desktop or laptop PC as it may be the tablet or other mobile devices where planners and suppliers do the majority of their work.

MS office is beginning to shift to becoming more of a Web-based tool. Office 365 is the Web-based version of the standard MS tools. Continuing to compete with other online office-based tools, such as Google Drive, these tools continue to be standards for meeting professionals, with the only twist being the portability of the device on which they need to be utilized.

However, this general package does not fill every need. Many planners, especially in organizations with noncentralized meeting departments, need tools that allow information to be shared across the organization. The industry has a number of tools that foster better information centralization.

At the core of this need to centralize information is the ability for organizations to be aware on the amount of purchasing leverage they have. The individual planning a small meeting within a large organization is at a disadvantage in terms of negotiation, unless they can combine their hotel room contracting with others within the organization. This is where third-party software tools can have a significant advantage over the MS Suite. While more expensive, they frequently provide exceptional cross-organization value by allowing organizations to bundle their purchasing needs.

The Convention Industry Council, the organization that manages the Certified Meeting Professional (CMP) examination, has been at the forefront of establishing the **Accepted Practices Exchange (APEX)**—for the MEEC industry. The essential concept of APEX is to make the industry more efficient by creating a set of standards that all parties within the industry would accept. As was noted earlier, APEX is also involved in helping planners understand conference bandwidth needs better. (A great link to learn more about APEX is found at the Convention Industry Web site, <http://www.conventionindustry.org/standardspractices/apex.aspx>.)

## DURING THE EVENT

You've created the ideal Web site. The social networks are in place and active. You efficiently communicated and marketed to your prospective attendees and exhibitors. You established an ongoing dialogue with your constituents using the various technologies. Is your technology usage finished? Of course not.

Even before you go on-site with the meeting/event, you need to be considering how you want technology to support your goals and objectives at the conference. From your setup work to awareness of the devices that can complement your (and your attendees') goals, technology is playing an enormous role in creating a successful conference/event experience for all of the event's shareholders—planners, exhibitors, and attendees.

### Setting Up Your Infrastructure

The event professional understands the importance of negotiations with hotels. From rates, dates, and space to every other aspect of the event, the professionals, armed with knowledge and information about their event and the destination, can have a productive give and take with the hotel, to create a win-win event.

However, many event professionals are fearful about or unaware of the technologies. Thus, they leave out any discussion of the technology during this part of the planning process. And, this can be a very expensive omission. The technology-savvy planner, however, understands enough about the technologies that support their event so that they know the need to plan for (even negotiate) it during the initial stages of planning.

As was discussed earlier, planners need to think about issues of bandwidth. They also need to think about how they will use the Internet and other technologies to support their goals. In addition, the technology-savvy planners will think about how their attendees will want to use technology to enhance their meeting experience. While Jane Planner may not be able to implement all of these technologies, she can identify which ones are most critical (and useful) to successfully achieve everyone's goals, thereby allowing the technology to play a spectacular supporting role in the success of the conference or event.

### Bandwidth

Simply defined, bandwidth is the maximum speed of the Internet coming into a facility or a space such as a meeting or guest room. Today's planner needs to be aware of the four major components to investigate and inquire about:

- Guest room
- Speaker/presentations
- HQ office needs
- Attendees meeting room needs

A critical question that the planner should ask about in these four areas is whether the hotel or venue can offer shared or dedicated bandwidth. As the names imply, shared bandwidth is where the internet pipeline is shared among the users. Hotel sleeping rooms are one example of this. Bandwidth in public spaces (like your neighborhood coffee bar) also is shared. Attendee bandwidth in the meeting space also falls under this category.

However, is shared bandwidth acceptable when your CEO is giving the big presentation, complete with streaming content from the Web? Since the speed of shared bandwidth is based on the number of users at any given time (as well as how they are using it), one cannot imagine any planner wanting to take that risk. Additionally, the organization's on-site management needs should also be a dedicated stream of bandwidth.

Today's planners have tools to test the bandwidth while they are on the site visit. The free app/Web tool "SpeedTest" allows the immediate testing of bandwidth into a space. Planners should understand that this is a snapshot at a given point of time and needs to be supplemented with conversations with the hotel or venue. The Convention Industry Council's APEX has created the industry's first Event Bandwidth Estimator, allowing planners to estimate their bandwidth needs based on projected attendees and fundamental categories of usage. For many meetings, bandwidth requirements are so critical for the success of the conference that they are part of the event contract.



