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Column - September 2010

## Perspective

# One Meeting...Many Learning Environments

## Contemporary Meeting Planners Should Stage Transformational Experiences For Attendees



**Eddie Turner**

In their landmark book *The Experience Economy* (Harvard Business Press, 1999), B. Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore advance the position that “work is theater and every business a stage.” This is an axiom that meeting planners would be well advised to heed, according to the group of industry thought leaders who gathered in Chicago in March 2010 for a summit convened by the International Association of Convention Centers. These industry leaders suggested that the contemporary meeting planner must think of his or her role as more than convening a conference or organizing an event. Today’s meeting planner must think of him or herself as what Pine and Gilmore refer to as an “experience stager” — in essence, someone who stages transformational experiences for the individuals attending meetings.

To execute this transformational experience there are several variables that factor into the type of experience a person tasked with setting the meeting stage as the experience stager needs to consider. Perhaps the most salient points for consideration are:

- the increased accessibility of advanced technology;
- the changing age demographic of the work force; and
- the importance of making the best use of the physical space available for a session.

## The Accessibility Of Technology

Not so long ago a person’s place of employment had appreciably better technology than most homes. The term “Cyber Monday” for example, referred to the fact that the Monday after Thanksgiving became the second biggest shopping day of the year. A significant amount of shopping was the result of employees using lightning fast Internet connectivity and robust computers in their workplaces to process their Christmas shopping orders.

Today, however, more employees have technology at home equal to or better than the technology resources they have access to at work. This seismic shift has affected meeting planners as they struggle to meet the needs of the consumer and business professional who demands access to the same high-end technology at meeting sites as they have at home. Additionally, many people arrive at meetings with their own cutting-edge technology and want to use it at the meeting venue. It is incumbent upon meeting and event planners to factor in the vast accessibility of technology as they plan meaningful experiences for their audience.

## Staging For Multiple Generations Of Workers

The second variable that meeting planners and experience stagers must be cognizant of are the varying ways in which workers from different age demographics interface with each other, with technology and with work in general. The contemporary work force is an amalgam of several generations of workers — baby boomers (born 1946–1964) work in lockstep with Generation X (born 1974–1980) and Generation Y (born in the 1980s and ‘90s), also known as millennials. Each generation brings with it a change in workplace expectations, learning styles and the level of reliance and comfort in the use of technology. When planning a meeting, stagers have to assess the readiness of each participant to leverage technology. Depending on the participant’s age, technology can be either an

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The goal of a stager is to provide a blended solution that utilizes multiple technology channels. In other words, in one meeting, he or she has the opportunity to create many learning environments.

## Setting The Scene

Another key point to consider that may be one of the most overlooked in staging a transformational meeting is the physical layout of the meeting room. Careful consideration should be given to the aesthetics of a meeting room. The physical layout affects the level of participation, the level of personal comfort and security, and the capacity for learning. One of the panelists, Mark Griener, supplied examples of an entire body of empirical evidence, which suggests that psychologically, the layout of the room has a strong correlation to the amount of learning and collaboration that will take place at the event.

As the global leader in conference center management and collaboration, the International Association of Conference Centers was the ideal vehicle for discussing ways to stage transformation meetings. The members on the panel were some of the brightest and most talented individuals in their industry segments.

In the panel's highly evocative and engaging meeting, many observations were discussed and keen insights emerged. The panel arrived at the conclusion there are many learning environments that can be created in one meeting, and experience stagers have the power to deliver transformational memories and successful events if they stay abreast of advances in technology, the changing demographics of the work force and make the best use of the physical space at learning events.

### C&IT

*Eddie Turner, principal of Turner Technologies LLC, St. John, IN, recently participated as a panelist at the 2010 IACC Thought Leaders Summit — "Incorporating Advancing Technology into the Meeting Experience" at the 29th annual conference of the International Association of Conference Centers. Turner has 16 years of experience in technology support and training. Passionate about all aspects of technology, training and social media, Turner also enjoys using technology in the world of learning and talent development. He can be reached at 312-287-9800 or [eddie@turnertechnologies.biz](mailto:eddie@turnertechnologies.biz).*