

Expert Advice

Registration, Cyber-Style

Online registration and management systems are increasingly sophisticated and user-friendly. Automating your next conference or event has never been easier

BY JUDY ALLEN

WHEN ORGANIZING A conference or event, many planners know that much of their planning time is spent sifting through mail-in registration forms and faxes and typing attendee details into a database or spreadsheet. Then there's the issue of manually processing credit card payments, running to the bank with cheques and later creating mail-merge style documents in order to print name badges. In addition, many planners must hire administrative temps to assist them with a large event, which ends up eroding their profit margins.

Meeting planners on the cutting edge of emerging trends are discovering new technology applications that save both time and money. They are taking event registration and management online and finding that it meets their needs – and those of their clients and participants as well. Automating data collection and storage, payment processing, reporting, exporting and name-badge creation, frees up time (and money) to spend on more important tasks.

Until recently, creating an online registration system has meant that a planner needed to pay a programmer to design and develop a registration interface, obtain online merchant accounts, pay an online credit card processor's setup fee, pay a monthly or per-transaction credit card processing fee and pay a monthly Web hosting fee for a location for their registration application. In the end, they could spend up to \$10,000 for an application that sits unused most of the year.

Online systems now, however, take advantage of economies of scale, and online registration companies are able to offer planners of all sizes affordable solutions.

In addition to saving time and money, online registration Web sites provide more control over the management of the event, enhance communication tools to help the planner keep registrants informed, improve the data capture rate, data accuracy and boost attendee satisfaction by providing timely information.



For some planners in North America, an online registration system is a welcome solution to an increasingly time-consuming process that can be wrought with mishaps. "With new technology, I typically wait until I feel something has been tried and tested before jumping in," says Susan Stottlemeyer, president of Atlanta, Ga.-based event-planning company, Unique Events & Parties. "But when a client gave out my home number to the entire association to RSVP for a banquet with an expected attendance of 200 to 300, I knew I had to do something. I started scouring my industry publications to see what was out there." Stottlemeyer found several options that just didn't quite fit her needs. She even worked with a company that ended up having several glitches. "[The software] opened the Web site and sold more tickets after we had sold out," she says. "I needed an easy-to-use site that would allow me to go in and create, update, and change as needed." She researched many online registration companies before discovering New York City-based eRSVP.com (www.ersvp.com), and has been delighted with the outcome. "Online registration is already having tremendous impact on our industry," she says. "As online registration companies become more user-friendly, I believe it will become an industry standard."

Starting Your Online Search

There are many online event registration and management companies throughout Canada and the U.S., all of which can service a Canadian client with ease. In order to make sure you

employ a system that meets your needs, however, it's important to know that there are several different structures that can be employed. Online event registration and management companies may use one or a combination of templates, event-management software, and custom event registration Web sites. Knowing what you require and asking the right

ONLINE CHECKLIST

Here are some points to consider when looking for an online registration provider

- What are the costs? Are they fixed up front or based on the number of attendees? How do your costs compare to other providers' costs?
- Do you offer services such as multiple event and session tracking, name tag and income statement generation and demographic collection?
- Can I see a demo site to try out the system first?
- How much of a learning curve will there be for me to understand this system?
- Will I be able to control and have access to the online administration system?
- Can you give me references and testimonials from past users?
- Are you able to change parts of the system if necessary?
- Is the registration data secure and private?
- Who owns the data and what happens to it after the event?
- Does the functionality of the Web site comply with the new privacy rules regarding the collection and access to personal data gathered over the Internet?
- Does the Web site have secure credit card processing capabilities in both U.S. and Canadian funds?
- Can the Web site support both French and English?
- Do you offer additional services such as a toll-free information number, domain name registering and Web hosting services?
- Do you offer an online seating plan module for events like awards dinners and galas?
- Do you have in-house software developers who are capable of responding to technical issues of any degree?

questions is the first step towards finding the right partner (see "Online Checklist," page 14).

"Custom event registration Web sites tailor the look and the feel of the Web site and the registration process to the needs of the client," says Mark Turner, president of DotCom Your Event (www.dotcomyourevent.com), a Toronto-based custom online event registration and management company. "Template-driven Web sites are great for smaller, one-time events but when there is a need for an identity on the Web or a need for a special registration process, custom Web sites are the only solution."

Toronto-based EffectiveRegistration.com (www.effective-registration.com), is also a custom registration Web site, and offers an online registration engine that provides capture and storage of attendee data, real-time credit card payment processing and a host of advanced administrative reporting and data export functions, whether it be a simple one-topic seminar or a much larger multi-day, multi-session conference or convention, says president Mark Strongman.

eRSVP.com, on the other hand, is a template-driven online event registration Web site. Sanjay Arora, vice-president of sales, says in addition to the benefits in terms of accessibility, registering online offers value-added solutions. "The availability of resources on the Internet is greater," he says. "Links can be provided to give additional information to your guests on items



such as destination, hotel and climate while they are registering."

