Hybrid meetings require updated meeting space

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Meetings of the future will rely on great lighting and acoustics to provide a high-quality hybrid meeting experience for physical and remote attendees.

By Jeff Loether
HNN columnist

This is the third part in a four-part series from the International Society of Hospitality Consultants discussing technology trends in the hospitality industry. Read part one and part two, and look for part four tomorrow.

If we boil it down to its essence, what are meetings? Meetings are people communicating. There are two factors here: people and communicating. Let's look at each of these two factors to predict what we need to do to be prepared for the future of meetings.

Future of communications
Where are we headed with presentation and group communications technologies? The short answer is everywhere. The integration of wireless technologies (smartphones, tablets, etc.) with larger group display and interactive location-aware content management systems are exploding, blurring the line between physical and virtual realities. This leads to an expanding world of augmented-reality applications, and fully immersive and interactive experiences for meeting attendees.

The expanding use of visual and virtual communications technologies of FaceTime, video teleconferencing, telepresence, Skype and webinars, brings remote attendees together for virtual face-to-face meetings. This has been in practice for a long time, but with the integration of social media, the immediacy and interactivity has expanded to again blur the division between physical and virtual. Our concept of space is expanding and shrinking at the same time.

Future of people
We see that communications technologies are rapidly developing and advancing in all directions, but how are people advancing? Do we think that we as humans are evolving as quickly as technology? That 's probably not the case, but what does all of this mean for the hotel owner?

The box matters
When we think about putting people along with technology together for a physical, face-to-face meeting, where do we put them? Into a box, usually. It could be a ballroom, a meeting room or an auditorium.

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As hoteliers, we are in the box business. What kind of box works best for this blend of people and technologies? How do we plan for the future of meetings? How can we make a better box? How can we improve the boxes we already have?

Some technologies are designed to capture the activities and content of the physical event (what's happening inside the box) to present that content to remote audiences, both in real time (streaming, webcasting, video conferencing) and in the future (recording and on-demand serving). To do this, the technologies must capture the audio and visual content as it occurs, using microphones and video cameras.

Other technologies are designed to capture the activities and content from remote participants (those who are not physically present) including both presenters and attendees, and present that content in real time to the assembled in-person attendees in the box. These technologies use sound systems with loudspeakers and visually projected or direct-view displays to show what's on the "other side."

All together now
So, we have technologies with microphones and cameras, speakers and displays. And we have people with ears, eyes, voices and faces. How are these related? Closely, as it turns out.

Let's look at visual elements. What do cameras need to work optimally? Consider what TV studios look like: brightly and evenly lit stages. This allows the video sensors to capture detail without having to use electronic gain, which degrades the images, and to allow a greater depth of field and sharpness of focus. That's how cameras and optics work.

Lighting the box matters a lot to the future of meetings whether for the platform/stage or in the audience. Color-balanced and even lighting is necessary to accommodate the human attendees, and the present and future technologies that merge virtual with physical events.

How about sound elements? It's all about signal-to-noise ratio or how much of what we are hearing is what we want to hear (signal) and how much is noise or undesired and distracting sound. The greater the signal-to-noise ratio, the higher is the intelligibility and the lower the stress for the listener. This applies both to the acoustical environment in the box as well as for people listening remotely, even with headphones.

The room acoustics matter, as do the sound systems built into the rooms—even more so than the lighting. Good room

acoustics make for better meetings both for the physically present attendees and for the remote attendees through the hybrid technologies.

As with lighting, we already know what the sound and acoustics standards are required for adult-learning classrooms and meeting spaces from the research: low background noise, low reverberation, good acoustic isolation between adjacent spaces and good built-in sound systems.

The future is what it used to be
As hybrid and virtual technologies become more integrated into our meetings, the higher-quality rooms with great lighting and great acoustics will stand out by providing higher-quality hybrid event experiences for physical and remote attendees.

Ultimately, we cannot fix a bad room (poor lighting, poor acoustics) through technology. Technology makes bad rooms look and sound even worse. Word will get out, and that's not the type of word of mouth you want for your facility.

Jeff Loether is president and founder of Electro-Media Design , ltd. Before starting Electro - Media Design, Loether served as the manager of audio/visual systems design for the Marriott Corporation's Architecture and Construction Division from 1980 to 1990. Electro - Media Design, Ltd. is an independent technology design and management consulting practice that has provided design and consulting services to the hospitality industry for 22 years—from feasibility studies and systems design to project and AV operations management consulting.