IACC's Second Thought Leader Summit

"Incorporating Advancing Technology into the Meeting Experience"

Date: March 24, 2010

Location: Workspring, a conference facility owned and operated by Steelcase Inc., Chicago, IL

Panel of Experts:

-Mike Dickersbach, VP of Information Systems and Technology, Thayer Lodging Group, Annapolis, MD
-Greg Van Dyke, Senior VP of Marketing, PSAV Presentation Services, Long Beach, CA
-Mark Greiner, Senior VP/Chief Experience Officer, Steelcase Inc., Chicago, IL
-Paul Leguillon, Technical Support Director, Q Center, St. Charles, IL
-Steve Mahaley, Director of Learning Technology, Duke Corporate Education, Durham, NC
-Michael McCurry, CMP, Strategic Account Manager, Experient, Des Plaines, IL
-Andrea Sullivan, President, BrainStrength Systems, King of Prussia, PA
-Eddie Turner, Principal, Tunrer Technologies LLC, St. John, IN

Facilitator: John Potterton, VP Education, Professional Convention Management Association, Chicago, IL

This report written by Robert Carey, Principal, Meetings & Hospitality Insight, Bayside, NY

Tom Cappucci, President of the North and South American chapters of the International Association of Conference Centers (IACC), kicked off the event by welcoming not only the participants but also several hundred audience members who connected to the event via webconference, and who could submit questions to the panel through Twitter. “Today’s theme is incorporating advancing technology in the meeting experience, so our session features seasoned professionals in conference technology that is designed to expand and enhance—rather than eliminate—live meetings and events,” Cappucci said.

Facilitator John Potterton added that “the learner outcomes for our discussion are these: To be able to anticipate and track how different presentation and collaborative technologies can add to, or detract from, the meeting experience for attendees; to be able to develop new strategies to complement the learning needs of meetings, particularly through the thoughtful use of advancing technologies; to gain an awareness that allows you to create compelling learning experiences that create loyal customers, through the use of social media and other tools before and after events; and to learn how to measure the return on investment for the sizable amount each conference facility spends annually on technologies that support the meetings they host.”

Topic 1: Changes in technology require fundamental shifts within facilities

John Potterton commented that the evolution of technology is happening so quickly today compared to the not-too-distant past. “I recall in my days running conference centers in the late 1980s that the technology didn’t advance as quickly—we were using flipcharts and slide projectors for many years. But right now, we see that it’s just a matter of months where technology changes in significant ways.”

Greg Van Dyke said that the days are long gone when “facility staff had to worry most of all about loading the right rack of slides into the projector at the right time.” He noted that three areas have changed significantly in the meeting experience. The first is the environment. “There are so many ways to create a stimulating, welcoming environment with staging, lighting, sound, and display, that compels attendees to take notice. And it is becoming more necessary for facilities to take part in this in order to differentiate themselves, and not leave the task solely to the planner.” The task is not easy, either, because “when people used to come to meetings, they would say ‘Wow, this technology is really neat.’ But these days, so many people have a large HDTV with Blu-Ray in the living room that they come to meetings and think, ‘This is it? I have something as good as this at home.’ So we have to constantly deliver the appropriate impact, and that will require an ever more sophisticated environment.”

The second area of change regards the “lifespan” of a meeting. “A meeting does not start at the conference facility anymore,” Van Dyke said. “It is expected today that the life of a meeting extends from before the in-person event to well afterwards. In fact, today’s event used social media to inform people about the meeting, to prepare them for the meeting, and then we are going to use technology to continue the conversation after this meeting. So what are facilities doing to address this fact, to make the meeting have maximum impact for the client?

This leads to the third area of change: “When you talk about these things, you can’t help but talk about the trend towards convergence of the IT and AV functions from an overall delivery standpoint. And this development gives us greater opportunities for interactivity with the audience, and opportunities for greater potential reach—right around the globe.”

Paul Leguillon supported Van Dyke's contention. "In the last several years, we have combined our separate IT and AV teams at out facility, and that was a key approach in terms of helping clients. During the meeting, clients no longer have to wait for the right person to get there at the moment they have a particular problem. And before a meeting, we are now doing a lot of educating of clients on the many technologies available. Our infrastructure allows our internet lines to send audio and video out to other rooms in the facility and to outside locations easily and without many hardware needs, so attendees everywhere can feel like a central part of the conversation no matter the location the meeting originates in."

What's more, with YouTube and other do-it-yourself applications, more planners and presenters are creating presentations that require thoughtful support. For example, "you have to assume that people are going to play audio in their presentations, but they often don't think about the fact that when they get on site, the audio must work well throughout the room for recording or other purposes. We don't want extra time and money spent on site trying to make that happen, or have part of that audience miss out on valuable content. So while we are building our infrastructure around HD—in many cases we're knocking out walls and putting all the wiring in there—it is taking clients a lot of time to adjust properly in how they create their multimedia presentations. So the merging of IT and AV just seems like a necessity."

Topic 2: Researching planner and attendee needs

John Potterton noted that 20 years ago, many facilities bought expensive technology that was not used enough to recoup its costs. So he asked Mike Dickersbach how his facilities decide among all the emerging technological developments, especially when a facility renovates. "We hold a lot of focus groups," Mike Dickersbach said. "If we are building or renovating a center, we'll bring in different types of planners and say, 'Here is what we are building, what would you folks want in it?' Over the years, their requests have evolved; they are definitely getting more technically savvy and their requests always become more advanced. In the last round of focus groups, we got requests for things we never got before. Some said they want plasma TVs all through the public space, and they want to use them to post attendees' Twitter feeds on them. We asked them why, and they said 'We want to stay up with the latest things, and we want to encourage people to use our hashtags to comment on and add to the progress of our meetings.' And besides getting face-to-face with the customer, we tour other facilities like this one we're at now. It lets us see new ideas and put new things in motion. It's inspiring."

The Workspring facility that hosted this discussion panel was completed in fall 2008, so much of the latest thinking went into its design. Mark Greiner explains: "The design intentionally follows the research that our company has done, and we've been doing such research for decades. The design revolves around three domains: work, which is the activity and the processes; the workers, which means people as individuals and in teams; and the workplace, which is the physical environment. Each time the three come together, they create unique scenarios and opportunities."

"Our research is based heavily on observational methods," he continued. "There are three ways to understand people: The first is to ask them directly, and you get explicit needs and desires. But they often don't know what they want, so next you must observe them—and often it turns out that they need something completely different than their stated needs. For instance, when we put a camera on someone who says 'I need more work space,' we often find that they actually don't put much inside that space, so their initial thought is not accurate' the actually have a different need. The third way is to get at latent behaviors, where you prototype something and set up a simulation that will exhibit the ideas you are thinking about. This is deep stuff—these behaviors don't come out until you set up a different environment for them to work in. So observation is a big part of how Steelcase tries to understand the world, and we connect with universities around the world in this endeavor."

