Event Technology Trends: The Significant Seven

Here are the areas where meetings, conventions and trade shows will see real technological progress over the next one to three years
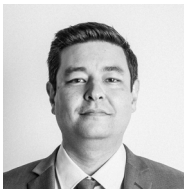
Introduction

In an industry designed to bring people together in person to interact, learn and make lasting connections with each other, it's rather ironic that technology has become perhaps the most critical element for making all of that happen. During the months and weeks leading up to an event, the days of the event itself, and the weeks and months after an event, planners and marketers have at their disposal a variety of technology tools to help them make the attendee experience not just impactful but also seamless and easy. Almost as important is the fact that many of these tools also make event coordination, execution and data-gathering tasks easier and more effective for planners and marketers.

There is, however, a flip side to all this event technology: Keeping abreast of the latest advances is a seriously time-consuming aspect of planners' and marketers' jobs. Almost as soon as these folks become proficient with the various features of their event app, or logistics software, or content-presentation tools, along comes new functionality—or a new product altogether—to change the game yet again.

To help event professionals manage this constant change, etouches—a leading event technology firm with more than 1,400 clients worldwide, which has provided comprehensive solutions for more than 200,000 events since 2008—asked its two most innovation-focused executives to explain the progress presently being made in the industry across seven critical areas of event technology. What follows is analysis from Chief Technology Officer Shane Edmonds and Vice President of Digital Innovation Brian Friedman about emerging developments the events industry will see between now and 2020, and how those advancements will make events better for attendees, exhibitors and host organizations alike.

Our experts

Shane Edmonds
Chief Technology Officer

Brian Friedman
Vice President of Digital Innovation

Self-Service Event Check-In

Of course, online registration for events is nearly universal now, with event apps maintaining a personalized agenda right on an attendee's smartphone. However, attendees still must check in once they physically arrive at the venue to obtain an identification badge and related materials and items. And this is where the event experience can go awry, souring attendee perceptions just moments after walking in the door.

"If people's first impression of your event is waiting in line, you've made a mistake," says Shane Edmonds. "In some industries, it's been said that self service is the new full service, but it's most true in the events business. If you do self service well, it brings not just lower costs, but also a much better attendee experience."

Self-service check-in has been part of etouches' offerings for some time now, and "it has to be a simple, visually appealing and informative experience," adds Brian Friedman. Attendees approach a kiosk, laptop or iPad and type their name; the badge prints out along with a personalized agenda on the back. What's more, the experience is enhanced by recommending to attendees relevant sessions or exhibitors they can visit that day, based on their registration data.

The next iteration of check-in that etouches will soon offer is facial recognition based on a photo provided during online registration. "The check-in unit will recognize you, say hello and state your name; then your badge and agenda print out," Friedman notes. And while etouches will make it optional to post a photo during online registration, "we'll emphasize that a photo will make check-in smoother and quicker on site. Based on their experiences using Facebook, Google and Amazon, most people now understand they get a better user experience if they provide some information, so we think this new event-related functionality will be popular."

Interestingly, etouches uses its own product offering—the LOOPD Smart Badge—to seamlessly recreate a check-in experience for attendees each day they attend the event. "When an attendee returns, the passive Bluetooth system on site reads the badge and alerts them to certain events and booths they might be interested in that day," Edmonds says. "The host organization also gets to see how many times each attendee came back, which is a huge metric that groups want to measure."

