

ATLANTA BUSINESS CHRONICLE

Planners get more connected with events

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Casey Cote remembers the days when organizing a meeting meant putting out an announcement, registering participants, and then sitting back and waiting for the meeting day to arrive.

"There used to be a long, dead period post-registration," said Cote, CEO of **Omnience**, an event marketing services firm. "But now, that period before the event offers a lot of opportunities to connect."

Connectivity has become the buzzword of many meetings that are now driven by a plethora of social platforms. It's not enough to spread the word and sign up attendees, or to just swap business cards over the coffee service. The best events often hinge on a focused social media campaign that Cote categorizes into three phases.

"Before an event, if you leverage a company's current site, you can connect to those followers and get information about the event out to them, too," Cote said. "We can build buzz about it that way first. Once they have registered, the second phase is to get the experts and speakers to engage with the audience. It might be an invitation to come to a session on a certain topic. We can also leverage those fol-

lowers, and in fact, it sometimes helps the speaker to get ideas about what people want to hear and tailor the message."

The third phase is connecting during the actual event. "We see people tweeting, 'This was a great session; make sure to go when it's offered again' or they ask follow-up questions," Cote said. "We've even seen people in the audience tweeting questions directly to the speaker."

With more people employing social media outlets to create interest before and during events, it's almost impossible to have a meeting without a mobile device, Cote added.

"Mobile is the key component to social media," he said. "We even use it to connect to the people who can't get to the event. We can extend content to them outside the physical conference."



Tracy
Stuckrath

Meetings and Events, attests to the reliance on social media during events.

"I was just in Minneapolis for a conference, and **Twitter** was the outlet most people used to see

what was going on," she said. "It's the main way to stay in touch. People were tweeting, 'Hey, this speaker's fabulous' or even 'It's too cold in here.' And people used it to send questions to the speaker, Deepak Chopra, who answered one of my questions on stage."

In her own business, Stuckrath relies on social media platforms such as **Facebook**, **Google Plus**, **Instagram**, **Pinterest** and **Twitter** to schedule events. "I also use **Hootsuite**, a platform that uploads all social media platforms – my customer accounts, personal pages and **LinkedIn** groups. I can write a blurb and schedule it to go on any platform at a certain day and time. It saves a lot of time and money. I haven't paid for any kind of advertising; social media is my means of advertising my company."

Meredith Martini, owner of **PlayWorks Group** in Roswell, contends social media has transformed not just individual businesses, but the entire planning industry.

"We're all about those face-to-face interactions, and that's what we plan," she said. "But the way we source vendors, communicate with participants, research, find the jobs as contractors – that has all been impacted by social media. I have gotten clients from Facebook and Twitter; I've researched

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through social media platforms to find ideas; I've sent out calls to find a new venue in a certain area; I've reached out to my social media contacts to find staff. It's so helpful."

During an event, Martini uses social media to give real-time updates for schedule and location changes. "It keeps things interactive and interesting," she said. "But it has to be a conversation; if all you're doing is sending messages, then you're wasting your time."

Because participants are plugged into social platforms, Martini has made it a point to have clients' brands in prominent locations.

"You have to know that whatever you put out there is going to end up on social media, so creating vignettes and branded backdrops are very important," she said. "That way, when people do post photos and videos – which they will do – your program is well-positioned."

Along with social platforms, there's one specific app that can help planners make last-minute adjustments, change schedules and get the word out. The mobile app ExpoRep, a product of Athens, Ga.-based software developer **Map Dynamics**, was created by CEO Jeremy Minnick, who got the inspiration from building interactive city maps.

"With this app, the map is the event," he said. "We can convert all the booths and spaces to an online map that gives planners the tools to



SARA SPEERT PHOTOGRAPHY

Casey Cote of Omnience said social media is playing a bigger role in events.

manage it. They can add or remove booths, sell registrations and add links to wherever they're promoting their shows."

It's the real-time aspect of the app that makes it a valuable tool, Minnick said. "Once you have the software, you can move things, change a layout and get the changes into the hands of the consumers in real time. That's what people really like. Before, they had to change a drawing on a PDF, export and upload the file and notify people it changed, but this idea of real-time updating has been really beneficial."

That sort of immediate con-

TOP SOCIAL MEDIA SITES FOR PLANNERS

- ▶ Facebook
- ▶ Twitter
- ▶ Instagram
- ▶ Pinterest
- ▶ Google Plus
- ▶ Hootsuite

nectivity is social media's strong point, Martini said. "As planners, the goal is connection, and social media has impacted that at every level."