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# IACC Thought Leader Summit: The Future Meeting Experience

October 3, 2008



# IACC THOUGHT LEADER SUMMIT

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The International Association of Conference Center's first Thought Leaders Summit took place Friday, October 3, 2008 at the BMO Financial Group Institute for Learning in Toronto, Canada.

The event brought together a group of acknowledged experts to detail the evolving trends, as well as the related best practices and strategies, for the total meeting experience. Thought leaders focused their presentations and discussions on the meeting environment of the near future—three to ten years from now. The proceedings from the Summit are captured in this report, which will be updated periodically to reflect future changes within the meeting and conference industry.

## **IACC has identified nine key elements that comprise the total meeting experience:**

- Generational Characteristics/Tendencies
- Methods of Knowledge Transfer
- Technology
- Exterior and Interior Design
- Learning and Living Environments
- Furnishings
- Social Opportunities
- Food and Beverage
- Environmental Sustainability

While the Thought Leaders Summit reflected the thinking of experts in these areas, each presentation was crafted through the prism of “Generational Characteristics/Tendencies.” The reason: Understanding what the younger generations in the workforce need, want, and expect from every element of the meeting experience will enable venues to prepare for the future.

## **The report can be interpreted by any meeting venue as it pertains to that venue's unique characteristics:**

- Location and market
- Scope of the facility's use
- Customer base
- Amenities
- Overall mission and operational philosophy

# SUMMIT OBJECTIVES

## The goals of the Thought Leaders Summit were:

1. To gain perspective on what IACC conference centers – and all other excellent meeting venues – need to provide in the future to satisfy the evolving needs of both planners and participants.
2. To identify best practices which ensure that meeting environments are congruent with customer needs.
3. To fulfill IACC's commitment to providing leading-edge information and advice on present and future meeting environments.
4. To launch an Expert Advisory Panel comprised of distinguished veterans from various disciplines who can be called upon periodically to share insights on the optimal meeting environment.
5. To maintain IACC's position as the authority on the meetings experience.

# SUMMIT PARTICIPANTS

## Summit Presentations and Participants:

*Demographics:* Adwoa Buahene, Analyst, n-gen People Performance

*Learning:* Diane Blair, Senior Manager, Meta Learning, BMO Financial Group

*Technology:* Don Hyde, Senior Consultant, Collaboration Services, Telus Corp.

*Architecture:* Daniel Welborn, Vice President, Gettys Group

*Furniture Design:* Barry Brennand, Director, Workplace Solutions, Steelcase Corp.

*Food & Beverage:* Mark Shuda, Vice President, Food & Beverage, HEI Hotels & Resorts

*Sustainability:* Kitty Ratcliffe, President, St. Louis CVC; Director, Green Meetings Industry Council

*Customer Perspective:* Tony Pastor, Manager, McKinsey Learning, McKinsey & Co.

*Facilitator:* Katrin Vahi, Director of Leadership & Talent Development, BMO Financial Group

# GENERATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS/TENDENCIES

To open the summit, facilitator Katrin Vahi told participants: “We’re here to get a firm understanding of trends in your areas of expertise, and to lay out their impact on how conference centers must operate in order to get their fair share of the training, meeting, and conference market. And because shifting demographics—mainly generational—are central to driving the changes in each of your disciplines, the topic of generational differences is the perfect place for us to start, and to return to throughout the summit.”

Adwoa Buahene of n-gen People Performance in Toronto began by defining the four generations in the workplace, who also serve as the customers of the conference business. They are the Traditionalists (born 1945 and earlier); the Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964); Gen X (born between 1965 and 1980); and Gen Y (born between 1981-2000).

The common link between generational identities and behaviors is that all are based on the life-defining events of a generation’s adolescent years. As historical and cultural touchstones changed, then, so did the perceptions and priorities of each generation.

Come about 2000, as the first wave of Gen Y emerged from its schooling, the disparate perceptions, priorities, and styles became apparent to many managers, who now had all four generations sharing the same workplace. And as Gen Y comes to the workplace in increasing numbers, managers are noticing the generational differences in these areas: relationship with the organization (loyalty); relationship with authority; relationship with colleagues; work styles; management styles; and learning styles.

Relationship with the organization pertains to loyalty, both to the employer and to the brands people consume. Only for the Traditionalists does loyalty lie at the organizational level (“The Company Man”); Boomers have loyalty at the team level (participants in protests and demonstrations), Gen X at the manager level (latch-key kids with self-responsibility early on), and Gen Y at the colleague level (technology makes everyone accessible and, in essence, a peer—regardless of station in life).

It’s a myth to say the different generations have different values, Buahene noted. In their own way, all four generations are loyal, and all respect authority. But their notions of each are different, and needs and expectations vary among the four.

For instance, all expect great service, but the grace period each generation gives an employer or a supplier to deliver on the deal becomes shorter. Traditionalists gave employers 30 or more years to deliver, while Boomers typically gave it a few years before they made a move. Gen X gives it several months to a year to see how things are going in a job. But with Gen Y, some public-sector executives told Buahene that recent new employees more than occasionally will leave before the end of their first week if they do not feel engaged in the work. And as consumers, if they aren’t fully satisfied with a product or service the very first time, you’ll never see them again—there are too many other options. In both instances, the grace period they give to create the satisfying or memorable experience is that brief.

