

# MEETING PLANNING GOES DIGITAL

New apps and social media  
have transformed  
traditional trade shows and  
networking events

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**T**he meeting space format is changing drastically, as event planners and attendees have entered the digital age. New apps and social media sites have changed the face of networking, assuring business professionals their days of approaching random people in hopes of making a connection may be numbered.

From email invitations with hyperlinks to sponsors' websites to pre-event lead qualifiers – such as apps allowing organizers to capture information about attendees prior to an event and electronic badges that blink in sync with fellow attendees' to alert each of a potential connection – the networking experience has evolved.

Event planner Hillary Needle, of Hillary Needle Events Inc. in Dix Hills, recently produced a networking reception for a professional association utilizing badges that were pre-programmed with attendees' information.

"We created a customized questionnaire that everyone was asked to complete in advance of the event that captured their information, such as job title, company size, location and the type of business person they would like to meet," she said. Once at the event and in close proximity to a potential match, attendees' badges would light up. For instance, if an event planner had been interested in meeting an accountant or attorney, their badges would blink in sync, alerting both to a potential match while helping to facilitate targeted networking.

Feedback from attendees was positive, Needle said, noting the badges were a unique ice-breaker and conversation starter. And, they helped ensure a more effective networking experience.

"After all, you want people to leave a networking function feeling they met the people they wanted to meet," Needle said.

Building on the popularity of tweeting, Twitter lounges are another hot industry trend. Needle recently attended an event planning conference hosted by BizBash, an event industry trade company. During the trade show, a Twitter lounge was set up where attendees could go for some

downtime to tweet about the conference, she said. Attendees who tweeted about certain topics that were trending at the conference could see their tweets on a big screen in the lounge area.

"It was a cute way for conference participants to connect," Needle said.

In addition to attendees looking to maximize their productivity, similar apps and web-based products are available for exhibitors hoping to make a profit. A trailblazer in interactive event-planning and promotional tools, BDMetric provides a platform for exhibitors to communicate directly with their target audiences before, during and after an event. Rather than pulling people over randomly, trade show exhibitors can target potential clients after reviewing their demographics from registration information, and set up an appointment during the trade show for a specific time.

## MOBILE APPS AND WEBSITES MAKE IT POSSIBLE TO PROMOTE EVENT SPONSORS AND PROGRAM INFORMATION ELECTRONICALLY, REDUCING THE NEED FOR PRINT MATERIALS

Utilizing these pre-event lead qualifiers and appointment setters enables exhibitors to measure a concrete return on investment if and when leads turn into sales several weeks or months later, according to Gerald Longo, an event planner and a chapter president of Meeting Planners International.

Cindy Mardenfeld, president of the Hauppauge-based event management and strategic planning company Infinity Relations Inc., and a self-described "techie geek," said there are several apps designed to help people forge new relationships and connections in an efficient

manor, including Qrious, which provides smartphone-based lead-retrieval and a free social networking app for a group's conference or trade show; Highlight, a location-sharing app that promises to "give you a sixth sense about the world around you, showing you hidden connections and making your day more fun," while connecting users with nearby friends or strangers with mutual interests; Sonar, a similar mobile app that leverages social and location data from networks such as Twitter, Facebook, Foursquare and LinkedIn to give users context about the relevant people surrounding them; Banjo, a social discovery app for iPhone and Android that lets users view people's social network profiles based on their location; and Intro, another location-based networking app with a unique business angle: it's built on top of LinkedIn and lets users specify who they're looking to meet by both industry and profession, and then enables them to make that connection.

In addition, mobile apps and websites have made it possible to promote event sponsors and program information electronically, all but eliminating the need for print materials, such as directories, programs and signs. While saving exhibitors thousands of dollars in printing costs, digital signage enables event organizers to make immediate corrections or changes to programs and speaker information, Longo said.

The traditional trade show experience is being transformed, as well. As it costs more for facilities to open their doors, the expense has been passed onto exhibitors, Longo said.

"We had to re-invent the trade show model," he said, noting organizations are moving toward a sponsorship platform in a boutique setting. In this environment, 50 or so top companies in an industry are considered major sponsors and have their brand expanded into content areas, such as the food and beverage area, during an event. Rather than relying solely on booth space to promote their brand, companies would be "spreading out their marketing dollars," Longo said. "They're downsizing their footprints, but their presence, branding and imagery have tripled."