Eight Tech Trends to Watch in 2011

By Danica Tormohlen, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

This time last year, the iPad had yet to be introduced. Less than a year later, tablet technology was all the rage at the International Consumer Electronics Show last month in Las Vegas as major manufacturers scrambled to announce their own versions due out later in the year.

In a new report released in January, Forrester estimates that tablet sales will grow from 10.3 million in 2010 to 44 million in 2015, eclipsing laptop sales by roughly 5 million units.

Products like the iPad, smart phones and other mobile devices continue to blur the line between consumer and business technologies and applications. Attendees and exhibitors expect instant mobile access to up-to-the-minute show news, information and schedules. Show organizers want to provide tech tools to enhance the show experience, but they also want affordable options that can be customized to their specific needs.

Which technologies will trade show executives be deploying in 2011? Trade Show Executive talked to industry tech suppliers to find out what's hot and what's next. Here are eight trade show technology trends to watch for this year.

1. Mobile Apps for Trade Shows are Going Mainstream

In 2009 and 2010, numerous early-adopters — such as the *International Consumer Electronics Show*, the *NAMM Show*, the *Golf Industry Show* and the *International Builders Show* – launched mobile apps. These apps featured everything from interactive maps of the exhibit hall and personalized agendas to exhibitor directories and program guides. In 2011, shows of all sizes will be rolling out mobile apps with a variety of functions, including networking, lead exchange, speaker information, detailed booth layouts, show alerts, electronic ticketing, social media, way finding, audience polling, surveys and much more.

"If you think about it, smart phones are the only media that someone carries around with them 24 hours a day," said Jay Tokosch, CEO, Core-Apps. "Mobile apps offer a new way to communicate with your membership and attendees."

Pricing for mobile apps varies by company and by functionality offered, but it's surprisingly affordable for most events. For example, Core-apps offers a conference-only app for $2,000 to $5,000 and an exhibits app starting at $5,000, based on a per-exhibitor fee.

Most show organizers offer the app for free, and some are beginning to sell sponsorships to help cover the costs. For example, Hershey's sponsored the app for the *NACS Show (National Association of Convenience Stores)* held last October. When users opened the app, they were directed to a landing page that featured a sponsor promotion. Hershey's was so pleased with the sponsorship, they signed up for another two years, said Tokosch.

Standard Apps. Mobile phone apps are standard issue at many trade shows. The cost of creating an app for an individual show is also coming down.

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2. Dashboard Technology will Transform How We Access Real-Time Data and Make Decisions

"Dashboard technology is making it easier and more accessible for show producers, attendees and exhibitors to access real-time registration, housing and lead-retrieval data and to make better, more informed decisions," said Pat Fallon, vice president of business development, CompuSystems Inc. (CSI).

Dashboards have been around for many years for banking, online trading and social networking, but have been introduced only recently in the trade show industry. Basically, dashboard technology provides a panel of quick visual cues representing critical information in real time. In 2011, exhibitors and attendees will also be using this technology to better prepare for the show, maximize their time and enhance the buyer/seller experience.

As an example, CSI launched *ConnectME* Mobile for attendees in December at IAEE's *EXPO!EXPO!* The product, which is fully integrated with CSI's attendee Internet registration dashboard, gives attendees the ability to:

- View exhibitors that matched their product interest;
- Request, view and manage appointments with exhibitors and take notes about those meetings;
- Browse the entire exhibitor list and add exhibitors of interest to their *MyExhibitors* list;
- Create and view their session agenda;
- Collect exhibitor electronic brochures; and
- View their notes anytime from their registration dashboard.

"This app currently runs on the iPhone platform," said Fallon. "The corresponding iPad, Android and Blackberry apps are scheduled for deployment in the Second Quarter of 2011." This product is part of CSI's registration package.

Feeling the Pulse. Computer dashboards link show managers, exhibitors and attendees to real-time show developments and data.

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3. Web-Based Solutions Will Improve and Increase Productivity

Like other businesses, many show organizers have moved away from purchasing custom-installed software to using web-based solutions for exhibition, sales, financials and customer relationship management. Web-based solutions save money on the front end, but they often aren't as robust as installed software programs.

"Traditional web applications have delivered less productivity than desktop applications. However, that's changing with the rise of Rich Internet Application (RIA) technologies such as Flash, Microsoft Silverlight and HTML5," said Krister Ungerboeck, president, Ungerboeck Systems International (USI), whose company offers both desktop and web-based solutions. "Over the past three years, we've been investing 75% of our R&D efforts on web-based solutions that use RIA technology."