When we talk about the use of meetings for the purposes of improvement, Gen Y’s grace period is also exceptionally brief. On day one of a job, they want to be told what success looks like. Then they expect to be educated towards that success immediately—with access to almost any information within the company because they want to move up fast, and because the Internet has conditioned them that you can always find what you want. One

possible means of satisfying them: Meeting planners could arrange to broadcast a summary, or actual segments, of a firm's executive meetings in order for employees to feel that they are being kept in the loop and are respected as members of the organization.

On a related note, Gen Y does not believe that "putting in your time" at a certain level of responsibility has merit once you can prove your proficiency in the tasks waiting at the next level. Consider this: In a performance review, saying to a Gen Y, "You are not quite ready yet for the promotion" might well prompt the response, "Why haven't you made me ready by now?"

These days, large corporations can't attract the youngest generation because of their brand names. Rather, they see that they must create a feeling that each department operates as a startup company, and allow young employees to have the excitement that comes from seeing the immediate impact of what they are doing. We have to make work fun and interesting, and also show them that they have a say, just as they have when they are on the Internet with their peers. For instance, Gen Y won't feel engaged if managers simply dictate responsibilities and schedules to them. Instead, put those tasks out to the group and allow employees to volunteer for specific duties—but then hold them to their performances. This is simply responsibility in a different format, and one that Gen Y is familiar with.

Diane Blair from the BMO Financial Group added that from the employee's perspective, jobs are less defined than ever in that people often have many types of duties and functions regardless of their title, and these days they might even work temporarily for organizations which partner with their own. And as each project they take on has a different structure, employees might be part of a team in one instance but on their own in another. So the new reality is not just about flattening of organizations, but also about fluidity in what people do for their organizations. As a result, Gen Y expects learning to be about making them better all-around performers, not simply proficient in specific job duties. They wonder, "Does my employer care about me, or simply about my output?"

In the area of employee feedback, Gen Y is also a unique group among the four, Buahene said. On the whole, members have quite high self-esteem that comes from growing up in an environment where kids received trophies simply for participating in an activity, rather than for winning. They are very goal-oriented, and are used to having the good aspects of their performance recognized frequently. So within their workplace there must be mechanisms to give them constant feedback, and have it emphasize more of the positive. While this can border on coddling, if they are treated as respected peers within a flat organization, they will contribute continuously, literally 24/7. In that way, the work/life delineation is much less clear with Gen Y; because of technology, they are unfamiliar with walling off any aspect of their lives for a period of time, including the work aspect.

Of course, when the newest employees meet the real world of work, we cannot always cater to them and say repeatedly, "You are terrific." There is a balancing act that must take place—but it's one that must involve sensitivity in how we get Gen Y to reflect on and improve their performance.

Interestingly, a similar sensitivity must be present in dealing with the learning styles of younger generations at meetings.

# LEARNING STYLES

Buahene stressed that the way all four generations build relationships and interact with colleagues varies markedly, which naturally will affect the course of meetings. Traditionalists and Boomers are social people, with Boomers the most eager for face-to-face interaction and learning. Gen X is decidedly not as social, and tends to prefer having commonalities among particular attendees established before an event so that they do not have to come into the meeting environment needing to conduct baseline interaction to find the commonalities themselves among other attendees.

On the other hand, while Gen Y is, on the whole, more social than Gen X and values peer relationships strongly, these relationships are very often built online, as can be seen from the popularity of MySpace, Facebook, and other Web applications. Buahene cited a recent research report where Gen Y respondents said that through multi-player video gaming, they often make friends, and they feel that those relationships are as strong as if they had been built through interacting in person.

What this means for meetings, said Buahene, is this: Organizations must convince Gen Y that there is additional value in the face-to-face event that will take place. Gen Y is happy to participate, but the benefits must be outlined to secure their buy-in for an event.

One critical way to build buy-in is by asking Gen Y to be involved in the creation of the event content and format. They are used to setting the bounds of content through their technological interactions and creating the rules of the game through consensus, so the in-person event has to be validated by them. Letting them comment on the proposed curriculum and the methods of learning gives them the feeling that they are a respected part of the process. It's almost a replication of what they would do in the online space, which would not consist of people simply sending information at them, but rather collaborating as a matter of routine.

From the customer perspective, Tony Pastor of McKinsey & Company said that the implications for his firm as Gen Y populates the ranks is that "people definitely want to be involved in the overall process, and we are responding to that. We're allowing for people to have a say in how the day goes. For example, we found that they wanted more role-playing. Also, they wanted some free time during the meeting to either bond with one another outside the meeting room, or to reconnect with their technology to stay up to date on the world beyond the meeting. From this, we've changed our approach somewhat, and we've found that it's appreciated by attendees."

Once there's buy-in for the meeting, Gen Y expects certain things from the style in which they are to be educated. First, with the speed of change they are used to in software, video games, and other items, they don't subscribe to the notion of "If it's not broken, don't fix it." Instead, they think: "If you didn't change the learning experience from last year, it can't be good anymore—it must be obsolete."