### Technology Is Great: When It Works

A MEEC Industry conference included a session that was meant to be at the cutting edge of technology. Attendees sitting at tables were each provided a tablet while others were invited to use their smart devices. All were provided log on information. The concept was to have content streamed to each attendee. Two-way communication was incorporated where

attendees could send text to the presenters and participate in audience polling. The session began well. However as more and more attendees logged on, communication slowed and eventually the entire session crashed. This was due to insufficient bandwidth. Technology is great: when it works.

## Conference Apps

Perhaps the biggest shift in the usage of meeting technology over the past few years is the development and standardization of the conference mobile app. Just a few years ago, when smartphones such as the iPhone and Android were in their infancy, there was no thought about how a mobile device could somehow become the attendee's essential tool to navigate the conference. Yet fast forward a few years, and more tech-savvy (and "greener") planners are reducing their carbon footprint by minimizing (or in some cases eliminating) the need for conference programs and printed handouts by replacing them with **conference apps**.

Today's planner should begin thinking about producing a conference app at least a few months prior to the event, if not at the beginning stages of the event's life cycle. At its most essential, the conference app provides all of the information that had previously been published in the conference program and more.

## Two Essential Flavors

When thinking about creating an app for your conference or event, the first, and possibly most important consideration, is the style of app to choose. The two major approaches are "native apps" and "Web-based" apps. Both have pros and cons to them.

*Native apps* are the style of apps that we have become accustomed to using. These "programs" are downloaded and live inside of the mobile device. While connectivity is still important on-site for these devices, it is for either the downloading of the app, or the interactivity (primarily in social feeds) that is one of the apps' features. As the name implies, being a native app does mean that continual internet connectivity is not absolutely necessary for these to work. A major challenge and discussion point for the native app is in regard to the operating system for which it is written in order to be utilized. It has become trendy to build great apps for iOS (iPhone, iPad) devices, which has the negative impact of eliminating any user with an Android or other smart phone. The smart conference planner will make sure that whichever type of app is developed, that they maximize the number of attendees who can utilize it. Otherwise, why bother at all?

*Web-based apps* are more like mobile Web sites, optimized for the smaller screen. As such, for these to work at events, adequate bandwidth must be available to all conference attendees. Since many properties (and planners) still do not provide for this, this type of app won't work well in a limited bandwidth environment. However, on the plus side of this process is that an attendee with any smart device (one that has a browser) can use this service.

App pricing also runs the gamut. Freemium, ad-based models, such as Guidebook and Bloodhound, provide the planner the opportunity to create a low-cost/free version. This is especially useful when implementing the conference app for the first time. EventMobi, a Web-based app provider in the industry, couples their product with the ability for the planner to design it themselves. Other top players in the meeting app industry include QuickMobile, CrowdCompass, DoubleDutch, and E-proDirect. This is definitely a changing landscape.

One other app conversation that is part of the productivity tools of today's planners are the apps that they use to get their work done. The challenge in discussing this is how quickly new apps (and new needs) are being developed. For the current time, here's a list of a few apps, which many event professionals have found exceptionally helpful.

Cloud Storage—Dropbox  
 Notetaking—Evernote  
 File Reading—Good Reader  
 Translation Tool—Word Lens  
 Airport Flight Info—Flight Board

### **Wired versus Wireless or Both?**

When considering the bandwidth needs of an event, another consideration in MEEC venues is how the bandwidth is delivered to the attendee. Facilities have the capability of both wired and wireless connectivity. The tech-savvy planner will discuss both these options during their site visit. Wired connectivity tends to be a bit more stable but is clearly of little value to the attendee who wants and needs their connectivity wherever they are at the event.

If the planner is really thinking through the area of connectivity thoroughly, they will even find out how good the cellular signal is within the facility. Phones that have 4G LTE capabilities (which most major ones do) can provide high-speed bandwidth through their cellular signal, thereby reducing the reliance (and in some cases cost) of expensive dedicated wireless bandwidth. Like any technology, this should be tested throughout the venue to see which carriers work well and where the dead spots may be.

### **Digital Recording and Streaming Media**

The General Session is a critical part of any annual meeting or conference. The marketing success of many conferences depends on the quality (and often name recognition) of the keynote speakers because they establish the tone of a conference.

