

Social Networking for Meetings

Latest trends use interactive technology

BY KAREN ZAK

Social Networking and technology is revolutionizing the way we plan, deliver and promote events. Most businesses today are actively embracing social media in the work place as a new marketing tool creating a two-way conversation. But how are social networking sites and technology utilized in meetings?

In the past, “going green” and reducing our environmental footprint has been all the rage. We eliminated paper conference solicitations and replaced them with online registration; we stopped printing massive amounts of speaker handouts and, instead, we loaded them on USB drives. Online registration is now the norm and PowerPoint presentations are posted on the conference website before, during and after a conference. Paper evaluations have been replaced with survey software that captures data online and tallies the evaluations instantly. So, what are the latest trends now and into the future?

INTERACTIVE COMMUNICATION

Social networking sites have exploded on the meeting scene. Clients are creating conference Facebook sites, Twitter sites and mobile apps specific to the meeting or event. These sites create an active dialog about the conference and allow attendees to connect with colleagues and friends; chat about meeting up after an event; or “tweet” about the best place to dine. A dedicated conference site can instantly create a “buzz” about the event, reach a new generation of participants, and establish a favorable perception that the organizer is current and relevant. The sites also provide real-time feedback during an event that allows organizers to monitor the attendee feedback about the event and, if negative, acknowledge the issue with a “tweet” and ensure the

audience knows you are reacting to their concerns.

Another example of how interactive technology is being utilized in meetings is the use of QR codes. For those unfamiliar, a QR code (short for “quick response”) is a sort of barcode that stores information that can be captured and interpreted by a mobile device by way of the camera on the device. One example is a scavenger hunt game with QR codes created for a conference. An email blast was sent to participants announcing the contest rules along with the first hint in the form of a QR code. The unique QR codes were printed on door signs, exhibitor maps and sponsor signs throughout the conference and each one held a clue to a list of questions. The goal was to increase interaction between attendees and to encourage participation in different areas of the conference such as the registration area, exhibits, sessions and social events. The scavenger hunt also was announced on the client’s Twitter site and the official conference registration website. The attendee that found the most QR codes and hints to answer the game questions won a prize and the winner was announced on the Twitter site.

NEXT GENERATION NAME BADGES

Name badge barcode lead retrieval has been utilized at large trade shows for years and is now considered an outdated model. The exhibitor scanned the attendees name badge bar code that captured contact information in lieu of a collecting business card, but this method only generated a basic contact list. The next generation badge code offers an interactive model allowing the attendee to scan exhibitor’s information to include websites, special show deals and contact information.

The attendee and exhibitor can

directly import data into smartphones and share information. There are even mobile exhibit apps using the smartphone’s GPS capability to assist attendees with the most efficient path to maneuver through exhibit halls to reach specific exhibit booths efficiently.

The meeting industry expects to see a rapid adoption of mobile applications for events over the next few years; real-time distribution and access to event information, and enhanced networking via social networking sites. So if you have not begun to embrace social networking and new technology into your meetings and events, now would be the time to get on board before your event is considered behind the times. □



About the Author

Karen Zak, general manager of Visions Meeting & Event Management has been in the meeting planning industry in Alaska for 13 years and in the Lower 48 for 10 years. Zak started Visions (Alaska) in 1998 as a division of USTravel. Visions manages all size meetings statewide, incentives worldwide, and is a known planner for complex international conferences and events.