WHAT'S NEW FOR MEETING PLANNERS
APPLICATIONS THAT HAVE THE MOST IMPACT ON HOTELIERS

by Richard Brooks and Jane Edelstein

There is a broad range of software that meeting planners now use as part of their daily jobs. The applications that have the most immediate impact to hoteliers are online requests for proposals (RFPs), online registration products and meeting consolidation products.

There is site selection, online registration, meeting logistics and company-wide meetings consolidation. You thought you knew all the terminology and applications. Well, there's a whole new world of technology for meeting planners out there that's going to touch you.

Online RFPs Go Mainstream

It wasn't long ago that site selection was one of just a few online tasks with which meeting professionals were comfortable. (E-mail and searching of hotel databases were the others.) This was primarily because search engines on hotel and third-party sites were easy to use and usually didn't require planners to identify themselves or their meetings. The best meeting planning Web sites have over 40,000 lodging establishments in their databases. However, searching for properties without taking advantage of the time-saving online RFP function that would narrow the search made no sense to most planners.

Sue Carter, meeting planner with Global Knowledge, said, "Many times I am working on finding a facility for over 30 small meetings. So for me to be able to send out 10 RFPs per meeting within minutes is exciting and a huge time-saver." She continued, "It's so simple and I don't have to repeat the meeting specs over the phone 40 times."

Now, the norm for most corporate and association planners is to submit online RFPs to either hotels directly, a national sales office or both. One major supplier of Internet-based meeting planning tools, PlanSoft Corporation, reported over 100,000 members and 11,150 RFPs processed during the first half of 2003.

Most planners take advantage of more advanced aspects of online RFPs, such as exporting select data to build comparison reports, storing and saving both RFP queries and responses, and seeking hotel "hot dates" (distressed inventory) as appropriate.

Online RFPs provide numerous advantages to hoteliers as well as planners. Most major hotel companies and/or independent properties now feature online RFPs within the meeting planning section of their Web sites. Online RFPs give hotels more information, often structured in a form they are familiar with, and allow them to respond to meeting planners more quickly. A sampling of meeting planners interviewed said they have come to expect some type of response within 24 hours, at least for small meetings.
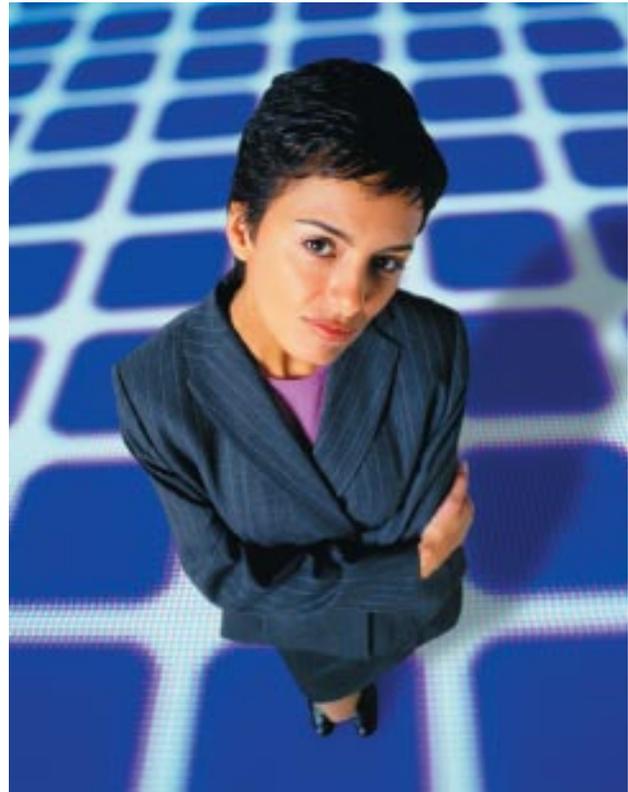
Online Attendee Registration: It's All about the Marketing

Online attendee registration products are the second category of software that is dramatically changing the planner/hotelier relationship. Why should you care whether meeting attendees register online vs. via fax or even snail mail?

Online attendee registration is a solution to handling registrations only in its simplest form. As a planning tool, online registration allows a planner to e-market to specific target markets, massage real-time data to alter marketing as necessary, and create and distribute branded marketing campaigns to build overall attendance. It may also help hotels and resorts market to attendees by allowing them to make reservations for dining, golf, tennis, spa and many other property features.

To hoteliers, a planner's effective use of online registration means that room blocks—and various sub-blocks—will be better managed, hopefully reducing the group attrition problem we all face. In addition, planners using online registration will have more accurate and current attendance data. These planners are able to generate up-to-the-minute master registration reports, housing confirmations and rooming lists.