However, there are many people who cannot attend and would like to watch/hear the talk, either in real time or on an archived basis. The organization can extend its keynotes (as well as other meeting components) to those who cannot attend by digitally recording the event and streaming it over the Internet (frequently referred to as Webcasting) or creating podcasting content to share or sell.

If you have never done this at a meeting, be aware that a lot of extra coordination and support is required, especially with video content. The event professional will need to have cameras (and video/audio engineers) in the session to ensure that the recorded material is of good quality. Also needed is a company to digitize the video into a format that can be electronically distributed. The event professional will need to determine whether the event should be streamed live (always a more risky proposition) or archived. Another issue to decide is whether people will have free access to it, or will the organization charge a fee for people to virtually attend?

While learning about the technical side, the event professional must also understand a great deal about their audience, and what they might want to view online. Age and demographics certainly play a role in whether an entire session should be digitized, or if a highlights approach is best for their group. The adage “Know Your Group” applies to all aspects of meeting planning, even the technological side.

### **NFC and RFID**

These two acronyms are at the core of many of the interactive technologies available on-site at conferences. **NFC** stands for Near Field Communications, which is a short-range, high-frequency wireless technology, allowing for information exchange between certain devices. **RFID** stands for radio frequency identification and are the tags (readers) that can be used to access these signals. RFID tags are commonplace as anyone living in a city knows with tolls from bridges or tunnels using RFID tags (known by a variety of names, including EZPass, SmartPass, and others) to quickly pay these fees. They also can be used to inventory products in a company’s warehouse, enabling workers to better track their products. RFIDs and NFC are finding a use in the MEEC industry as well, mainly in use in **interactive nametags**.

### **Interactive Nametags and Networking Devices**

Although not as trendy as it was a few years ago, perhaps the most widely used RFID is occurring in nametags. Either attached to a slim piece of paper behind the badge, or as part of a slightly

larger wearable nametag device, the RFID-based service offers better networking and interactivity between conference attendees, as well as between attendees and vendors.

RFID devices frequently contain program contents, surveys, instant messaging capabilities, and other interactive tools for the attendee to utilize while at the event. The badge is now their communication device and program (as well as nametag) for the duration of the event. However, with the development of the smartphone, it is unclear whether this technology will continue to be used for the long haul.

The interactive, RFID-driven nametag, has two well-defined meeting-specific uses:

**CEU Tracking** Many organizations need to track attendance at each educational session in order to provide CEUs (continuing education units) for the attendee (in many industries, these units are critical to maintain certification required for employment). The RFID-based tag, coupled with readers in each room, can automatically track attendance, so that proper CEUs can be awarded. Medical and scientific meetings are conferences where a significant value of attending is to allow the individual to obtain the required CEUs.

**Interactive Message Centers** In the older days, conference message centers consisted of a phone (and a hired attendant to take messages), along with a cork board and push pins. Today's RFID-based systems can provide an electronic board that, as you walk past the board, will display your name and indicate whether you have any messages waiting. This is a far cry from cork board and push pins.

When thinking about the networking advantages of RFID devices, don't forget about the pre-event attendee networking options discussed earlier in the chapter. Today's attendee, when supported by a technology-savvy meeting professional, can truly take advantage of the enormous benefits of conference networking by using these systems. Tomorrow, perhaps these services will be completely integrated into one's personal mobile device.

## Lead Retrieval Systems

For many years, trade shows and exhibits have used **Lead Retrieval Systems** to help capture customer information. The process begins with the meeting organizer asking questions during the registration process that will help identify information of importance to the exhibitor. These questions often include the attendees purchasing responsibility, and nature of products and services in which they may have interest.

The information is coded into a badge, though it needn't be an RFID. From the 1990s through today, many groups still use a simple bar coding on the badge (or even a credit card-based system) that can contain this information.

When the attendee enters the trade show floor and interacts with an exhibitor, the exhibit staff members can ask to swipe the badge with their lead retrieval device (typically, these are rented to the exhibitor for the duration of the show by a vendor who is supporting the meeting). Once swiped, this information now resides in their handheld lead retrieval device. At day's end, the exhibitors can download this information to their spreadsheet or database, and have customized thank you notes e-mailed to the attendee before their work for the day is complete (not to mention excellent information about their prospective clients).