Diane Blair added that because the useful lifespan of knowledge is getting shorter, knowledge exchange is not as formal as it used to be—there's not enough time for that anymore. So there is a need for people to connect quickly and to make choices as to which knowledge is useful and which is noise. Because of the increased "speed to performance" that is now required by management—and expected by younger employees—meeting planners don't have several months to plan in-person events anymore, making the quality of a meeting venue's staff as critical to a planner's choice of venue as the actual physical space and the cost.

What's more, not only is Gen Y accustomed to fast-moving images and sounds through multimedia even more than the Gen Xers who said "I want my MTV," but authority in the form of a single lecturer or presenter delivering knowledge does not exist among Gen Y, even if the presenter uses robust multimedia. Again, because of the collaborative technology they grew up with, Gen Ys "talk" and share constantly through their computers, and this style impacts both how they learn and the knowledge they value. Because of their pack mentality, they make collective decisions, just as they do on Facebook and the many product-rating Web sites. And with Web 2.0 applications proliferating, Gen Y is used to creating content. All of this is very different from even Gen X.

In short, Gen Y knows from experience that knowledge resides in many places, and it needs the proper formats in order to be teased out. The credibility of the in-person learning event among Gen Y hinges largely on whether this is done in ways they appreciate.

Don Hyde of Telus Corporation was quick to add that soliciting participant input can and should take place not only before the in-person event, but during the event as well. The ability for attendees to provide feedback in real time to session leaders via handheld personal devices will soon be a necessity. Allowing attendees to see the consensus among them—and to have a hand in shifting the focus of content—at given moments acknowledges that their voice is being heard. This is affirmation, a form of positive feedback.

What's more, Gen Y has a fluidity in which they work, because all they know is the 24/7 world; they do not have any other experience. They have always been able to have access to information and conduct commerce anytime, and that idea of being able to do what you want when you want is critical to understanding them from a work perspective. Buahene noted that when Gen Y comes into the brick and mortar world of the office—and the learning environment—they are baffled that anyone would set up a meeting that runs from 9 until 12, breaks for lunch, then continues from 1 until 5. They are thinking, "who could stand to work in the same way for all that time?"

Interestingly, the Gen Xers share this notion to some degree because of their familiarity with technology, and because of their general informality (which used to be mistaken for being "slackers"). Their thoughts are somewhat similar to Gen Y: "What's the difference if I take a long lunch to play games as long as the work gets done by the deadline?" Meanwhile, the older generations are in the habit of working in a more linear, structured way because they had little or no technology in their formative years.

But as was mentioned earlier, the workplace should not cater primarily to Gen Y's preferences and simply expect everyone else to adapt. Buahene stressed that Gen Y must come to understand that technology is not always at the center of things; many times, it is simply a useful tool only for a particular moment.

On the flip side, Blair said that Traditionalists and Boomers do have to adjust to the fact that more of their colleagues are working and interacting 24/7. One result is that learning cannot be made to have a defined place and time; it does not happen only when planners bring people together in person or via technology—it now also happens in e-mails in the middle of the night, and in other ways, and is not going to go away.

The implication this has for developing a learning strategy, and for where face-to-face meetings fit within that strategy, is quite complex. For instance, said Barry Brennand from Steelcase, meetings can be used to build trust among people from different generations, as well as different offices or departments, so that everyone can feel comfortable communicating via technology thereafter—feel that they will be respected and that communication will be civil and taken seriously. Basically, a meeting can allow everyone who

is not part of Gen Y to become comfortable with being provocative or controversial in the future, when they ask the tough question among the entire group via technology.

On a broader scale, engaging all four generations will require “mass customization,” which means that the environment to support leaning will become much more complex. Planners might have to create separate styles for delivering content based on the demographic in a room at a given time, and meeting rooms will have to be flexible enough to be user driven, and not organization driven. Further, planners cannot just accommodate different sets of attendees; they must make sure attendees across the generational spectrum are connecting with each other in relation to the topics being addressed in the meeting, too.

Some solutions that cater to the needs of younger generations, while still effectively reaching the older generations without overwhelming them, are being implemented today. Diane Blair cited the concept of the “modular” meeting, where technology-driven segments are alternated with in-person segments, not only over a few days but perhaps also over the course of a few weeks. In a similar vein, there’s the concept of the “blended” meeting: Rather than having attendees fly to one central location for several days, they drive into regional locations for a shorter period, and all locations are connected via two-way audio and video. Organizational leaders can scatter themselves among the regional locations for morale purposes, yet each can deliver his or her executive presentation via technology to all locations, so that attendees everywhere hear the highest-level messages straight from their leaders at the same time. Meanwhile, for those objectives which require in-person interaction such as role-playing exercises, each regional group conducts those exercises among themselves, then reconnects via technology to all other regions in order to share the various experiences and outcomes from those exercises.

Interestingly, the “modular” and “blended” meeting concepts demonstrate how technology can actually help preserve the number of in-person meetings in the future, rather than reduce the number.

