



IACC's Third Annual Thought Leaders Summit

“Creating Compelling Meeting Experiences”

March 23, 2011



**Kellogg
Conference
Hotel**

At Gallaudet University

**Kellogg Conference Hotel at Gallaudet University
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Washington, D.C. 20002-3695**

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View the IACC Thought Leader Executive Summary:

<http://iacc.cardinalware.com/assets/ftp/IACCTLS2011ExecSummary.pdf>

Panel of Experts:



Left to right:

M. Theresa (Terri) Breining, Principal, The Breining Group LLC, Encinitas, CA;
Former Chairwoman of the Board, Meeting Professionals International

Bob Dean, CPA, Director of the Americas, Profiling Online, Chicago, IL;
Certified Professional in *The Experience Economy*

Richard Flanagan, Psychologist, Consultant, Co-Author of *The Six Disciplines of Breakthrough Learning: How to Turn Training and Development Into Business Results*; Hockessin, DE

Andrea Sullivan, President, BrainStrength Systems, King of Prussia, PA

Jeff Vredevoogd, Director of Education Solutions, Herman Miller Inc., Zeeland, MI

Amy Wickenheisser, Hotel Manager, Hamilton Park Hotel & Conference Center, Florham Park, NJ

Facilitator: John Potterton, VP Education, Professional Convention Management Association, Chicago, IL

Objective of the 2011 Thought Leaders Summit

Facilitator John Potterton first pointed out that “IACC has members from conference centers, management companies, and service providers from 13 countries around the world. IACC is about fostering a culture that began in the early 1980s by people who saw the need for creating meeting experiences in ways that had not been done before that time. In that same vein, the people IACC has gathered around this table today were thoughtfully chosen to contribute to this important discussion. They come from a variety of backgrounds: we have a meetings architect, an accountant and conference-center user, a psychologist, a brain specialist, a space consultant, and a GM and ‘happiness provider.’”

“The intent is to help you—both the conference center professionals and the meeting professionals watching this event—to raise the bar within your own organizations by creating better meetings and events. Specifically, we want you to leave this session with new knowledge about how to create compelling meeting experiences that engage participants, transforming them in a way that drives business results.”

Topic 1: Examining Each Panelist's Area of Expertise

John Potterton first turned to **Terri Breining**: “You’ve been a meeting planner for more than 30 years, and now you are a teacher of meetings architecture and measuring return on investment. So what is the secret formula for building a meeting and then capturing its ROI?”

Breining responded that “the secret formula is simple: First, you identify objectives, which means figuring out what you want to accomplish in this meeting. But here’s the key: If you start by addressing the things you want to happen as a result of a meeting that will dictate the things you choose to do at the meeting. It sounds pretty simple, but it is often not simple in practice. And second, how are you going to measure so you know you accomplished what you wanted both during and after the meeting? That’s the basis for ROI calculations, and again, it’s not as easy as it might seem.”

Next was **Bob Dean**, a former chief learning officer for several large firms and a longtime user of conference centers. Potterton asked him to “paint a picture of what it looks like when meetings and learning work in harmony with one another.”

Dean drew upon one of his own recent experiences. “We were entrusted with creating a learning and development initiative that would drive results that truly impacted the business. So with my understanding of the tenets of *The Experience Economy*, we created a six-month-long experience that had a combination of in-person learning events; online events in between the in-person ones to keep the change process going forward; lots of informal communications between a few people at a time either in person or via technology; and even some community-building among all the people who were working towards that same goal.”

“This was actually a first for me: Half a year of meetings and other learning opportunities converging through the use of different media, all with one objective in mind,” Dean noted. “It ended up driving some of the best results I had ever seen. So there is progress happening both on the learning side and the meetings side of the equation. The more we can converge these two disciplines, the better it will be for making a measurable business impact.”

On the other side of this process are people such as **Amy Wickenheisser** of Hamilton Park Hotel and Conference Center. Potterton asked her to clarify what she means when she says that, as a supplier, her primary business role is to make people happy. “You have been at the property for 22 years, which clearly speaks to your success at what you do,” he said. “So give us a customer story that shows how you deliver happiness.”

“I feel that listening closely to the customer, but thinking outside the box while you do it, is the key to making happy customers,” she replied. “When they are telling us something, we might need to hear what they are really getting at, even if they don’t know it themselves at that moment. Here’s an example: A few years ago, a planner wanted to do something special during a meeting because it coincided with the birthday of her CEO, who was from Scotland. She didn’t know exactly what she wanted, except something that would bring his ethnic heritage into the event. So I hired a bagpiper and located some haggis, a very traditional Scottish meal. At the right time during the meeting, we had the piper come in through the back of the room playing, followed by a server holding the steaming haggis on a platter. My goal was to make the meeting planner the star of her group, and she was very happy with the result.”

Potterton then addressed **Richard Flanagan**. “You’re a psychologist who has spent most of his life helping organizations and individuals to deliver meetings and training that will drive behavioral change. But can you give us an example of a behavioral change that has come in your life because of a meeting that you attended?”

Flanagan found that as he thought about this question prior to the event, “I realized how few meetings have really brought about a significant change for me. But here’s one: I attended an event at the Center for Creative Leadership some years ago, with the goal of becoming a better leader, naturally. But the change that came from the event was that I became a better follower! They impressed upon us that leadership often involves following, and that is a skill that does not get taught to most people in charge.”

But what made that event’s message resonate with Flanagan was that “it did not rely primarily on the event to drive the message home. Instead, the meeting simply set the table for change. Change takes time—it happens later, it takes practice and follow-through, documentation and support. But it all started with the meeting, and if they didn’t plant that seed at the meeting, nothing would have grown. The survival of in-person events in the future rests on this ability to set in motion the process of demonstrable change in organizations.”

When Potterton came to **Andrea Sullivan**, he shifted gears a bit. “For us, your focus is on brain-compatible meeting design. And one thing that’s central to your message is that what people consume has an impact on the brain, and thus an impact on the ability for people to accomplish what is expected in the meeting. So what did you consume this morning to help you prepare for today’s discussion?”

Sullivan did not miss a beat. “I woke up at 5 a.m. and had an energy bar, and then one hour before we began, I had some yogurt with blueberries—all good for mental performance.” She added that, on a broader scale, both planners and service providers must understand how the brain absorbs information, processes and stores it, and how that information will be accessed and translated into action later on. “So we must remember that our biological state has a huge impact on everything that goes on around creating effective learning and compelling meetings.”

