

# Technology



## Wi-Fi at Your Meeting – Is Free *Really* Free?

With last month's smartphone set to be obsolete almost as soon as you've mastered its apps, it's difficult to keep up with the ever-changing world of onsite technology. However, what remains constant is that event attendees expect Wi-Fi to power their technology gadgets. The hotel and convention center for your next meeting have agreed to include free Wi-Fi in your contract! That's good, right? Well...maybe. And maybe not. Here are some recommendations from Anita O'Boyle, director of event services at SmithBucklin Corporation, on how to ensure you get the Wi-Fi coverage you really need — and your attendees expect — at your next meeting.



### YOU CAN'T SEE WI-FI!

Let's face it, you can't see Wi-Fi! When you go on a site visit you can view the layout of the meeting rooms, check out a few hotel guest rooms and visit the ballrooms and large spaces where your trade show will be held. So, when your hotel or convention center representative notices you looking at folks beavering away at their laptops in the lobby and agrees to include Wi-Fi "at no extra charge," you're very pleased. But what does "free Wi-Fi" really mean? Make certain that your technology needs and expectations match what your venue is offering the same way you would double check a room setup. Your due diligence before the event will ensure your conference runs smoothly and you don't face any last-minute issues and up-charges onsite.

### WHAT ARE YOU DOING BEHIND THAT POTTED PLANT?

Anticipate how and how often attendees will use Wi-Fi. Will speakers need Wi-Fi to access the Internet during their presentations? Will you have 3,000 people logging in at the

same time every day to check their email? Will 500 people at a general session be logging in for two hours to follow a presentation on the speaker's website or live stream? Are you using a mobile app? Does your "free Wi-Fi" extend throughout the facility (sleeping rooms, session rooms, trade show floor, etc.)? Do your attendees expect to stay connected 24/7? Understanding Wi-Fi coverage needs will eliminate attendees crowding around that potted plant in the corner of the lobby where there appears to be a bit of a signal — if they lean to the left.

### MAKE A LIST AND CHECK IT TWICE!

O'Boyle advises meeting planners to fully vet tech requirements so there are no surprises onsite. Here are six tips to use when planning your Wi-Fi needs:

**1. Find the right person to speak with and be persistent if you aren't getting the answers you need.** The "technology director" can have a range of titles depending on the venue you're working with, so make certain you're speaking with someone who really understands your needs as well as the building's technology capabilities. (Your sales contact will admit this is not his or her area of expertise!)

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**2. Request your usage reports from prior meetings and bring them with you when negotiating with a new venue.** These reports will capture your bandwidth, usage, time of usage, number of users, amount of time spent online, etc., and allow the new venue to prepare a bid tailored to your needs.

**3. Your peers are a great resource so post your questions via a social media network** such as LinkedIn to see what experiences others have had with the hotel or convention center you are working with. Ask your contact at the hotel, too, if you can speak with other event organizers that managed a highly technical meeting so you can benefit from their experience at the venue. You may well get some pointers that make your negotiations more successful and lead to a better experience for your attendees.

**4. Limit free Wi-Fi in the exhibit hall to attendees.** Exhibitor usage can suck up your entire bandwidth, so make sure that exhibitors purchase a hard line for use in their booths. Always include an order form for a

hard line in the exhibitor kit so it will be clear that the event Wi-Fi is not for exhibitor demonstration use.

**5. Budget and negotiate for Wi-Fi like you would for food or any other conference expense.** Just as there is no "free lunch" there really isn't any "free Wi-Fi" except in a very limited sense. Remember that potted plant? Wi-Fi throughout your meeting space is a negotiable item with the venue, so put it on your list!

**6. Consider pricing strategies to cover Wi-Fi.** If your find your Wi-Fi needs are beyond your budget, and don't feel you can scale back in this area, consider bundling at least part of the cost into the overall conference fee or the

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room rate. Add \$5 or \$10 to the daily room rate or \$50 to the conference fee (if required by your bylaws, be sure to disclose that the rate includes a modest fee for unlimited Wi-Fi access throughout the meeting).

### PUT YOUR ATTENDEES 'IN THE ZONE'

In today's high-tech world where everyone has a laptop or a tablet or a smartphone (or all three!), "dead zones" are deadly and can result in huge attendee dissatisfaction with your meeting. Nothing is more frustrating for attendees than finding out they can't check their email between sessions or use your mobile app in the exhibit hall. Many of yesterday's technology nice-to-haves have become today's must-haves. Make sure you're providing your attendees with the experience they desire, so they can tweet about your great conference in real time!

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