Brian Friedman

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etouches
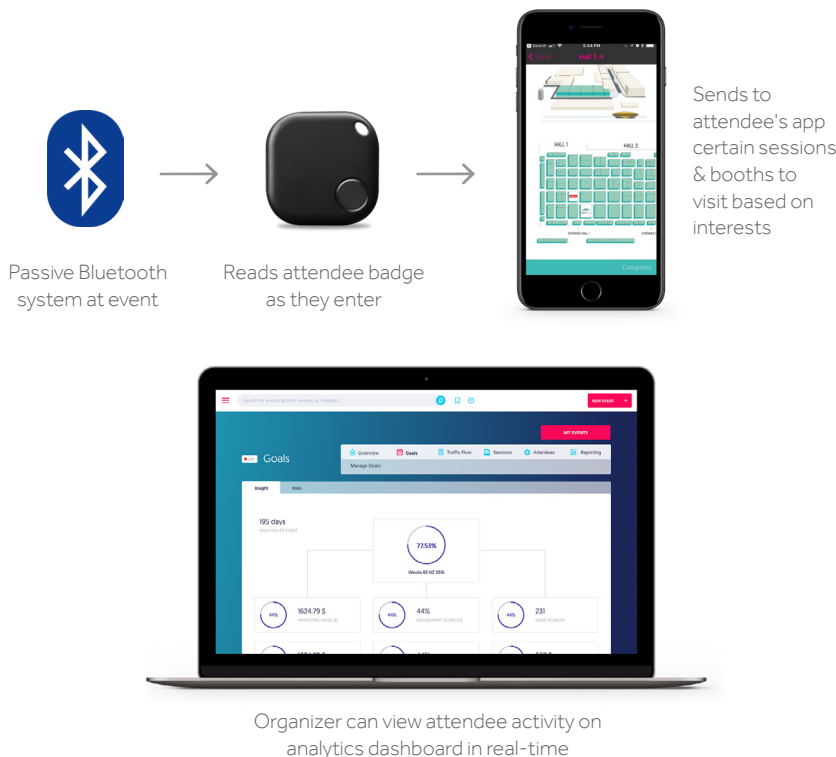
Self-Service Event Check-In (cont.)

Another development in the works is the use of mobile robots to conduct check-in, even away from the event site. "Attendees download our event app ahead of the show so they can message us at the right moment: 'I'd like to check in now.' Then a self-assisting robot with facial recognition capabilities can travel to where you are in the meeting venue, a hotel or even in the airport, to provide your badge and other materials."

One other possibility that's close to fruition in some places is the "smart city" concept, which enables event check-in through public kiosks at transportation hubs. Attendees can obtain their event badge, which can also act as a public-transportation card and as a food and beverage card accepted by certain shops and vendors. "Las Vegas does this now—attendees can check in right after getting off the plane, and use their badge to board mass transit and get to their hotel," Edmonds says. "As other cities connect their various information and communication systems and allow event planners to tap in as well, this option will become more widespread."

Check-in Experience

Passive Bluetooth system at event

Reads attendee badge as they enter

Sends to attendee's app certain sessions & booths to visit based on interests

Organizer can view attendee activity on analytics dashboard in real-time

Shane Edmonds

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On-Site Attendee Surveying

The combination of robust event apps plus smart badges which can track attendee movement throughout an event gives planners the ability to gather more useful feedback from attendees. "Survey questions can be extremely timely and contextual, which makes for more accurate attendee insight," says Shane Edmonds. For instance, attendees can receive a survey with session-specific questions in the final minutes of the session so that the presenter can prod attendees to give feedback before they even get up from their seats.

What's more, smart badges provide another compelling possibility. Edmonds notes: "If an attendee leaves a session early, their badge can relay that information so that the event app sends a survey just a minute or two later asking, 'Did the session deliver what you wanted, or did you not get what you expected?' So you still get feedback from that attendee—and perhaps you find out they left the session to pop into another one, not because they didn't get the content they sought." This will eliminate guessing and jumping to conclusions.

In the near future, groups using smart badges will be able to not only identify attendee-behavior patterns but also send daily surveys tailored to the sum of each attendee's demonstrated interests. "Because of the badge, you'll know that an attendee went to certain sessions and also went to certain exhibitor booths that day," Brian Friedman notes. "So planners will be able to template surveys for that specific interest profile and ask attendees more focused questions as they are leaving the event each day." This type of real-time segmenting will generate the most granular data for the host organization.

Another emerging development in gathering attendee feedback is, for the moment, taking place beyond the realm of event apps: Social-media listening and sentiment analysis. "The event-tech companies don't really have the ability to build out this functionality right now," Edmonds says. "But event organizers can use tools such as Google Analytics or IBM Watson Analytics for this task."