Speaking of universities, Steve Mahaley from Duke Corporate Education noted first that his organization is a separate company from the university, but is owned by Duke. So "my perspective comes through the lens of providing corporate education to clients," he said. "Our challenge when it comes to meetings technology is responding to clients' requirements in terms of what is available to them in their everyday work lives—how they routinely connect to information and to each other in the office and on the road. We too create simulated scenarios to find latent behaviors, and we also consult with them more directly to see how we can use their existing technologies within our meeting space. So they will often have web conferencing or their employees will have smart phones they use to connect to internal web sites, and we help them make those tools they already have more engaging and create a learning experience that's far more than the typical group experience. We all know what it's like in face-to-face environments when people are just being anesthetized, like when presenters use PowerPoint as a crutch. We don't want to replicate bad pedagogy from the face-to-face environment in the virtual environment, so we always seek to extend the experience of learning outside the face-to-face in the most impactful ways."

Topic 3: The changing human brain: technology plays a role

On this point, John Potterton addressed Andrea Sullivan: "You are in the business of understanding how people work in relation to how their brains function. What should we be doing in meetings to enhance the experience so that people aren't bored to death by simple visuals, but also so that we aren't using things that seem very cool but are not essential or useful to the meeting objective?"

"The first thing to note is that the brain functions in ways that we only recently have come to understand, but our current meeting structures and designs are based on dated information," Sullivan responded. "We now know, for instance, that the brain can be rewired, and we know more about how people learn—and that they cannot sit for an hour straight and effectively absorb information. So learning is about creating a brain-compatible experience."

"But the fascinating part is that technology is actually changing brain structures," she added. "Young people today have different brain wiring than older people who used different technologies that were dominant in earlier decades. For instance, older generations who are used to print media read from left to right and top to bottom, while younger people who are used to reading screens pick out boxes and colors and bounce around the viewing area with their eyes to absorb information. So we are playing catch-up with the meeting design, and it has to come into alignment with these differences. Not only that, but as newer technology comes out, the brain will keep changing through generations. For us, it should come down to not only how people process information and learn, but also what do we do after people leave the meeting to reinforce the learning."

Mark Griener jumped in with the point that "the brain creates markers through its hippocampus region, which records information very much by the context of the physical environment it gets the information from. So the way you remember your childhood is by the room you grew up in, the schools you attended, or the place you got married, and that's a trigger for so many other memories. So neuroscientists find that the more an environment can be inspirational and memorable, the more that people will be able to recall that content. Neuroscience and architecture is merging; architects always knew that certain designs worked for learning, but they never knew why. Now the neuroscientists can say they know why, and this will make the architecture for learning environments better as we go along."

Topic 4: Gaming technology, brain structure, and better learning

In February, Michael McCurry attended the Virtual Edge Summit, where experts talked about the role of gaming in stimulating learning and enhancing productivity. He asked this panel for their thoughts on the topic. "What we are seeing now is that the action-video games that everyone complained was making kids couch potatoes is actually increasing kids' ability to pay attention, to perceive distinctions, and to respond to them quickly," Sullivan responded. "Contrary to the old thinking, gaming is good—it increases cortical efficiency. Not only that, but when you bring a fun aspect into an exercise, you release all those wonderful neurotransmitters. We now know that a lot of learning occurs emotionally, so the experience should tap into that that part of the brain to deepen the impression and thus increase retention."

Mark Greiner agreed that the ability to recognize patterns is important for business purposes. "The ability to quickly detect a pattern from many flows of information will be a trait of the leaders of tomorrow," he said. "Business problems have so many dimensions that there is no true right answer to a problem. You need to bring so much information from all directions, and you have to find the patterns in that flood of information that lets you come to the best solution."

In his work, Steve Mahaley has created multi-player games and developed virtual work spaces in which "avatars" move about under the control of the people they represent. So Potterton asked Mahaley if a true multisensory environment can be created at a distance. "The answer is yes, but the richness of the physical location cannot be matched, at least not today," he said. "For instance, the olfactory sense, which greatly improves recall, is something that's missing from such scenarios at this time. But what you do get with gaming is the thrill of the challenge, choices that users control and get engaged in, plus immediate feedback. Many parents can surely tell us how hard it is to detach kids from an engrossing game. And with regard to brain wiring, the pattern recognition that kids are growing up with because of gaming aligns with what Andrea said about how the younger generation has different wiring, and about how it's even possible to have the brain rewiring itself with new connections, known as 'neuroplasticity.' How the youngsters come from their other environments into the face-to-face environment is something we have to take into account, so we should leverage the gaming scenarios for good learning outcomes."

McCurry added that he has taken notice of the strong collaborative aspects of multi-player games. "The richness of these games is unbelievable, and the energy that's created among the people working together in 'competitive collaboration' is infectious," he noted. But Greiner quickly pointed out that while younger people "can multitask in a way that we older folks can't, like doing five things at once, they are not operating at maximum effectiveness in any of them. So that is something to consider when introducing technology into a meeting scenario."

Potterton raised an interesting dilemma: "Dedicated conference facilities pride themselves on providing distraction-free environments, but these games seem very distracting, at least for me.

Can we successfully integrate the understanding of how the younger brain functions, its multitasking aspects, into these focused environments?"

Paul Leguillon believes so. "We have a variety of tech-based experiences available on site, and we use them in different ways based on what is most beneficial to the demographic of a particular client," he said. "So we have typical audience-response systems, but we can also create a full "American Idol" or "Family Feud" experience. Such competitive-teambuilding exercises not only make for a memorable experience, but they also teach people through challenges that a group has to solve, and they have to take in all the different facets and find the best solution. The game is never cut-and-dried, so it helps them learn to get the best solution they can from all the different dimensions they must contend with. We also have the Wii game systems; clients started off using them simply to enhance social networking, but that could be used somehow in more educational ways."

Interestingly, tapping into different areas of the brain during a meeting does not require much technology. Mike Dickersbach said that his facilities will distribute throughout break areas "mind-inspiring items for specific demographics: we'll put out classic comic books or show classic cartoons in certain areas, and we'll also put out a few Wii consoles in other spots. We also put out foods whose nutritional makeup affects the brain. Each of these is stimulating to certain people in the group, and it changes the scenery and gives them a mental break from the classroom. It's a bit unusual, but it taps into different parts of the brain and makes new mental connections while they are being refreshed."