Lastly, Potterton addressed **Jeff Vredevoogd**, who helps universities to design their space, understanding that the impact of space on both teaching and learning effectiveness is critical. “I’ve heard you say that you can attend college to get a degree, or you can become fully engaged at college and get an education,” Potterton said. “So what does that engagement look like? How do we know when we’ve had an engaging experience?”

Vredevoogd responded that “If we all looked back on our college days, I’d bet we’d all say we got an education—but many times during college we probably just got through the class. And this was in large part due to the way we were taught, the way the room was set up, and the overall experience that was created. When we talk about creating a truly different experience, it has to encompass the facilitator, the technology, the furniture, the lighting, the food, and even the learner. So as you look at ROI and look at making the client happy with a great experience, there are many things to actively work on.”

Topic 2: Searching for the Proper Measurement of What Meetings Deliver for Organizations

John Potterton looked to Terri Breining, the ROI expert on the panel, to start this conversation. He asked, “What is it that planners and conference-services professionals should be doing to measure meeting results, and why is that important to us if we are in the business of trying to create compelling meeting experiences?”

“Historically, we have spoken about the success of meetings in anecdotal terms: the way people feel about the meeting they attended, if they had a good time,” Breining responded. “But as we look at the universe of meetings, the impact of most of them are not measured to any meaningful level. So organizations will spend hundreds of thousands of dollars or more on a single meeting but not know exactly what they accomplished that is of value. ROI measurements give us something concrete to associate with the value of meetings for executives and other stakeholders.

Potterton then asked if it is too difficult to do, or if we are simply focused on the wrong things. “There has not been a methodology until recently,” said Breining. “There is now a formal ROI Methodology that lets planners use the same process that is used for many other business investments. It is not a checklist of the type many planners are used to and comfortable with, and it is not easy. It is a different skill set that can be intimidating. But planners and service providers must be willing to invest time into education, because if meetings are going to remain important in the world of escalating technology, ROI needs to be calculated. An event like this one we’re having today is so critical and valuable and rich—but we have to be able to say exactly how much, and justify these face-to-face interactions so they are not seen as replaceable.”

Jeff Vredevoogd brought his university experience to this topic. “It’s a matter of taking the time to create and ask the right questions for that meeting. On campus, we spend a lot of time asking, ‘What are the specific learning outcomes we desire?’ The same goes for business meetings: ‘What does success and satisfaction look like after this event?’”

Potterton wondered if most meeting planners are focused on the proper outcomes: “If attendees respond on post-event questionnaires that they felt they learned a lot at the meeting, is that enough?” Breining said absolutely not. “The problem is that there’s been no definition of desired outcomes—organizations have a meeting because it’s time for it, like it always has been. But at a sales meeting, what exactly are you seeking to accomplish this year versus last year? It should be something different, because the business landscape this year is different. But it seems that the desired outcome is the same as it always has been—and many organizations can’t even specify what *that* is!”

Richard Flanagan acknowledged that the single hardest thing to wrestle with is to answer the question: Exactly why are we doing this event? “Many companies I work with have an event planned, but when we ask them for the specific business outcomes they’re looking to have afterwards, they can’t answer. If that foundation is not solid, the meeting you are building will not stand in attendees’ minds for long.”

Bob Dean relayed what he sees from within a customer’s home office. “I have lived in a slew of corporate cultures for decades. One of the reasons major meetings are not more impactful is because everyone’s expectations and accountability from meetings are pretty low. It is a

function of people equating an off-site meeting with the day-to-day ones in their appointment books. If attendees and other stakeholders aren't prepped by the organization to differentiate between those daily meetings and your meetings, there's little chance of having a good ROI."

Topic 3: Roles Conference Centers Play in Maximizing ROI for Customers

Amy Wickenheisser said that conference center personnel are actually as important to building the ROI foundation for a meeting as anyone else. “Rather than just taking notes based on what planners tell us on their own, we ask questions about their meetings. So on a site tour, the first thing we ask is, ‘Why are you doing this meeting—is it for training, for developing strategy, for motivation, or for another objective?’ We do this because it is our responsibility to train and coach the customer on doing this meeting in this facility as well as it can be done.” But even with such prodding, she finds that “a few months after a meeting is booked, many planners can’t give us more detail about the desired outcomes than that simple description we asked for—there’s no ‘why’ they can relay to us. So we stay proactive in our questions throughout the planning cycle in order to put that thought process back on them, and it helps them create a better meeting.”

Potterton asked Wickenheisser how the questions she asks of planners can translate into actions her team will take to maximize a meeting’s productivity. “Well, if it is going to be a very serious meeting, then we are not going to allow another group’s orientation or teambuilding or motivational session to take place anywhere near them, because that could be distracting,” she offered. “So when we know why everybody is on property, we can set the right tone for each group by using our space in the best ways for their objectives.”

Actually, failing to be this proactive in today’s business climate could be detrimental to the career prospects of the sales and service staff at a conference center. “Our owners are very involved in viewing our customer feedback to see if we exceeded the expectations of customers,” she noted. “They do this because they need to be successful in their own ROI calculations—a large part of which is earning more revenue.”

To exceed customer expectations, Wickenheisser not only uses the observations from groups’ post-con evaluations but also her staff’s own observations. This serves to maximize the impact of future meetings held at the property. To wit: “With customer feedback, it is so often about the food, and we adapted as we learn from each meeting that comes through. We make sure not to provide certain foods at breaks that would contribute to people losing their attention or even dozing off 60 to 90 minutes later. But it’s not enough to rely on customer feedback; we ourselves have to be observant and proactive too.”

Her best recent example of being proactive: In mid-March, the Northeastern U.S. saw a warm stretch, with temperatures near 70 degrees for about a week. “The result was that attendees had cabin fever and suddenly wanted to sit outside during breaks. Now, this was not part of the planner’s thought process, and it shouldn’t be—but it has to be part of ours. So we made sure that all our patio areas were clean and neat, because people would be unhappy to hear, ‘Sorry, I know that space is right there, but we haven’t got it ready yet.’”