In fact, IBM Watson Analytics has a free edition where organizations can upload 50 columns and 100,000 rows of data for analysis. As a result, "planners can feed it captured data such as survey feedback and social-media content and, based on its built-in library of language processing, it can show you through word clouds and other ways which aspects of your event got positive feedback and which got negative feedback," Edmonds adds. "As etouches looks at which tools we should build for our clients, social-media analysis is one area we also want to move into."

Audiovisual Possibilities: Holograms and Augmented Reality

The entertainment industry has advanced the development of hologram technology such that it is nearing practical use in the realm of business events. Within the past year, Brian Friedman has attended two live concerts where the musicians were presented via this three-dimensional seamless-motion projection. Actually, "the performers walked onto the stage in person halfway through the show yet did not look much different than they did as holograms," he notes.

While the cost is currently prohibitive for the majority of business events, "we see hologram technology advancing to where you won't need the really expensive mirrors that right now must be installed around the edges of the stage," Friedman adds. In the next couple of years, many more companies and associations will be able to use hologram technology to present otherwise unattainable speakers or entertainers to their audiences in a way that delivers maximum impact.

Another technology that is gaining traction at business events is augmented reality (AR). Requiring only a smartphone, "AR gives an event host the ability to demonstrate a product that is not physically there, and in three dimensions," Edmonds says. In the retail world, companies like Disney and Ikea use AR to have products appear through the screen of a smartphone when it's held over a QR code or other sensor.

Similarly, "if an event speaker is describing a product, each attendee can hold their phone over a brochure in their hand and the product will appear in three dimensions above the brochure," Edmonds says. In fact, etouches is presently experimenting with AR in its own marketing presentations for the LOOPD Smart Badge, so that planners can see through their phone cameras its exact size and shape via a rotating 360-degree rendering. Friedman offers up another possible use of AR: If a presenter is on stage alongside a physical product, attendees can look at the stage through their phone camera and see an overlay of facts and statistics related to the product.

Interestingly, AR also has a useful application outside the meeting room: wayfinding. "Rather than looking at a top-down map while you are making your way through an event venue, you simply look through your phone camera at the show floor and the AR app will know where you are and guide you to where you want to go," Edmonds says. "It also shows you where relevant exhibitors or other points of interest are located as you move through the venue." While this feature is available only through dedicated AR apps now, etouches is actively working to create this functionality within its event app.

Exhibitor Presentation Possibilities: Smart Displays and Virtual Reality

At many events, the quality of the attendee experience hinges on the activity on the exhibit floor as much as from what takes place in formal educational sessions. As a result, new technologies are coming into the marketplace that will enhance the presentation of exhibitor-derived content.

One recent development has been the smart display, an LCD panel connected to a sensor that reads smart badges within a short radius of the panel. "The display becomes smart by understanding who is looking at it at that moment," Shane Edmonds says. "It then provides content based on the visitor's interests." So, a display panel can present a product-demo loop to passing attendees until someone stops for a closer look; the sensor then changes the content to focus on product uses and features relevant to the attendee, per their registration data and event activity up to that point.

Another technology moving along in sophistication is virtual reality (VR). One example of this innovation at work comes from Food Processing Suppliers Association. At its September 2017 Food Process Expo of more than 14,000 people, the association created a virtual-reality showroom so exhibitors could collectively leverage VR technology for product presentations using three-dimensional simulated environments.

In the travel and lodging industry, convention bureaus such as the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority (LVCVA) and hotel companies such as Two Roads Hospitality are using VR headsets at trade shows to give attendees true-to-life 360-degree views of different areas across the city or across a property, thus simulating an actual site inspection.

Specifically, "we can present different scenes involving the same space, so that planners can see the ballroom set in theater style, in banquet style, or other ways. The planner can turn in any direction to see what the entire room looks like," notes Andre Fournier, executive VP of sales, marketing and revenue for Two Roads Hospitality. The company also does this for outdoor terrace spaces at various properties to give planners a panoramic view of the natural surroundings. LVCVA allows planners to don a VR headset and take in street-level views from various points around town and 360-degree perspectives of different attractions and spaces that meeting groups could use for social activities.

