

Real-Time Answers to What Is Driving Event Success - By Greg Pesik, President and CEO, Passkey

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Thanks to the emergence of new technologies, an opportunity now exists for all companies in today's business world to operate in real time. This potential is true for a variety of businesses, ranging from financial services companies and advertising agencies to, you guessed it, corporate meeting and event planners.

Flash back 10 years ago, and the concept of real-time action was far different than it is today. Real-time action consisted of an assistant calling your office phone or canvassing the show floor to hunt you down and tell you the slide projector was not working or that the keynote speaker was missing. The same theme extended to show attendees, who were at the mercy of long check-in lines and dated in-room technologies that made staying in the loop while out of the office very challenging.

Now, with technologies like cell phones, e-mail, instant messaging and wireless hand-held devices, real-time action is a reality—one that the event world is finally beginning to embrace.

E-Mail Alerts

E-mail is the most ubiquitous communication tool around, so it's not surprising that it has become a critical tool for managing an event. Popularized by companies like Yahoo! and Google (i.e., Google Alerts), e-mail alerts allow teams to automate many of the critical processes of an event. For instance, in the months leading up to the conference kick-off, any meeting professional will tell you that a block of rooms can sell out with virtually no warning or notice. Most planners do not have the luxury of monitoring the reservation status throughout the day due to the multitude of other important deliverables on their plate. As a result, there are times when they are essentially flying blind. This lack of visibility can result in major issues if your guest list exceeds the number of available rooms, or if you block off more rooms than you need.

By leveraging e-mail alerts, however, planners can have room-block alerts sent out automatically as soon as a certain user-specified event condition is met. The scenario may be along the lines of "send me a note when an event block night is at least 85 percent full," "alert me to the room status every day at 5 p.m." or "send me a room status at the end of each month."

By automating this process and delivering information right to the planner, the event staff gets up-to-the-minute knowledge of which blocks are most popular and when they need to add or remove rooms—all before it is too late. This not only frees up the team to focus on other critical logistics, but also helps to avoid potential conflicts, such as a guest who is forced to stay across town in another hotel. It also helps to save their organization money (why pay for rooms you don't need?) and maintain a stellar level of customer satisfaction.

Meeting planners can also set up registration e-mail alerts that follow the same principle. In the event-planning stage and leading up to kick-off, planners always have to work with an estimated attendee number that they base their budget on, as well as items they require from the venue (chairs, conference rooms, conference swag, etc.).

With any given event, the reality is that interest can exceed or fall short of this figure, and the more connected you are to what is happening, the better you will be able to effectively manage it. By setting alerts, the planner—or the entire team—is instantly notified when a person has registered for the event or when the number of registered attendees has exceeded specific preset milestones. Planners then have a better idea of what to expect regarding attendance and can make any necessary changes to ensure smooth sailing.

Get Out Your Hand-Helds

Other technologies such as hand-held wireless devices are playing an important role in ensuring real-time execution. For example, let's say that on the day of the event, an attendee that you know has registered and booked a room is running behind schedule—a not uncommon occurrence. Now, suppose that person is the CEO, who is trying desperately to make it to the hotel and check in, all before he or she is supposed to deliver the keynote address and host the event's big kick-off dinner. This is where hand-held technologies come into play.

Many venues have begun employing wireless hand-held devices that tap into their property-management system in real time. In doing so, they give designated staff the ability to check in guests from anywhere—curbside, in the convention room, at the company cocktail reception, you name it. These wireless devices not only get the guest's name into the system, but can also handle credit card transactions and the printing of their room card, all while keeping them out of the long check-in lines.

A viable alternative to the hand-held model is a self-service focused registration system, such as the ones you see at the airport. These kiosks let attendees check into the system at their own convenience, check room status, upgrade rooms, get their key and more. At the same time, the kiosks integrate with other systems, alerting the management team to all activities and giving them an accurate, up-to-the-minute snapshot of the event. Plus, the conference team can now operate with a smaller crew or dedicate more staff to a particular area of the event that may require extra attention.

Staying Connected

Once you have registered your attendees and they have checked in, your job is not over. Businesses are always operating in real time, and it is critical to give attendees the tools they need to stay connected while traveling. In-room wireless is almost a standard offering with venues that are hosting corporate events (in fact, many planners won't even consider a location that

doesn't offer Wi-Fi). Today, venue-wide wireless access is picking up steam. Providing attendees with access to the Internet from any location gives them instant connectivity to the world they left behind and the ability to remain involved, while letting them remain connected to the event itself.

For the event team, venue-wide wireless also allows show planners to maintain connection with all their staff and partners. Need access to the online registration system? Go online and check it. Need to contact a colleague during an important speech (we have all heard a cell phone ringing during an interesting roundtable)? Use instant messenger (you can even IM their cell phone), and let the team communicate with each other without interrupting the flow of the event.

Real-time solutions are a must-have for today's planners, delivering real-time insights and action by bringing all critical information to the right people (i.e., the meeting planner, the sales team, the reservation manager and, yes, the attendees) at the right time. Those organizations that embrace this technological shift will find themselves with a major competitive advantage as well as a long list of satisfied customers. Those that hesitate may find themselves left behind.

Greg Pesik, President and CEO, Passkey

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