Wickenheisser’s anecdote resonated strongly with brain specialist Andrea Sullivan. “The new framework for measuring meeting success must involve capturing parts of the meeting that are difficult to quantify in terms of pure business outcomes, but which will affect those outcomes nonetheless. So if conference centers are going to say, ‘We are flexible and can do whatever is best for the client,’ then that outdoor area has to be ready for attendees to use it on a moment’s notice. Here’s why: Such an experience gets all sorts of good chemicals flowing into the brain. Both the variety and the spontaneity of going outside during the meeting will actually allow people to learn better and to experience the event more deeply. But if the facility is not

prepared for that, you have not only lost an opportunity for mental stimulation through surprise and delight; now you have people sitting inside who are saying, 'I really wish we could be outside right now.' When that happens, it is not a neutral development—it becomes a negative development and actually detracts from the meeting's effectiveness, and from customer satisfaction scores."

Topic 4: The Effect of Physical Spaces on a Meeting's Effectiveness and ROI

John Potterton asked Jeff Vredevoogd, from business-furniture and -equipment maker Herman Miller, to “talk about space as an important factor in learning. You and your colleagues understand before an educational session takes place what the learners are looking for, and make adjustments to space accordingly. So how can your experiences help conference center operators to satisfy groups, persuading them to use the facility again in the future?”

“The people I work with spend a lot of time with me before their events on what they want to accomplish; we make sure to all the right players around the table and ask the right questions,” Vredevoogd said. “Now, they don’t always have the answers at that moment, but that’s okay because we will work through that. With the right people present, we then use a formula for each meeting: *People plus pedagogy [the art or science of teaching] plus place equals possibilities*. Each of those elements must be focused on in detail for a meeting to achieve its maximum potential. And when we say people, we keep in mind that every meeting has many stakeholders. So if IACC members look at that equation, part of what they must address is, ‘Who are all the players in this meeting, and what do they want from it?’ It’s the attendees, it’s the planner, it’s that organization’s leaders, and it’s also the conference center and its team.”

“With those people present, we emphasize the perspective that what is truly going on within a meeting is not just teaching and learning,” Vredevoogd added. Another huge element is collaboration—if there was not going to be lots of collaboration, then why even have an in-person event? So it’s not just what kind of technology is being used to match a session’s objectives, but also which space is being used for a session—and how is that space being configured to contribute to collaboration that will help reach the specific success you want from that session?”

Amy Wickenheisser recounted a discussion she had 15 years ago with her property’s owners about a renovation that, in hindsight, she is relieved did not happen. “We were one of the few properties in our area that did not have an amphitheater. We got very close to changing some of our space over to that, but we backed off. It turns out that over time, an amphitheater has become one of the least frequently booked rooms in a conference center, because the message such a room gives to attendees is, ‘This session is a lecture.’”

Today, Wickenheisser finds that the most popular setting is a pod, with groups of six or eight people at a table—even within a general session. “We’re seeing a speaker at the podium for 10 minutes, followed by 5 or 10 minutes of conversation at each pod. Next, the meeting leader returns to the podium to act as a facilitator, while someone from each pod shares the ideas their group came up with.”

Another development she sees more of lately is the use of the facility’s soft furniture among smaller groups. Now, “this can make things a bit tricky if you don’t have a lot of storage space, but we are being creative in using the existing soft furniture we have. For instance, we’ve learned that a potted tree makes a very good space filler for times when you have to move a couch to another part of the facility. And it seems that more planners are interested right now in a coffeehouse setting—it is more relaxing for attendees, and more stimulating too.”

Potterton noted that such adaptations might mean “a bit more cost in terms of furniture and in terms of labor for rearranging space. However, we need to find the way to do things for our clients that will make happy and satisfied.”

Vredevoogd liked Wickenheisser’s creative examples. “So many meetings are focused within rooms like this large board room we are using today. But as we walk through this property, we could look closely and think hard about all the common spaces and public spaces that could add more to the experience of the clients coming here. Now, I don’t believe it is a facility’s job to say, ‘You can have this layout, this one, or this one. And you can use this technology, this one, or this one.’ If that’s the case, then any facility can offer that. To be a true consultant, it is really about understanding that equation I used and asking, ‘How do you want your people to work, operate, and interact with each other, and from that we can figure out where in this facility they can best do that.’ I also loved to hear Amy’s story about the outdoor patio—once the temperature outside reaches a certain point, there’s a new possibility for a memorable experience. If the facility staff anticipates that, it makes an impression on the customer, even if they don’t use the space this time around.”

Potterton agreed that there is flexibility in the use of space within centers that many people have not yet considered. But he took this point a step further: “Being more flexible does not simply mean having movable walls or making use of unusual areas. Having a variety of furnishings not just within meeting rooms but throughout all the common spaces allows you to create a variety of moods and dynamics between people, depending on what a planners needs from a session.”

“When we talk of possibilities, we ask people to think about the physical space in six ways,” Vredevoogd said. “Anywhere in this facility is a potential learning space, so the first word is **adaptable**. In looking at IACC’s criteria, that term is in there, to make the space able to serve many purposes.”

“Next, the space has to be **social**. Learning is a social activity, especially face-to-face meetings; one of the biggest benefits of these meetings is building a network that shares information and experiences now and in the future. And there are so many social elements to meetings: Celebrating achievements, honoring individuals, etc. So how does your space support those?”

“The next term is **resourceful**. With the box itself, you have to constantly rethink the space: Must this room even have four walls at all times?”

“The next term is **healthful**. What is the lighting, what is the air temperature, what is the air quality? These things impact attendee focus, and their overall impression of the event.”

“The next term is **sustainable**. I’m sure most IACC properties are concerned about this one, and most meeting leaders are too. So what are you doing with making your client solutions sustainable and how are you getting the word out not just to planners but to attendees about what you do?”

“The last term is **stimulating**. Many students on campus say the biggest thing they are lacking in their facilities is stimulation. It’s color, it’s light, it’s art, it’s outdoor views, it’s even scent. These and other elements give people the variety they need in a learning situation.”

Andrea Sullivan brought a biological perspective to how variety raises attendee stimulation. “When we talk about boredom in attendees, it’s a serious consideration—boredom actually debilitates the brain. Our brain cells are not being used, and the number and quality of our

neural connections are based on ‘use them or lose them.’ So if your mind is not activated with all those different stimulations we mentioned, this is a negative development for the meeting. If there is ‘sensory poverty’ because the walls are one color or bare or there are no windows, or it’s too warm or the lighting is too harsh or too dim, there is simply not enough input going to our brains to get them firing so that we are thinking better and remembering the details of this experience.”

