

A Brainy Approach To Meeting Environments

WHEN YOU'RE INVITED TO attend what is billed as a "Thought Leader Summit," you show up with high hopes. And the International Association of Conference Centers' (IACC) three-hour summit, held on March 24 at Chicago's innovative Workspring Conference Center, did not disappoint.

The eight-member panel discussion on conference technology was facilitated by PCMA Vice President of Education John Potterton, CMP, and webcast live to kick off the 2010 IACC-Americas Conference at the Eaglewood Resort & Spa in nearby Itasca, Ill. Those watching the webcast could tweet questions to the panelists.

Potterton began by outlining the four learner outcomes for the discussion: 1) to anticipate and track how different presentation and collaborative technologies can contribute to — or detract from — the meeting experience; 2) to develop new strategies to complement the learning needs of meeting participants through the thoughtful use of today's technologies; 3) to gain an awareness of how to create compelling learning experiences and build loyal customers through the use of social media before, during, and after the event; and 4) to learn how properties are measuring ROI for the hundreds of thousands of dollars that they spend every year on technology to support meetings.

Panelists included Mike Dickersbach, vice president of information services and technology, Thayer Lodging; Mark Greiner, senior vice president and chief experience officer, Steelcase Inc.; Paul M. Leguillon, technical support director, Q Center; Steve Mahaley, director of learning technology, Duke Corporate Education; Michael M. McCurry, CMP, strategic account manager, Experient; Andrea Sullivan,



A MEETING OF THE MINDS: Co-panelists Andrea Sullivan, president of BrainStrength Systems, and Eddie Turner, principal of Turner Technologies

president, BrainStrength Systems; Eddie Turner, principal, Turner Technologies; and Greg Van Dyke, senior vice president of marketing, PSAV Presentation Services.

The panelists dug into the topics at hand: the evolution of technology, the adult learner, the learning experience, and face-to-face meetings. You can watch the entire three-hour panel discussion — wide-ranging, far-reaching, and at times freewheeling — at

<http://events.iacconline.org/videos>. In the meantime, here's a snippet of a summit conversation about face-to-face interaction vis-à-vis virtual meetings and social media:

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ON SITE

Mark Greiner: It should be no surprise to us [that social media is having an effect on meetings].

We've given a tool to humans, and humans are social animals. So, the more you allow them to be social, the more they're going to make use of it. The reason why people pull from all these [social-media] sites is, they're trying to create their pattern of understanding.

Their view of the world. So they take all of these feeds and websites — these are others expressing their point of view, they have to make it their point of view. In the past, you could ask your cubicle-mate what they thought about something. But now, you can instantly ask 2,000 people what they think of an idea and get 17 different things — that you can then say, "I agree with these four, those two I disagree with. This is *my* new point of view."

There is nothing that is going to trump face-to-face. Now, for cost reasons or travel reasons, or whatever, we're going to have to accept things like telepresence, but face-to-face is always going to be the best interaction. It's generally where new knowledge is created.

John Potterton: Is face-to-face threatened by virtual?

Mike McCurry: I've seen evidence to the contrary, that actually online interaction leads to face-to-face interaction. An example is the hashtag community I participate in called EventProfs. For about 11 months, this group, which



PANEL PRESENTERS: Left to right: Paul M. Leguillon, Q Center; Steve Mahaley, Duke Corporate Education; and Greg Van Dyke, PSAV Presentation Services

grew to about 2,000 people, had twice-weekly chats about business issues related to the events industry, which culminated in an actual live, face-to-face event that we organized, called EventCamp, in New York City. And it was the most high-energy event I have ever been to in terms of the immediate connection and dialogue.

Steve Mahaley: Face-to-face is never going to go away. It's a matter of understanding what the desired outcomes [of a meeting] are, and the participant profiles. The opportunity with technology now is to create almost as sensory-rich an experience as face-to-face meetings. Almost as rich.

Greiner: One of the major research efforts going on at Steelcase right now is addressing this specific fact. In teleconference calls, if you were to ask the person who called in after the fact, they [would tell you that they] feel like they're listening in to your meeting. They don't feel like they're a participant in your meeting. Then you move up to videoconferencing or even telepresence. There still is the sense that I am

watching your meeting. I don't feel like I am a participant. I don't get the sense that when I lean forward, you're going to wait until I talk. The project is to try to make it a real experience, regardless of who is participating. And that is a tough nut to crack.

Mahaley: The meeting is not going to be successful if a particular part of the audience — however they're connected — doesn't participate. It's about creating the design of the meeting so that there's interdependency across however people are connected.

Eddie Turner: There is nothing that's going to replace that human element, because we're very emotive, and you don't get that through a screen. [There need to be] strategies to make it highly compelling and very interactive — with

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ways of involving the user as if you were almost there.

A tweet from the remote audience: Is there a danger of too much virtual support where it can devalue face-to-face for some audiences?

Mahaley: I'd counter that and say that it actually increases the value of the face-to-face. We've all been to conferences where you don't know many people. And you show up trying to do what you can to meet people. But the chances of meeting those one or two people who can really work with you on something that's on your mind are pretty slim. The virtual ability to search, find, connect, plan, organize, collaborate — in advance of the thing that's going to happen — increases the value of the time that you're actually face-to-face.

John Potterton: But is there a point where that becomes too much?

Mike Dickersbach: I think it's a generational thing. Gen Xers, and more so the Y's, will say bring on all of it. And the Boomers not as much. So there's going to be a period of time where it is uncomfortable for some and a distraction for others. It's a period of adjustment.

Andrea Sullivan: Most of us are very comfortable receiving information online. If you want social interaction, collaboration, if you want people to get engaged, face-to-face is great. You have to look at what is it you want to accomplish, and then blend according to that. **Greiner:** What we are all collectively agreeing to is that going too far would be to mandate "never" on either end of this spectrum [face-to-face or digital]. I think we're all saying that you need to figure out how to weave all these threads together, but to go to either extreme would be wrong.

— Michelle Russell