

Integrating technology within meetings

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This piece of research is a companion study to the IMEX analysis, Meetings Marketing on the Internet. It considers the views of buyers from 12 countries in Europe, together with a small grouping from the USA, among them venue-finders, DMCs, incentive travel agents, association planners, events organisers, and also corporates (in sectors ranging from pharmaceuticals to insurance, electronics to medical equipment). The job titles of respondents characteristically include: managing director; project manager; sales and marketing manager; general manager; president; congress manager; director, EMEA; chairman; professor, etc.

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Buyers were asked to set the scene by revealing which of 11 technological options they have already integrated into the planning and implementation of their meetings. The ranking follows, together with the percentage figure summarising the proportion of buyers using each concept:

* Searching the web for suitable venues/destinations	88%
* Online registration	74%
* Distributing papers and agendas to participants and others	50%
* Checking websites for venue availability	48%
* Using high-tech presentations to improve communication with delegates	44%
* Booking meetings venues online, by email, or via RFP	41%
* Video-conferencing involving speakers or VIPs from afar	27%
* Booking meetings venues using online booking engines	17%
* Electronic voting within sessions	12%
* Virtual forums and delegate chat rooms	11%
* Distributing speeches by webcam to non-attendees	9%

Only approximately 1 in 3 respondents (35%) accepts the argument that electronic participation via video-conferencing or web-cams can become a low-cost and time-efficient substitute for face-to-face meetings, and even those felt this could relate

only to minor, smaller, or 'standard' meetings. There remain significant reservations to the whole 'virtual events' principle, including: *'the experience is not the same'; 'the savings are outweighed by the reduced impact of the event'; 'there is no substitute for body language'; 'without being there you cannot experience the pulse of a meeting'; 'it creates a false environment so that debate cannot flow in a productive way'; and 'without networking a meeting loses its whole point'*. There is some acceptance of the suggestion that for bigger meetings such electronic techniques make possible the involvement of very senior or specialist speakers, or those with prior engagements elsewhere. For the time being, however, the apparent logic of savings is considerably outweighed by the anticipated effectiveness of personal chemistry and intellectual engagement.

environmentally-friendly venues

In a similar vein an even smaller proportion (22%) supports the suggestion that staging more electronic meetings can reduce greenhouse gas emissions associated with delegate travel, and will therefore become more popular. Among buyer comments: *'this may begin to happen, if the technology gets better, but not in the short-run'; 'the far more likely explanation is that if the price of air travel continues to rise then video-conferences may be the only economical option'; 'this is only half the story because meetings organisers could already do much more to choose more environmentally-friendly venues, minimise food waste, make energy savings, and do more recycling'*.

The integration of technology within meetings is not without its irritations, buyers report. Typical comments include: *'venue staff are not always up-to-date or aware of technology as they should or need to be, nor even know what facilities they offer'*; *Congress Centres are not always entirely covered by Wi-fi'; 'it can be difficult to get even a basic internet connection in some countries'; 'all that happens with complicated technology is that more things can go wrong'*. For just such reasons the specialists offer the following tips:

- * *'take time to integrate the new technology by doing everything the 'old' way and the 'new' way at the same time (admittedly twice the work to begin with)*
- * *'young people, particularly, expect events to incorporate technology'*

- * 'remember that some delegates find technology difficult to understand and use'*
- * 'have skilled technicians on hand to trouble-shoot and provide back-up'*
- * 'be certain to decide whether the technology is really an advantage or just a gimmick or gadget being sold by 'techies''*
- * 'decide whether the particular meeting activity needs technology - for instance, a sales meeting might not'*
- * 'make the technology user-friendly and forget the novelty factor'*
- * 'present your previous meeting online to whet the appetite for the next one'*
- * 'use technology wherever possible – for example, doing a survey on paper could be a surprise to many people – and generally the more interaction the better'*

Finally, research respondents identified 'the one piece of meetings-related technology that they have begun to use recently and which has made a major difference to the success of their events'. Examples include: online registration; live broadcasting; Wi-fi; memory sticks; meetings blogs; a remote control that allows speakers to surf the internet directly from the stage; electronic voting; Webex; pre-bookable excursions; and using the web for internal meetings connecting all parts of the world.

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