Topic 5: Introducing Different Elements into a Space to Improve Attendee Performance

On the contrary to “sensory poverty,” Andrea Sullivan cited recent research on “attention restoration therapy” that substantiates the benefits of outdoor elements in meetings. “The finding was that being outdoors for some time provides so much stimulation that it actually replenishes the prefrontal cortex, where executive functions take place. These functions are what participants use all throughout a meeting to concentrate on the speaker, to solve problems in mock situations, and more, using up blood glucose and firing out that area of the brain. But when we go outside, it relaxes us and it puts the focus of our sensory receptors onto other things, which then refreshes us.”

This information brought a slightly different perspective from Richard Flanagan. “I recall a time when schools and conference rooms alike were built with no windows so there would be no distractions. And while we all probably scoff at that now, it does speak to a legitimate consideration: For some people, trying to learn in an outdoor environment would be a complete nightmare—they would be so distracted that it would be useless to them. So again, it’s important to know the best uses of the spaces that are available to you, and to know your audience.”

Jeff Vredevoogd stressed that the right lessons must be taken from such research. “The most important thing is to look beyond the where, and focus on the why. Some people will say, ‘I like to learn outside,’ but we need to know exactly what about it is so appealing. Or they say, ‘I like to sit and read in that corner of the facility.’ Again, why? What is it that they like about these spaces—is it the light, or the view, or the surrounding greenery, or the fresh air? Then, from these answers, how do you create spaces that provide similar impact within the facility?”

Taking it a step farther, Terri Breining asked an insightful question of Sullivan: “If we cannot use the outdoors for a group, would it be beneficial to have large pictures of outdoor scenes within the rooms we use? Does a facsimile of a natural experience have a stimulative effect too?” Sullivan said yes. “You’re just looking to activate the senses through variety and get the good chemicals flowing. In that same vein, flowers are very effective as visual stimulation and for their scent; while music is wonderful too.” Vredevoogd added that “in essence, it’s about getting participants’ focus off the color of the walls in the room and onto something else. Or consider this: What if the colors of the walls themselves could be changed at will? You could have brighter colors during the learning part of the day, and as the day winds down the colors shift to a soft blue, to relax people and ease them into the more social portion of the meeting.”

Richard Flanagan said that this idea has merit with one of the brightest minds in America, to the point that it is central to that person’s day-to-day life: “In Bill Gates’ house, the pictures on the walls change as different people walk into the room, as does the music. It is all about customizing the environment so it is pleasing to the audience at that moment.”

Topic 6: The Role of Food and Beverage in Maximizing a Meeting's ROI

Referring back to Amy Wickenheisser's mention of serving food that does not slow down attendees' mental faculties, Andrea Sullivan expanded on how certain food and beverage can help create engaged attendees and effective meetings. "Meetings are geared towards promoting actions that take place in the future which lead to positive business outcomes. So in a meeting, we need people to be able to process information, and that is done best when certain neurotransmitters are released," Sullivan explained. For instance, "dopamine motivates us, while serotonin makes us feel good. The things we eat can produce these and other beneficial chemicals."

On the flip side, when attendees are fed empty calories that fail to release those chemicals, or they consume items that overload their systems—Sullivan gave the example that too much salt constricts the blood vessels, which slows oxygen flow to the brain and leads to drowsiness inside of 30 minutes—"the food is now a negative ingredient in the meeting. It is vital that the food supports physiological functioning of attendees at meetings."

John Potterton asked Sullivan which types of items should appear on a breakfast or lunch buffet that would be useful for attendee engagement. "On the whole, you want balance in your protein and carbohydrates, and that balance will bring about a good mental state," she said. "If you want to tweak your offerings to the type of session you are about to have, then here's an idea: More protein will stimulate the brain, which is good for strategic planning, information processing, and clarity. But if you are doing teambuilding or a more social and interactive type of session, then you could have more complex carbohydrates than proteins, as that produces serotonin and relaxes the brain."

As for caffeine from coffee—a mainstay of meetings—the latest scientific thought is that "it has a stimulative effect to a point, but consumption beyond that point will cause people to crash," Sullivan warned. "You must be careful with caffeine—perhaps you do not offer unlimited coffee for people to consume during meetings, or at least inform them of the amount of coffee that will pep them up but not set them back later in the session." Richard Flanagan added that "the combination of coffee with pastry is still too prevalent at the outset of most meetings. Some nutritionists say the only thing worse than a businessperson having no breakfast is having a breakfast consisting of those two things."

Interestingly, Sullivan herself has started drinking tea and eating dark chocolate at times when she needs to be focused, because the caffeine in those items is absorbed by the body at a slower, more sustained pace. Terri Breining said she likes the idea of adding dark chocolate to a breakfast buffet, to which Sullivan added this: "If you combine the dark chocolate with some protein, you get the best effect of caffeine but still keep blood-sugar levels steady, so people don't crash from a sugar swing." Such a swing also happens with items like pastries and traditional pancakes. "The white flours create a sugar rush followed by a crash not long thereafter, and that is when people get brain fog and feel sluggish—their cognitive abilities are compromised," said Sullivan. "Meeting planners have to keep people's brain chemistry in proper balance for as long as possible in the meeting."

Bob Dean ended this segment with a wise insight about the potential effect that would come from communicating to everyone why certain food and beverage items are chosen for particular meetings. "First, as a conference center customer, if I had someone from the facility advising me on food and beverage possibilities based on the purpose of my meeting, I would be

so grateful—you are helping me to customize and maximize my experience towards the meeting's purpose. Furthermore, as the planner, I'd say to attendees, 'There is a strategy in place that we'd like to share with you regarding our food choices for this meeting, to make you the best you can be during our time together.' I think the participants would feel respected by the planner and the property."

Topic 7: The Role of Conference Center Personnel as Consultants

As a customer, Bob Dean finds that conference centers could go so far as to take Jeff Vredevoogd's six elements of effective space—adaptable; social; resourceful; healthful; sustainable; stimulating—and apply them to one overarching purpose: “To customize the total space for my meeting so that I have full ownership of that space for the two or three days we are there, which would maximize the benefit to my people and my objectives.” Dean added that “until now, I have found this difficult to do in conference centers, so there is room for improvement in that respect.”