VR hasn't advanced enough to take a major role in formal meeting sessions…yet. "VR does not have traction just yet because the technology needs to become more robust to account for multiple people moving around within the space that's being projected," Edmonds notes. But Brian Friedman adds that "VR headsets are being found in more and more households for use with video-gaming consoles. So, at some point, meetings will be able to leverage VR to remotely bring people into selected event sessions through their own Playstation, Nintendo or Xbox."

Artificial Intelligence in Hotels and Meeting Spaces

As more hotels provide in-room electronic concierge systems such as Alexa—which not only answers spoken questions but also fulfills requests such as restaurant and spa reservations—attendees will soom come to expect that event hosts provide on-demand artificial-intelligence (AI) solutions for meeting-related inquiries and needs.

Brian Friedman points out that the website module featured within etouches' event-management platform uses AI to make relevant recommendations to attendees as they fill out an event registration form online. "The system leverages its ability to sift through all of our data captured from attendees and exhibitors to say, 'Here are sessions you'd likely be interested in; here are exhibitors you'd likely be interested in; here are other attendees you'd likely want to meet up with.'" A real-time version, where the event app determines an attendee's location while on site so that its AI capability can make recommendations that are most relevant to that attendee and convenient at that moment, is in the works.

A variation of this functionality is the chatbot, which etouches presently has in working trials among several event clients. "We're starting with a focus on the registration process," Shane Edmonds says. "As people have questions about the agenda and other logistics, they can type those directly into the form and get answers that you'd otherwise have to email the event team or comb through the event website to obtain. Anything from 'Will Company X be exhibiting at the show' to 'What are the nearest Italian restaurants to the venue' can be answered right away."

Friedman points out that AI will even assist planners as they do their jobs within the etouches platform. "It can act as a 'coachbot,'" he says. "We use AI to see how planners are using our product, and then we will advise them how they can use it in the best way for their specific needs. Then planners can put many of their event systems on autopilot, so it handles all the manual processes that are tedious and time-consuming. This is something we are actively working on now, and we'll deliver more concrete information about this functionality later this year."

Brian Friedman

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Post-Event Surveying

The questionnaires that host organizations send to attendees in the days after an event are undergoing significant change for two reasons. First, advancing technology allows much more on-site surveying about each event aspect an attendee participates in. And second, ever-growing data collection and analysis capabilities are enabling event hosts to segment attendees based on their show activities and behavior, and then push out customized post-event surveys to gain more focused insight.

"Right after a show ends, the host can analyze the data they gathered on site through the smart badges to create different surveys that match up to each attendee type, so that every attendee receives a survey with no questions that are irrelevant to them," says Shane Edmonds. "Not only do you get better information, but the response rate goes up when attendees see how relevant the survey is to their experience."

In addition, other features within comprehensive event-management platforms such as etouches let attendees continue to give feedback about an event's value for many months. Specifically, "a show organizer can create different attendee chat rooms and let the conversation and feedback come to them in an organic way," Brian Friedman notes. "The most important thing is to identify the influencers at the event—the people who engaged the most—so that you develop a thought-leadership community that's very willing to give feedback. They will have forum conversations you can analyze through word clouds and other ways to learn not only the sentiments about the previous event, but also what topics are trending as you plan your next event." In short, post-event feedback evolves to become year-round feedback.

