

Call and Response

By John Anderson

Every group wants to get the most out of their meetings and events, especially these days with meeting spend down and ROI more important than ever. One of the essential ways to accomplish that goal is for attendees to be as engaged as possible. But an effective meeting doesn't stop there. A steady flow of information, feedback and ideas should be readily available to all involved, from the meeting facilitator to the individual participants. And the conversation has to be like a superhighway—with multiple lanes of communication coming and going in both directions—and not a one-way street that only runs from facilitator to attendee.

One way meeting groups have been able to achieve this flow is through the use of technology, such as polling and audience response tools like ResponseWare from Turning Technologies, where a moderator asks a question and the respondents choose from a list of answers on hand-held devices. The results can then be tabulated and sent back to the moderator, who can display the results for the audience. It's an effective method, but the conversation is still limited, confined to already-formulated answers that respondents simply choose from.

Two-way Street

Fortunately for planners, there's an abundance of technology available, suitable for just about any situation and need. And for the purpose of communication, the pathways don't get much more open than with CoVision. The San Francisco-based company takes audience response to another level, and allows participants to openly and actively engage in the meeting dialogue without causing a traffic jam.

"[We have] several voting tools, so you can do that," says Karl Danskin, senior consultant with CoVision. "But what we're bringing to it beyond the voting tools—and what becomes valuable—is if they do vote, *why* they voted that way. If you don't want to give the audience a constrained group of choices, you can leave it open to them in a brainstorming situation, and they can come up with their own ideas and solutions." Danskin says that by using a theme process, participants can see what ideas are present in the room, and what ideas are on the minds of the attendees, instead of just votes on a set of choices. "It opens up a topic to 'what are the best ideas and possibilities,'" he says. "A large part of what we do is based on their meeting objectives. The client organization doesn't need to know the interactive process and technology. We bring that expertise, and the whole technological infrastructure to them."

Imagine a ballroom filled with tables. CoVision uses a system of laptop computers set up at each table (generally one per table) in a large room where a moderator stands on stage at the front. The company's browser-based software is loaded onto the computers, and as questions and issues are put to the audience, people sitting at each table work together as breakout groups, brainstorming for answers, feedback and questions of their own. This information from each table is sent via computer, through a wireless connection, to the moderator who might also have his or her own group assembled to discuss the feedback. And especially for large groups, a representative from CoVision will be on hand to pare the information down into



bullet points and a more readable format, which is then passed on to the presenter for display to the room.

"It's like small breakout sessions within the larger meeting," Danskin says. "It's a seamless mix, with the large group learning and assimilating what the small groups are talking about." Danskin says that the group might have 35 minutes of presentation from the moderator, followed by 5–10 minutes for table discussions. "It gives the participants a refresh, a chance to look away from the stage and think about what the presenter has been talking about." As the ideas are passed along from each group, they're added to the theme of the meeting, which the presenter will then address.

Easy Does It

Founded in 1992, CoVision's software is now in its 3rd generation, with the company working to evolve it into a system that's very intuitive and user friendly, where no learning curve is required. The on-stage presenter will offer a few instructions, or a page of instructions will be provided at each table, which allows participants to easily interface with the system. "We've taken anything that was complicated off the screen," Danskin says. "We want [the groups] to focus on the conversations at the tables, to capture the small intimate conversations the participants are having related to the topic presented on stage."

Danskin says CoVision's system is typically used by groups from 100–500, "just because people tend to have more meetings in those sizes," he says, though he adds that it can be used just as effectively for groups of 50–2,000. And CoVision can even do it for multiple sites, as they did for a State of California health-care meeting, with eight different cities setup simultaneously and linked through video to the main moderator.

According to Danskin, the system is most appropriate for intact organizations or stakeholder groups who are trying to come to a shared understanding or alignment, as opposed to users conferences. It's also valuable in sales training, where it's important that everyone gets the same message, and believes in that message. "When you care about the whole group, and [care] what you come away from the meeting with, that's where it's of most value," he says. **covision.com**