The job of the event professional in this process is to identify and select a system or service that can support the lead retrieval process. Since exhibitors require this level of information to determine whether exhibiting at a function will potentially help their business, lead retrieval systems are primarily used for exhibitions and trade shows. However, these systems have also been used to help facilitate attendee surveying using automated kiosks around the event.

Also available to the planner is what is known as a reverse lead retrieval system. Instead of the exhibitor scanning the badge of the attendee, the attendee uses a handheld device to scan information positioned in the booth of the exhibitor. When utilized, it is frequently found in the larger shows.

As for the future of lead retrieval systems, it is clear that the integration of this functionality into the smartphone (and frequently the conference app) is the new approach. With all of the devices that people carry around today, one more piece of hardware isn't high on the wish list.

### The “Virtual” Trade Show Booth Model

RetailNext was looking for a way to stand out on the crowded floor at Retail’s Big Show, hosted by the National Retail Federation at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center. The company decided to try a new tactic to entice attendees to stop at its booth: a life-size, lifelike virtual presenter from **Prsonas**.

The company positioned the virtual presenter in a high-traffic spot in its booth. While in idle mode, the unit would look around and wave to attract attention from passersby. As attendees got near, motion sensors triggered it to speak a welcome message that invited them to select an option from an attached touch screen, such as watching a video about RetailNext or submitting contact information. As attendees stepped away from the unit, it would say good-bye and thank them for visiting the booth, and RetailNext staff members were nearby to answer any questions.

This was one of the first virtual presenters created with Prsonas’s new computer-generated system, which creates the lifelike image entirely through computer animation rather than shooting video of a real actor. Live talent is used for the voice recordings, because it is warmer and more engaging than a computer-generated voice. Clients provide the scripting for the presenter’s messages—which can be recorded in multiple languages—and they also customize its appearance, choosing hairstyle and color, eye color, and clothing.

The virtual presenter can be configured to swipe attendee badges for lead capture or process credit cards for exhibitors that are selling products in their booths. The system captures data such as how many people interacted with the presenter, the duration of the interactions, and which topics on the touch screen were most popular.

### Audience Response Systems and Speaker Interaction

If you’ve ever watched certain audience participation game shows, you’ve seen the host poll the audience to determine their opinion about a question. The audience is outfitted with small keypads that allow them to answer questions quickly and have their data tallied immediately. This is the essence of the **Audience Response System (ARS)**.

Historically, ARS systems have been expensive propositions for the planner to implement, but today’s technologies have made it a more affordable, and in today’s two-way communication lifestyle, a more necessary part of many meetings. One such service is Poll Everywhere, which uses SMS (texting), in addition to Web and Twitter voting that interfaces with a real-time Web-based poll. The audience members respond, and the data are instantaneously updated and posted for all to see.

Another product that has simplified the ARS process is Turning Point that allows for real-time poll integration into PowerPoint. In addition to using handsets, their latest product also supports certain mobile device-specific responding.

Twitter is also used to help facilitate interactivity during a session, whether it’s for the purpose of providing an audience chat discussion or used as a way to send messages and questions directly to a speaker. SMS (through texting of questions to a session moderator) is another way that these technologies have created a better real-time connection between a speaker and his/her audience.

What may be the hottest technology for speaker interaction are the apps and services that allow the speaker’s presentation to be delivered directly to the attendees mobile device. Services such as SlideKlowd, Nice Meeting, and Eventpad include features such as real-time polling integrated into the app, as well as the ability to download handouts directly onto mobile devices, among other bells and whistles. It is clearly early in the development cycle and usage of these tools. The next few years will determine how these will be used and developed further.

### Attendee Blogging and the Social Conference

Event blogging, while not as popular as it was a few years ago, still provides the event professional a way to integrate better attendee interaction within the event. The meeting professionals’ responsibility, if they wish to facilitate attendee blogging, is to provide wireless broadband connectivity in any/all of the meeting rooms and prefunction space. Although this can result in



Google Glass in use  
Martin Matthews/Fotolia

a significant cost, the establishment of this wireless environment allows the attendees to enter sessions and utilize their computers.

Various social media tools can truly extend the conference outside of its four walls. While following attendee blogs is one way, Twitter, with the ubiquitous hashtag, could be the best tool out there to help extend the event. It has become easy for non-attendees to feel part of some of the activity. Tools such as Tagboard make it easy for the attendee to follow the conference Twitter stream in a newsmagazine-style layout.

