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# Interactive conferencing makes its mark

**STEVE BINDLEY** looks at the impact audience response systems are having on the conference and events industry

The conference and events industry is constantly evolving as new technology changes the opportunities open to us. Over the years we have seen presentation technology evolve on all fronts, from 35mm slides to computer based PowerPoint presentations, followed by video tapes being superseded by digital video solutions and it is vital that we maximise the impact of this progress.

As an event production company, we are not only expected to manage the content of the event, but more importantly, we are expected to be able to offer the expertise to ensure the event achieves its full potential. Aside from actually implementing the production services, we need to be able to provide guidance on the latest technological advances and equipment that is available to our clients to ensure the individual requirements of each project are met.

I have worked in the conference and events industry for over twenty years now and one thing that still remains true is that each event is different, and this needs to be captured by the production team. This includes everything from the technology available, to the choice of venue, the style of lighting and the stage design – and, of course, the audience.

Whether the event is a small, specialised meeting or a large, international convention, the audience is key to the success. Obviously the core purpose of most conferences is to impart knowledge, share experiences and present new findings, but this alone is seldom enough to make an event really stand out. To make an event memorable there has to be something that distinguishes it from the crowd, you have to give the audience a reason to remember the event.

Increasingly the focus today is on interactive conferencing – getting the audience to feel an integral part of the event and working with them to shape the overall experience. A key part of this is the use of audience response systems, with the technology now available to instantly gauge attitudes and monitor reactions.

However, as interactive keypad technology has developed to offer far greater insight than a simple A, B or C response, it is no longer being used to its full potential. This is due to a combination of nervousness about committing to something new, and a lack of communication about the technology's full potential.

It is this communication that is key. Event organisers need to continue to build their understanding about the creativity this technology gives us, and embrace the opportunities it opens up. The incorporation of the technology into conferences allows for a more

diverse presentation, which can be tailored in whichever way is desired – providing new levels of flexibility.

With today's audience response keypads the level of interaction created is incomparable, allowing participation that is simple and powerful. The key to their success is simple - each audience member has their own keypad, allowing every individual to feel greater inclusion in the event and be sure that their views are being heard.

The keypads also give event organisers the ability to capture a vast amount of data in an instant - gone are the days of organisers having to collect half completed feedback forms at the end of every conference and spending days processing all of the information. Data can be immediately incorporated into a presentation, providing an event that reflects the real-time attitudes of the people who matter most – the delegates. Allowing greater in-depth analysis and assessment of results, keypads offer a fair and accurate insight into the audience, enabling companies to plan and develop their approaches based on true response.

I am a great believer in this technology. We have recently invested in 1,000 keypads, and have committed to organising free interactive training seminars once a quarter, where businesses can learn how the keypads can be used to maximum effect at their conferences and events.

It's an investment we're willing to make if we can support clients in their understanding of the technology and where it can take them. If we, as an industry are to maximise the potential of new technologies, it is vital that we communicate the advantages and techniques with our clients, presenting them with simple solutions that allow them to create more engaging events that can have real impact.

Interactive conferencing is a current hot topic for the industry, but this will no doubt change with future technological advancements, and when it does, we need to be ready to offer the support and guidance that the new challenges will bring.

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