



Pyrotechnics and giant-sized LED ribbons (backing the stage) in Atlanta's Georgia Dome capture attention at Primerica's corporate meeting.

Photo courtesy of Steve Smith—The Switch

# Maximum Impact

## New Tech Tricks to Keep Attendees Engaged

Like all things technological, the variety and quality of audio-visual equipment is improving so fast that it's difficult for meeting planners to keep track of it all. There are seemingly endless varieties of LCD screens, projectors and lighting; high-definition and plasma monitors; video walls; microphones and speakers; computer-based presentations; and AV combined with video-conferencing and webcasting. Meeting planners needn't be AV experts, but they should know enough to communicate their needs and ask the right questions of AV providers to obtain equipment that satisfies meeting goals.

That's the strategy of Marc Silverstone, principle of Equilibrium Events Inc., a corporate meeting and event planning

firm with offices in New York City and Hollywood, FL. Silverstone took that approach when planning a tablet PC product launch for a technology company. The launch took place earlier this year during two meetings that were held simultaneously in hotel ballrooms in London and New York City. About 350 company executives and salespeople attended each meeting, which included a reception and product introduction.

### Just Like Being There

Both ballrooms displayed two giant video walls, consisting of HD LCD monitors on opposite sides of each room. One video wall in each room depicted live feeds from the other ballroom. "The goal was to make participants feel as if they

were in the same place. The walls made each room look double its size. The enormous screens almost made you feel like you could walk through the wall into the other venue. They used several cameras in each room that made people in each room feel a part of the other room," says Silverstone. To bolster the illusion, the food service staff in each location wore the same uniforms, and the bands in both ballrooms dressed in tuxedos, alternately playing the same genre of music.

The second video wall in each room showed the president of the company introducing the new PC product from a separate location in New York City. "We did that because we wanted both meetings to feel his presence without feeling like they were missing out on some-

thing, as they would have if he were in London or New York," says Silverstone. "Attendees raved about the event. It was more cost-effective than bringing everybody from both sides of the Atlantic into one place," Silverstone adds.

Silverstone met the meeting's goals by clearly communicating his AV needs. "The typical way I work is that I give AV companies the big picture of what I envision, and then I'm very specific about the exact needs and how people should see and hear each other. Once you do that, give them the ability and freedom to come up with a plan, but make sure you review it and see samples of it. That way, there are no surprises," says Silverstone.

AV professionals agree that planners must clearly explain the impact they want AV equipment to have on attendees. That's some of the advice that planners received during a session entitled "The Power of AV for Meeting Planners" at InfoComm 2011,

the annual conference of InfoComm International, the Fairfax, VA-based AV association. Bill Thomas, InfoComm director of education and one of the session's presenters, says he offered planners the following advice. "If the goals are to have people understand a complex technical issue or set of requirements or knowledge that requires detailed description, then you want to make sure the equipment supports that. If the goal is persuasion or general information, and not highly detailed, the equipment should support that," he says.

### The Latest and Greatest

Experts cite several AV trends in meetings:

- More meeting planners are looking to use AV equipment with handheld devices. "With the advent of the iPhone, smartphones and tablet PCs, we are seeing more planners looking for ways to integrate these devices into meetings. They want to allow instant two-way communication between attendees and presenters during PowerPoint presentations," says Tim Brady, executive vice president and COO of Swank Audio Visuals, a Scottsdale, AZ-based provider of onsite AV services to hotels, resorts and conference centers nationwide.

planners extend the reach of their meetings. Participating in meetings remotely will become easier through more types of devices and from more places as the operating platforms of different systems become more compatible," Thomas observes.

- High-definition screens, as singular displays and large "video walls," will become part of more meetings. However, many projectors can't be used with HD screens. "When most people see a wide screen, the first thing they think of is HD, but some projectors are compatible with it and some are not. That's a bigger factor than the size of the screen. Eventually, the compatibility issue will be ironed out. Meanwhile, projectors keep getting brighter and smaller," says Brady.
- LED lighting is changing the way planners create different "looks" in meeting rooms and on stages. LED lighting uses less voltage than traditional lighting and is more economical. "In the past, if you wanted to turn, say, pillow walls on sets three or four different colors, you would need three or four different fixtures and use lots of voltage. LED lighting has reached the point where it's more cost effective and provides several colors, logos or

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Jim Sharpton, Vice President of Meetings and Conventions Primerica, Duluth, GA

- Audio-visual videoconferencing and teleconferencing will become more common. "You will not only be having a live meeting, you will also have a virtual presence of more external groups as companies and

other looks. Setup time is shorter, voltage requirements and cabling are easier so it's more cost effective, even for smaller meetings. This gives you a simple look that grabs attention," Brady notes.

By Derek Reveron

## LED Magic

Advances in LED technology provide planners with a range of options and formats. Primerica, the Breckinridge, GA-based financial services marketing

*“When you are working with AV vendors with whom you have a history, you can build up a trusting relationship that helps in negotiating.”*

Carol Cazessus, CMP

CAZ Meetings & Incentives, Merritt Island, FL

company, used giant LED ribbons at its biennial corporate meeting. The five-day meeting took place in June in Atlanta and included about 40,000 of the corporation's employees, independent contractors and strategic partners. During the general session in the Georgia Dome, the LED ribbon effect — produced by the St. Louis, MO-based experiential marketing agency Switch — dominated the giant stage, says Jim Sharpton, Primerica's vice president of meetings and conventions. “They had motorized panels and were flexible so they could move around, up and down and undulate, almost like a flag. They could be moved together as one giant panel, or they could be separated into multiple panels, and each of those panels could have different information or different colors. They moved around and changed the look of the stage,” says Sharpton.