Is there meetings-related software designed to be used by both planners *and* hotel executives?

One such program is provided by Boston-based **Passkey International** (www.passkey.com), which offers Web-based housing applications designed to allow multiple parties—including hoteliers—to share critical event information and real-time reports.

The most significant aspect for hoteliers is the reservation data entry interface that allows reservation agents, call centers and/or meeting planners to enter reservations and rooming lists. In addition, revenue management modules allow hoteliers to institute nightly rate management and length-of-stay controls.

Importantly, the applications are user-friendly for the meeting attendee as well. Attendees can actually book themselves and make their own changes based on real-time inventory.

Passkey offers two different housing applications. The CityWide product targets CVBs, meeting planners and hotel corporations that manage events with one or more hotels. The HotelDirect application is designed for hotel corporations and independent hotels to manage single property meetings. In addition, Passkey also has systems that integrate meeting registration and housing functions, as well as a group reservation processing system.

Passkey powered Hospitality Upgrade's *The CIO Summit reservations Web site shown above.*

Meeting Consolidation Tools

Perhaps the most important online tool for meeting managers and hoteliers alike is meeting consolidation applications. This tool enables a planner to consolidate his/her entire company's data—costs, savings and negotiations—into one big, central database. The result is that planners have much better control over their expenditures and can negotiate more comprehensively. The product is applauded by meeting professionals who use it—organizations such as Anheuser-Busch, the American Heart Association and dozens of other organizations—as both time saving and cost saving.

So, if meeting planners can negotiate more effectively, why is that good news for your hotel?

PlanSoft Corporation's Vice President Tony Stanfar said, "A customer with documented, consolidated buying power allows hoteliers to provide appropriate pricing, services and amenities commensurate with the total business value brought to a hotel, brand and chain by that customer." He continued, "Furthermore, hoteliers also get the information they need regarding past meetings and future opportunities to be more aggressive in earning a greater share of a customer's business, knowing that the customer has the ability to control the sourcing process to drive additional traffic to their hotels."

The advantages for hoteliers aren't all about the total number of sleeping room nights. Planners who are armed with centralized meetings data are in a better position to negotiate ancillary activities that also generate significant revenue for hotels, such as food and beverage functions, entertainment events, audiovisual services and more.

All the meeting planning tools described here—online RFPs, online registration products and meeting consolidation applications—work most effectively in tandem with each other. One software program can be seamlessly interwoven with another, with synergistic results. Use of a search engine naturally leads into sending an online RFP; use of an online registration product becomes increasingly advantageous over time as more attendees expand the database and are target-marketed for future events. And meeting consolidation tools are increasingly able to support both meeting professionals *and* hoteliers by holding down attrition rates, reducing the number of no-shows at food and beverage events, and providing hotel companies with the chance to book multiple meetings or events simultaneously.

The Future

First and foremost, the future will bring improvements in all existing areas. Improvements will clearly be technological, as products get better, smaller and faster. These online applications will be expected to interface with hotel property management and sales systems.

But improved efficiencies will also reflect the tremendous technology learning curve among both planners and hoteliers, and usage of all software described will continue to increase. For example, according to *MeetingNews* magazine more than 50 percent of U.S. planners said they have already tried online registration. Nearly 90 percent of those who have used it said it has saved them time and money and plan to use it again.

As far as what will actually be new, you should expect that all of the above may be increasingly utilized on PDAs. Already, planners are beginning to rely on PDAs to speed communications and make decisions.

Some examples you are likely to see in the near future include:

- **Lead retrieval:** Planners can retrieve information on sent RFPs while at a tradeshow and immediately meet with a hotelier or national sales office to discuss further details.
- **Gathering exhibitor information:** Planners can more effectively gather property and contact information at a tradeshow. Imagine the potential cost savings of printing and shipping collateral materials for use in your tradeshow booth if many planners choose to receive the info on their PDA.
- **Quicker feedback to exhibitors:** Show managers' post-show follow-up could speed up tremendously. Imagine getting follow-up concerning your show participation in a matter of hours, rather than days or weeks.

As an industry it is important to do our part to stimulate the meetings business. To that end it is imperative that we stay abreast of the technologies that entice planners to "come" to your property.

Richard M. Brooks, CHA is vice president of the TWE Group, a hospitality consulting resource. He can be reached at rbrooks@twegroup.com. Jane Edelstein is former editor/publisher of Meeting News *magazine and serves as a marketing consultant. She can be reached at jedel@adelphia.net.*

"...Well, that was fast."