Furthermore, “if a facility is able to do all those things, then I want my contact there to be a consultant like Jeff described: Give me the best examples of other groups who have done flexible, social, resourceful, healthful, sustainable, stimulating things so I don't have to think of these things myself,” Dean said. “And if you have photographs of some of the sessions where interesting things were done, all the better. I would see exactly what it looks like and how I can build my own experience from that. This way, my facility contacts have become experience architects who can be a true partner in my event.”

Vredevoogd suggests that conference centers encourage sales and service personnel to become “thought starters” for customers. “The reality is that a planner can create a wonderful experience, but if they have not designed for exactly what they wanted to accomplish within that physical space, it won't be the success they were looking for. Conference center staffers should remember that just because there is a piece of equipment on wheels, that does not mean the meeting planner is going to think to move it. Or just because you have a great piece of technology, that does not mean the planner will choose on her own to use it, or even know its potential uses. So a lot of it has to do with working with the client to provide a solution that hits right on what they are trying to accomplish—one which they might not have known about before you educated them.”

John Potterton asked Amy Wickenheisser, “When your staff gives site inspections, do they show the space but also give guidance such as, ‘Here is how customers with similar objectives as yours have used this space, in conjunction with this technology, and here are results they got from it.’ Such an approach allows you to turn a feature into a benefit,” which is the essence of sales.

“I preach to our planning department that you are not simply note-takers; you are planners, and you should be active in the creative process,” Wickenheisser responded. “And I think that approach is working for us, because sometimes I find my planners defending the client about something they want where we will have to bend over backwards to make it work. When that happens, I think, ‘Okay, my people are in the right frame of mind.’ They see themselves as advocates for the customer.”

Potterton then asked veteran planner Terri Breining, “Is it refreshing to know that there are conference centers asking such questions and offering up such information, all to help planners as much as possible based on their knowledge of how best to use their own space for different objectives?”

“I don't find that to be the norm throughout the hospitality industry, so I think there is great opportunity for IACC members to be stronger partners by asking the ‘why’ questions and then acting on those answers,” Breining responded. “With the concept of meetings architecture,

which incorporates the sciences as we design an experience, the three basic objectives are learning, networking, and motivating people to act after the meeting. These are what should drive every single decision a meeting planner will make.”

But Breining added that in order to be as effective as possible, “we also have to know exactly who is participating in the meeting, because that impacts everything: How to communicate with participants before and after the event; what kind the food to serve; what kind of music to use; whether to make use of the soft furniture; and more. When conference center staff speak to customers about these types of things, they are speaking quite differently about the product they offer, and proving that they are deeply involved in the process. This will resonate with customers.”

Richard Flanagan added that “a conference center can play a huge role in helping planners understand what success will look like for all stakeholders, and doing that would be a huge added-value item. The mantra is, ‘What will people be doing differently as a result of the meeting that can be called a success for the organization?’ To this end, what can be the conference center’s role in this so that the center gets repeat business plus word-of-mouth referrals, and thus achieves its own revenue objectives?”

Topic 8: The Need for Variety Among Repeat Customers to Maintain Their Satisfaction

Amy Wickenheisser acknowledged that “we do much better with our repeat customers in terms of digging deeply into their needs, because they know us well enough to speak more freely and trust us with more insight into their larger organizational issues.” But she added that “the challenge is to not get stagnant for these customers. The first few times they are on property, they say it was an excellent experience and the satisfaction scores are high. But then they come to have a higher expectation of us, so if we produce the exact same experience for them next time, there is no wow factor and the satisfaction scores will reflect that. So thinking outside the box and being a bit more over the top with them is something we look to do. The work that goes into the relationship cannot stop after the first successful meeting—it has to continue to grow, or they are going to find someplace else to go that will give them a new experience.”

To achieve this, Wickenheisser says that her planners “really pick the brains of their clients in the post-con and take detailed notes so that when the group comes back, we know specifically what the client liked and what they felt was lacking. So if a planner says, ‘We felt rushed at lunch’ or ‘The buffet lines were too long,’ we need to make sure they do not have that same experience.”

Jeff Vredevoogd suggested that “it is not about taking a customer from here to there—it is about taking from there to beyond. Yes, you can always improve on last year’s experience, and that is the ongoing goal, but a center will stand out if it can draw on its totality of customer experiences and say, ‘Here is what you might need two years down the road with this event, and let’s use this meeting as the starting point to get you there over time.’ Perhaps that is a place the client never even thought they could be in two or three years with their meeting.”

John Potterton asked customer Bob Dean if there was a situation where he leveraged the relationship with a conference center in a way that enhanced the experience and helped achieve the desired outcomes from the meeting. Dean provided a fine example: “When I was first certified in *The Experience Economy*, I wanted to get the word out in the Chicago area. So I chose to run an event that brought in one of the two authors to collaborate with me on an event that had an admission fee.”

Dean and author Joe Pine wanted to use a conference center in a way that would make its space as much an attraction for attendees as the author himself. In keeping with the theme of his book, Pine subscribes to the concept of a “learning excursion,” or as Dean describes it, “What can people learn from moving through a physical space and looking for or focusing on certain things along the way.” So Dean and Pine had participants walk through much of the conference center to look for certain things, and keep brief notes on a scorecard. Once participants made their way to the last stop—the ballroom—Pine’s presentation began, and incorporated all the elements they saw along their journey.

As participants left the ballroom that evening, their memento was a personalized, signed copy of *The Experience Economy*. “This makes the experience come back into their minds each time they refer back to the book,” Dean said. So overall, “we put on a high-impact event that would not have been that way if we did not have the assistance of the conference center.”

Regarding how to create a new, exciting experience for repeat customers, Andrea Sullivan made a key point: “Whatever you do does not have to be bigger and better than last year—the novelty itself is what creates an emotional state, the surprise, that helps people retain the experience. So it is about the customer and the conference-services staff being flexible, rather than thinking that they always have to do things bigger and better. In fact, often times less is more; strip down the elements in a room or in a session and that will create a novel experience, and people are more present and making deep connections with each other as a result. The novelty is what increases the flow of dopamine in people’s brains, which leads to the good results you’re looking for.”

