

BEYOND BANDWIDTH

How new technologies are being used to engage attendees at meetings and events

By Ann Shepphird

When noted theoretical physicist Dr. Michio Kaku spoke to the more than 300 association executives attending digitalNow 2013, held April 4–6 at the Walt Disney World Resort in Florida, he spent a lot of time discussing a number of upcoming scientific and technical advancements expected in the fields of biotechnology, artificial intelligence and nanotechnology.

Dr. Kaku posited that these new advancements would create a world of augmented reality in which computing

“Technology can tell you what’s popular, sometimes even before the event.”

Jason Paganessi
PCMA

would become as much a part of our environment as electricity. As he pointed out, we don’t really think about electricity anymore—it’s just there—and he thinks the same will soon be said for our ability to access information and computing power through technology embedded in, say, our eyeglasses or a contact lens.

What was interesting about his view of this brave new world is that at first glance it doesn’t appear to have much room for personal

Mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets have revolutionized the use of new technologies at meetings and events.



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human interaction. If we can communicate from anywhere, why bother to travel to get together? The answer, according to Kaku, is that, even as far as we have come in the fields of science and technology, we are still very much like our hunter-gatherer ancestors in our need to get together and bond with other like-minded people. “We like to look each other in the eye, size each other up—and then have a great time drinking beer afterward,” he said.

Perhaps this is one reason that the lure of face-to-face gatherings has not waned over the years. And it’s not just because of the beer—although, as we all know, a great deal of networking and deal-making does happen in the bar (that, too, is part of the power of face-to-face communication). The bottom line is that, as human beings, we get more real communication done in a one-on-one setting. And that has become more—not less—obvious as an increasing amount of technology has been introduced that plays a role in the way we communicate the rest of the time.

The Power of Face to Face

Communication theorists will tell you that dyadic, or interpersonal, communication (versus mass communication) is so valuable because of the amount of information that is able to be passed in the messages sent to and from each person. There is no delay in transmission, and tons of feedback is relayed both verbally and non-verbally from person to person (and back again). Interpersonal communica-



New social media app YeHive has been designed so attendees at sports events and meetings can create what the founder calls a “hashtag on crack.”

tion also allows both people to participate in the process, something that’s very hard to do in a mass communication setting.

This is one of the reasons that new communication technologies have not taken the place of in-person gather-

ings, as many feared they might. Instead, what we’re witnessing is the advent of new technologies used to enhance or promote the in-person experience. Indeed, a number of organizations have found that after offering a hybrid meeting in which people were given a virtual option, the attendance actually went up the following year.

“Offering a virtual component can help persuade people to attend in person the following year,” confirmed Anthony Miller, vice-president of strategy for Active Network, a global event-management software organization whose business solutions division provided technology solutions for the Professional Convention Management Association’s Convening Leaders event and for the Macworld/iWorld conference.

“People can access content that might be relevant from their desk or home and understand how valuable it is,” said Miller. “Before virtual, there was no level of engagement with the event or the content or the discussions taking place around it. Now we’re able to give enough of a taste for people to



The ability for both verbal and non-verbal feedback is just one of the reasons new communications technologies have not replaced face-to-face communication.



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say it's worth going to when they have the next opportunity."

John Graham, CAE, president and CEO of the American Society of Association Executives, compared the experience of participating remotely to that of watching a party through a window. People get a glimpse of the experience and want to be a part of it. With this in mind—offering a taste of what's on tap at an upcoming meeting or event—the Austin Convention & Visitors Bureau now offers microsites for visiting groups that include the organization's logo and links to housing and registration information, as well as photos, videos and suggestions for activities in town, which can then be used to help build excitement and drive attendance.

Getting Involved Earlier

In addition to helping market an event before it happens, new technologies are enabling attendees to be better prepared once they arrive at the event. Jason Paganessi, CAE, vice-president of business innovation for PCMA, said that new technologies allow for more of a year-round con-



Taking the time to identify the right technology for a particular group, meeting or event from the vast array of available options can be a challenge.

versation. "As opposed to walking into a convention center without knowing a soul, you walk in and know a lot of people," said Paganessi. "The conversations and connections made before the meeting can save the first two days of a meeting."

The North American Association of Commencement Officers recently promoted the use of mobile applications and social media for com-

mencement and convocation ceremonies. The organization pointed out that apps could help graduates and family members with scheduling, program listings and parking for the event, while uploading photos and live posting to Twitter could create a more interactive experience for the attendees.

The sports world has also embraced the use of mobile apps and social media to enhance the experience at live events. In February, the computer networking company Cisco Systems installed technology at the new Barclays Center in Brooklyn, New York, that allows fans attending games to stream three different high-definition video feeds to their smartphones and tablets through a mobile app. The idea is to attempt to create the multimedia experience often found in people's homes.

"As a generation, we're becoming more comfortable with multi-tasking," said Miller. "We've got the tablet on our lap while watching TV and are used to dealing with multiple sources of entertainment and information asking for our attention at the same time."

The U.S. Open tennis tournament launched an app two years ago that allows fans—whether they are at the event or not—to look up information that includes scores, schedules, draws, players and stats. Nicole Jeter West, director of digital strategy and partner-



Games involving QR codes, such as those employed at PCMA's 2013 Convening Leaders conference, are being used as a way to facilitate communication at conventions and trade shows.