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Phase II of MPI's Future of Meetings research has identified areas of important study in meeting design (looking at technology and individual needs), content, communication and distribution. In the following articles, we're focusing on two topics that we've uncovered and are beginning the discussion into how you, the meeting professional, can prepare for these eventualities.

What Boomers Want

Throughout relevant research, we see a lot about how the younger generations are or will be changing the meeting and event industry. In this extension from MPI's Future of Meetings research, we take a look at how Boomer and Gen X planners and attendees affect the meeting industry.

BY MARYANN HAMMERS

Are You Future Ready?

You need to evolve to stay in business. And businesses—even super-huge corporations—are changing faster than ever before. This change includes how they meet and how they determine partners to help them handle their meetings and events. In MPI's Future of Meetings research, understanding the younger, up-and-coming industries (such as nano-technology and advanced information technology) was identified as a key trait for meeting professionals wishing to work with those industries in the future. Here, we spoke with one of the primary sources for that research—a futurist-thought leader—to garner further insight and help guide meeting professionals to greater relationships with the younger industries on the rise.

BY MICHAEL PINCHERA

What Boomers Want

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For people old enough to remember when phones were for talking and tweets were for the birds, a meeting means meeting—folks gathered in a big room, listening to rousing (and sometimes not-so-rousing) speeches, participating in panel discussions, viewing PowerPoint presentations and getting together with colleagues for ballroom banquets, scheduled activities and maybe a little golf.

But that traditional format is rapidly becoming obsolete. Increasingly, events are being planned by and for younger-aged groups, who prefer less formality, less structure and use technology to convey and receive information more efficiently, quickly and conveniently.



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“This generational difference affects everything, from pre- and post-meeting communication to speaker selection, activities and networking,” said Jason Dorsey, chief strategy officer at The Center for Generational Kinetics, an Austin, Texas-based organization that studies generational trends.

That leaves planners in a bit of a quandary. Those who abandon tradition for the latest technology and trends may alienate older attendees. But if you party like it’s 1999, the agenda will seem irrelevant to the younger crowd.

DETAILS, DETAILS

Generational differences can usually be spotted in the attention to details, or lack thereof, says Joyce Landry, whose company, Landry & Kling, plans meetings and events aboard cruise ships. She ▶

Are You Future Ready?

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What might meeting planners need to learn or do differently to work with and plan events for “newer” industries? How might these industries ultimately affect the work of meeting professionals?



In my book, *The Extreme Future*, I mapped out five key technologies that will shape the future marketplace and they’ll be reflective of new businesses, new industries, that are going to be totally driven by these technologies. Those were: nano-technology, bio-technology, neuro-technology, information technology and quantum technology. And they all relate to new industries such as alternative energy, climate

mediation, geo-engineering as well as other kinds of industries.

The meeting planners of the near future need to have a fundamental understanding of how the marketplace is changing and what new industries are emerging. So I would advise meeting planners to become more technically aware of the fundamental definitions, likely jobs and likely products and services that these new emerging innovation areas are going to bring. It will help them to get in synch with providing for those innovators an understanding of what their needs for meetings are going to be.

In addition, meeting planners need to have a better understanding of the evo-

lution and the different life cycles of these industries. Some of these are fairly embryonic. Nano-technology is not that embryonic; quantum technology and neuro-technology are fairly embryonic. If you understand the life cycle of these innovation buckets, you’re going to be ahead of the game in being able to interact with those market leaders or emerging companies that are going to have tremendous needs to touch their customers and interact internally—and many of these companies are going to be global.



They may have 20 or 30 nodes around the world; they may have customers in 80-100 countries. A lot of my ▶

What Boomers Want

remembers working with an experienced (i.e., Baby Boomer) colleague, whose careful planning extended to ensuring that attendees would never get stuck in a buffet line.

“He carefully strategized flow and did meticulous calculations to ensure that attendees were whisked from one location to another without effort,” Landry said.

That may sound like sweating the small stuff, but Boomers excel at it.

“Boomer planners—and I am one—had it drilled into everyone that we had to have back-up plans and be buttoned-up long before the meeting

started,” Landry said. “And Boomer attendees expect those tiny details to be handled for them. Younger planners and attendees don’t mind winging it, sometimes leaving details to be decided on site—or not at all.”

Dorsey, a generational speaker who has attended and/or spoken at more than a thousand events, claims he can usually figure out the demographic of a meeting or conference (or the age of its planner) by the amount of formality and adherence to protocol.

“I recently keynoted an exclusive financial services event at a resort,” he said. “It started on a Saturday morning and people were wearing jackets. Older generations also tend to focus more on titles, executive speeches and tables with

‘reserved’ signs.”

That’s because Boomer planners and attendees generally prefer a predictable structure that packs in as much as possible, with presentations that begin and end promptly and include scheduled breaks.