Recently, the service Conferize has provided a tool for attendees to be able to aggregate the social feeds of an event, including Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and others, so that they can keep up with the speakers, sessions, and activities.

Clearly, conference apps, with their significant social component, can also be used by attendees and non-attendees alike to follow the real-time conversation at the event.

### **Augmented Reality**

For both pre- and on-site event functionality, what may be the next big thing are augmented reality tools. **Augmented Reality (AR)** is a tool that allows attendees to use their mobile device to see beyond what is visible to the naked eye. Layers of AR content can be created to supplement typical marketing and event content. The highest profile of these tools is the upcoming release of Google Glass; this small screen, sitting at your eye level and connected to the Web, provides a personal interactive tool for all attendees. Pricing and privacy issues may not make this the ultimate AR tool, but it will likely be the first of the major players in this space and possibly may define how these tools are used in the future.

Some groups are already using AR in their marketing. In 2013, Omni Hotels, in conjunction with AR app developer Aurasma, created what many believe is the first augmented reality print ad for the hospitality industry. By hovering a smart device over the ad (while in the app), the phone will deliver “second screen” content to the user, in the form of video, Web sites, or many other options. Another major player in the AR space is Layar. How these tools impact the MEEC industry will depend more on the creativity of the meeting professional than on the development of the devices.

### **POST-CONFERENCE TECHNOLOGY APPLICATIONS**

Technology has clearly served a great purpose in the marketing and running of the meeting or event. However, it continues to be a useful tool once the meeting or event is completed. From the post-conference evaluation process to the digital highlights (which weave into the marketing for the next conference), there is more to review regarding technology applications in our industry.



## Evaluations and Surveys

Many organizers have moved the meeting/event evaluation process from a paper-based process on-site (it can be digitized as well) to a post-conference/event, online approach. While there is much debate over whether post-conference/event evaluations provide the greatest number of responses and best accuracy of information (since the survey is not being completed at the time of the event), we are such a digital society that most meetings have moved in this direction.

Regardless of one's position, it is a system in use by many event professionals. In fact, Web-based tools such as SurveyMonkey have become increasingly popular for this process. The Web-based services not only distribute the evaluations, but also tally them and provide the planner with easy-to-read analysis of the questions they posed to the attendees. In fact, many integrated online solutions for meeting professionals include event survey functionality. For those looking for a free alternative, Google Drive has survey functionality built into its cloud-based set of tools.

This process should not be limited to conference evaluations. Any event professional who is involved in the programming process understands that learning about the needs of his or her audience is one of the best tools to identify program elements that create greater value for the attendee. The online survey, independent of the event evaluation, can be of significant support to that process.

## Marketing the Media

The essence of post-event technology is to extend the conference past the traditional time borders. A conference is no longer bound to a Monday to Thursday time frame. It can begin with attendee networking months prior to the opening session, by using tools such as pre-event networking. After the conference, the event professional can provide content to those who didn't attend (or even those who wish to view it again).

Conference YouTube channels are at the core of this experience. Video is such a fundamental tool of today's online media; it should be a given for every event professional that they take video at the event and use it in their follow-up marketing. Professionals should also be aware of newer video tools, such as the app Vine, which allows for the creation of 6-second videos. You may not think this is the content approach for you, but the success of this tool for many may have you thinking otherwise.

As for delivery, especially in a live environment, the event professional needs to make certain that they have the servers and technology (including bandwidth) available so that whoever wishes to log on and view the event can do so without the signal degrading or breaking up.

The professionals best marketing tool is the success of their previous event. The digitization and distribution of this content is then an absolutely critical tool for not only generating revenue from this year's event, but continuing to attract attendees in future years.

## VIRTUAL GATHERINGS

As event-based technology is discussed, the need to also focus on the purely virtual meeting must be included. Many smaller meetings, where stakeholders cannot afford (in terms of either time or money) to travel to attend, can be run virtually. The generic term "webinar" seems to have become the standard term used to describe the online services that allow audio, data, and sometimes streaming content to be delivered over the Internet.

### Webinars

The creation of a successful **webinar** is very different than a live event. All day live events are rarely successful (who's going to sit at their desk all day to actively view a meeting?). Short burst training (sometimes as short as 15–20 minutes) can be as, if not more, effective than more standard session durations of sixty to ninety minutes. The speaker, who is getting no visual or audio cues from the audience, must be able to keep the audience engaged. Q&A tends to be relegated to a specified time frame following the session.

