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Feature - December 2010

Technology



Audio-Visual That Keeps on Giving

WPI Event Partners created a multilayered environment using seven projection surfaces, intelligent lighting, surround sound and more.
Photo courtesy of WPI Event Partners

By Derek Reveron

Meeting planners and attendees depend more than ever on audio-visual technology to communicate information, engage audiences and make sessions more productive. Audio-visual presentations are becoming so advanced that the technology itself can sometimes make a meeting a valued and memorable experience for attendees.

That's what happened last year when a global telecommunications corporation held a meeting in Miami for its top executives and those representing industry partners worldwide. About 800 executives attended the four-day meeting, which included networking events, a golf tournament and sailing regatta. The meeting kicked off with a session that presented information about the corporation's global performance and latest technology. During the session, the moderator appeared to talk to her "twin" on stage because she was standing next to a hologram of herself. The "double" ostensibly appeared from



Ali Pena
CEO
Forums Event Design & Production
Miami, FL

"It looked like the slides were floating in the air, like they were 3-D. ...People were blown away. ...There was a big buzz about it."

the future to discuss technology in use years from now. The hologram was projected next to the presenter using a sophisticated projector, a screen placed unobtrusively beside the stage, and pre-recorded audio and video of the emcee that made it appear that she was having a spontaneous conversation with herself.

Then, executives of the telecommunications company made presentations using the hologram technology. "It looked like the slides were floating in the air, like they were 3-D," said Ali Pena, CEO of Miami-based Forums Event Design & Production, which planned the meeting. During other sessions, attendees could text their questions to moderators, who monitored the inquiries on laptop computers. Moderators selected relevant questions and verbally relayed them to speakers. Prior to the meeting, Pena and her staff distributed brochures to attendees with instructions and a text number to use for submitting questions.

Pena said the corporation wanted to give attendees a presentation they would never forget. "Since they are a high-level crowd, they have pretty much seen it all. My client was looking to create a 'wow' factor. For these types of meetings, you want them to walk away feeling energized, like they've seen something they've never seen before. It reinforces the company's brand as being

innovative and on the leading edge," said Pena.

The meeting succeeded in making a lasting impression on attendees. "People were blown away and had never seen anything like it at meetings they attended. There was a big buzz about it," Pena

observed.

Using holograms at meetings is still cutting-edge and uncommon. However, because of advancing audio-visual technology, it is becoming more important for presentations to include some type of visual glitz and entertainment along with education and information.

Marcy Manley, CEO of WPI Event Partners, a Chicago-based firm that plans events and meetings for Fortune 500 companies, explained, "Attendees expect convenient and amazing audio-visual presentations, whether they are technologically sophisticated or not. If there are issues with that, it is going to impact the tone and pace of the program and your ability to disseminate information. There could be a disconnect with the messaging."

Manley also stressed that it's vital for meeting planners to stay informed about the capabilities of the latest audio-visual equipment. "It's important for planners to understand what the gear does so they can intelligently speak to clients about what it can and can't do onsite. Understanding how audio-visual equipment, technology and multimedia work together is important, especially in large-scale productions," added Manley.

Keeping Up

Meeting planners must continuously educate themselves about audio-visual technology that is becoming increasingly interactive, combining LED display screens, computers, handheld devices and live video feeds. The convergence of audio-visual, voice, data and Web technologies is increasing the need for integrated audio-visual services overall and among corporations, a fast-growing segment for products provided by professional audio-visual firms, according to the 2010 "InfoComm Global AV Market Definition & Strategy Study" by InfoComm International, the audio-visual industry association.

The fastest growing audio-visual products used by meetings are displays, audio-visual conferencing equipment, streaming media and webcasting, wireless connections and software, according to the report. On the other hand, traditional audio-visual projectors, screens and shades are the slowest growing products.

More meetings use technology that allows attendees to text or e-mail questions and comments in real-time during presentations. The questions are presented on a large screen or appear on a computer used by the speaker. There is also a growing trend to use social media such as Twitter to get audience feedback during meetings.

"The feedback helps to keep the discussion fresh and cutting-edge, especially if the attendees are tech-savvy," said Emogene Mitchell, president of Mitchell's Meetings, a meeting planning company based in Arlington, VA. "In the past, somebody would give PowerPoint presentations and you would sit there with a printout and take notes. Now, audio-visual is incorporated into an interactive format, even with small groups. Presenters don't want to just stand there and talk to people anymore."



AV expert David Stout advised, "The ability to instantaneously communicate questions is a huge benefit that increases productivity and keeps meetings on track."

Photo courtesy of Swank Audio Visuals

Remember ROI

Interactive audio-visual technology can boost the bottom line of meetings. "In today's meetings and events market, there is such a huge focus on ROI and timeliness, that there are more presenters in fewer days, and they seem to be more tightly packed within a conference, so there is not as much time for question-and-answer sessions," said David Stout, area manager of Swank Audio Visuals, a 63-year-old St. Louis-based company, which provides audio-visual services to events, meetings and hotels nationwide. "Texting questions and answers provides the ability to instantaneously communicate, which is a huge benefit that increases productivity and keeps meetings on track."

Stout, who participated in a recent InfoComm seminar entitled "Power of AV: Meeting Planners,"

cited other advantages of interactive audio-visual systems. The systems can be configured to reject repeat questions and comments as well as remove them before audiences can see them. Audio-visual presentations — including the speaker's comments, audience questions and everything appearing on video screens — can be electronically published and e-mailed to attendees within minutes after a session ends, said Stout.