Topic 9: Taking Lessons from How Universities Enhance Their Learning Environments

Bob Dean was struck by something Jeff Vredevoogd said even before the start of this Thought Leaders Summit. “Not only because of my learning role in organizations, but also because I have had children in college over the course of eight years, I am always looking for innovation in enhancing the learning process,” Dean said. “So when Jeff said earlier, ‘It’s the libraries where things are going on at universities,’ I was intrigued. After all, libraries are places where people study on their own or with a group of people, and it is the number one place where students learn—not in the classroom. So it hit me that conference centers might make resource rooms available to attendees for them to go extend their learning and explore other resources on their breaks. Then they can bring that knowledge into the next session so that everyone benefits from it.”

Vredevoogd said that research does show that “more learning takes place outside the classroom than inside. So the hospitality industry could take cues from a library or the other areas on college campuses. Exploring a place like the student center can push a conference center to rethink some of its own areas. Universities use café-style tables and stools, soft furniture, pods, and other elements throughout their spaces. So is there a way to bring these elements into the conference center environment?”

Universities can even offer new perspectives on styles of learning. Richard Flanagan cited the use of “problem-based” learning, “where the professor is charged with orchestrating groups of students to work on different problems during classroom time, in a more collaborative way that is not the typical one-way flow of information in class. Thinking about my own experience, it would have helped me in the business world to interact in that way while in college—in a way that lets us arrive at a host of possible solutions to a particular problem, while having technology tools available to help us gather information immediately that will help us make more progress in the session than would have been possible otherwise.”

Topic 10: Placing Some Responsibility for Maximizing and Measuring ROI on Meeting Participants

Bob Dean made the observation that, just like at universities, meeting participants should be given significant responsibility for maximizing the effectiveness of the in-person portion of their learning experience. “When we talk about raising the impact of off-site meetings, we need to think outside of the box that is the meeting itself, and look closely at what comes before the meeting to prepare people—not just sending out an e-mail before the meeting with an attached article for them to read. And then what can we do to extend the meeting experience after the in-person event is over? And can we do a better job of measuring the meeting’s impact in the following weeks and months—how have people’s behaviors have changed based on what was delivered and gained at the meeting? By doing all these things, we show people that this meeting isn’t like all the other ones they have in their calendar.”

Richard Flanagan agreed. “A meeting’s results depend on how you define the meeting experience for participants. If it is defined as most people define it—doing things as a group while on site—then the effect is going to be minimal. If there is no preparation beforehand to get people ready to do things differently, a meeting won’t produce lasting results solely from the on-site experience. The support and follow through you have with participants is critical too.”

When it comes to measurement, “I don’t think we talk to participants enough after a meeting,” Flanagan continued. “We send out a survey: ‘How did you enjoy the event? Was it beneficial to you? Are you doing something different as a result of our meeting?’ You get those baseline responses, but then you also must make time to talk to people in detail as well, to see exactly what worked and what didn’t for them, and why.”

John Potterton had strong feelings on this topic. “We are all survey-challenged, in that we have the best intentions to follow up to see the effect of a meeting, what people took away from it, and where they expected more from it. But then the usual distractions come in: the phones ring, projects are due, and other meetings are coming up. So nothing really happens—we have a broken way of operating in this area of business. If we are really going to get people to do something different as a result of their meeting experience, we do need to talk to people. But we also need to set expectations for the participants well beforehand. We must say, ‘This meeting is important to your success. So we want you to come into it with a plan for what you intend to do as a result of what you learn at the meeting, and be focused on that plan during the meeting, and then be accountable for doing those things you said you would do after the meeting. And we the organization are here to help you with all of this.’”

Terri Breining added that “a lot of survey weariness comes because survey questions are meaningless, and everyone knows that the people asking are not going to do much with the answers. This is why we need to establish ahead of time what the objectives are, and these should be shared with everyone—the stakeholders, the attendees, the venue staff, the presenters—so everyone knows exactly what the point is. We should also share how we are going to measure whether we accomplished these. Basically, if we treat people like adults in that way, they will respond responsibly. And after all of it, you get out the message, ‘Based on your feedback, this is what we are going to do.’ From this, people will be more inclined to complete the surveys with deeper thought. The questions have to go back to the objectives, and people will feel their feedback does matter, and you will get more useful results.”

From a broader view, “the flaw here is the relationship of meetings to change,” Flanagan said. “Meetings are too often seen as events at a particular time, but change is seen as a process. However, if you actively promote meetings as a key part of that bigger process, that’s going to alter people’s mindset. This would also give more clarity to how you plan all the other steps: How do we design the meeting; who do we need there; what is going to be done there: talk or action; what is going to change from it; and how do we document the change.”

Potterton summed it up nicely: “If planners treat each meeting, and promote it to others, as a process itself along the continuum of change, participants will not ignore that part of the process that takes place after the meeting, and we can get a meaningful measurement of results.”

Flanagan noted that for conference centers, “the key thought to take away from this particular topic is that you have an opportunity to help planners and their executives see each meeting as part of a larger process in their organizations, and not simply as this week’s event.” But with that said, Jeff Vredevoogd referenced sobering data showing that many facilities need to change their thinking to help themselves with their own measurements, even before they can help customers with their measurements.

“We recently did a survey of higher-education leaders, and found that 84 percent of schools were doing some sort of major renovation or new build of their educational space on campus,” Vredevoogd reported. “But just 22 percent of those folks said they had an assessment plan in place to prove the effectiveness of those spaces—and most of those plans took the form of a “butt check,” or how many people were in the seats in week eight versus week one. Almost none of it was focused on assessing whether and how people were using the technology and other features they were installing in those spaces, so what the facility was trying to accomplish was not going to get measured. So to facilities, I say: If you are going to renovate, you should pull back and first determine what you truly trying to accomplish with that renovated space, and then devise a way to accurately measure that.”

Topic 11: A Deeper Understanding of “Meetings Architecture,” and How Conference Centers Can Be Part of That Process

John Potterton asked veteran planner Terri Breining to be more specific about the tenets of meetings architecture for this audience of conference center personnel. “It is a process that creates meetings from the inside out,” she said. “In other words, you don’t start with a cool place to hold your meeting and then decide what you are going to do there. Instead, you start with the participant, you look at where in the larger process of change this meeting will take place, and then you identify clear and measurable objectives for the meeting. Also, what activities will take place before and after the meeting to make the whole experience as effective as possible for getting to the specific change you are looking for.”

