



Going Paperless

Streamline Communications with Technology

By Tamara Muldoon

The Internet, computers and cellular technology have transformed how people work, play and communicate in a single generation. These technological advances offer new ways to streamline conference communications and enrich the experience for attendees.

Marketing Materials

Not that long ago save-the-date notices, registration brochures, sponsor/exhibitor prospectuses, conference programs and evaluation forms were all printed on paper. Now, websites, social media, email and survey apps make printing these items no longer necessary or even desirable. The savings on printing and distribution costs are significant and can easily offset the cost of software purchase or user fees.

Your conference website should be the “go-to” place for information about call for papers, agenda, speakers, sponsors and exhibitors, registration, destination and lodging details. Update the content frequently to keep it current. Use social media such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, and email marketing tools such as MailChimp and Constant Contact to drive interested people to your website. SurveyMonkey and similar applications allow you to easily create and send online evaluation forms to conference attendees.

Planner References

As an event planner, you wouldn’t dream of going onsite without having reference materials at your fingertips with all the details that you’ve so painstakingly organized to get to this point—event and catering orders, program schedules, contact lists, staffing schedules, room diagrams and more.

Instead of a paper-filled binder, have you considered putting those documents on a tablet computer instead? After all, they are on a computer in your office, so why not? Think of the tablet as a smaller, easy-to-carry version of your office computer.

Another plus for the tablet is its capacity. You can easily store all your conference-related documents, making them available for reference; a luxury that would be too bulky if printed on paper. The tablet also provides an Internet browser and access to your email when connected to WiFi.

CONNECT

The mobile app vendors listed here offer a wealth of free educational resources on their websites.

Guidebook
guidebook.com/resources

EventMobi
eventmobi.com/resources

Replace Printed Programs with Mobile Apps

Printed programs are expensive, time-consuming to produce, require substantial lead time and are often out-of-date as soon they are sent to the printer. With the ubiquitous use of smart phones, mobile apps for events are now a practical alternative. Mobile apps offer many benefits. You can:

- Update schedule and program information in real-time, even during the event
- Send out notifications highlighting upcoming sessions or alerting attendees to changes
- Allow attendees to create a personalized schedule of sessions they plan to attend
- Help participants connect with one another via networking features
- Have built-in social media links allowing registrants to promote the event to their contacts and engage in discussion during the conference
- Measure attendee engagement and app usage with analytical tools
- Add code scanning for vendors to capture prospect leads
- Include “gamification” features, allowing you to create fun games or contests to boost engagement

The only downside to using a mobile app is that you need a fast and reliable WiFi connection. Depending upon the venue, this could be a significant cost. Negotiate this cost with the venue to get a better deal.

CHOOSING AN APP

The easiest and least expensive option is to use an existing mobile app platform. These applications are relatively easy to set up and use, plus they offer a great deal of customization. You can create an application that mirrors your conference branding and include only the tools that make sense for your event.

According to the Event App Buyers Guide produced by mobile app vendor Guidebooks, an effective event app should meet at least four main needs:

- Provide program information that attendees need to navigate your event, such as schedule, session descriptions, lists of speakers, exhibitors and sponsors
- Utilize real-time communication to instantly send announcements, program changes, surveys and more to all your participants
- Facilitate networking among attendees
- Collect and analyze usage data to evaluate the effectiveness and return on investment for both the app tool and the event

Surveys of meeting planners and conference attendees indicate that the five most important app capabilities are: an easy-to-navigate event schedule; session descriptions; the ability to create a personalized schedule; being able to receive notices from the organizers; and access to maps and directions. A networking function is also high on the list.

Most apps have attractive add-on features. Start with your must-have list, then assess whether any of these “bells and whistles” are worth the extra cost.

Ask the vendor not only for a demonstration, but to allow you to try out an actual app. You want to see how it functions both from a user and administrator perspective.

Ask about support. Are there tutorials and reference documents to help you learn to use the product? During what days/hours does the vendor provide technical support? Request references and talk to other customers about their experience.

Anne Jacko, conference queen (her actual title) at Eclipse Foundation, often uses mobile apps at conferences she plans. “Take the time to compare different apps and really look at the features and figure out if your attendee base really needs those features,” advises Jacko.

Implementation

Once you’ve chosen a mobile app product, begin customizing it for your event. Depending upon its functionality, you will likely be entering the agenda, session descriptions, speaker bios, and perhaps loading registration records. Most of this information can be imported to save time. Be sure to include a “Help” contact; someone that users can call or message for technical assistance.

Next, test the app on different devices and operating system platforms (i.e. Android and iPhone). Try sending notifications to a group of test users. Practice updating information in the app.

Plan to launch the app well before the conference, allowing time for users to log-on and get familiar with it before the event starts. Consider offering a charging station onsite where attendees can plug in and charge up their devices during breaks.

DURING THE EVENT

Inform attendees of program changes by sending push notifications via the app. Some vendors also offer an option of sending the notice by email as well, reaching those who are not using the app. Advanced features may allow you to send targeted messages to specific subgroups among registrants, for example inviting first-time attendees to an icebreaker reception.

NETWORKING AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Built-in social media links allow registrants to easily promote the conference to coworkers and business contacts before and during the event. Displaying a social media feed such as Twitter, encourages participation and provides valuable feedback. Be sure to prominently display your conference hashtag and other social media “handles” to make sharing simple and fast.

Networking among attendees is often a major objective of any conference. The app can make networking simpler by allowing users to send private messages to each other, arrange meetings, exchange information and more.

SURVEYS

Use surveying tools to get feedback on sessions, individual speakers and conference events. Crowd-source ideas and hot topics with polls. These tools can also be used to stimulate Q & A at the end of presentations.

The Takeaway

Technology is not just for tech conferences. It provides useful tools for attendees and planners alike. Offering a mobile app does not have to be complicated or expensive. Start out with a basic app, then analyze user engagement and return on investment following the event. Based upon feedback, you can add features to future versions. **M**



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