In the end, "the discussion about meetings technology should not focus on the gear itself," Greiner said. "It's not about that. Instead, you have to look at how you can set up the right gear the right way to facilitate each desired meeting experience, its interactivity and collaboration needs. We must remember that one person's distraction is another person's stimulation. So if you do it thoughtfully it's a hit, but if you don't then it misses the mark and is just a distraction from your objectives. It could be as simple as facilitating interaction at a snack break to reinforce what just happened in the meeting itself. The meeting objective is most important: Is it to deliver a message, increase sales, cause behavioral changes in the workplace, congratulate people for a job well done? Each piece of technology should be used only when it will reinforce that purpose. If you take a step back and look from the objectives first, the tools can be used wonderfully."

Topic 5: One meeting, many learning environments

When he goes inside his children's school these days, John Potterton finds that "the classrooms are noisy and the airwalls are often open, so you can actually hear another teacher conducting an adjacent session. I sat there and wondered, 'How can the students sort all of this out, and concentrate on their own lesson?' It brings me to the question of what we need to do in our facilities to support all the ways different generations learn. Is there something you all are doing with your environments to accommodate all the different types of learners? Do you have different spaces, some of which are more conducive to multiple things going on at once while others are designed so people focus only on one thing?"

Steve Mahaley responded that "It's important to be nimble from a technology standpoint, but it's more important to have that consultative, focused conversation with the planner up front, and the salesperson must initiate this. It's almost a given now that there will be multiple generations involved in a meeting, and people will want different choices in how they absorb information and interact with each other. You must structure things to leverage the fact that some people will want to Twitter while some others will not want to even turn on their smart phones during the meeting. We probably do not have enough of these conversations to find out the opportunities we can leverage for each group."

"I think this is a new kind of diversity that we are talking about. Early on, we made distinctions such as visual learners and auditory learner. But now we are talking about even more ways that the brain can process information," Andrea Sullivan said. "The one thing that's always constant, however, is that people do not learn well when they feel threatened or don't feel safe. And the older generation does not feel safe when the other half of the audience is not fully there mentally—they're tapping on their personal technology in the middle of a session. Meanwhile, the younger half feels isolated and agitated when you take away their personal technologies in meetings, because they are so used to constant interaction. So you have two mutually-exclusive feelings of comfort that you have to address. As a result, creating different habitats and tracks so people can sample the different ways of learning—and then give you feedback—is important today."

Mahaley noted that "there are many studies on learning theory that confirm that a variety of formats and experiences improve learning. So I'd say don't just focus on all the different technologies, but also on giving participants an active role in creating the meeting. It spikes attendee engagement." Sullivan agreed. "While using an approach that's a novelty to each type of attendee makes the learning experience better, you really have to study the makeup of your particular group to make sure you are not going to overdo that." Potterton gave this example: "Yes, some people are tired of the 'talking head' experience, but others like a topic expert to come in and present their knowledge and even their subjective thoughts. So we don't want to totally throw out that setting. Knowing your attendees and giving them choice are essential."

Mark Greiner stressed that "even the parts of the physical space in a center must be different if you are going to optimize these experiences in the long-term learning process. One-on-one communication needs a certain physical environment. Evaluation needs a different environment, and collaboration requires yet another environment. At the end of the chain is the co-creation process, when people come together for the purpose of generating new knowledge and new results from existing information that's coming in from all directions. This activity absolutely needs a very different environment than the others, different than almost all the other in-person meetings that take place. So the physical space must merge not just with the technological aspect but also with the objective in order create the best opportunity to reach the desired goals."

Eddie Turner, who brings a customer perspective to the panel, noted that attendees can detect early on in a meeting if the planner and facility did their homework on the group in order to align the meeting approaches with the demographic. "To get buy-in from attendees quickly, you must use some of what you know about them right at the 'entering' phase of the event," Turner said. "It might even require a phone call with each participant so the planner finds out exactly who the audience is. From that you can tailor your first impression, the first function of the meeting, so that they say, 'Wow, the organizers hit this right on the head.' You can also structure much of your content from that attendee research, and create your 'thoughtful distractions' too. Sure, some people might find one thing distracting and another thing useful, but the important thing is that you accommodate everyone at different points of the meeting."

Topic 6: Social Media: a help or a hindrance to meetings?

When the topic turned to social media's potential role with meetings, Steve Mahaley made a profound observation: "These technologies can actually change the rationale for why people are coming together. If you engage people at a distance through social media before they meet in person, and if content is easy to create with YouTube and chat forums and other things, then we can bring people up to a certain level before they get together. They can gather their own data and interact with presenters, and all of this makes the actual meeting much more relevant for them. We have an opportunity ahead of an event to leverage technology that people are already using so that the event is just a step along the learning path, and it's now more effective than ever because people are not starting from square one when they sit down with each other."

Michael McCurry added that "this technology gets people really excited about the content of the upcoming meeting and also the networking opportunities that will be there. Also, presenters are putting content ideas out and asking attendees if it is valuable to them, and even asking them to add to the content. That is called 'crowdsourcing,' and it is a valid term. People are beginning to understand it more, and it is becoming credible through its popularity."

Greg Van Dyke finds other value in social media: "It can affect the depth of the meeting content right in the middle of the event. For instance, you can put out poll questions across the plasma TVs in the public spaces, and people can Twitter or text via cell phone so that when the session continues, that information can be incorporated for deeper instruction and more relevant discussion. Or consider the use of 'smart' recognition badges, where you can find someone in a meeting you have communicated with electronically before the meeting. The badge can vibrate when a person who has specific interests is near you in the room. Social media is not just for pre- and post-meeting activity; it can instantly enhance the in-person component too." Furthermore, because of social media "the younger generation is used to being a participant in creating content, not just a receptacle for content," Andrea Sullivan said. "This is how their brains function, and they expect that the total meeting experience, from pre-event through post-event, will reflect that."

Interestingly, Eddie Turner used this panel discussion as an example of intelligent use of social media: "We had a Twitter feed running two weeks before this event to start the conversations and get a feel for each other, and also to capture content from people who were not able to be here so they could add to the meeting. And through his pre-event blog, Mike McCurry encouraged people who would not be with us to submit their thoughts, because they'll watch the video of this event over the web when they find the time. During the meeting, people are Twittering their questions to us so we keep the meeting focused on what the audience most wants. And afterwards, we will extend the dialogue and continue to learn from each other. Next time, perhaps we use Skype to bring people into the parts of the meeting that most interest them, and that costs nothing to use. All of this makes for a more robust learning event."