Basically, web applications built using RIA technologies have many of the characteristics of desktop applications. "RIA technologies allow software developers to take it to the next level for the web," said Ungerboeck. "It's like the difference between running an app on your iPhone vs. going to a web page. Applications are faster and create a richer, more productive user experience. For someone who works in an application all day, RIA can save 30 minutes a day over a traditional web application. That's a huge time savings."

Net Gains. Web-based Internet solutions are increasingly robust and capable of delivering results that previously required custom software.

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4. Hybrid Events Will Drive Virtual Growth

"In an effort to drive adoption of virtual events, the industry has tried to mimic physical shows with illustrated images rather than focus the technology on complementing the physical event." said Michael Westcott, vice president of marketing for INXPO. "That will change as the technology becomes more broadly adopted and people realize the need for a simpler online experience."

One technology application that appears to deliver on both is the hybrid event, which combines a live physical event with live online access. Over the past year, access to high bandwidth has improved rich media access within event venues as well as remotely.

For example, at the *Professional Convention Management Association (PCMA) Annual Meeting* and the *Virtual Edge Summit* held last month, organizers worked with *INXPO* to deploy a hybrid experience for a handful of selected general sessions and workshops. For those unable to travel to Las Vegas for the event, a complimentary hybrid event featured live streaming video, and virtual attendees could participate in real-time by posting questions and comments via Twitter or live chat. In addition, the content could be archived online for free or paid access after the event.

"The next 18 months will see a dramatic uptick in use of virtual hybrid events," said Westcott. "There's a growing need to leverage content and extend the investment of physical event assets. In addition, virtual event platforms are seeing increased adoption due to simplification in the interface and attendee experience."

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Role Player. Virtual technology is shifting away from creating a stand-alone digital trade show and toward providing content from the physical event to viewers stuck at the office.

6. Capturing Event Content and Repackaging it to Use Online

"Despite all the buzz surrounding virtual events, many shows are not ready to make the leap to a full virtual event," said Jim Kelley, director, global accounts, PRG. "But capturing content of sessions is easy for most organizers."

In most cases, a majority of the technology (i.e. presentation source: laptop; audio source: microphone; and video source: camera) required to capture content is already available in a typical meeting room. The recording/capture device simply takes a feed from the provided sources, then records and encodes it in multiple formats that can used post event, said Kelley.

"A typical day of sessions in a meeting room could reasonably be recorded or captured for $1,000 to $1,200," said Kelley. "If you are running three or four sessions in that room, your cost-per-session is about $250. Often these costs can be offset by post-event sales or sponsorships."
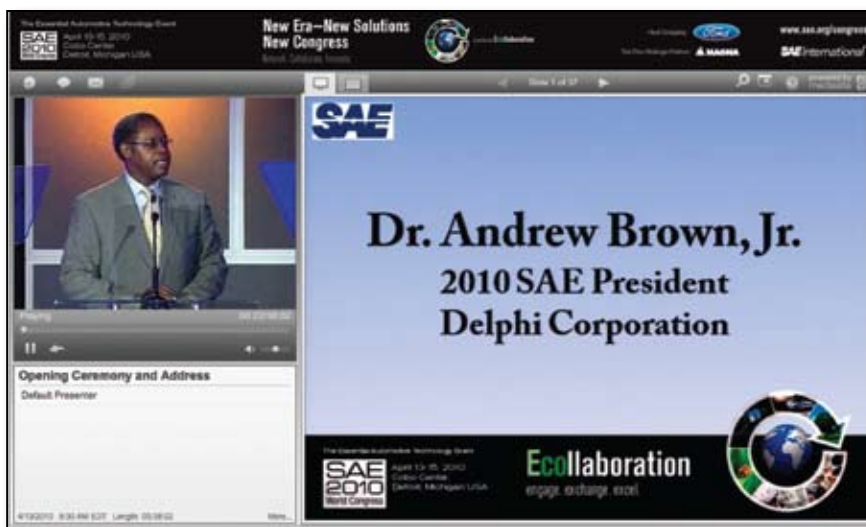
Instant Archive. Recording and archiving content from physical sessions is getting cheaper and easier. Standard on-site AV equipment can often be used.

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5. Leveraging Virtual to Drive Attendance to Your Physical Event

"We are looking at ways to extend the physical events of our customers to a broader audience," said John Grosshandler, director of virtual extensions for Freeman. "How can we use virtual extensions before, during and after the show to drive traffic to the face-to-face event?"