“It’s deciding where the meeting fits in the organization’s strategy, and using certain elements as you create the meeting—best practices from adult learning, from marketing, from science, and from other disciplines,” Breining continued. “So meetings architecture looks beyond logistics management to a much wider experience that creates results, and then assesses those results afterwards and makes course corrections for what you’ll do the next time. It is about creating something that has much longer impact than typical meetings. Actually, it’s not a complete departure from what planners are doing—it is an expansion or rearrangement of what they are doing. Some planners already do a lot of this, even if they don’t identify it as meetings architecture.”

In fact, Breining noted that the next step for promoting meetings architecture is possible development of a Master’s degree in the discipline. “If we have people versed in the science of color and music and the outdoors and other things as they relate to human learning and interaction, that provides great opportunity for the stature of meetings to be elevated in the business world.”

Potterton asked if the meeting and event community needs to rebrand itself, and what that branding would look like. “Now is absolutely the time to do this, because crisis brings opportunity,” Breining responded. “So many meetings have been cut in the past few years, and planners have been in a state of constant crisis. So right now is the time to create a ‘new normal’ for meetings. Meeting planners at every level need to speak more articulately about the need for meetings and the value of meetings, and this speaks to structure and measurement and using other best practices.”

“A lot of this has to do with the marketing function too,” said Richard Flanagan. “The learning and development niche and the meetings niche are among the worst I know of at marketing what they accomplish. They create a brief report of attendee survey results, and then they’re on to planning the next meeting. If we want acknowledgement and validity and acceptance at the executive level, then take those results and use them in a powerful way to market what has been accomplished. Go back to your objectives and make them as clear as possible so you can not only measure well but also make your case well.” Breining added that “we talk to ourselves a lot about this, but you have to talk to people up the chain about the importance of meetings in a way that resonates with them.”

Potterton noted that for this event’s audience, “the question is what does this have to do with someone like Amy Wickenheisser, who operates a center? What is their role in the meeting architecture process? How can they support it?” Wickenheisser responded that “there are

some things that conference centers can do in this area right away, but then there are some things we might have to wait on a renovation for, in order to make the necessary changes.”

As for right now, Breining cited the following: “It starts with a fundamental change not in the space, but in the discussion between facility and planner. It’s no longer, ‘How do you want the room set?’ Now, it’s ‘Why do you want the room set that way?’ Talking about the physical support a planner will need at the facility will be secondary in the conversation. This is different than what happens in almost all facilities places today.”

Bob Dean posed this idea: “What if someone from the property actually gets fully involved in the meeting? They could sit in the back of the room to observe, and they can give some thoughts to the client on what they saw and what might be able to be done during that meeting or at the next one that would improve each session for participants.” Wickenheisser said that while this would be interesting, “Some clients would not allow that.” Having sufficient personnel to do this and still fulfill all other necessary duties on property could be problematic too.

To make this more workable, Potterton suggested that the facility ask the client about which part of the meeting would benefit most from having a trusted outside observer. And even if the client says no to this, “I think they would be impressed by the initiative of the staff,” he added. “You are proving that you want to support the meeting in any way you can think of.”

Wickenheisser pointed out that there are often A/V technicians present in a session, “and to be honest I have never thought to ask them about what worked in the session and what did not. Or how they thought the lighting was, or the room temperature, or how attendees seemed to be acting—engaged, bored, fidgety, or otherwise.”

Jeff Vredevoogd finds that “there is a tendency for inertia at a facility, a feeling that this might be too tough a hill to climb. So it’s easy to say, ‘We need to wait for a renovation or a better time to do this.’ But at some point you have to simply jump in—it does not have to be a new purchase or something that requires much effort. At this facility we’re in today, there is soft furniture in some areas. So why not test them over here and then over there to see if the groups coming through use them differently and perhaps create a better result? Just look around at what you have in your facility, play around with some things and see what happens. New ideas will come from this; you will learn more about your clients and about yourself too.”

Topic 12: The Role of Planners and Conference Centers in Making Meeting Content More Effective

John Potterton asked Bob Dean to “share some insights into the role the planner (who is not always very involved in meeting content) can play in the creation, delivery, and effectiveness of content?”

“First, you have to use the lure of good content to market the meeting beforehand, and then package it well during and after the meeting to extend the experience in attendees’ minds,” Dean said. “But presently we live in a world where the definition of meeting content is that it’s whatever the technology presents.”

To break people out of this mindset, Dean recently conducted a 90-minute session, on how to optimize meeting content, without using PowerPoint or any other electronic technology. “All of our support items were props, physical things people could pick up. It made an impression,” he said.

And a few years ago, Dean discovered that a printer in his own office could produce more than just typical handouts; it could produce a format he calls a true “learning magazine.” “It was 20 pages long, and it contained everything on the topic that the participant would need in their job after the meeting,” he recalled. “Participants liked it most because it was not big and bulky like a binder—one attendee said, ‘This shows you are thinking of us, because I can’t fit a binder in my briefcase but this I can slip this right in whenever I need it.’ It is actually called an interactive briefing book, so it is intended for people to write inside as well. For conference centers, the lesson is that they could have printers with these amazing capacities and create slick, useful items that attendees will continue to refer to in the future.”

Amy Wickenheisser said that her facility does in fact create these types of items for groups. “We offer various printing abilities of groups’ materials so they don’t have to ship all of it here. It’s actually a pretty eco-friendly offering, because they are not using binders or boxes or emissions to ship it here.”

Dean stressed that “we need to look for more innovative ways of packaging content not just in print but electronically too. The next generation of meeting attendee that’s coming up is going to scrutinize what they are given to take home because they are so used to doing everything online, and iPads and other tablets have a huge impact on their preferences too.”

Potterton noted that this Thought Leaders Summit was being webcasted live, and was also being archived for on-demand viewing in the future. “But there is a fear that giving content away like that is going to stop people from coming to in-person meetings at conference centers. But I dare say that it’s been proven in the past few years that giving away content like webinars are actually driving *more* business for meetings—people are intrigued by the content, and they decide to come to the meeting next year to get the full experience. So giving away content can actually help next year’s attendance.”

Richard Flanagan cited a specialist on the topic of change named John Kotter, who makes the point that “people learn and change much more as a result of being involved in emotional experiences as opposed to being exposed to facts and figures and straight information through other means. And when you talk of content, people tend to think of those means, but the beauty of meetings and events is that they can go to the next level and serve to show people

how to apply the content in meaningful ways. Because if content does not hit me in a way that I can apply it, it is useless. Content has to be actionable, and meetings can make that happen. But most presenters at meetings throw out a bunch of data and information in the hope that some of it sticks; the planner should try to not let this happen. The key is that people can work together in meetings and actually generate their own content beyond what is presented. This advantage is the one that planners and centers alike need to market to the other stakeholders.”