Although he is a strong proponent of social media, McCurry expressed some caution. "While I think the technology has a natural fit with the benefits people look to get from meetings, it is a mistake when planners throw a whole bunch of applications out there that they haven't thought through in terms of how to enhance certain objectives of the meeting. If you don't spend time understanding who in your audience is going to use these things and how, then it's going to look very disorganized to attendees. For instance, using Twitter is a great tool used in the right context, or a terrible distraction used in the wrong context. You have to connect the dots before you go through with it."

Mahaley agreed. "It's a bit daunting as our clients come to us and say, 'What about this social media stuff?' Many of them don't really know what to do with it. Part of the agenda at every meeting is social networking, and the disadvantage in the past was that it could only happen in the meeting itself. But now we can go where the people already are to get them to network. It's easy to do a search on Facebook to see how many of your attendees have a presence there, and if enough are on Facebook, the planner should create an interest group on it. The nice thing is that the planner does not have to create much—this stuff is already bubbling out there. You just have to ask your attendees their preferences or snoop around yourself."

John Potterton noted the irony that "the early phase of Twitter seemed to be a narcissistic waste of time, just frivolous. But there's been a shift from frivolous and personal stuff to the point that Twitter is in the mainstream of the business world now, and even in meetings." Turner offered his explanation for why this happened: "It was probably an issue from a marketing standpoint, because you have a key demographic using the medium, and it's cheaper to reach them through that medium. And from a communication perspective, the succinctness of the communication was appealing to companies and recipients alike. Businesspeople thought, 'We can create brief but effective messages to establish an awareness and appetite for our products.'"

McCurry said that "it's also a great collaboration tool, and there are other tools evolving that will do that even better. But right now Twitter is a fast, efficient way to get people to talk about their common interests. Posting links is a big way users share content because it's succinct. So it went from kids using it for personal things to being multidimensional; it can be what you want it to be."

"When it comes to social media being seen as either a help or a hindrance, we have to ask, 'To whom?' Among the people who know how to use it, they feel it's helpful. But among the people who don't, they feel lost and alienated," said Sullivan. "So I would encourage conference centers to have a help desk that could give people brief tutorials on social media or other technologies that would push them to get into using them." In fact, Turner said he does just that at some of his meetings, during refreshment breaks. And Potterton said that PCMA events now have mini-sessions for this too: "They are becoming very popular, especially among those who don't have a teenager in their home."

Paul Leguillon cited that "some large companies have had Lotus Notes for a long time, and it had a collaborative aspect. But it was expensive, and then Microsoft put out Sharepoint with its protective enjoinment that houses video and blogs for sharing. That allowed more freedom and also provided good security." Mike Dickersbach found that other large firms are building their own internal social-media portals. "A company with thousands of employees lets people distribute content with each other, and then they can take it to a meeting facility and share it other ways."

"You used to be able to ask only your office mates about topics, but now you can ask thousands and get all different perspectives from diverse people," Mark Griener added. "From all of that, they find their own patterns, and it makes their thinking on a topic more nuanced and sharper. Then people can say, 'This is my new point of view; I have a new collection of knowledge from a variety of sources.' People collect books and music to expose themselves to different ideas, so why shouldn't business information be similar? With these technologies, we can do that."

Topic 7: Finding the technological balance for each meeting

Is there a danger of too much virtual support that results in the devaluation of the face-to-face medium, John Potterton asked. "I would say it actually increases the value of the face-to-face event," Steve Mahaley responded. "When you go to a conference and you don't know other people, you spend time meeting them but the chances of you finding the one or two people who can best help you with what you are working on are slim. But the virtual component's ability to search, find, connect, organize, and collaborate in advance increases the value of the time you are actually face to face."

Mike Dickersbach added that "it could be a generational issue as to whether it's too overpowering. There is going to be that generational overlap for a period of time where some think it's overload while some think it's great and they want more."

"I think you definitely can go too far the other way, where you are looking for reasons to do everything online," Paul Leguillon said. "Job searches and other tasks you would not have thought could be done online are now there. But you have to find that happy medium for each group. Unfortunately, if the person designing the program favors the technology from a cost perspective or for the 'wow' factor, that can make things go awry."

Michael McCurry cited a sharp example of this: At a recent large meeting, the keynote speaker addressed the group while a screen behind him displayed attendees' Twitter messages regarding the content of the presentation. The meeting organizer did not have a person filtering the messages, however, and many negative comments about the speaker flashed onto the screen, unbeknownst to him. "It was very embarrassing," McCurry said. "You have to know the ins and outs of this stuff, and you have to know each presenter's comfort level with the technology too. Some are well-versed in using social media and whatever else, while some don't have any logistical sense of how it works. Don't blindside them."

Andrea Sullivan presented a useful distinction for technology use: "Most of us are comfortable receiving a stream of information electronically. So if the goal is straight dissemination, then you can use the technology heavily with little problem. But when you want collaboration or social interaction as the primary order of business, you have to look more to the face-to-face interaction."

"To mandate one medium or the other all the time would be going too far," Mark Greiner said. "For instance, for clients to eliminate the meetings and travel budgets would be incredibly detrimental; on the other hand, turning off all the cell phones and the Twitter feeds in meetings would detract significantly from the meeting objective as well. Somewhere in the middle, you have to figure out the best ways to weave all the mediums together in the right proportion."

Greg Van Dyke pointed out that "there will always be unforeseen developments that will require us to adapt and blend face-to-face with the virtual component. Take the various flu-pandemic scares we've had in recent years, not to mention terrorism. I would advise conference centers to figure out how to partner with other facilities around the world to make possible meetings where people go to a regional facility and can connect to all the other locations in a robust way that meets the client's meeting objectives."

Topic 8: Mini-case studies of technology enhancing meetings

Greg Van Dyke asked Mark Greiner about the ways that Steelcase employees meet most often. "We know that there is nothing that will trump face-to-face," Greiner responded. "Now, we will have to accept telepresence and other things, but humans are social animals. Face-to-face has advantages that no other medium will match. So while we at Steelcase use videoconferencing and telepresence, and we use our Blackberries for daily communication, we always get together in person at regular intervals because that's where new knowledge is created from the information that we have exchanged via technology over time. And each person has many interests; someone can be interested in fine arts or boating or whatever, while people in the company's other locations could share some of those interests as well. So the technology can tap into wider aspects of people's personalities, and this only strengthens people's connections and makes the in-person event a more comfortable, uninhibited, deeper experience."