There are many webinar providers that a professional can use. One such service is Ready Talk. The event professional should make certain that the service that is used is priced properly for their needs. Additional questions include how the service handles the audio (**VoIP**

### Case: The Pitfall of Virtual Meetings

Jessica, who is a meeting planner for a big corporation, has just been told by her manager that their company is going to start making budget cuts due to the economic downturn, and that the corporate meetings were going to be part of these budget cuts. Jessica began to worry about possibly losing her job and began doing some research on potential alternatives that cut costs for meetings.

Jessica came across virtual meetings. She thought that this would be the perfect alternative for face-to-face meetings because it would still give the corporation a way to network and communicate with their clients and customers, and also save money. The next day, Jessica went to her manager to present her idea about the virtual meetings. Her manager liked the idea and set up a meeting with the corporation managers to oversee the idea. Before the meeting with the corporate managers, Jessica wanted to do some more research on virtual meetings, so she contacted one of the virtual meeting companies to hear more about the software and also ask them questions. As Jessica was getting off the phone, she was sold on the idea. Jessica met with the corporate managers, and they also believed she had a great alternative for face-to-face meetings, so they began the process of starting up the virtual meetings.

Jessica was planning her first meeting through virtual events, and she was excited about it. She planned the first virtual meeting just like any other meeting except that she had to contact all the clients that are attending and send them software, with help from the virtual event company.

The first virtual meeting day was here and everything seemed to be ready to go. The virtual meeting began at 2:00 PM with a rough start. Jessica forgot that there are different time zones throughout the country. So, when her company logged on there were only a few attendees online. They started the meeting anyways, but the sound and video qualities began to go in and out. The corporate managers began to get flustered and even embarrassed because they were meeting with very important clients. Without the corporate managers being able to close the meeting, the screen cut off. The corporate managers were upset about the event that occurred because they did not want to lose possible business over technical difficulties. They were also a little upset with Jessica because they were putting a lot of faith in her, hoping the virtual meeting idea was going to be a success. The corporate managers then set up meeting with Jessica and the virtual event company the next day to talk about whether or not they should give the virtual events another try.

or teleconferencing), the maximum capacity of the virtual event, whether the service provides interactive tools such as chat and polling, and how easy it is for the event organizers and speaker to switch the view from the platform being used to their desktop, so they can showcase their applications and browser.

A more expensive, yet far more interactive, approach comes from Cisco, whose TelePresence videoconferencing provides face-to-face communications between the attendees. With HD and top-quality audio, events or meetings held using this service can seem to tear down the walls between real and virtual events.

### Hybrid Meetings

A **hybrid meeting** is one that simultaneously takes place in a live and virtual environment. Hybrid meetings help event professionals extend their live events to those who cannot attend. However, successful hybrid meetings are more than just streaming the video of the speaker. Organizers need to put thought into creating compelling content and delivery that interact successfully with both the live and virtual audience. It is not as simple as just switching on a camera and streaming content.

### Virtual Trade Shows

The promise of **virtual trade shows** from its inception of a few years ago has not been met. Perhaps it was too ahead of its time, but for whatever reason, tools such as Second Life (which is no longer a major player in the tech space) and other virtual trade show providers did not catch fire.

### Case: Virtual Meeting Space at the Convention Center

Technology is becoming well known in every industry; soon it will take over the convention industry. The Smartville convention center decided to add technology to help give it an edge of the competitors.

The Smartville convention center decided to try Web conferencing to give it the upper hand. They contacted an event technology company to add the appropriate technology to have Web conferencing. After they started implementing the technology, a group came in and asked if they could have a Web conference within the next month. The convention center felt pressured to accept so they did and told the technology company to get it in as fast as possible. When deciding whether or not to implement a new technological upgrade, the convention center became concerned about what types of stipulations came with installing the system in less than month.

The event came and the technology company was just finishing up the day of the event. Due to last minute installation issues, the worst fears of the convention center were realized when sales managers were not capable of operating the system flawlessly after techni-

cians left. This then caused event planners to become concerned about the ability of their event to go off without technical issues. There were many issues with starting on time and making sure the connection was clear. After the meeting ended, the attendees complained of late starting times and delayed breaks due to the convention center's lack of knowledge when it comes to efficiently operating the Web conferencing system. Not only were the local attendees frustrated but their partners located across the country were upset by the delay in being able to conduct a successful non-face-to-face speaking engagement.

