Meetings Strategies

The Meeting of the Future
By Deanna Ting

Predicting the Future

Here are just a few of the ideas for what the future of meetings will be like, as brainstormed by members of the Georgia MPI chapter, who shared their thoughts with Shawna Suckow, president and founder of the Senior Planners Industry Network, during their Meetings Exploration Conference held in Atlanta this April:

[1] No more eyesore-inducing
projectors or other unsightly A/V equipment in hotel meeting rooms or conference centers
[2] Better microphones
[3] E-binders to replace the meeting planner's traditionally bulky binder
[4] An app or Bluetooth device that helps you network more easily with people
[5] More interactive and creative room sets and seating arrangements like stadium seating
[6] A place where people can charge their devices in the center of the room
[7] Completely wireless devices with longer battery lives
[8] Better non-alcoholic options at cocktail hour
[9] A gum bar with different varieties of gum to chew on. Suckow explains: "It's been proven that chewing gum excites the brain and increases retention and attention."
[10] The ability for servers to know exactly what kinds of dietary restrictions that an attendee has by scanning a special device worn by all attendees
[11] Totally customizable food-and-beverage options
Looking back on the sci-fi TV series Star Trek, which debuted in 1966, you might experience feelings of nostalgia. However, many of the technologies it depicted are no longer fiction. Nearly 50 years later, those communicator badges have become the devices we call cell phones. Those face-to-face showdowns Captain Kirk had with countless aliens via video screen are now possible via very real TelePresence technology. With the arrival of Google Glass, universal, real-time voice translation is almost here.

As technology evolves, meetings will, too, and so will the ways in which we plan and manage them. While we are by no means psychic — nor have we invented a gadget that predicts the future with 100-percent accuracy — we've asked some of the industry's most forward-thinking leaders and specialists to glimpse into the meeting of the future. Here's their take on what's ahead.

Immediacy Will Be a Requirement
It's been only six years since the iPhone debuted and only three since the arrival of the iPad, but these days, you'd be hard-pressed to find a meeting where these two devices are not present. In just a few years, they've revolutionized the ways we live and work — and they're just the beginning, says Bellingham, WA-based meeting technology expert Corbin Ball. "Technology is going to change things in

society in general in a profound way, and meetings will change more in the next five years than they did in the last 10," he predicts.

The biggest change, says Ball, will come from the confluence of two technologies — mobile tech and social media tech. "These days, everyone has a computer in their pocket that's just as powerful as a desktop computer was a few years ago," he says. "Thanks to smartphones, tablets, and the mobile apps that accompany them, expect to be able to do more than ever on site. It will continue to get easier for attendees to exchange leads, access where they're going, make appointments, or go through a large educational program and select what they want."

The most dramatic hint of things to come, what Ball describes as "augmented reality," is best illustrated by the newest device from Google — Google Glass. These eyeglasses can take photographs, film video, share what the wearer is seeing with other devices, give directions, send messages, access databases, and even translate your voice into different languages. "You can layer in all sorts of information and be assisted throughout the communication process with this device," Ball says.

At the Georgia MPI chapter's Meetings Exploration Conference (MEC) held in Atlanta this April, Shawna Suckow, president and founder of the Senior Planners Industry Network (SPIN), brainstormed the effects that new technology would have on future meetings during a session on innovation. The group came up with the following scenario for how this new connectivity will be used at meetings. "In the future, when an attendee walks past someone at an event, it is very likely that she will have a device that will tell the wearer exactly who that person is, where she's from, what they share in common, and why the attendee should stop and talk to her," Suckow recounts. "Networking will be taken to another level."

In the future, true connectivity, says Ball, won't just be about sharing over social media, or being tethered to the web; it will be having access to infinite amounts of information, instantaneously and seamlessly. There will, however, be a downside to this immediacy. Because it will be that much easier to do certain tasks, expectations for success also will rise, says Terri Breining, founder of the Encinitas, CA-based Breining Group. "Few people recognize the elements of a good meeting, but everyone recognizes the elements of a bad meeting," she says. "There will be higher expectations among attendees and a greater awareness and sophistication."

This will mean that planners will be required to be much more tech savvy than they are now. "Meeting planners today have to know how to interface with technology, but tomorrow they will need to know how to integrate it into the entire meeting experience," says David Sibbet, president and founder of The Grove Consultants International in San Francisco, and author of Visual Meetings: How Graphics, Sticky Notes and Idea Mapping Can Transform Group Productivity.
Mastering technology, however, has not always been a hallmark of the meetings industry. "Historically, the industry has been behind the curve on the tech side," says Mike Mason, founder and CEO of online meeting booking platform Zentila. "We have now begun to embrace technology, but we're behind, and there's so much available now that we sometimes don't even know where to turn."

Get Ready for Virtual Speakers

Through hybrid meetings, many organizations have become comfortable with the concept of the virtual attendee. But what about the virtual speaker? Futurist David Houle, a keynote speaker and author of The Shift Age, predicts, "We're going to see more speakers presenting in cyberspace. If a speaker is not doing an interactive session, it will be very easy to give a presentation from any properly equipped studio. The only part of the equation that needs to develop is the comfort level of attendees for receiving information this way."

Ball says the ways in which we communicate visually also will change dramatically over the next 10 years. "It is not incomprehensible to have holographic displays, or the ability to project yourself in a vivid 3-D form from another location and interact with people," he notes. "We'll have all kinds of display formats: transparent, flexible, you name it. By 2020, I think visual display technology will equal that of the human eye; you might not be able to distinguish a display from what's real."

