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Tech Impact Report



Preventing technology failures in hotel meeting spaces

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Hosting a meeting or conference is stressful enough, so hoteliers should make sure

they have the people and equipment ready to handle any tech problems that could arise.



(Photo illustration: Jon Edwards)

By **Bryan Wroten**

bwroten@hotelnewsnow.com

[@HNN_Bryan](https://twitter.com/HNN_Bryan)

REPORT FROM THE U.S.—Murphy’s Law seems particularly attuned to the workings of technology, especially when there’s an audience.

A crashed computer system. A burnt-out projector bulb. A microphone that doesn’t work, even with a new set of batteries. It can be difficult enough trying to host a meeting or conference at a hotel, regardless of its size, and the seemingly fickle nature of technology adds little comfort.

However, there are steps hoteliers can take to at least improve their chances of pulling off a successful meeting without any technological snafus, and, should there be a problem, there are ways to fix those, too.

Being prepared

Marc Szymanik, regional director of sales and marketing at Legacy Ventures, said it’s important for meeting planners to do their homework about clients before hosting meetings. If the hotel has a third-party audio/visual company contracted or an in-house engineer to manage the technology, make sure everyone understands how the systems work and there’s enough staffing to do it.

He said hotel meeting planners also must ensure they’re able to handle clients’ requests and know enough to ask the right questions.

“How much bandwidth?” Szymanik said. “Does everyone need Wi-Fi? Is everyone working on laptops? Is it as simple as needing access to email, or are they streaming data? If they’re streaming, is it everyone or just the presenter? You have to understand the download and upload capacities needed. Do you have the capacity to handle that amount?”

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[Legacy](#) regularly hosts guests for a Microsoft convention that comes to Atlanta, Szymanik said, and their hotels have learned the breadth of technology the guests need. Every guest has a laptop, a tablet and at least one smartphone.

“That’s one person with three to four devices,” he said. “You have to understand that and boost your systems to meet their needs.”

Richie Mata, GM of the Hilton Garden Inn West Little Rock in Little Rock, Arkansas, said his hotel doesn’t charge for internet use, and that’s extended to meeting rooms, which are smaller compared to those larger full-service hotels. To eliminate problems with bandwidth and streaming, he said, the hotel gives meeting attendees unlimited bandwidth.

“We give them the primary code for all attendees so they are not booted out, nor is the presenter,” Mata said. “That eliminates 99.9% of the Wi-Fi signal not working.”

Test and maintain

Preparation is good, Szymanik said, but the key is to make sure it all works.

“It’s one thing to say, ‘We’ll take care of it,’ and flip a switch and hope it works,” he said. “It’s another to test to make sure the needs are met.”

Hoteliers should sometimes test equipment in a less-than-perfect environment, Mata said.

He said his hotel had a recurring issue where microphones wouldn’t work during meetings but would seemingly be fine when everyone took a break. After investigating, hotel employees discovered there was interference from all of their devices, he said. To fix the problem, they asked the attendees to turn off everything except for their laptops.

“I don’t know what it was, but the signal was crystal clear,” Mata said.

Make sure preventative maintenance is built into the budget each year, said Jeff Loether, consultant and

founder of Electro-Media Design. It's imperative to have good design upfront with backups and built-in safety and training, but systems should be revisited once a quarter. If it's important to hoteliers to have equipment that performs reliably and consistently, he said, it's just as important to have a course of preventative maintenance. A built-in house sound system that is properly maintained can provide 15 years of reliable service.

"The maintenance of the systems needs to belong to the hotel staff," he said. "It's a hotel asset. Outside AV companies will be responsible for their own assets, but built-ins belong to the hotel, so the hotel staff need to be the ones responsible for the maintenance of those assets."

Plan B and backups

Szymanik recalled attending a meeting with a revenue management team where the Wi-Fi wouldn't work. The AV company determined it wasn't a firewall problem but simply the Wi-Fi not working, he said. The building was hardwired, so the attendees were able to connect that way.

Another possible workaround for the loss of presentation equipment or the internet connection is "going back to the old days" and printing out copies for all attendees, Szymanik said.

If there's a Wi-Fi outage in the whole building, he said, the other option is to create Wi-Fi hotspots with cellphones. The AV company or hotel could provide cellphones if it's not feasible for guests to use their own.

While many designers and consultants call it "old school," Loether said patchbays—which are similar to phone switchboards—are useful when audio systems fail. The patchbay is a fallback that can work quickly, he said.

"It reroutes the signal with the patchbay and feeds directly into the amplifiers to restore sound as if nothing happened," he said.

Hotels should always have extra equipment, Mata said. This can include things as simple as projector

bulbs.

“There’s always backup equipment,” he said.

Also, batteries are cheap, he added, so don’t skimp on them.



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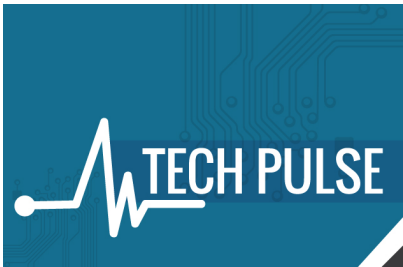
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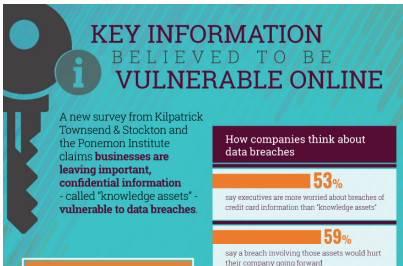
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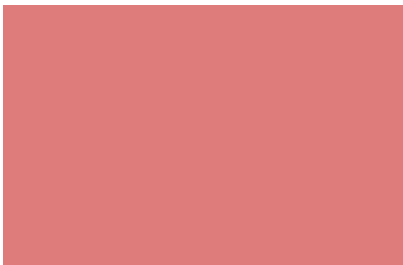


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