John Potterton asked the panel if facilities should feel threatened that all this technology might convince organizations to reduce the number in-person meetings. Michael McCurry immediately said no. "There's evidence that contradicts the idea that technology leads to less face-to-face interaction; it actually leads to more. Here's an example: I've participated in a hashtag community called EventProfs for about a year now. The group grew to 200 people and had twice-weekly electronic chats about the events industry. All of this culminated in a newly-conceived in-person meeting called Event Camp NYC, and this was one of the most high-energy events I have ever attended in terms of interaction and great dialogue. The social media makes in-person meetings that much more dynamic and substantial, and actually makes people want to meet in person more often."

Interestingly, one of the remote audience participants sent a message to Potterton via Twitter citing reports of the most recent Cisco international sales meeting. The event was held entirely via technology, and feedback was mostly good—except that participants said they missed the face-to-face interaction. And those meeting participants are surely among the most avid technology users!

"Humans are emotive, and you just can't get that through a screen," said Eddie Turner, an experienced stager of a variety of events. "But economic circumstances make the technology attractive for conducting a certain percentage of meetings. We planners need to make sure that we give attendees their say in how a meeting done via technology will be staged. And for those meetings that have both remote attendees and in-person attendees, we must create strategies compelling enough that each remote attendee feels that he is a central part of the event, not just a spectator." Interestingly, Turner noted that many attendees of his events "simply don't want to go online for much of their interaction. As a result, we only do some online information distribution so they can prepare ahead of the meeting; then we bring everyone together; and then we use the online medium for information-based follow-up. It's what these particular people want at this time."

The key to successfully integrating remote attendees into an in-person event lies in "using the virtual technologies to create an interdependence between everyone, no matter how each person is connected," Steve Mahaley concluded.

Topic 9: The facility and the planner: partners in the task

John Potterton asked Eddie Turner whether he as a planner must often educate, or even train, the service staff at the facility regarding the use of technology as he builds his meeting designs. "Well, it frequently happens that when I inform them of what I need, they respond with, 'This is our range of packages.' But things are never that cut-and-dried for the planner, so it is sometimes problematic to get exactly what I need. For instance, something as simple as one or two extra network connections can be a real chore to obtain. This has to change at many facilities. It is up to the planner to make the facility aware early on of what they need and why, but then both parties have to be flexible to come to an agreement on logistics and then cost."

Is it the role of the conference sales and service staffs to become a trusted advisor to a client, rather than simply a provider of what planners ask them for? Absolutely. “The old-school mentality of ‘We provide the space; you tell us what you want and we will get it’ is going away,” said Mike Dickersbach. “What we try to do is incorporate into an upcoming event the things that worked well in previous experiences at our facilities, and over time we’ll add something new to our offerings and monitor it to see which situations it works in, and which ones it does not. We just opened in South Florida an IACC-certified, LEED-certified, pure-air conference center, and we got tremendous feedback because people are looking for environmentally-friendly facilities now. But the technology backbone we built there is also something people love. So we will now incorporate many of those items into other facilities; we try to think of everything we possibly can build in. Of course, you always have clients who come with a need you have not experienced before and you work with them to see how well you can do it, and then you figure out how to incorporate that into the next center you build or renovate—provided our customer surveys tell us that enough people will want that.”

“I think there are plenty of opportunities for a facility to be an advisor rather than just a provider, and help planners connect the dots,” Greg Van Dyke added. “So if you are HD ready you can show them how you can do HD conferencing to facilities in other regions so they can have more people participate than they originally thought. Also, show that you have a flexible construct to support all the different types of learning environments today’s attendees need. Describe the way the infrastructure of the your facility has been thoughtfully laid out for specific meeting purposes, and how it has been used by others. The conference centers that succeed are not only going to ask the planner a lot of questions, but also give them examples of how previous groups have used the possibilities available on site.”

One problem, said Dickersbach, is that “some people are intimidated by technology—not just inexperienced planners but even on the facility-sales side. So you could have the most high-tech center in the world, but if you have people who can’t explain it well enough to really sell it, the potential is wasted. I can do point-to-point HD video broadcasting, but if the sales team does not have a strong grasp of that concept—not to mention the third parties who sometimes get involved in the process—the result is that we don’t engage the client thoughtfully when they have questions, and then things get lost in translation and the client is disappointed. So the education of everyone internally is key to making a center be able to sell and to perform.”

Andrea Sullivan made an interesting suggestion: “Conference centers could actually create a mini-meeting for their own employees, so they experience the various technologies firsthand. This would make them better at and comfortable with explaining the possibilities to clients.”

Another bit of practical advice: “When planners come through the facility on a site tour, make sure that as they take photos of different spaces and set-ups that there are identifying markers of your property in each shot,” said Greg Van Dyke. “Perhaps the salesperson can be in the photo, or a facility sign. Because when planners go back to their offices, they have so much material from different facilities that they could look at the photos and say, ‘You know, I really liked what they did there—but I don’t remember which place this was!”

Besides the planners capturing such things, “facilities must capture the great stories within their walls—clients need to be able to see all of it,” Greiner added. “Most clients simply don’t know what possibilities are out there. Storytelling is critical for conference centers to build their brand. The more you can share examples with your clients, the more credibility you’ll have as a sophisticated center for meeting and learning. You can do this through traditional testimonials but also through on-the-spot video of session set-ups—and even attendee interviews—that you put on YouTube, as well as through your own blogs, internet radio, and more. These are all low investment but high payback." Sullivan also noted that "meeting architecture and learning design are new to many planners. They need to know there are resources for them to tap into, like your facility."

Coming from an academic background, Steve Mahaley thinks that "a facility could create a matrix where their featured technologies are listed down one axis, and the potential purposes for all of them are listed on the other axis. This would help for whenever a planner needs to know which tools you have for people to connect with each other, or which tools you have that best present information, or which tools you have for people to collaborate, or which tools you have to create the immersion and multisensory experiences, or which tools you have for attendees to give text or video feedback in final evaluations. Now you have a handy item that you can present and then ask, 'What is your audience like? What works well with them? What are you looking for to get them to reach the meeting's goals? Here is everything we offer, and why.' You can really target the conversation with such a matrix in hand, and spell out the design aspect quickly: how to organize the spaces and what tools to use."

Potterton suggested a related idea that expands the technological possibilities further: a matrix that includes the technologies the planner and the attendees will bring to the event and their uses. Why? "Because sometimes what they bring can do many more things than they presently use it for," he said. "A cell phone can take photos and video, but you can suggest that attendees take footage during and between their sessions to be used at a later presentation or at meal function. The planner's eyes will light up, because you are presenting possibilities that they never considered for technology that's already in hand. This is how you become a trusted advisor with whom clients will want a long-term relationship." Mahaley added an interesting thought: "Remember that calling something a technology does not mean that it has to be digital—there are plenty of analog products that work very well as meetings technology."