In one example, Freeman worked with the Professional Convention Management Association (PCMA) to produce webcasts that featured collaboration between the virtual attendees watching the presentations and live interaction with the presenters who would be speaking at the face-to-face event. The three webcasts aired over a thee-month period leading up to the 2011 event held last month in Las Vegas. "These webcasts, as part of the broader PCMA365 virtual environment, provided a more robust taste of what the physical event had to offer than just stand-alone webcasts," said Grosshandler.

For the upcoming *National Association of Broadcasters NAB Show*, Freeman will create a virtual extension after the April show. "In keeping with NAB's focus, Freeman will dramatically increase the use of video within the virtual environment, including content from individual exhibitors, which will lead to a more engaging attendee experience," said Grosshandler.
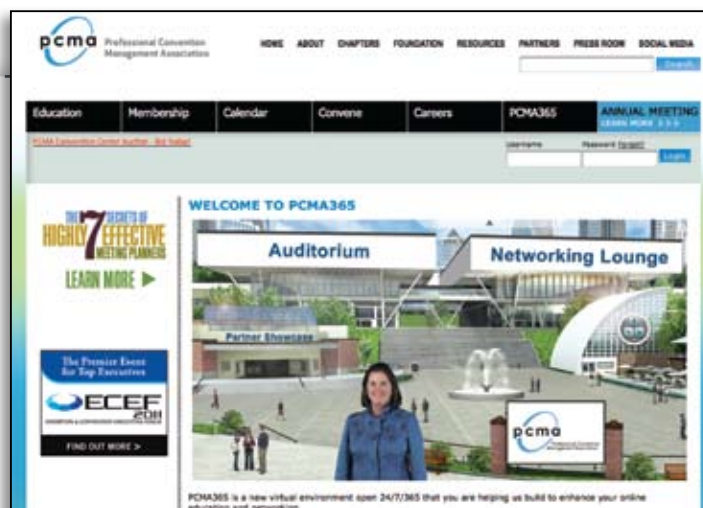
Complimentary Events. Pre-show webcasts and other special online events are increasingly being used to drum up interest among potential attendees.

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7. More Convention Centers Will Offer Free Wi-Fi

While many convention centers offer free Wi-Fi in certain areas of their facility, most still charge show organizers and exhibitors for Wi-Fi access in meeting rooms and exhibit halls. But that appears to be changing. In a move that's sure to please show organizers, exhibitors and attendees, some convention centers are moving toward offering free Wi-Fi throughout their facilities.

Last October, McCormick Place became one of the first major convention centers in the U.S. to provide free Wi-Fi available throughout the facility, including all common hallways, exhibit halls and meeting rooms. Implemented as part of a package of reforms, the facility took a bold step to cut costs and increase flexibility for conventions and trade shows in Chicago.

McCormick Place

"We will be rolling out free Wi-Fi throughout the facility within the next couple of months," said Shura Lindgren-Garnett, general manager of the St. Charles (MO) Convention Center and regional vice president for Global Spectrum. "It's no longer seen as a luxury. Our customers – show organizers, exhibitors and attendees – expect and depend on this technology."

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St. Charles Convention Center

8. Use of RFID will Continue to Rise as the Price Goes Down

As a technology, radio frequency identification (RFID) is nothing new. RFID uses radio-frequency waves to transfer data between a reader and an RFID tag, which can be embedded in badges. It's been used by a number of major shows over the last several years, but RFID has yet to penetrate deeply into the exhibition market in part, because of its increased cost over other badges.

"Prices have come down dramatically," said Arnie Roberts, president & CEO, SMART-reg International Inc. In addition, reliability has increased.

In 2011, shows of all sizes will be using RFID for attendee and exhibitor registration badging. RFID tags can hold much more data than traditional barcode badges – from enhanced buyer data and authentication for security purposes to attendee tickets for banquets and event traffic information.

Reach Arnie Roberts at (888) 999-9169 or arnie@smart-reg.com
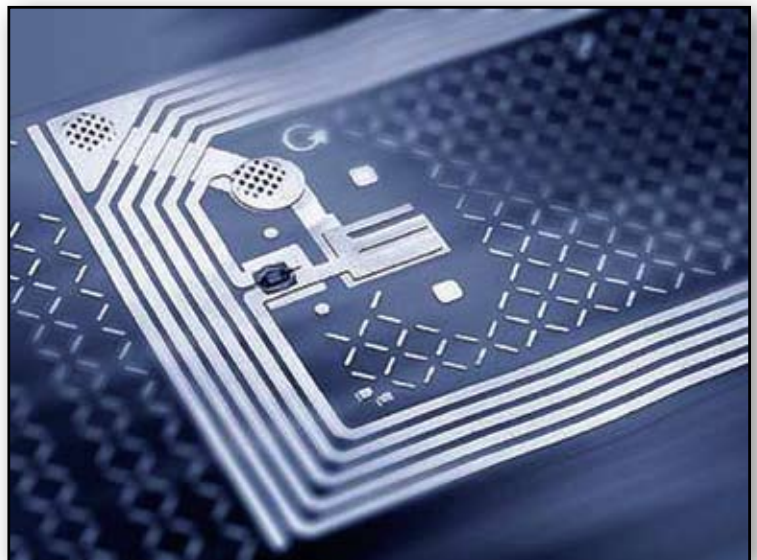
You've Been Tagged. RFID chips have greater range and lower price tags. They hold plenty of attendee data for lead-capture and many other purposes.