## **Impact of Learning Styles and Needs on Conference Center Sales and Service**

Diane Blair stressed that among conference centers, the most critical result of the increasingly complex universe of learning and interaction solutions—plus the “speed to performance” factor faced by meeting planners—is this: Facility staffs must be part of the value chain so that clients’ attendees go back into their world better able to perform. Sales and service personnel need to be partners in achieving clients’ performance goals, and be advisors to meeting planners who cannot possibly know the entire range of solutions at their disposal. The time has passed when conference centers can simply say to clients, “Tell us what you need and we can do it!”

As the providers of the face-to-face learning channel, conference centers not only have to increase the value of that channel, but also clearly prove the benefits the channel provides towards clients’ business objectives. Between the “speed to performance” demands and the ever-shorter shelf life of knowledge, the support system for meetings is tapped into by planners closer to the last minute than ever before—and this is the perfect scenario for conference centers to demonstrate their value as knowledgeable, trusted, useful partners.

Don Hyde from Telus Corporation gave an illuminating example: Conference-services personnel should no longer be spending much time talking to a client about whether he or she needs, for instance, a u-shaped setup along with an electronic whiteboard. Now, the conversation needs to be much deeper: “We can set up wikis so that your presenters can

publish their bios and interact with your attendees before the event. And here are the ways we think your specific group can increase the effectiveness of its knowledge exchange. Also, here are the following types of feedback mechanisms we can provide both during and after the event. And we can set up on-demand streaming for attendees and non-attendees to access every session afterwards, and we will host the those web sites for you.”

In short, said Hyde, the conference center is not just the physical place of the meeting; everything about it, especially its personnel, are part of the meeting experience, offering clients the best ways for their attendees to interact and learn.

Lastly, another significant part of the value that comes from the face-to-face channel is the ability to engage all five senses in order to enhance learning and retention. Blair noted that the “feel” that’s generated during in-person time creates powerful memories and connections—this has been proven through scientific research. With the conference facility now placed so strategically in the learning process, added Blair, both the physical plant and the people operating it absolutely must create, and emphasize to clients, that “feel.”

In the end, “the inspirational aspect we think we can create at an in-person meeting is critical,” said Tony Pastor—and that is something technology will likely never be able to replicate.

In the sections that follow, we’ll explore specific areas where conference centers can create such inspiration.

# TECHNOLOGY

Don Hyde of Telus Corporation began by observing that with everything from the stores they frequent to the cell phones and iPods they use, Gen Y is used to the niche, the customized, and the personalized. As a result, this focus must be carried over to the technology the younger generations are asked to use at conference centers, so that they can create the specific experience they want.

Just as they want to be able to hear their e-mails as converted audio files on their phones, and want to be able to retrieve their voice mails as text messages, Gen Y wants technology to unshackle the limitations in their educational choices. So if there are 20 different breakouts at an event, of course they can only attend a few—but they still want access to everything they missed in the other breakouts. They want the ability to retrieve an entire session via an on-demand application later that day or next week or next month. Not only that, but they want to be able to simply browse the slides that were used in a session, or read a session abstract to decide whether they even want to browse those slides. They need those choices.

As for the sessions they attend in person, interactivity is an absolute must, Hyde stressed. The younger generations are used to multimedia, so you will definitely lose them if you offer a talking-head presentation with slides. Instead, how about using interactive whiteboards to capture information from everyone in the room easily, and then have the ability to park those thoughts in an electronic file that even keeps the handwriting and other characteristics of the original notes? Going back to what was said earlier about improving retention through engaging all five senses, to be able to see the notes in original form would likely spur stronger retention among attendees. That file can be put onto a web site where anyone can retrieve it, and you also can e-mail the file to a distribution list.

Hyde argued that the biggest competition for conference centers these days are Microsoft, Cisco, and IBM, in that they are making significant progress with products offering unified collaboration and telepresence. But rather than see them as competition, conference centers must determine ways to tie those applications into the “modular” and “blended” meeting environments that were discussed earlier, so that in-person meetings are still the most attractive solution.

One possibility: Facilities could enter into partnerships with technology companies for mutual benefit. Barry Brennand from Steelcase envisioned this scenario: Given that tech firms aim to sell their products to the same organizations that use conference centers regularly, those firms could lend the latest applications and equipment to facilities so both planners and attendees can be introduced to it, and understand its usefulness both within and beyond the conference center. In such a scenario, conference centers would always have cutting-edge applications and equipment at their disposal—a clear product differentiator that would elevate conference centers above other meeting facilities.

Another way to differentiate conference centers is through the creative combination of technologies. For example, digital signage has become more sophisticated in recent years. But if it was combined with the use of radio-frequency identification (RFID) badges among attendees, each sign could then give custom information to each attendee who approaches.

On the personal-technology side, it's no secret that handheld devices have worked their way into every nook and cranny of society, including meetings. Meeting leaders have always seen that as a detriment, a distraction, within their events. But now, we're able to use people's cell

phones and Blackberries to conduct real-time polling and commentary during sessions that can be visible to all, allowing the direction of the content to be altered on the fly.

