Why technology shouldn't matter

Charlotte Webb and Julia Hudson look at how technology can be best used to add, rather than detract, from your events.

Imagine you've spent months planning the perfect conference, sparing no expense. Just as the keynote address begins, you look towards the back of the room and the four CEOs you most need to impress are wandering around, oblivious to your messages – because they're distracted by the revolutionary virtual-reality headsets that seemed such a good idea a month ago.

That may seem a niche example. So, instead, think back to a time when you've been sitting in an audience, politely listening to somebody give a presentation. All of a sudden, the microphone fails, or the projector cuts out, and your attention shifts from what the speaker was saying to the audio-visual problem. You lose your concentration, and your experience has been undermined by a simple technical fault. Surprising as it might seem, many event organisers still neglect the basics, and it is absolutely crucial, when dealing with any form of technology, to get the fundamentals right. Get them wrong, and you'd have been better off not using any tech at all.

Recently, we've enjoyed using contactless cards handed out at expos, which allow us to give out contact details instantly without fiddling with business cards or smartphones. Apps that allow delegates to respond instantly to speakers, with feedback on-screen before the speech has ended, transform mundane talks into engaging – even riotous – exchanges that leave everyone buzzing. Nothing is better than a simple idea that makes a big change. But even these small innovations have gone wrong, and when they do, embarrassment and chaos compete to be

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the dominant experience.

Naturally, businesses look to deploy technology to ensure that they stay competitive. If it can help the bottom line then it should be introduced, no questions asked. However, this approach fails to address what we see as the key issue for technology. The most important question is how technology can improve the client experience. When we organise an event, we will only look to use technology when we are sure that the experience of those in attendance won't be adversely affected.

Let's look at how this applies to one of our specialist areas – professional services. It is a good example of an industry which is desperate to introduce technology across the board, but which is simultaneously nervous about trying new things.

When someone goes in search of the help of a lawyer or accountant, they want to be reassured before they are blown away. Initial interactions must put them at ease and leave them confident that the service is being delivered by competent, talented individuals. A flashy electronic presentation is certainly a bonus, and if advisers can illustrate additional value by, for instance, helping firms to automate contractual processes, then this is even better. The most important thing, in all situations, is that the client can leave feeling great about the experience.

In short, technology can add to the client experience, but it must never detract from it. As much as any business wants to stress the importance of innovative technology, the last thing they want is to give the impression that they don't

know how to use it effectively. Firms should be aware of this, and be cautious of introducing technology before they feel certain it will improve their service.

This is supported by comments from Caleb Parker, Tech & Innovation Chair at the HBAA, who said "...there are some really cool #eventtech start-ups out there...but I believe the best tech implementation is when it enables more human experiences – tech that removes robotic tasks lets people do what they do best – be human". Successful businesses understand that the introduction of technology into a service must be premised on the importance of the client experience.

It isn't just when technology goes wrong that it may be better off left behind. The use of tech should be carefully thought-out and additional hardware should only be involved when it serves to improve the event for everyone. Often, our clients will come to us eager to deliver a cutting-edge event, and together we discover that a streamlined design, reducing the numbers involved in the planning and the overall cost, is a much better idea.

Having said this, we are constantly on the lookout for emerging technologies to improve our offering and help create cost-efficiencies. Technology can be used to track expenditure and return on event-investment accurately. Minimise the expense incurred in your offering by utilising emerging online platforms, and continue to seek measurable metrics to provide evidence of the value delivered. Used correctly, technology shouldn't get in the way of good work, it should enable it.

We've found that this approach proves to be familiar to our clients. Taking the legal sector, as the freedom to work anywhere unshackles lawyers from their offices, and as firms evolve, the way that lawyers interact with technology has begun to change. We only need to look at Allen and Overy's Fuse, designed to provide an incubator for tech companies, or Linklaters' Nakhoda, an AI offering developed in-house, to see that the big players are embracing technological advances, and taking their futures seriously. As firms continue to increase their spend on technology, it is beginning to look like there's finally something on which the lawyers agree.

In the world of events, we've been careful to ensure that the technology we use is adding value for our clients. We've seen a marked uptake in the need to track success of our offering, increase attendance and follow up with attendees. On the client side, technology is heralded as a method to generate an improved return on investment. In a changing environment in which marketing budgets are under ever-increasing levels of scrutiny, there is a need to evaluate the potency of spending on events, and technology is rightly seen as a way to deliver this.

On the delegate side, technology is positioned as something that will improve the events themselves. As long as it is well delivered, this is true. After all, a working microphone is better than no microphone at all. We often hear – and agree with – industry insiders espousing the virtues of new tech, from facial recognition to 360-degree venue tours. There is no doubt that technology is vital to our industry.

So the noise continues to grow, and the opinion pieces on how tech is the future continue to be published. But, as we've seen, there's a part of the story that this narrative fails to notice. Technology is only useful insofar as it helps to improve our experience, and when it detracts from this it is better off avoided entirely. Events should work to connect people, and technology should be deployed carefully to facilitate interaction, not to discourage it.

By itself, relying on the idea that 'technology' automatically creates some kind of solution fails to acknowledge what it is that we are looking to achieve. Whether in law or in events, we should be offering clients an enjoyable experience, memorable for the right reasons. We are looking to achieve something beyond cost-efficiency and return on investment accounts for – we want to improve people's lives, by giving them good experiences.

This points to a deeper understanding of the purpose of technology. It exists to make our lives better. Lawyers have to understand the law, and event marketing experts have to understand business, but both of them should recognise that their real strength lies in understanding people.

Technology is at its best when it allows us to improve people's lives. Whether we are curating an events programme or simply having a conversation with a client, we have to remember that people are the drivers of our success, and technology will always be secondary to that.

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