The LED ribbons depicted the names of incentive winners during incentive award ceremonies. At one point, the ribbons were brought together as one large panel to announce an incentive trip to Orlando next year. “It was great for showing details about the destination because it was a giant panel with sharp imagery. It was mostly LED material in front of a pipe and drape wall, so it wasn't the static wall that you usually have at meetings,” Sharpton adds.

## HD Image Mapping

Primerica used another cutting-edge AV technology during a meeting in July at

The Breakers Palm Beach in Palm Beach, FL. The five-day meeting covered new products and training for about 270 salespeople. During one session, presenters used HD image mapping. The technology,

produced by Boca Raton, FL-based Multi Image Group, allowed presenters to stand in front of a large screen and interact with the information on it. “Image mapping involves using multiple projectors tied to multiple computers, and you can literally touch the flat screen and move information and objects around on the screen. It's about keeping presentations exciting and different so they aren't the same flat-panel, boring presentations,” says Sharpton.

## What Planners Should Know

Using the latest AV technology doesn't necessarily require planners to be AV experts. For example, planners needn't know detailed technical specs, such as the amount of lumens (visible light) emitted by different types of projectors, in order to shop for the latest model. However, planners should know that lumen capability impacts which projector to use for a specific purpose in meeting spaces of different sizes. Meeting planners such as Sharpton have knowledge of such basics and use it to meet their meeting goals. Sharpton advises meeting planners to continually improve their knowledge of AV. “As a planner, it is part of your task to know what's out there to keep meetings new and exciting. It's an aspect of your job that will always be there. I choose to be involved and learn about it. I'm not as knowledgeable as our production people, but I want to read up on it and ask lots of questions of them,” Sharpton says.

Despite advancing AV technology, visual and audio communication needs for

most meetings remain relatively simple. However, even meetings using basic AV equipment require meeting planners to provide a detailed description of AV needs to equipment providers. Carol Cazessus, CMP, owner of CAZ Meetings & Incentives Inc. in Merritt Island, FL, once prepared a 14-page proposal for a training and educational meeting involving more than 200 attendees at a Florida hotel. The proposal was provided for the hotel's in-house AV provider. “We just had LCD projectors, screens, laptops and microphones. It took two inches on the page just to say there is going to be a 7-foot tripod screen in the room. It wasn't lengthy because we required a lot of equipment, but because (the AV provider) required a lot of details. I usually go through and check what I need in each room and it hopefully eliminates mistakes,” says Cazessus.

## Avoid AV Horror Stories

Mistakes with AV equipment aren't uncommon. Many meeting planners have AV horror stories to tell about setting up the wrong or faulty equipment. Thomas cites the following crucial factors to help planners avoid mistakes in selecting the right AV equipment to meet their communication goals.

- **Spend strategically.** This is crucial for meeting planners on tight budgets. Save money and still create a special AV experience by asking the following question: “How can I save money in one area and put it in another area for a bigger impact and still meet the communications goals of the meeting?”
- **Focus on attendees and their experience.** The basic purpose of AV is to help people see and hear information and people well, but some meetings overlook that. Thomas cites an all-too-common occurrence at meetings. “If you have a tiny screen and a big audience and detailed information you're sharing, that doesn't work well for attendees. There

will be eyestrain. You have to turn the lights down to see the contrast on the screen. It's fatiguing for attendees,” says Thomas.

## • Build trust with AV providers.

“Create a long-term relationship with good partners. They get to know how you work and what your expectations are, and that makes it easier to work through issues,” Thomas advises.

## Survey Says...

Brady says that planners cited the importance of trust and relationships during focus groups that Swank Audio Visuals conducted with Meeting Professionals International last year. Two groups of 20 planners were asked to rank factors they considered most important when looking for an AV partner. The factors included price, equipment, technical expertise, creativity and the relationship with the AV professional. “Unanimously, every meeting planner said what's most important for them is the relationship. I asked the moderator to ask them about price. They said that relationships come first because if they have trusting relationships, they could get a good price,” says Brady. Cazessus agrees. “When you are working with AV vendors with whom you have a history, you can build up a trusting relationship that helps in negotiating,” she says.

## In-house Versus Outside Providers

Planners shouldn't let a good relationship with a provider stop them from shopping for the best price. Many planners forego this step because it's customary and more convenient to work with a hotel's in-house AV provider. Cazessus uses in-house and outside AV providers. “Whenever I can, I try to use an in-house AV company just because of the simplicity of it and getting additional equipment if you need it, especially if I have a relationship with the company. When I have a new meeting, I typically will get three bids. And it isn't always the in-

house company that we use. Sometimes an outside company will give you a better quote. The downside of this is that you have to make sure they have a staff person there and have extra equipment on hand,” Cazessus says.

Because today's world of whizbang

technology has revolutionized nearly every aspect of our lives, it's more challenging than ever to keep attendees engaged. But planners who stay ahead of the curve in audio-visual advances will gain not only their attention, but some points from the C-suite as well. **C&IT**

# SET FOR SUCCESS

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