And with GPS-locator capability now available on these devices, attendees now have one more way to find not only meeting rooms, but also each other on site—especially useful if those attendees have only had contact via technology up until the in-person meeting.

Moving to the internet, a conference facility's web site could greatly help planners market their meetings to attendees and generate the buy-in that's so critical. So do you allow people to use your facility's web site to ask questions about the facility and their specific conference, and then get the answer delivered to their Blackberry? And how about allowing attendees to order their meals and other personal choices for the conference in advance via their personal devices?

Going a step further, planners and facilities could take pieces of existing tech and put them together to create something new—this is familiar to Gen Y, who even has a term for the new creations: “mashups.” For instance, if a planner used the LinkedIn social networking application before a meeting to make an icebreaking session more effective on site, Gen Xers—who generally don't like to conduct “cold call” social interaction in person—would be able to identify others with common interests or duties prior to the event. Then, their GPS locators can help them find each other at the gathering, or to meet on their own somewhere else in the facility.

Using all of these options to adapt to a world where learning and interaction no longer have physical constraints or time constraints is necessary, said Diane Blair. But she added that conference centers must not simply offer planners a menu of technology tools that are at their disposal. They must also help each client choose and then use the right tools for their objectives, based on what's been done by previous clients plus what can be done through the newest technologies the centers get their hands on. In short, Blair said, it's equally important for conference centers to be a total solutions provider now, not just a hospitality provider.

Tony Pastor of McKinsey & Company agreed. “If facilities had people on site to help the older generations get up to speed quickly to use the various technologies, that would help add options to what a planner could use in their meetings. Perhaps more importantly, it would also help to bridge the gap between generations, and clients would certainly appreciate that.”

# FOOD AND BEVERAGE

Mark Shuda from HEI Hotels & Resorts set out to answer these questions during his presentation: What do conference centers have to do to cater to all generations not only in food and beverage offerings, but also in the design of food-service spaces?

First, he said, the social consciousness of younger generations demands that our food and beverage operations have the smallest possible environmental footprint in the production and delivery of goods. They also expect the freshest ingredients—we've moved beyond the canned goods of yesterday. Combine these preferences with the need for conference centers to give attendees a feel for the local area so that the meeting is memorable, and you have the opportunity for centers to embrace local products and flavors that create the unique experience. For instance, you can have local fish that was caught that day, along with local produce. Of course, going local does not always mean it is going to be less expensive, as most of us have seen. But if you pick your spots and go for quality where it counts most, you can offer memorable meals without breaking the budget.

Like their younger colleagues, Boomers have also embraced quality and appreciate the farm-fresh, local organic ingredients; they didn't speak up on it until recently, though. Then again, Boomers are the ones who want their comfort food. And while comfort food to them is what their mothers made, we know that their mothers were the first generation to use packaged convenience products, like Campbell's soup. So how can conference centers do comfort food so that it is a pleasant, satisfying experience for everyone? They do it with the better ingredients, some of them local. For instance, groups can have their macaroni and cheese, but it's made with asiago cheese and shaved truffles. This satisfied all generations.

Let's talk about breakfast. In order to meet Gen Y's expectations, you of course need to have plenty of fresh fruit because of their focus on healthy eating, and they want more choices than what we've typically offered in the past. On the other hand, Boomers want some guilty pleasures present, so the muffins and doughnuts need to be there too. And while managing all of this from a cost standpoint is difficult, centers need to be creative. For instance, the fresh fruits of today's breakfast become tomorrow's smoothies and fruit salads.

Remember that people have become used to knowing the story behind their food—everyone is scouring labels, and thus labels have become more detailed. So at the hot buffet, you not only need some nutritional information, but you need to tell the story behind what they are being offered: You're serving cage-free eggs, perhaps, as well as locally-raised, hormone-free beef, ham, and pork. The food and beverage staff has to become proficient at telling the story so people can feel as comfortable with their food as they do at home. This also contributes to the unique experience groups want.

There are some great applications of science to food and beverage in the hospitality field right now. For instance, one hotel chain is moving forward with the "Superfoods" idea. What this means is pairing up foods not only to make the result more nutritious but also to boost mental and physical performance over a given time period. And this concept not plays into health and attendee performance during the meeting, but it also gives people more choices at each meal.

Of course, the trend that flies in the face of much of this is the revival of the steakhouse. There almost always comes a time during a meeting when such an experience is called for, and when it comes there should be no compromise on what makes a steakhouse great: high-quality beef and a high-quality broiler. The level of expectation is high—for Boomers, the steakhouse meal is a power show and a treat.

Even this experience, though, can be tweaked to satisfy everyone. Right now, the things that come along with a big steak are big drinks, plus big side dishes like the oversized baked potato or family-style mashed potatoes or vegetables. But what if you do flights of side dishes? You can do a sampler of three different potato styles, served family-style at the table; this fulfills every attendee's taste profile in the precise amount they want.