We're already getting a glimpse into what the future of visual meetings communication will be like. Today, we have interactive whiteboards — SMART Boards — that allow dozens of people to work on the same whiteboard, for example, says The Grove Consultants International's David Sibbet. Increased connectivity and visual displays, he believes, will lead to greater collaboration among attendees and, "meetings supported by really rich access to data. We've never really had that before. Companies are collecting all kinds of data now, and there are many people out there who are trying to figure out how to look at data and analyze and package it all in real time."

From Monologue to Dialogue
In the future, meetings will not just be one-way communication vessels; they'll be conversations that harness the power of social media to expand the conversation beyond meeting room walls and across borders.
Social media, Ball believes, will have planners relying more on feedback from attendees than ever before. "Instead of top-down, it'll be bottom-up," he says. "Social media brings in all this input that attendees didn't have before, and they will demand a greater say in who's speaking and what's happening on site."

Zentila's Mason sees this trend going even further. "I think we'll get to a point where events will be entirely crowdsourced on the spot," he says. "Not all of the breakouts or sessions will be planned ahead of time. I think we're going to take all of this data from feedback and be able to create schedules on the fly." Mason thinks this type of "custom content" will become a reality in just a few years and notes that crowdsourcing already exists in some form in today's meetings.

"PCMA [Professional Convention Management Association] and MPI are doing mini crowdsourcing now, where in one room you might have 20 roundtables and each table discusses a different topic," says Mason. "The topics are already created, but you're free to join whatever discussion most interests you."

This was the strategy that SPIN's Suckow enlisted at the MPI Georgia Chapter's MEC in April. Her discussion topic? Inventing the meeting of the future. "I had all different kinds of topics, so people could talk about what they were passionate about, from technology and room design to engagement, social media, and food and beverage," Suckow says. She is planning to compile responses from a number of

MPI chapters nationwide over the course of this year into a book, which will be published next year. (See page 30 for some of the Georgia MPI chapter's ideas about what meetings will look like in the future.)

Chris Cavanaugh, president of Freeman XP, a boutique strategy and creative agency within the convention management firm Freeman, says that the use of "second screens" is already facilitating crowdsourcing in meetings. Such screens "allow audiences to dig deeper into the content on the main stage to interact with social media live in the context of an event," explains Cavanaugh. "In the future, you will need to have a two-way dialogue and you need to have second-screen technology that let audiences track content and offer live opinions back," he says. "The audience wants to take control of what they see, hear, feel, and touch."

Meeting Value Won't Be Limited to the Meeting Room
Looking ahead, the most important part of a meeting may not even be the meeting itself. The networking and conversations that take place outside the formal meeting room are just as important, if not more so for some attendees, and planners will have to adjust their agendas accordingly.

"The delivery of content doesn't have to take place in the meeting room or only through the speaker or presenter," says Suckow. "Creating more and different watering holes and finding more time in the agenda for organic collaboration and interaction between attendees is key. These watering holes are gathering spots for people with similar interests to talk and have an organic exchange of information."

In Long Beach, CA, where the groundbreaking TED Conference has been held for the past five years, the Long Beach Convention and Visitors Bureau is investing millions into developing more open meeting spaces that are conducive to networking and collaboration. CVB President and CEO Steve Goodling says that creating an environment that supports collaboration and connection is going to be even more important in the future than it is now. "As attendees collaborate and connect, they bond, and a sense of community develops. Whether you're a corporation or an association, you want your membership to embrace the mission and direction of the organization and you can't do that without a sense of community." He adds, "We've spent a lot of time and focus on creating facilities that permit people to really meet. Our convention center has all Steelcase furniture. It's not utilitarian. It's got plenty of breakout spaces for people to sit down and talk in smaller groups."

Goodling also predicts that more meeting and convention spaces will have "ancillary spaces" where attendees can sit comfortably and watch or listen to meeting speakers, but also be able to get their work done by checking emails. "These ancillary areas are like being at home. People are used to multitasking, and you need to give people the opportunity to decide how they want to learn."

Because the world is getting smaller, and technology has made it easier for us to connect than ever before, meetings can, theoretically, last forever. As Houle notes: "The before and after parts of a meeting will be just as important, and just as interactive."

To accomplish this level of engagement, Breining says planners will need to be increasingly flexible in their programming. They will also need to facilitate conversations with and among attendees that begin

even before the actual event does. "Once people have already established a connection, meeting up at the conference lets them take that conversation to a deeper level."

Following a meeting, Houle believes it will be crucial for organizers to have curated content relating to the meeting that is free and accessible to any and all participants. "I think every entity that has a conference will need to create a curated content location that attendees can access in order to track the knowledge and intellectual property that comes from a meeting," he says.

Houle also predicts that instead of one single annual meeting per year, more organizations will have semi-annual meetings — some of which may be entirely virtual — in order to keep up with the pace of business. But Houle also says that all-virtual events will only increase the importance of face-to-face meetings. "Conferences are high touch, and as humanity becomes even more high tech, it's invaluable to have high-touch interaction," he says. "High-touch interaction increases in importance as high-technology interaction increases in ubiquity."

So, to get ready for the meeting of the future, there's no better time to start planning than now.

"The only barrier preventing us from moving forward rests between our two ears," says Ball. "As Darwin said, 'It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change.' We're going through a period of unprecedented change, and we're going to have to be open to that. Those of us who are will survive."