Topic 10: Not all technology that's valuable is digital

Until Steve Mahaley made that last point, the panel had spoken exclusively about the digital technologies that are influencing meetings. But John Potterton pointed out that one thing that he noticed shortly after arriving at Workspring for this panel discussion was that analog technologies occupy a prominent place throughout the facility. It hit him that "being an advisor to clients means that facilities must show all the possibilities that could fulfill the meeting objectives, not just the high-tech ones." With that, he asked Mark Greiner: "What is the thinking behind having analog products all over the place?"

"There are three needs at every meeting: informational needs, social needs, and spatial needs. And with the informational aspect, the use of paper is still so effective," Greiner responded. "So the ability to switch from digital applications to simply making a point on paper or on a traditional whiteboard is critical to meetings. The beauty is that you can move and layer content quickly and easily by moving the analog product with your hands. And when you're done, you can use a digital camera to capture the analog output and then upload that to everyone's email. This way, the analog applications add to creativity, yet the results can still be disseminated by technology."

Another important point that bolsters the use of analog products: "The brain retains information best when there is persistence of content. In fact, it's one of the things grammar-school education gets right—the alphabet is over the blackboard for everyone to see, every day," Griener continued. “But one of the worst things we do at meetings is create content, then erase the whiteboards! We should let it remain, because the more you see it the more it gets burned into the mind. And the way we come to a group understanding of content is to see it as it’s created by everyone, and then let it stay up there.” And Mahaley added that “with anything you do that’s analog, it’s so easy to snap a photo with your cell phone so that the information can be captured and disseminated even to people who were not at the meeting. That is creating a persistence of the content in multiple formats, which makes learning more effective.”

The use of digital/analog combinations in meetings resonates with Andrea Sullivan’s knowledge about how the brain works. “It speaks to the diversity of brain structure and type,” she said. “As you switch back and forth between modalities, you are satisfying everyone and generating the highest probability that people understand, learn, and retain.” Eddie Turner gave his own example of multiple modes: “I am currently looking at things like loading an iPad with content specific to particular breakout sessions, such as reference books and exercises. Then we can capture whatever the group does, both electronically but also on paper and whiteboards, and go back to the larger group and share that content and also repurpose it for others after the meeting. And I’d like to get into some gaming as part of my breakouts too.”

With all of these possibilities at hand, Potterton commented that “the tools we use will probably have an impact on the brains of attendees of any generation.” Sullivan said “absolutely. Our tools have altered the way we think since man first created tools. But because of the tools they’ve used every day since adolescence, the younger generations tend to learn collaboratively, and they bring that into the professional world. So a presenter who simply speaks for 45 minutes straight is not going to work for them, especially if the information presented can be found by them tapping into their preferred tool: the web browser on their phone. In such cases, the young attendee says, ‘Why am I here?’ and tunes out.”

Topic 11: The collaborative needs of today’s meeting groups, and the facility’s role in fulfilling those needs

“Collaboration, experience, and design are central terms these days versus 25 years ago,” Mark Greiner noted. “The world has gotten more complex, and big problems can’t be solved in silos, by people sitting in their cubicles thinking by themselves. Plus, the world of work has shifted. It used to be that you moved from one task to another in a linear fashion—complete one task, then on to the next until that one’s completed. But those linear things are now automated or outsourced, and the problems that are left are the complicated ones—the innovation problems that require creativity and demand the collaboration that goes into generating new knowledge from existing information and knowledge. This is where conference centers play their most critical role in today’s business world.”

John Potterton followed up on this: “If collaboration is so critical and will now be central to the world of work, how are conference centers working with planners and their attendees on this need?”

“First, we should reconsider our physical space,” Greiner replied. “It seems that conference centers have to change the fact that many of their smaller breakout rooms are miniature versions of their larger rooms, and that is not conducive to the things we’re talking about today: a variety of formats and fostering collaboration. Bigger rooms are more conducive to dissemination rather than collaboration, so the smaller rooms have to be very different.”

Next, Greiner cited a recent patent that Steelcase obtained for what it calls LearnLab. The concept involves three projectors scattered among different corners of a meeting room, each of which faces a screen across the room. Meanwhile, the instructor is located in the center of the room, but can move about. This set-up forces people to look at a screen across the room from them, and in doing so they can't help but face the other people in the room. The result is that attendees feel more connected to each other than if they all simply faced forward to look at one screen.

"Causing a stronger awareness of other attendees is huge in raising the interest and energy levels of participants, and it raises active participation during the session," Greiner said. "We held several university classes with this set-up and videotaped them, and the results were great—test scores were higher, and people said they got to know each other better in these classes too." To take the concept to another level, LearnLab can be set up so that different content can be displayed on each screen, so that three breakout sessions can actually take place in the room at one time, with the energetic buzz that comes from an engaged crowd. "It not only saves you from using more breakout rooms, but it gets people deeper into the engagement process," Greiner said.

Here's another example of a facility taking the initiative on collaborative learning: When a group of foreign executives came to Duke Corporate Education, they wanted technology to somehow enhance their collaboration on several delicate management issues. Steve Mahaley created a set-up where several computer terminals were stationed in different areas of the room, along with a management challenge or question displayed by a paper banner over each terminal. Using wikis that were set up on the terminals, each group of four or five executives rotated among the terminals every 10 minutes, addressing each challenge as a small group—but with the benefit of seeing the content that previous groups had created on that issue, which gave them other perspectives as they collaborated. In the end, all the knowledge generated on each topic was captured, cleaned up, and presented to attendees as a takeaway.

Furthermore, "the technology is getting to a point such that people using hybrid meeting formats—where some attendees are in a main meeting facility while other individuals or whole groups are patched in from other locations via technology—can collaborate in real time in a way that is almost like everyone being together in person," said Michael McCurry. But Greiner pointed out that "groupware products have been weak up until now. They still fall a bit short; they don't offer collaboration in its truest sense. Google is creating the product that Michael is talking about, and they are getting closer with it. They still have to figure out the bandwidth issues." Nonetheless, all these examples show how facilities must take the lead in providing clients the possibilities for collaboration—even if the client chooses to bring to the facility its own groupware product or other technology. In short, the facility staff must be knowledgeable advisors to clients on the best uses of various technologies when they are utilized within that facility.

