



Tech Excellence

Following this roadmap will turn tech zeros into tech heroes – BY MATT ALDERTON

MEETINGS ARE NOT MACHINES. Instead of electricity, gasoline or batteries, they run on conversation, education and ideation. In place of circuits, capacitors and microchips they have presentations, handshakes and hellos. Their modus operandi isn't hardware and software, it's people connecting with other people in a room.

It's easy to see why some meeting planners continue to resist technology: The best meetings aren't high-tech, they're high-touch.

And yet, meeting professionals who dismiss technology entirely do so at their own peril, according to Brian Ludwig, senior vice president of sales at meetings technology company Cvent. "Meeting planners need to [embrace technology] first and foremost because their attendees are demanding it," he says. "Whatever type of meeting it is — internal or external — you're going to have a hard time keeping your audience engaged and coming back to drink the Kool-Aid if you're not delivering content and experiences in the way people are accustomed to getting them."

Meeting professionals get it. They just don't get it. Consider, for example, the results of a 2016 survey by Meeting Professionals International

(MPI): While six in 10 meeting planners (61.4 percent) agree that technology makes event management easier, 92 percent say meeting planners are not yet making the most of it.

Fear and cynicism are to blame for the gap. On the one hand, meeting professionals worry that they're not savvy enough to use technology, and will therefore fail if they try to implement it. On the other hand, they're skeptical that technology will live up to its promises if they succeed. Faced with an impossible decision — failure or disappointment — many meeting planners choose neither, electing

instead to dig their heels in and continue doing things the way they've always been done.

Unfortunately, that's no longer an option, according to Ludwig. "While planners may be slow to adopt, they all see the train barreling down on them," he says. "They recognize what's coming, and recognition of a problem is the first step toward solving it. More than ever, meeting planners' eyes are open to the fact that they've got to move in the direction of technology."

Although meeting planners know what



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destination they must eventually reach, many are still at a loss for how to get there. If you're among them, here's turn-by-turn directions that will get you from where you're at — technological ignorance — to where you need to be: technological excellence.

1 DEFINE SUCCESS.

Before embarking on a journey of technological discovery, meeting professionals should be clear about what “technological excellence” requires — and, just as important, what it doesn't.

“Planners don't need to be over-the-top tech-savvy wizards, but they should have an open mind for change and embrace technology as a driver that will propel the industry forward and strengthen the value of their role within corporations and third parties,” explains Catherine Chaulet, president of Global DMC Partners, a global network of independent destination management companies (DMCs) and sales advisers serving meeting planners around the world.

Meeting planner Carly Silberstein, CEO of Toronto-based Redstone Agency, agrees. To be technologically excellent, she says, meeting planners don't have to be technical enough to

develop technology or troubleshoot it, they just have to be visionary enough to deploy it. “We don't need to be the IT department,” Silberstein says. “But we do need to be open-minded enough to try new things and to understand that technology will allow us to do our job better and faster and easier.”

Simply put: Technological excellence demands that meeting planners be strategically capable, not tactically adroit. “The best software nowadays is as easy to use as email,” says Mike Doane, marketing manager at event technology company CadmiumCD. “If you can use email, you should be able to use event management software.”

2 START SMALL.

Once they understand that technological excellence is not tantamount to technical expertise, meeting professionals should feel comfortable advancing their high-tech agenda. If they want to succeed in doing so, however, they should proceed slowly.

“If you're not someone who's on the cutting edge, start small,” Ludwig advises. “You've got to walk before you run.”

In other words, don't try to implement all the technology you can, everywhere, at the same time. Rather, take a single step. “Ask yourself: What are you wasting the most amount of time on?” Ludwig continues. “If you're spending 20 hours a week on something, ask yourself if there's a piece of technology that could turn those 20 hours into 15, and then to 12, and then to 10. Don't try to solve every problem you have [with technology]; just try to solve one.”

The goal is to establish a quick win. Because once you've experienced the benefits of technology firsthand, you'll have the momentum you need to continue your journey.

“A lot of people want to jump head-first and take everything on, but that's not the way to do it,” Doane says. “The best way to do it is to take a baby step by solving an immediate frustration or problem.”

MGM Resorts International facilitates exactly that approach at its meeting venues. Consider, for example, the brand-new Ideation Studio at Park MGM, which opened in

October 2018 with 7,000 square feet of space divided among 10 meeting rooms. Designed for groups of six to 24, the venue takes a surgical approach to technology, according to MGM Resorts International Senior Vice President and Chief Sales Officer Michael Dominguez.