What's Next?

Guest Text Messaging at Convention Centers. "At most stadiums and arenas, guests use a text messaging service to report issues and concerns, as well as call for assistance in a fast, easy and convenient way," said Shura Lindgren-Garnett, general manager of the St. Charles (MO) Convention Center and vice president, convention center sales and marketing for Global Spectrum. "We're looking at how we can adapt this technology for conventions and trade shows," she told *Trade Show Executive*. For example, attendees and exhibitors could be offered the option to text the venue management about a spill on the floor, security issues, or simply the need for more toilet paper in the women's room."

Every Show Will Have a Virtual Component. "We believe that within three years, every major event will have a virtual component to drive physical attendance, increase global reach and help build year-round programming, revenue and community," said Michael Westcott, vice president, marketing, INXPO.

Many Trade Shows Will Operate in the Cloud. In 2010, there was much talk in the IT press about cloud computing as the next big trend. "Instead of purchasing hardware and servers, show organizers can rent capacity and infrastructure online," said Krister Ungerboeck, president, Ungerboeck Systems International. "The economics are pretty simple, especially for trade shows that really only ramp up for a few days each year. It reduces the upfront costs and should reduce the total cost because companies won't need as many tech people on staff."

Mobile Apps Will wEventually Replace Lead-Retrieval Equipment. "We're estimating that within two to three years, exhibitor lead-retrieval apps will replace the current equipment," said Pat Fallon, vice president

of business development for CompuSystems. A number of lead-retrieval companies are already offering mobile apps for a variety of platforms, from iPhone and iPad to Android and BlackBerry. "Exhibitors will gravitate to those apps because they're more comfortable using their Smartphone devices or tablets that are part of their everyday business life. Having the leads delivered from the lead-retrieval app on the trade show floor to the lead follow-up application in real-time will play a key roll in helping exhibitors achieve a better buyer/seller relationship and greater ROI."

Tablets Will Become a Staple at Trade Shows. "It's great to see the application and value that tablets can have in the meetings and event space," said Jim Kelley, director, global accounts, PRG. "They are very mobile, easy to use, lightweight and interactive. There are already events using tablets to hold all of their meeting specifications, effectively replacing the infamous binders carried around the event."

Trade Show Applications Using 3D Capabilities and Augmented Reality. "In the future, we will be able to present dynamic 3D information directly to attendees with 3D-enabled mobile devices," said Jim Russell, senior vice president of event technology for Freeman. "For example, diagrams of exhibit halls, meeting rooms and entire facilities will be accessible in rich, interactive 3D formats." Augmented reality uses camera-equipped mobile devices or computers to enhance a real-world environment to be interactive for attendees. "One application for trade shows may be attendees using their smart phones to look down the

Keep Handhelds Handy. The future promises more applications for smart phones and tablet computers in the trade show space. Cloud computing will help offset costs of the IT boom.

aisle of the trade show. They would be able to access layers of information about exhibitors and their products."

Apps Will Communicate with Members and Attendees Year-Round. "I think we're going to see one association or event app, and the trade show will be a component of that app," said Jay Tokosch, CEO of Core-Apps. "We're trying to build those pieces together right now. For example, users would be able to access member information, CEU credits, all association meetings and events, industry news and research, and more."

Contributing editor Danica Tormohlen, who served as editor-in-chief and publisher of EXPO magazine, has covered the trade show industry for 16 years. She has won numerous awards for outstanding editorial and design, including the Folio: Award for Editorial Excellence and Best Web Site Redesign Award from min's b2b. Tormohlen is active in the trade show and publishing industries, serving on various committees for the International Association of Exhibitions and Events (IAEE) and on the board of the American Society of Business Press Editors. She can be reached at (816) 803-8103 or danicat@tradeshowexecutive.com

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