This is not a luxury; it is becoming a necessity. Eddie Turner noted that "I've heard about studies that say about 80 percent of knowledge is lost three weeks after a meeting. So we have to get conference centers to help us turn that around through their various technologies and their educational expertise." Interestingly, Andrea Sullivan pointed out an example of that wider expertise that she encountered right at Workspring in the minutes before the panel discussion began. "The beauty of face-to-face meetings is that we can actually help retention by engaging the other human senses," she said. "For instance, I was a bit nervous before we started our event today, but when I went into the ladies room there was a subtle lavender scent that was so pleasant. It really helped me relax. It's something I will remember from this event, and that will trigger other recollections of our interaction today. This is something that technology can't replicate at the moment. And it's so small, yet it adds so much to the effectiveness of the meeting."

Topic 12: The balance between education and entertainment

Given the abundance of media today in the lives of people of all generations, John Potterton asked if there is truly a difference anymore between educating people and entertaining them. Eddie Turner replied that "of course, every experience we create has to be educational because that is why people are there. But people also must feel like it is entertaining, in the sense that they have escaped their everyday environment, in order to be engaged in the content at the highest level." Mike Dickersbach added that "you need to create an experience that allows people to remember exactly why they were there, and not look back a few months later with, 'Oh, that was just another of those training sessions I have to attend periodically."

"A memorable experience is defined by the positive recollections of what took place, and the more that entertainment can be part of that, it reinforces the memory," said Mark Greiner. And John Potterton noted that "if an event is done right, people won't remember the specific technology—they will remember the experience, the people they were with, when they were there, and other things you want them to remember. The pleasant surprises that you can create for attendees is what will stick in their minds."

Topic 13: Measuring return on the technology investment for the facility, and measuring return on objective for the meeting group

John Potterton made the point that while the LearnLab concept created by Steelcase seems exciting and groundbreaking, "that's three projectors the facility is spending on for that room, rather than just one. At what point does the facility's ROI on such technology products become a difficult decision?"

"You can sell the room or the set-up to clients by presenting your research," says Mike Dickersbach. "If you can say to clients, 'Here are the results, based on X number of groups who have done this before at our facility and at others: Retention of the material immediately after the session increased by Y percent, and three weeks after the meeting, retention increased by Z percent versus other delivery methods. Even if that set-up will cost an extra 10 dollars per CMP, it's likely going to get purchased by the client."

On the flip side, "it never ceases to amaze me how people will sweat an additional 10 dollars on the CMP when they are already spending so much on travel and everything else that goes into the meeting," said Greg Van Dyke. "We just have to show them the benefit it has towards achieving their desired outcomes through such results or testimonials. This is something conference centers will always have to deal with."

Facilities might even need to determine the worth of each client versus the demands they put on the facility. Potterton recalled one center he consulted for whose largest client by volume of events, percentage of space occupied, and time and effort from the staff actually brought the least financial return. "I told them that they needed to either renegotiate prices with the client, or else fire the client and free up all that space for small meetings of other clients. But they could not get their minds around that; they thought this anchor customer was invaluable. But to survive, you have to properly define who your best customers are."

Paul Leguillon explained his approach to estimating ROI for his facility's equipment: "I am always looking at the figures for capital expenditures and related payroll, and comparing that to the revenue coming in over that period. We also conduct regular feedback sessions with clients as to what's working well for them and what's not. This let us make the determination: Do we continue replacing that equipment or do we move to something else, and how soon is that necessary?"

"Another way to do it is to have a variety of solutions," Mark Greiner said. "If all your solutions are the same, you can't judge clients' preferences. Your meeting spaces have to be different along with the technology in them so that you see which rooms and applications are being booked more than others, and learn which applications you should emphasize more in your facility over time."

Potterton suggested that rather than buying different technologies, a facility could "lease them and experiment with specific environments. The infrastructure and the bandwidth has to be there, but the environment can be put up and taken down in a room quickly, and the equipment kept only as long as it is utilized."

Eddie Turner noted that "facilities might be able to best leverage their budgets not by going for the biggest and best in equipment and hardware, because so many consumers are already walking around with the best stuff. Instead, they could figure out how to take advantage of those technologies the client firm and its attendees already have and are bringing into the meeting. This would allow attendees to feel more engaged when at the facility."

Many of PSAV's facility partners will create a list of their meeting rooms that also shows all the different configurations plus the applications that have been used in each room, Van Dyke said. "We will also give an incoming client the contact information of a previous client who had similar objectives, so they can ask how well different set-ups and technologies worked for that group, and just pick their brain," he added. "There is no better selling tool than that."

When it comes to the value of a meeting to the attendee, testing and surveying is key to helping both planners and facilities determine how well specific meeting designs resonated with a specific audience. But Greiner finds that "too many surveys are not capturing the right elements of meetings. They ask, 'How did you like the session,' not 'How engaged did you feel with the content and with other attendees? How many other people did you talk to about the session afterwards at the facility and back at your office?' We are trying to create new and better spaces to achieve new objectives, but too many of us are measuring all of it against yesterday's standards."

"With the variety of groups who come through our center, we see every type of questionnaire. These days, some of them are using blogging and even Twitter as the medium so that people can give feedback in easy and timely fashion," said Leguillon. "The only drawback is that it's not going to fit neatly into the traditional feedback forms. It's going to be open-ended, but that's what gives you specific, detail-rich critiques. So the question is, are planners going to try to somehow allow attendees to give feedback in whichever ways they want, and then the organization enlists people go through all of that to get at what's really in people's minds?"

Regardless of the method a planner prefers, Michael McCurry pointed out that "with the social media out there, you will find people giving feedback to you or to each other anyway. So maybe we create detailed feedback mechanisms that can be done through those channels." Greiner took it a step farther: "Maybe we don't even create a questionnaire; instead, you just monitor the electronic spaces where attendees interact after the conference to see what the consensus is. If you use the old forms in this rapidly changing environment, it is going to seem as if everything is okay with the meetings and you don't need to change anything—but the Twitter chatter is saying how lacking the meeting was."

"The problem with online feedback is that it skews the population," said Andrea Sullivan."The less tech-heavy attendees won't do it, so you are getting a distorted view. Also, we have to find ways to measure people's learning, which will keep happening a week, a month, three months later among each other."

Steve Mahaley addressed this. "Our objectives are clearly learning and development among our clients. But if you can get clear on an organizational level and on a personal level what that client is trying to change by having its people come together, then you can make that clear to attendees at the start of the meeting that at the end, you are going to ask them about those things and that you want their honest feedback. That should get you some good, honest data about how the meeting impacted people personally. Then a few months later, you can contact people and ask what evidence they have that the meeting had an impact. This way, the attendees help create the metrics that determine how relevant the learning event was to their work lives."