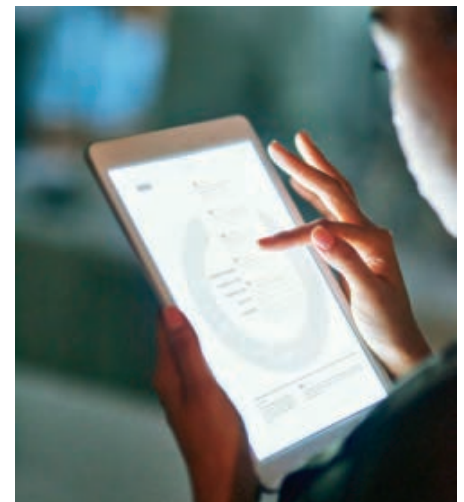
“Technology should enhance the opportunity for you to meet your objectives,” Dominguez says. “What we've done [in the Ideation Studio] is take a look at how we can use technology specifically in collaborative spaces where people are coming together for strategic planning or brainstorming.”

Instead of infusing the venue with technology for technology's sake, MGM Resorts singled out a discrete need — more efficient and effective collaboration — and implemented a targeted technology solution to suit it: Cisco's Webex Teams virtual meeting technology, which utilizes screens that do double duty as monitors and smartboards. The screens can display presentation decks and other visuals, and can be digitally “written” on by meeting participants; everything

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that appears on the screens is saved to the Cloud for on-demand access by participants both during and after the meeting.

“I could have gotten really sexy in these rooms, but that's not what our clients needed,” Dominguez says. “What our clients needed was an effective system where they could communicate and collaborate and all be together.”





“You could always hire a consultant to come in and discuss what problems you’re looking to solve and what technology could help you,” Silberstein suggests.

4 MAKE TECH A TEAM SPORT.

Speaking of reinforcements: Being a tech-savvy meeting planner doesn’t necessarily mean executing technology yourself; as long as you’re a champion for technology, it could mean delegating it to someone else.

“There’s the old saying, ‘Don’t be the smartest person in the room,’ which means

artificial intelligence, take cues from your larger competitors, Doane advises. “If you’re watching your budget and you’re not super tech-savvy, it doesn’t make sense for you to be an early adopter,” he says. “Think of Google Glass. Everybody in the events industry was talking about it a couple years ago, but it just never took off. I think we’re going to see a resurgence of wearable technologies like that, but it was the wrong time to invest in that technology for your events. Instead of jumping on the bandwagon right away, wait to see how it’s being used at the big conferences and then ask yourself if there’s a use case for your audience. Because if you just throw technologies at your event and hope they stick, they’re going to fall flat.”

While you’re waiting for new technologies to mature, the time is now to move forward on technologies that have already ripened. When you do, you’ll become excellent not only at technology, but also at everything else.

If your network isn’t helpful, or you want more tailored recommendations, call in reinforcements.

3 SURVEY THE LANDSCAPE.

Knowing your pain points is an important first step. However, you still have to find technology with which to address them. To start the process, turn to the three ‘Ps’ of research: publications, presentations and people.

Publications include industry magazines, newsletters and blogs, all of which can be a good resource for discovering technology solutions, as well as tutorials for using them. “I’m a big reader, and I think reading is the best way to learn,” Doane says.

For presentations, look for virtual and face-to-face learning opportunities, including webinars and live events. “There are some really great events that are held by software companies. Cvent, for example, has their CONNECT show, and we [at CadmiumCD] have a show called CadCon, as well as meet-ups throughout the year that we call lunch ‘n’ learns,” Doane continues. “Big industry events like IMEX, PCMA and Expo! Expo! are other great places to learn what’s new and get hands-on training.”

Finally, there’s people. “Planners should leverage their relationships with other meeting professionals to see which tools make their jobs easier and bring ROI to their events,” Chaulet says.

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you should always hire people who are smarter than you,” Silberstein says. “At our company, we try to balance ourselves out by hiring people who have a skillset or a knowledge base that we don’t already have so that we can learn from them.”

Echoes Ludwig, “If you’re not a technically advanced person, you have to own that and know it, and then you’ve got to surround yourself with people who are. Go find someone who’s implemented an event management system — or any sort of event technology — and get them on your staff ... o come up with suggestions and good ideas that you can then sign off on.”

5 FOLLOW THE LEADERS.

Of all the skills that can serve meeting professionals on their journey to technological excellence, perhaps the most important is good judgment; because technology changes so quickly, the most effective meeting planners are the ones who know when to take cutting-edge technologies and when to leave them.

If you’re wondering whether now is the right time to pull the trigger on trendy tech like augmented reality and

Concludes Chaulet, “It’s the ability to better report and engage, as well as manage budgets, that’s critical to meeting planners, not just for the event logistics management side, but also as a way to easily showcase the true value that their role plays in an economic environment where ROI and efficiencies drive so many decisions. Technology could help meeting planners go from a perceived cost position to an actual position of value.” ■