The center part of the plate, the protein, is always the most expensive. But you don't have to serve a full 10 ounces of it anymore. After the third or fourth bite, the satisfaction from each ensuing bite diminishes; this has been proven through research. So why not do 4 to 6 ounces, and use other items on the plate and as side dishes for variety. Also, lighter fish dishes will appeal to smaller appetites, and to more women too. With these approaches, people get filled up just as well, and it's more cost-effective.

We also need to make the steakhouse more amenable to the diverse profile of meeting attendees. It needs to be less about the dark woods, and closer to the airy feel of the BLT Steak and BLT Prime brands that have popped up in New York and other big cities, because 50 percent of the room is female now.

One principle that should not be passed over in all of this: Service cannot be sacrificed. I have read that Gen X, our next business leaders, do not want to be served in a formal way, but I don't buy it. Rather, you just have to deliver service and ambience in a way that feels more comfortable to them. After all, it's not scotch on the rocks with the younger generations, but rather the Mojito—and if you grow your own fresh mint for it right on property, all the better to them.

Part of the service experience is delivering food when the customer wants it delivered, and how they want it delivered. We must respond to fact that the appetizer-entrée-dessert progression is going to be abandoned more often as groups' needs change. Some groups will want five appetizers, and then move off property for whatever is next that evening. Or they might sit in the bar for awhile after the main course, and then want to come back for dessert.

To accommodate the choice and flexibility more people want these days, the bar in most facilities is getting larger in space while the other areas are getting smaller; it's part of the socialization trend that differentiates in-person meetings from other types of interaction. Communal tables within bars and lounges is the next big thing—but to take it a step farther, you'll have communal tables that can be broken up for different numbers of people, so groups can shift the setup as the mood changes throughout the evening.

Lastly, the trendiest hotel chains these days are adapting their food service to the fact that formally segmented spaces at a property are going away in favor of main and side lobbies becoming the central socializing points at a property. As a result, more food-service areas are being built right off the lobby so people can get food and return back to their gathering space in the lobby, or sit in the food-service area and still feel connected to the open gathering area, and can socialize right from there.

Food and beverage is always going to be integral to in-person meetings, not only because people love food but also because it requires a few hours a day at minimum. So it is a prime opportunity for conference centers to deliver a great experience.

# ARCHITECTURE

Daniel Welborn from the Gettys Group agreed with Mark Shuda that there's a shift towards having a choice of spaces for a variety of needs, whether the need at that moment is eating, discussing business, or simply socializing.

What's more, he noted that more people today consciously seek to gather experiences; it's central to their notion of quality of life. Younger people in particular are aspirational in this way, which means they do not want to go to the high-end chain hotel in Puerto Rico that looks just like the sister properties in San Francisco and Washington and Montreal and Berlin. They want to recognize where they are, because where they are staying is part of the context of the communal experience they'll have with colleagues. So they want singular experiences, and facilities that deliver those can actually help attendees retain more of what they saw and heard from an in-person meeting; it engages all the senses to create distinct memories.

So people want authenticity, a real experience rather than a manufactured one. Creating something that feels authentic is a process, so architects should get together with the property's stakeholders early on to understand what kind of client they'll have and what the property wants to deliver to them. As a result, we can't simply pull the same design out of the drawer that has been used somewhere else, and facilities should not accept that anyway. Wherever the property is, the idea has to be: "This place is different."

One advantage for facility owners these days is that style does not matter anymore. Attendees have seen every conceivable style through movies and television, from the old James Bond movies to the shows set in China today. Basically, everything is valid, from modern to traditionalist. The only rule here is to use the appropriate style in your setting to accentuate your local flavor. Make sure the style works both in your space and your surroundings.

Further, we all respond to a residential feel. So we can't create conference centers that look like offices. That does not differentiate the experience from the work situation back home. No matter which style you use to do it, make it far enough from their everyday surroundings so the experience is different in people's minds.

On the other hand, some parts of a conference center need to be a bit of a vanilla box so that they can take on the various personalities of the groups being hosted. Facilities need to be flexible in their various gathering areas. To customize those spaces for different groups, then, you can offer the ability to do large-scale projected images on the walls, for instance.

Also, there should be simple, intuitive design for the entire facility, the same kinds of thinking tech companies have when they create their products. In other words, take the complexity out of spaces and out of navigation. People don't want to have to think about where they have to go, and they really don't want to have to ask someone. Attendees don't realize that this is something they really want until they notice your facility does not have it and they get frustrated just in getting around.

Tony Pastor from McKinsey & Company summed it up this way: As a meeting decision maker, I have never not returned to a facility because the bedrooms weren't up to snuff or the fitness center was lacking. Certainly service is a key component, and food has to be near the top of the list, too. But I very often hear my stakeholders say, "That was just not a good, natural place for our group to meet; there was not enough space in the lobby and there were

not enough other public spaces for us.” So facilities that are built in a way that people get funneled to the bedrooms or just to the meeting space simply will not work.

In conclusion, Welborn said that we can’t talk about architecture trends without addressing sustainability. It’s a differentiator among properties today, but in five years it will be standard and unacceptable to not have made significant adaptations for it. I look forward to hearing Kitty discuss this topic in more detail.