Shane Edmonds

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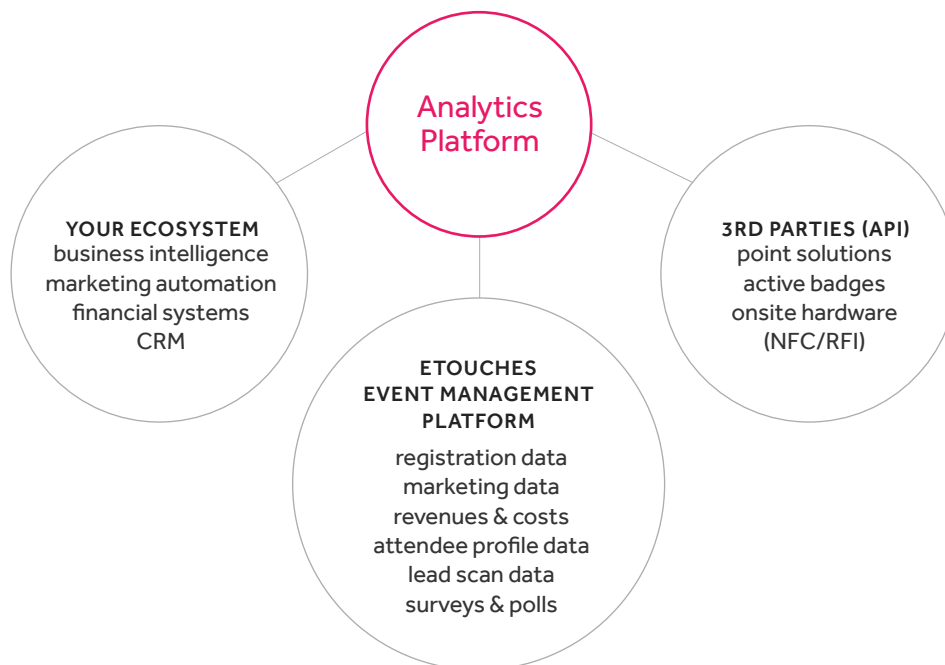
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Data Integration across Event-Tech Products

Even with the rapid pace of progress in event-data collection and analysis over the past few years, there's one aspect of the discipline that has yet to be resolved: Easily integrating event data from every source into one system which can provide robust query functionality across all the data and then shows the results via simple-to-understand dashboards. "This is an area of the event-tech niche where a lot of work still needs to be done," says Shane Edmonds.

From etouches' perspective, "our focus is on having as much of the event process in one platform, which is easiest for data analysis," adds Brian Friedman. "However, many events use different platforms for registration and check in, speaker management, mobile event app and other elements." To make data workable for such clients, the etouches platform has an extract, transform and load (ETL) functionality which lets clients pull etouches data into other systems they use. On the flip side, etouches also

has a strong application processing interface (API) which can draw data from other event-tech products and repopulate it across its own platform. As a result, "clients can tie in data from registration, surveys, sponsorship revenue and other event elements. Through a dashboard, they get a unified view of how the event performed," Friedman says.

The ultimate objective is to make data integration easy enough so that event planners and marketers can find trends and insights that make their events better and make their year-round marketing efforts better. "We can seamlessly integrate data in etouches with marketing automation platforms such as Marketo and Salesforce," Friedan notes. "The evolution of data capture and analysis has reached a point where we can affect every aspect of face-to-face events—using the data to better inform the entire host organization and boost the potential for financial benefit from hosting events."

Analytics Platform

YOUR ECOSYSTEM
business intelligence
marketing automation
financial systems
CRM

3RD PARTIES (API)
point solutions
active badges
onsite hardware
(NFC/RFI)

**ETOUCHES
EVENT MANAGEMENT
PLATFORM**

registration data
marketing data
revenues & costs
attendee profile data
lead scan data
surveys & polls

Conclusion

Are you ready now for what's to come in 2018 and beyond? While some of these ideas and initiatives may be new, others are things that have been building in our industry for a while. You need to keep a keen eye on what is changing in each area to make sure that you are not falling behind.

While you may want to adopt many of these technology tools and tactics right away, it's important to see which ones are actually best for your organization and overall goals. Before bringing on anything new, make sure that this new initiative will positively impact the success of your events.

Today's event tech leaders are paving the way for this new technology, whether it's updating their current products to meet client demand or developing brand new technology to help event planners create a stand out attendee experience. It's important to talk to your event tech provider about what they're working on today, as well as their plans for the future. If you're excited about what you hear, it's a good sign you'll have an innovative technology partner for years to come.

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About etouches

etouches is a global end-to-end event management software solution. The success oriented and cloud-based platform delivers innovative technology solutions to streamline the event process and increase ROI. Founded in 2008, etouches has assisted over 20,000 event professionals in planning, executing and measuring their events. With a focus on event sourcing, registration, marketing, logistics, engagement, mobile and data, the software solution has been able to serve more than 1,200 customers in corporations, associations, agencies and educational institutions. Headquartered in the United States in Norwalk, CT, the company has a second office in Orlando, Florida and five global offices in the United Kingdom, Belgium, Australia, UAE, and Singapore. Learn more at etouches.com.

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