Eddie Turner noted that his firm will "ask people to answer specific questions in essay style, based on what was determined by them and by us in the 'define and design' stage before the meeting. Then we follow up with a personal phone call four to six weeks after the program ended to get more from them."

By involving attendees in the "define and design" process, "some accountability is put onto them for the success of the meeting," Mahaley said. Similarly, "if the facility can get the client organization to commit on paper or verbally what they think they can accomplish at the event, then the collaboration can happen between the facility and the client to get to the metrics that truly determine if the methods actually pan out."

Topic 14: Predictions on the next wave of meetings technology

John Potterton asked the panel, "What can we anticipate coming down the pike next, and how do we prepare ourselves as facility and service providers? What will we need to prepare for?

"One thing I see happening is the convergence of virtual and real, though I would consider anything that happens within a meeting 'real,'" said Steve Mahaley. "Granted, there is a difference between what happens in a virtual space and what happens in an actual space. But the entire experience is real to the participants no matter where they are. That is our frame of reference to think about how we can create that real experience no matter where a person is. We presently have mixed-reality events where some part of the audience is in a virtual space that might be analogous to, or completely different from, the physical space of the meeting. Our attempts to blend these two seamlessly is going to be quite interesting."

Mahaley has been part of many sessions where part of the audience is right in front of him while others are watching—and also being watched—on screen. In such situations, he makes sure to use some of the remote people as presenters; this can now even be done with 3D hologram technology. "Things like this give IACC members an opportunity to think about how they are going to create an experience that draws in the virtual audience to interact deeply with an in-person audience," he added.

Mark Greiner agreed that "all of it is real to the participant, though it doesn't feel quite like what they are used to. I think the design of the interactivity aspects are the key to success in such environments." Mahaley stressed that in the instances where he has created such set-ups, "the people attending in the virtual space are given a central role. So when I am standing on the stage on front of 500 people, at some point I always hand over the presentation to the people in other locations so they can lead the session for awhile. Such a collaborative aspect makes the virtual component more like reality for both audiences."

But when it comes to meetings of 15 people rather than 500, "the challenge becomes this: What technology or methods do you have that will accommodate that virtual audience for the much greater collaboratation you will likely have at a smaller meeting," Mahaley noted.

What's more, "I think we will see more of an augmented reality hitting the meeting space, where people come in and demonstrate something live and in detail that is not physically there," Mike Dickersbach said. For instance, he cited an application whereby a magazine can offer a cutout of a wristwatch in its pages that a reader can place on his wrist, then go to the advertiser's web site and hold it up to his webcam to see on the monitor what the real watch looks like on him. "To take that type of experience into the meeting space is going to be vital, and we in the industry need to be the conduits for people to be able to do these things—it's not going to be about providing the space and chairs and tables. We will have to really understand the uses of technology more than a lot of centers do today."

Greg Van Dyke made an interesting point that can't be refuted. "None of us knows what the future of meetings technology will be. So the challenge is how do we put ourselves in the best possible position to react to whatever does occur? I would suggest it's more bandwidth and power, basically infrastructure accommodations. But it's also the ability to manage that infrastructure. Consider this: If several people are watching Netflix in their guest rooms, can you segment your bandwidth so that you do not lose the ability to accommodate the conference room needs at that moment? And can you make sure that guests cannot take the bandwidth from free public space and disrupt the feed of a client's videoconference? These are the types of considerations to make as we prepare for the future."

Dickersbach added that "we will continually have to think about things we never thought about before. After all, at first we never thought that people would have to use their cell phones at our facilities—look at all the phone banks we had on site! Well, we know now that of course they must use their cell phones for a variety of things, and we are adding infrastructure so people can use them robustly, and we should let them use their technologies and be able to bring it all in. Face it: if a meeting group has people using iPads with 3G but for whatever reason they can't use it well in your facility, they probably won't come there."

Topic 15: Last thoughts from the expert panel

John Potterton wrapped up the event with this query: "What is one thought you'd like to leave the IACC audience with?"

"Interactivity is the point of meetings," said Greg Van Dyke. "So is your meeting space truly designed to maximize that, and can you make the tools and expertise available to get that before, during, and after the event? My perception for dealing with the new generation is to change the learning construct to promote interactivity between the participants and the speaker, as well as the participants with each other. And with all the technological complexity we have talked about today, I'd advise facilities to have a single liaison to each client, so the client never has to go through different departments for whatever support or help they need on site at any given moment."

Mark Greiner said that “I go back to the idea of having a variety of spaces in your facility. There are always different parts of organizations that need to interact in a group setting today or this week, and the spaces they have back at their offices are not as good as the spaces we all have created. So how can you be an answer every single day to teams who don’t have many choices on space that’s ideally suited for meeting and collaborating? See how you can support those numerous meetings of six to 15 people, not just the 150- to 500-person meetings. Maybe you can take one of your mini-ballrooms and break it into four collaboration rooms of differing styles, and see what is a hit with clients.”

Mahaley agreed, suggesting that “IACC members should consider a rapid innovation cycle to test out many things on property. This means that you get very focused on certain technologies and try some other methods to see how they resonate with your core audience. Also, flexibility is the theme that comes up with both technology and with the physical space. And I would be thinking about what my role is in terms of being a consultant with clients for all the things we’ve talked about here.”

“I’d say we can’t get too wrapped up in the hardware—make sure to use the hardware to most benefit the participants,” Eddie Turner offered. “Bring the two together as harmoniously as you can.”

Michael Mccurry added that “what today’s conversation showed is that there is not a ‘one size fits all’ approach to event design. It is about all the stakeholders coming together beforehand to arrive at a mutual understanding of what they want to accomplish with the event. And then the technology is just a tool; the more important aspect is that the thinking behind the use of the technology aligns with both who your audience is and the goal of the event. That’s how successful meeting strategies come about.”

“We remind our people all the time to be flexible and to keep their eyes open to new things both inside and outside our facility that could impact meetings in any way,” noted Paul Leguillon.

Andrea Sullivan said that “there is a general fitness to organizations, and if conference centers can maintain their fitness, they will be okay. In other words, technology moves faster than any of us can keep up with entirely. Staying fit means making yourself adaptable, constantly scanning the landscape within and outside your facility, and being responsive.”

“Our goal is to have the clients we serve walk away better than when they came in, to achieve an objective or an outcome that did not exist before they came,” Mark Greiner concluded. “We create all these experiences to try to deliver on that goal. So I would end with this: Even if you don’t have a degree in design, act like a designer anyway. Be observant of people, record what you find out, prototype often, and experiment enough that you fail a little bit. Because out of that process new things will result, and you will be able to deliver a better value to your clients than you did yesterday.”