The convention center tried to implement the technology too fast. They should have waited to have this event on a later date to ensure that the technology was running smoothly and the staff was prepared. If they had more time, they would have had a better first impression on the community with the Web conferencing. The question came up for the convention center as to what to do as far as keeping the technology. It will be hard to market the technology now that they had such an unsuccessful event.

At its most basic, a virtual trade show can be an online trade show floor plan, with hyper-text links to the sites of the exhibitors for the attendees to visit. However, a virtual trade show can also be a virtual experience in itself, with the attendee virtually walking through the event and clicking on information (or in some cases, actually chatting with sales reps). Digitell is still one of the major players in this area.

While some people fear that these virtual events will replace face-to-face ones, it is pretty clear that for the foreseeable future, these services work best as an adjunct to actual events, or used when a face-to-face event isn't possible to hold. Whichever format is used, the main benefit of a virtual trade show of this style is that it greatly extends the trade show from the two to three days of live exhibits to potentially a year round buying and selling marketplace.

### FUTURE TRENDS

The only future trend we can confidently state is that change will continue to be thrown at us at an exponential rate. While futurists with crystal balls can only guess what the meeting or event of 2025 will look like, for the near future, what's clear is that the impact of social and mobile tools on the MEEC industry is still growing and maturing. Social media enables everything, including your events, to be shared in real time. Mobile apps and services will continue to develop and not only provide better real-time content, but hope to better alleviate some of the carbon footprint of MEEC events.

Clearly a trend to watch in the future of meetings is mobile commerce. "Mcommerce" will help redefine how payments are made at events by using mobile devices as the transaction model. Tools such as the Square app are already in use today, helping to reduce costs of credit card processing while expediting the experience for both the event professional and attendee. There is concern about mcommerce and security, and clearly this trend is something to watch in the upcoming months.

## Summary

Today's technology-savvy meeting/event professional has an arsenal of tools at their disposal to enhance their organization's event, both from the focal point of the attendee and from the organization. Social media has become an enormous focal point for many event planners to integrate into their event marketing and management. Since time, money, and objectives don't require every technology to be integrated, the true role of the event professional today is to identify and determine those tools that add the greatest value to their meetings/events, while continuing to learn about other technologies that could also impact their organization. Technology is also used in the "green movement" (see Chapter 13 on green meetings).

**Now that you have completed this chapter you should be competent in the following Meeting and Business Event Competency Standards:**

### *MBECS – Skill 10: Perform Administrative Tasks*

Sub skills	Skills (standards)
E 10:02	Manage information system

### *MBECS – Skill 32: Exhibit Professional Behavior*

Sub skills	Skills (standards)
K 32.10	Keep up to date with changes in the meetings and event industry

### *MBECS – Skill 33: Communication*

Sub skills	Skills (standards)
L 33.03	Use communication tools

## Key Words and Terms

For definitions, see GLOSSARY, or <http://glossary.conventionindustry.org>

augmented reality	hybrid meetings	RFID	virtual tours
Accepted Practices Exchange (APEX)	interactive nametags	RFP	virtual trade shows
audience response systems	lead retrieval systems	room design software	VoIP
blogging	NFC	RSS	webinars
conference apps	podcasting	social media	
	portal	Twitter	

## Review and Discussion Questions

- How can technology impact site selection?
- List three new technologies that support meeting networking.
- What are the seven types of Web-based gatherings?
- How is third-party software used, and what is its advantage?
- Why has the Web become so important to meeting planners and suppliers?
- What are the five facets of the e-marketing strategy of the technology-savvy meeting professional?
- In addition to enhancing live networking, RFID nametags frequently contain what other interactive tools?
- What is the major benefit of attendee blogging during a session?
- List four types of e-conferencing and discuss each.
- What are some of the benefits of using online evaluations?
- What is the main benefit of a virtual trade show?
- What is green technology?

## About the Chapter Contributors

**James Spellos** is the president of a company called Meeting U. He is a consultant and frequent speaker on technology issues in the MEEC industry.

**Kathryn Hashimoto**, PhD is a member of the faculty in the School of Hospitality Leadership at East Carolina University.

### Previous Edition Chapter Contributor

Dennis Rudd, Ed.D. and Kathleen Taylor Brown of Robert Morris College