Eleven Meetings Technology Trends to Watch for 2011

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The rate of technology change is increasing. Meetings and tradeshow technology continues to advance with technology products becoming better, cheaper and easier to use. Innovation is bubbling with new options. Here are some of the major meetings and tradeshow technology trends to watch for this coming year.

1. Web-based software increases meeting planning ease and options

The web has been the driver for much of the technology change we have seen in the last decade. The days of shrink-wrapped, custom-installed meeting software programs are gone -- they now delivered over the web. With the development of web services, a communication standard enabling different web programs to work together, the ability to exchange attendee, exhibitor, and member data has never been easier. Rich-internet applications are giving desk-top functionality to these programs. In short, the web is providing software for nearly every aspect of the meeting planning process in a manner that is cheaper and easier to use than ever before. See **http://www.corbinball.com/bookmarks/** for 1400 categorized meetings technology products in 40 categories, most of them web-based, as examples.

2. Freeconomics – the rise of free or low cost meetings and tradeshow software

Another benefit of the web software distribution is that it is more efficient than "shrink-wrapped" software. With the plummeting costs for data storage and bandwidth, the cost for web software delivery is going down as well. There are now many meetings and tradeshow technology products that are free (with ads or upselling as a business model) or substantially lower prices than they have been in the past. See **http://bit.ly/atMwXp** for many examples.

3. Mobile apps for meetings are exploding

Mobile apps are hot! This 2010 has seen hundreds of new mobile phone apps benefiting meeting planners, attendees and exhibitors – and many more are in the pipeline! Smart phone "micro-computers" are increasingly being used for networking, lead exchange, electronic ticketing, way finding, audience polling, surveys, pocket programs, pocket exhibit guides, course notes/literature collection and much more. A new website **www.meetingapps.com** has come online to track them. 2011 will see many of these tools working into mainstream conference use and many new ones emerge. See **http://bit.ly/bEQuqu** for many examples.

4. Location-aware applications are finding their way to meetings

A hot area in mobile development is location-based or geo-position based applications. In the context of meetings, attendees are business travelers who need way-finding information as well as location-based networking. There are many applications that can help with meetings: Google Goggles (currently only for android phones) can help with identifying landmarks, restaurants and other places of business using photo recognition and augmented reality (a layering of web information over a phone cam image based on GPS and compass data).

Foursquare and Gowalla are networking and social review mobile apps designed to encourage loyalty at restaurants, bars and other local businesses are beginning to be used at meetings. Specific business networking tools such as Sipity (**www.sipity.com**) using location-aware services have direct application to events.

We are just seeing the tip of the iceberg in terms of location-aware services and augmented reality applications for meetings. These will have huge potential in the future.

5. iPad and tablet PCs working for meetings and events

As the iPhone lead the way for a whole new genre of mobile phones, the iPad will lead the way for a wide range of touch-sensitive, tablet-like PCs in a wide range of formats. Dell, for example, is rumored to come out with two "Streak" tablets with an Android operating system in 7" and 9" versions. The Microsoft booklet PC (two 7" touch screens that fold like a book) is another proposed option on the drawing boards.

These highly portable, easy-to-input-while-standing (or walking) tools will be a natural for meetings: for surveys, for lead qualifications, for interactive displays at booths, for meeting planners to access specification data, for attendees to view streaming event video, for distribution (and annotation) of session handouts for attendees, and for a larger-version of the hundreds of mobile apps currently being developed for meeting planners, attendees and exhibitors.

6. HD video for hybrid meetings will bloom

Skype newest 5.0 beta version provides 760p high definition video conferencing at no charge (as well as the ability for four simultaneous callers). This is just one way that HD will lead the way to jump in hybrid meetings and speakers presenting remotely at events.

The price has plummeted, and with increasingly more reliable internet connections, the reliability is good.

On the high-end, Starwood and Marriott hotels are building public telepresence suites to provide full-size, high definition face-to-face virtual meeting spaces for small groups to meet virtually in dozens of cites with more to come.

7. Social media working into mainstream

Social media continues to be a huge driver for change at meetings. Meeting planners, attendees and exhibitors are all getting their feet wet, but most have not figured out how to integrate fully a social media strategy into their marketing mix.

This coming year will see increased usage of the "big 3" – Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter – for event marketing with efforts in increase attendee engagement before, during and after the event. Twitter in particular, with its 140-character limitation making it a natural for mobile use at events, will see continued growth.