While there will always be a need for face-to-face meetings, the trend toward integrated audio-visual presentations will grow as more employees work from home and at remote locations. "We will start seeing more of a blend between audio-visual and the Web, video conferencing and webcasts," said Manley. "Technology will make it



David Stout
Area Manager
Swank Audio Visuals

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more cost effective to communicate with core employees offsite by using audio-visual to connect them to meetings. If you are holding a meeting in a hotel with hundreds of people, you need a way to connect with people offsite so they can see the audio-visuals presented and participate in the meeting."

The Newest AV Tools

Meetings are increasingly using LED screens in several ways to enhance audio-visual presentations. Stout cited an example. "You can stand in front of the presentation and be integrated in it," he said. "Instead of using a laser pointer, you can stand in front of a graph, pie chart or Excel spreadsheet to make points. You can layer and integrate pictures and graphics, and have more flexibility in presenting them."

Stout noted that more meetings are using LED displays to display information and create effects to set the atmosphere for meetings and events. Some meetings combine LED screens, which have bright and vibrant colors, to form "video walls" of various sizes and shapes. The wall can collectively display one image, or individual screens within the wall can portray different images. "LED is the biggest and foremost technology coming along. Three to five years from now, you'll have LED projectors that will be much more efficient, affordable and higher quality," Stout observed.

Manley turned to some of the latest audio-visual technology for a meeting in Chicago last June for 3,200 employees, business partners and customers of a consulting firm. The opening session and various presentations incorporated video walls. "Each one was 30 feet by 20 feet. We had four of them," she said. "We could project videos and content onto several screens, which were 16 feet by 30 feet and 14 by 20 feet. The video walls were used mostly for their graphics and color-changing capability to provide atmosphere and innovative lighting. We also used video towers (consisting of large screens) to help envelope the entire room in light rather than just the stage," said Manley.

At a meeting in Chicago for 200 sales employees for a consumer products corporation, Manley positioned seven LCD flat-panel plasma screens to overcome an obstacle: The meeting room had several pillars that obstructed the views of some attendees. "We placed the screens in front of the pillars so that people weren't struggling to look around them to see the content and graphics on the front screen. We also used lighting technology to uplight the pillars to heighten the environment and give the room more dimension," said Manley.

Hotels are ramping up their audio-visual capabilities to keep up with the expectations of meeting planners and attendees. "Your average level of expectation in audio-visual quality certainly has increased," said Stout. "But lots of hotels still have the smaller 4:3 aspect ratio (the width-to-height of a television or film image). We have had meeting planners come to us because some hotels don't have wide-screen formats. Many hotels now are making a big push toward wide screens with 16:9 aspect ratios."

Hotels Keep Pace

Hotels of all sizes nationwide are upgrading audio-visual technology. Here is a sampling:

- When the **Mandarin Oriental Las Vegas at CityCenter** opened last year, the facility featured meeting rooms containing state-of-the-art audio-visual systems. Ballrooms include LCD projectors and drop-down screens. Attendees can view video of same-day sessions through a secure channel in the hotel's 392 guest rooms and suites.
- **The Carlton Hotel** in New York City has fitted seven meeting rooms with new audio-visual systems. The rooms, representing a total of 6,000 square feet of meeting space, have new ceiling-mounted projectors, speaker systems, mechanized screens and wireless microphones. Podiums were customized to allow laptop presentations. Lighting systems were also improved at the 317-room hotel.
- The 1,500-room **Hilton Anaheim**, located near Disneyland, installed a new audio-visual system as part of a \$560 million renovation project. The \$1.2 million system provides new audio systems, digital signage, speakers and a touch-panel control system that encompasses 51 meeting rooms and two 28,542-square-foot ballrooms.
- In Chicago's North Shore area, the 269-room **Hilton Orrington/Evanston** recently opened with state-of-the-art audio-visual equipment for its meeting facilities, which include a 12,000-square-foot conference center with a 300-person capacity.
- The **Hilton University of Houston** recently reopened after a \$12.5 million renovation, which



"It's important for planners to understand what the gear does so they can intelligently speak to clients about what it can and can't do onsite."

includes state-of-the-art audio-visual equipment.

Using the latest audio-visual technology, whether it's supplied by hotels or an outside service, doesn't guarantee that presentations will impress attendees. Mistakes can undercut the effectiveness of the latest equipment, so avoid the following common pitfalls.

- **Don't overload a screen with graphics.** It can be confusing. "Less is more when you're talking about showing graphics on a screen," said Manley.
- **Don't show unsophisticated graphics and Web clip art on large, modern screens.** "The disconnect is that you have all this amazing technology but you are still using second-grade graphics," said Manley.
- **Don't repeat verbatim the information on the screen.** "Don't insult the audience. They can read. Even the best presenters have a problem with that," said Manley.
- **Don't show information that is too small to read.**

More information is available from the "Setup Guide for Events, Meetings, Conferences and Classrooms" at www.infocomm.net. No matter how much you know, there is always something new to learn. Whether you are using a hotel's in-house audio-visual service or a reputable offsite company with a proven track record, remember to shop around, compare prices, ask for discounts, avoid extra charges and keep abreast of the latest changes. **C&IT**