“Boomers want meetings to end on time, and the cocktail party to start on time,” Landry said. “God help us if they miss a meal.”



HYPERBOLIC FATAL RESULT FROM SLIDE SHOWS

Planners who overly rely on tradition and formality, complete with introductions of introductions and droning PowerPoint presentations, do so at their peril.



Are You Future Ready?

clients in these emerging sciences are global companies, and they’re struggling with the question, “What is the new best meeting paradigm to combine connecting/aligning and touching customers?”

It’s a good time for meeting planners to become what I call future ready. More understanding of the fast-changing innovation economy, where innovation is occurring, where those key innovation buckets are, and how to become more of a valuable resource for companies and associations that are going to need to connect with their customers and employees and vendors—connect with their ecosystems around the world.

This sounds like it’s just smart business even if planners aren’t anticipating getting involved in planning for specific, younger industries.

Yes, it’s smart advice for meeting planners to understand the changing marketplace but also there’s a fusion model occurring. As a futurist, what’s happening is that big companies have traditionally been very slow moving, they have large market share and a lot of legacy products and services. What they’re doing is either acquiring faster-moving innovative technology companies or they’re acting like them more and more—they’re acting more agile. UPS is a logistics and information company—back when I advised them that all of this was emerging, they thought of themselves as a trucking company, a delivery company.



IBM used to make computers, now they have solutions and are in the knowledge management space and they’ve got customers all over the world in information

“Future readiness is really about helping clients navigate change successfully so they can continually touch their customers, their employees and partners in ways that will make them more competitive.”

Tenured planners, need to know what those whippersnappers want? Read our Gen Y research to find out: tinyurl.com/coddmdc.

“We expect you to get to the good stuff fast and if you don’t, we’re texting under the table,” warned Dorsey, who, at

services, data science.

Meeting planners have to become more future ready and recognize that they can’t look in the rear-view mirror—they have to look forward. And more traditional companies with legacy products are changing very quickly—they need meeting planners who understand how to change with them and how to help them lead the change. In fact, that’s what future readiness is really about—helping clients navigate change successfully so they can continually touch their customers, their employees and partners in ways that will make them more competitive. The meeting planner that knows how to do that is the one that’s going to be the most successful and effective. **one+**

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age 34, is a bona fide Gen Yer—a label for people who were born in the late 1970s through the mid 1990s (also called “Millennials”). “If you’re just going to read your slides to the audience, [we’d rather you] stop talking and send them via email.”

Regardless of the generation, attendees are also increasingly less likely to tolerate 1-2-hour-long speeches.

Boomers can be a tough crowd for another reason, too. With their years of experience, some believe they’ve been there, done that, heard it all.

“Many industry colleagues say they have a difficult time finding sessions where they will learn something new,” said Kathy Miller, president and chief creative officer of Total Event Resources, a meeting and event planning company based in Schaumburg, Illinois, who is a member of the Baby Boom generation with more than 30 years in the hospitality industry.

THE GREAT DIGITAL DIVIDE

Boomers (and Gen Xers) are less likely than younger attendees to be superglued to their iPhones. They are rarely spotted surreptitiously texting under the table. They may not have a Twitter account or be fluent with smartphone use. According to a 2012 study by the Pew Research Center, just 9 percent of Internet users, aged 50-64, use Twitter. Fewer than a third of adults, aged 55-65, own a smartphone, as do less than half in the 45-54 age range, according to another 2012 Pew study.

But when it comes to making the most of meetings, non-tweeters are at a distinct disadvantage.

“Boomers or Xers who don’t adopt social media miss out on some of the valuable takeaways,” Miller said. Her solution: Have a place where the Twitter conversation can be streamed for attendees to see (yes, a Twitter fountain), or reformat the information to be shared in a follow-up email.

In fact, comfort with technology is the major factor separating the

generations.

“Many new, exciting technologies are changing how we market and structure a meeting, engage an audience and provide instant information,” Miller says, citing gamification, hybrid meetings, social media and mobile apps. But Boomer attendees are likely to prefer the old familiar ways.

To accommodate older attendees who are less technologically savvy, Miller continues to provide binders for projects and printed materials.

“Even for ‘paperless’ meetings, I offer hard copies of the agenda at the registration desk,” she said.

BALANCING ACT

The challenge for planners is to create an event that is neither boring and irrelevant to Millennials, nor baffling and silly to Boomers. That can be done, Miller says, by mixing things up so there’s something for everyone: traditional theater seating and informal lounge-style chairs, nontraditional venues, varied presentation formats from highly structured to organic and free-flowing and an array of entertainment options, interactive events and contests.

“Liven up social events by incorporating activities that get different generations to talk to each other,” Dorsey advised.

Regardless of age, life experiences and expectations, the bottom line is that everyone wants to feel valued and included, he says.

“You can tell when this happens because people are not hiding out at a table or staring at an empty dance floor.”

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