# FURNISHINGS AND EQUIPMENT

Barry Brennand from Steelcase began by stressing that people are the number-one amenity that a facility can offer guests, in the form of intelligent personal service. The staff must be reflective of the architecture, the furnishings, and everything else. If the place is beautiful and the staff is impeccably dressed, but then they deliver indifferent or less-than-knowledgeable service, it's all just money wasted. So even though Steelcase makes products, we believe that the staff helping clients with the possibilities from those products is the biggest key to success.

On the subject of conference-services staffers helping groups use their equipment and tools most effectively in the meeting space, the latest thinking involves using all six planes within a room—the four walls as the possible focal point instead of what's typically thought of as “the front” of a room, plus the ceiling and the floor. This is definitely a trend in what educators consider high-performance meeting spaces.

One example of this thinking is that the overhead projector is no longer hard-mounted to face just one wall and thus take the choice of how to use the space out of the planner's hands. Instead, let's make all the surfaces active, and live if possible. The ability to capture content digitally allows us to consider the value of many places within a room to act as triggers of memory. Here's how: In order to have better, deeper learning that is retained longer, groups need to be able to pick up after a break or the next day with what they had done before. So what if you could come into a room, turn on a switch, and reboot the electronic walls and whiteboards so that all of the content reappears just as it was written during the previous session? This gets people back into the desired frame of mind much faster. And when it comes to retaining ideas, people will actually remember things in regard to the place on a wall or another surface where it was written—sort of like photographic memory. So enhancing recollection through the use of technology and through active contributions from the space is what we are looking to accomplish.

One buzzword these days within the meeting space is “plug and play,” and it is important in practical terms, not just for marketing copy. In short, user control is a big deal. A high-performance meeting space is going to be laced with technology, but will you need a facilitator to work and monitor all of that—and how do facilities charge for different levels of that service?

Also, getting older generations up to speed in those environments, and having them be engaged by it, is critical. On the other hand, planners should not hamper the finest presenters from the older generations by forcing them into using these tools. Some presenters just have a gift, and they don't need the technology to get people to learn. Younger presenters, though, feel that technology is part of their means of expression, and they would feel limited in many of our traditional learning environments—they've actually told us that. So the spaces have to be flexible enough to let people do things however they want.

Interestingly, Brennand said that facilities should focus on using their “in-between” spaces. Breakout areas that are not meeting rooms need to be varied in size, shape, and equipment. This could be anything from a small alcove with two or three chairs to one that can suit four to eight people and have a technology and power hookup too.

In fact, one big problem we're finding among business travelers is not enough access to power. Data and wireless connections are everywhere, but we did a research study a few years back that found that the most popular physical spots in the educational and social areas

on a college campus were adjacent to the power outlets. In conference centers' meeting rooms, there are often raised floor sections with outlets in them, but if you don't want people to have to reach down, you might have to build it into the tables or chairs or whatever.

Daniel Welborn added that within guest rooms, the layout of the desk is critical. At hotels, the desk needs to be both a work station and an activity table with different functions, because guests in a given room might not be there for business at all. Of course, this is rarely the case at conference centers, but we still have to find out from guests exactly what they use the desk for. In addition, we know that people work 24/7, so they don't work only at the desk but also in bed, or on the couch or soft chair in the corner of the room with the computer in their laps. So we have to make sure there is connectivity for everything by the bed and sitting areas.

Sometimes attendees want to jump out of their guest rooms to meet others on a moment's notice, but they don't want to feel weird about being seen in a space that's in a high-traffic area. So we should incorporate small, well-designed breakout and gathering nooks in the hallways, so people can sit semi-privately. We must also make the furnishings in these spaces modular so that one person is not forced to occupy a four-person setting and make that space unusable to others.

Getting back to equipment, Brennand discussed the recently-introduced "fitwork" product lines that incorporate light physical activity into work tasks. The first product to emerge is a treadmill with a desk attached to it, called a walkstation. The idea sounded goofy at first, but there is interesting science behind it. Instead of handlebars, there is a height-adjustable laptop table or desk area, and the treadmill can only reach a speed of 2 miles per hour to maintain safety. But the research of a doctor at the Mayo Clinic found that if people used the equipment one hour a day, even intermittently, they will lose 10 pounds over a year. The number of people at Steelcase who use them is significant. And you can have these items in larger areas, not just people's offices. It's just another way to make real estate, and your investments in it, work better.

Diane Blair added that from a learning point of view, there has been some work done recently regarding a "brain-gym" concept, which looked at the relationship between exercise and the stimulation of certain parts of the brain to make people more effective at a given time. And there are some simple things conference centers can do to invigorate people that don't involve machines—such as active refreshment breaks—that actually enhance people's capacity for learning and retention. It's all part of using the in-person event and the physical space devoted to it to create the richest experience for attendees.

# ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

Kitty Ratcliffe from the St. Louis CVC and the Green Meetings Industry Council pointed out first that interest throughout North America in the idea of reducing, reusing, and recycling when outside the home was practically nonexistent just ten years ago. But today, the demand on meeting planners in this area is either coming from bottom up—from attendees—or from the top down—from executives.