Filling the Void

Lesley Forbes, president of EventBuilders Inc., a Pickering, Ont.-based corporate event planning company, uses the services of DotCom Your Event and says her decision to search for an online event registration provider was spurred by her clients' needs. "Many of my clients wanted to project the image of being [on the] 'leading edge' technologically," she says. "Having guests fax or even e-mail their registration information is just not leading edge anymore. My clients use online registration because it allows them to project the image they want people to see, and to collect a greater amount of information about the attendees, while being very cost-effective. The actual benefits realized have been even better than expected."

Forbes says she was immediately comfortable using the reporting tools. "For some clients, I manage the data and

REGISTRATION EASE

Tips from the online registration experts

- **Knowledge = Power** If you are unfamiliar with terms like comma delineated, maybe it's time to study up, says Susan Stottlemyer, president of Atlanta, Ga.-based event planning firm, Unique Events & Parties. But, she adds, a full re-education is not necessary. "If planners are comfortable with the basic MS Office software, it will not take long to get comfortable with online registration."
- **Know your Audience** Before going to all the cost and work of implementing an online registration system, first find out if it will be convenient for prospective attendees to access the Internet, says Lesley Forbes, president of EventBuilders Inc., a Toronto-based corporate

event planning company. If not, consider supplementary registration methods.

- **Privacy Please** Ensure that the partner you choose for online registration both has, and adheres, to a strict corporate policy regarding the privacy of information it collects about you and about attendees to your events, says Mark Strongman, president of Effective Registration.com in Toronto. Companies without such policies may be interested in selling data to information brokers. "While this is not illegal, it is unethical without your express permission and the permission of those attendees who register for your events," he says.
- **Data with a Difference** Get creative when determining what data and information you want to collect from your online registrants, says Forbes. Don't just opt for the usual contact data – take advantage of the opportunity to find

out more about your audience by asking specific questions about their business, their expectations of your event, how they heard about your event etc. Also, consider asking your provider to supply information when people register so you can determine value-added extras such as how quickly your invitation was delivered and read, or if a reminder e-mail blast was successful.

- **Online Partnerships** When searching for an online supplier, be sure to make note of prospective partners' openness to suggestions and criticism, says Strongman. "Look for a registration partner who listens to your suggestions in regard to application features you'd like to see added and accepts criticism when warranted, and is constantly improving its application, adding new features and making them available to all clients at no additional cost."

forward scaled-down reports by e-mail. For other clients who are more 'hands on,' I provide them with the password so they can go online and pull reports as they wish. The reporting features are simple but effective for planners. You can also generate a broadcast e-mail message to the database of registrants. I have found this extremely effective for boosting actual attendance levels by sending out a reminder message just prior to the event."

Jamie Broughton, a professional coach with Toronto-based Footprint.ca, which specializes in leadership coaching for clients across North America in both business and life, has used the technology provided by EffectiveRegistration.com, and says the time-saving component of an online system is outstanding. "No more deposits to the bank, no need to manually record and track each registration, no more guessing and estimating as to the financial perspective. While the service commands a fee, the benefits far exceeded the costs," he says.

Fawn Annan, publisher of Toronto-based information technology publishing company, Lac Carling Governments' Review, IT World Canada Inc., used DotCom Your Event, and cautions planners to really be aware of the back end of the system and not worry so much about the front end, how it visually looks. "The back end is where the administrative process is found and comes under the term 'functionality.' You must be able to properly access the database built for your event," she says.

Melanie Siben, president of Media For Humanity, a New York City-based non-profit agency committed to using the power of the media to inspire and create positive change in society, has used online registration systems in her business and has found them to be an extremely efficient way of registering guests. "Why would event planners want to spend time inputting names, dates, demographics, e-mail addresses and worry about receiving cheques and credit card payments when [these services] exist?" she asks.

Forbes agrees. "Offering online registration to clients is a must if planners want to stay competitive. However, finding a service that is flexible yet cost-effective for small or medium-sized events can be difficult. There are a number of different services offered on the Web but many are priced based on volume of registrations. For a planner who regularly hosts large

conventions, this is quite possibly a good solution and perhaps a new revenue stream. The key is to find the service that is right for your clients and to keep up with the technology so you are aware of what is possible." EVALU

Judy Allen is president of Toronto-based event planning company, Judy Allen Productions, and author of Event Planning: The Ultimate Guide to Successful Meetings, Corporate Events, Fundraising Galas, Conferences, Incentives and other Special Events (John Wiley & Sons).