Hootsuite (**www.hootsuite.com**) and other social media aggregators will be used increasingly as meeting professional try to manage multiple accounts more effectively.

This is an extremely dynamic and quick-changing field. It will not be surprising to see a new platform will emerge to take a strong position, merge with or unseat one or more of the 'big 3."

8. Online collaboration tools will begin to replace email as a primary project management tool for events

Email was invented forty years ago, and as means of project management for meetings is not efficient. It is interruptive, often incomplete, it is difficult to manage a stream of multiple conversations, and people are often not on the same page with document versions.

Meeting professionals need a better way of managing these data!

Wikis (collaborative websites) will emerge as much more efficient ways of tracking conference logistics and other details among geographically distributed meeting planners and suppliers. Free tools such as Google Wave and Google Docs will play a role as well as other web-based project management wikis.

9. Speaker and content management systems being adopted

There are many tasks in setting up programming for large events:

- Sending out requests for speaker proposals
- Speaker selection
- Arranging programs into tracks
- Collecting speaker information (bios, AV requirements, session handouts, photos)
- Providing presentation visuals onsite in multiple locations with multiple presenters.
- Distributing session handouts
- Capturing/redistributing presentations (video/audio/presentation visuals) at meetings
- And more…

Historically, each of these has been a separate task, each with lots of data management required.

Fortunately, there are a number of companies (including OmniPress **www.omnipress**, One World Presentation Management **www.owpm.com** and others) that combine most or all of these tasks under a unified system greatly increasing the efficiency.

With the increased ease of networking in large convention venues, these systems will become standard operating procedures for large, multi-session events.

10. Strategic meetings management and ROI measurement is expanded and refined to improve meetings

Strategic meetings management programs (SMMP) have been used historically by large corporations to reduce meeting spend by using tighter controls on procurement of sleeping rooms, meeting space and other meeting services.

There is good news along this front:

- There are several companies who are developing web-based SMMP tools with a range of pricing models (including Certain Software **www.certain.com**, Cvent **www.cvent.com**, and SignUp4 **www.signup4.com**). The increased competition in this field will provide better meeting procurement tools at lower costs to a wider range of companies and associations – not just for the 'Fortune 500' anymore.
- SMMP programs are being refined. It is no longer just about reducing meeting spend. There is work using Lean Six Sigma framework (**http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Six_Sigma**) to improve the business process. Originally designed for manufacturing, this process focuses on increasing efficiency by reducing waste, rework, and activity that does not add value to increase value added activity.
- The communication pathways set up to track meeting spend and also be used to measure and track meetings ROI (return on investment). Additionally, ROI measurement tools are being offered with pricing tiers for small meetings and event on an individual attendee basis. For example, MeetingMetrics (**www.meetingmetrix.com**) has just introduced MyROI designed to provide attendees measurement tools to track their personal return on investment from meetings attended.

11. Despite the economic downturn and the increased use of virtual meetings technology,

face-to-face meetings and tradeshows remain viable (a repeat from last year's predictions)
Virtual meeting and web conferencing usage is up and conference attendance is down in these economically challenging times. However, meetings and tradeshows can still provide the best value for your education, networking, and sales budgets. Events offer unparalleled opportunities to bring buyers and seller together, to build relationships, to brainstorm, to network. For an exhibitor, it is often the best way to meet so many qualified buyers in such a short time. For buyers, it is a great chance to meet vendors of interest – all together in one location, categorized and mapped for your choosing. The events, tradeshow and hospitality industries are relationship-based and events and tradeshow are some of the best ways to build these relationships.

Although webinars are good for short information exchange, meetings offer a much richer learning experience. What happens in the meeting room is important – people have made the commitment to be there and are not as distracted as in the office. However, the conversations in the hallways, receptions and exhibit hall contribute greatly to the information exchange. Meetings provide a vastly richer, more targeted, and more focused learning experience than any virtual meeting. There is no such thing as a "virtual beer!"

Corbin Ball, CMP, CSP is a consultant, writer and speaker focusing on events and meetings technology. With 20 years of experience running international citywide technology meetings, he now helps clients worldwide use technology to save time and improve productivity. He has been named by MeetingNews Magazine for four years as one of the "25 Most Influential People in the Meetings Industry. He has also chaired the judging committee for EIBTM Wordwide Technology Watch for meetings technology innovation for the past seven years. He can be contacted at his extensive web site: **www.corbinball.com**

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