As for attendees, when they come to a facility for a meeting they now expect to have the same experience in dealing with their consumption as they have at home. People don't even think about where to dispose of paper or water bottles anymore—it's in the recycle bin, of course. So people expect that in their guest rooms, in the food and beverage areas, and in meeting space, they will see the proper disposal options. This is a development which properties must conform to in order to keep their reputations intact among clients, who might base their decision to continue their dealings only with those suppliers who implement socially-responsible measures. That is the executive-level mandate we're seeing more often.

Another area coming on strongly is the locally-grown food movement, and as Mark Shuda noted earlier, there are more than a few reasons why people prefer this. Besides offering improved choice and being part of an interesting experience, another reason to purchase locally is the reduced carbon footprint. It's quite responsible, and it is heartening to see it becoming more widely adopted.

As for specific tactics, we interviewed a few hundred planners in early 2007 about the importance of certain environmentally-friendly criteria in determining which meeting facility to use. The use of china and linen was cited by 70 percent as important; a food-donation program by 58 percent; a recycling and reuse program by 58 percent; demonstration of energy efficiency by 58 percent; local, organic, and vegetarian menu by 50 percent. And these results are from 18 months ago, so the numbers are probably higher today. Only 30 percent said an environmental certification for a facility was important, but as the awareness that there is a certification program for meeting facilities rises, so will that number, I believe.

On the other hand, many planners don't know all the ways of how to be environmentally responsible with their events, and so they are going to look to the facilities to know these things. Unfortunately, many suppliers also don't know enough about the possible action they can take. So both planners and suppliers are trying to observe what others do, and then cobble together checklists from that.

But there is a serious flaw in this strategy: The observers are not aware of whether there's true expertise behind what they are compiling, so they could get steered in the wrong direction and actually reinforce the use of tactics that are useless or even harmful to the environment. For instance, many planners hear that cardboard or plastic signage is wasteful, so we see a rise in the use of digital signage; now planners want plasma screens outside every meeting room. Problem is, there is often no consideration of the sizable energy use in doing that. So versus the physical signage, the electronic alternative might be less green. Someone on site has to know that answer.

The lesson is that facilities have to proactively assist planners in their green initiatives—ask them their objectives and give planners the pros and cons for each tactic they are considering. Too many planners simply make assumptions, they don't ask for the facility's input, and their efforts don't do the environment one bit of good. Conference centers should make sure that what they offer is truly beneficial to the environment, and educate planners on these offerings.

Lastly, on a larger scale, corporate social responsibility has to go beyond just environmental initiatives. Giving back to the community is attractive to many groups coming through conference centers. So make it easy for groups to know their options in your local area—don't wait for customers to ask and then scramble to find something. Find partners in your community, like Second Harvest, Habitat for Humanity, local schools and churches and shelters. Every community has needs, and when groups work into their agenda an opportunity to fulfill those needs, participants go home with a memorable, positive experience.

# CONCLUSIONS

Facilitator Katrin Vahi summed up this way: Everything we've discussed at this inaugural Thought Leaders Summit suggests that in the future, the gap will only widen between what dedicated conference centers will be able to deliver for demanding in-person meetings versus hotels, which are not completely devoted to the business of meetings. This is an excellent selling point for a niche that presently captures less than 10 percent of all meetings. So there is much opportunity in this marketplace for conference centers—even if the number of total in-person meetings stays flat or perhaps even dips slightly because of technological alternatives.

Diane Blair added that conference centers must sell the meeting experience, not a list of amenities. Furthermore, they must emphasize their ability to be consultative in ways other facilities won't match. While we have to do what each customer asks for, we also have to find better ways for them and develop their trust in our proactive, consultative role. We have to explain the things that we know affect a meeting's outcome, and why our venues are uniquely suited for better outcomes. Harnessing all the choices and then critically executing on those choices is the marketable advantage conference centers should sell as part of the meeting experience. Exciting, edgy, cool, productive, cost-effective, and measurable in outcome—those qualities define the experience we can give.

Adwoa Buahene noted that such an experience is attractive to the younger generations, but the excitement and benefits of an upcoming meeting must be conveyed to them in advance. "Telling the story in all of the areas we've covered is what will resonate with younger attendees, and have them looking forward to being at a conference center. Planners and conference centers must team up to communicate to attendees exactly what type of experience they are going to have. Otherwise, you might not meet their expectations, and their loyalty to your brand will be gone forever."

In the end, Tony Pastor from McKinsey & Company said, "Ten years ago, we planners were worried about if a meeting venue had enough breakout rooms. Today, we worry if people are going to be pleased with what they see when they look out the window during the refreshment break; what their bedroom space feels like to them; what their dining experience is going to be. In short, are people going to come here and feel inspired not just from the content, but from everything they encounter? We are looking for a physical plant and an atmosphere that inspire people. If both are inspiring, that facility is a winner."

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The International Association of Conference Centers (IACC) is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1981 to advance understanding and awareness of conference centers as distinct and unique within the training, education, hospitality and travel fields. IACC's mission is to assist members in providing the most productive meeting facilities available and to promote a market awareness of the differences between conference center facilities and other types of hospitality venues.

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