Andrea Sullivan said that “from a scientific perspective, we’ve figured out so much more over the past few years about how our minds learn and process information. And part of that revelation has been that most of us are overloaded with information, which is not good because our working memory only holds things very briefly to begin with, meaning fractions of a second. But when people do constructive learning—taking a bit of information and applying it through activities at a meeting—the information stays with attendees because they can attach meaning to it. The more we work to make meaning and patterns around information, the more it will be deposited into long-term memory.”

On the other hand, technological tools such as webinars are excellent for helping participants to prepare for in-person meetings, Terri Breining noted. “People will hear the key information a few times, and have some time to process those points and be more prepared to have a richer in-person experience.” Sullivan added that “participants will also be looking at the webinar for what is most relevant to them, which is a major part of motivation. They will already have had a top-line exposure to the content, and figure out that at the in-person event they will want to hone in on particular aspects.”

Jeff Vredevoogd added that “there is a big trend on campuses today where faculty upload a lecture on YouTube so they don’t waste time in class going over something you could have done on your own. So the class uses its time together to process the information everyone collected beforehand, and the classroom session is that much more effective.” In fact, Flanagan stressed that “this is the new expectation of younger employees regarding meetings. They don’t need to be here just to hear me talk; they need to be here to discuss, to hear all the different viewpoints.”

The portability of technology also gives participants the ability to absorb the preparation materials anytime, anywhere. “You can listen while exercising or commuting, and that makes learning so time-efficient that people don’t see it as a chore.” And because audio or video can be replayed endlessly, attendees’ absorption of the preparation materials goes up too.

Interestingly, Flanagan and Dean have been working recently with a preparation device that’s a step beyond a webinar: a virtual collaboration tool called ThinkTank. With it, “people can get online with each other and brainstorm and generate tons of their own content,” Flanagan said. “That content is going to be better than anything a presenter can give them in terms of on-the-ground usefulness. And the technology can capture the session as well.”

It’s clear that the meetings industry cannot move away from technology, but must embrace it and use it to its advantage, said Dean. “For instance, by putting onto the web this discussion we’re having today, you’re building value; IACC is seen as more valuable to industry members. It also shows that technology helps those who can’t make it to the in-person event. Learning these days is much more hybrid, where some is face-to-face and some is through technology, and that can be at different times or all at the same time. Think about it: People are coming into in-person events with powerful phones and tablets anyway. You have to show that you are not behind the times so that you maintain your credibility with them.”

Topic 13: Using Technology to Excite and Motivate Attendees Ahead of a Meeting

John Potterton fielded a question from a member of the remote audience: Can the panel give some tips for creating better videos that will engage and entice participants?

Terri Breining said that while she does not have experience producing videos, “the ones that entice me are those that are brief—you make your point but also acknowledge that everyone has a limited attention span in that medium. At most, you have about 10 minutes; you can get a lot of information across in that time if it is well planned out. And if the viewer knows it is going to be less than 10 minutes and not 45 minutes like a webinar, they will be more present and attentive for those 10 minutes. You must also make it entertaining. Having one talking head or a bunch of text is dreadful. Cartoons, graphics, camera cuts, and focusing on just two or three messages, not the full 40-point plan. Tell people the three most important things they need to know as they head into the meeting, with a bit of detail. That’s enough.”

Bob Dean added that “you can use inexpensive options, not necessarily a professional production house, because you can do many takes and make sure you get it right, and also produce more quantity per cost. A good story may have to be told three times in practice before the presenter nails it, so you can’t waste that time and money with a professional supplier. In fact, you can do something that’s good enough with Flip video and put it onto YouTube, if you plan it right. Planners need to have a wider media mindset these days; it’s just the direction that things are going.”

But Richard Flanagan noted that planners must address ahead of time “what is the point of this video; who will be involved in designing this experience; who will actually be in it; and who will edit it so it holds people’s attention. None of these can be taken lightly.”

In fact, Flanagan subscribes to the same tenets in regard to making videos that he does in the creation of meetings. “Planners must educate, entertain, create esthetics, and provide a feeling of escape for participants. These will increase impact. So plan the video, practice it, and make it short and impactful through those means.”

Breining recently read an article about people doing their own filming, and one point she found revealing was that “just because you have a great camera does not mean you can take great photos or video,” she said. “There is something to be said for knowledgeable video production. Perhaps this is one area that conference centers can develop expertise to assist planners.”

Bob Dean added that in order to use video to market the meeting, prepare attendees, and perhaps even extend the learning after the meeting, “planners will have to start looking at the total meeting budget and decide how to allocate money accordingly. There will need to be some adjustments there.”

Interestingly, to prepare for this Thought Leaders Summit, one person was entrusted with using Skype to record brief video interviews with all participants so they could become more acquainted with one another, and so meeting attendees could preview what was to come at the event. “The interviewer was in a small window and the person being interviewed in the larger window. And this was a breakthrough for me. I feel like I can do this for my own events now,

and this type of thing can be uploaded immediately to YouTube. And we live in a YouTube world, so meetings can't ignore this stuff—we have to incorporate it into all stages of the meeting experience.”

Flanagan concluded with this: “For planners, the five stages in a meeting’s lifespan are attract, enter, engage, exit, and extend. Problem is, the engage part is where most people spend 90 percent of their dollars, but attracting and extending are also critical, and these are where such video applications can help.”

Topic 14: The Role of Conference Centers in Enhancing Meetings Through Technology

Amy Wickenheisser explained why she thinks conference centers must become familiar with video applications their clients can use. “With the state of the economy and people doing multiple jobs at once, the need to get people together for collaboration and for generating emotion is more necessary than ever. Video is a great way to get the ground prepared for the in-person meeting, and for reinforcing and extending the learning. It is important right now that conference centers remind customers of the irreplaceable need to get people together, especially when everyone is operating so thinly. We could present this in the context of, ‘While an in-person meeting has an expense associated with it, using video and other tactics will make the ROI of an in-person meeting much higher, and make it worthwhile to you.’”

John Potterton noted that conference centers also have “the technological infrastructure to do some great things to help improve the quality of attendees’ engagement with presenters during the in-person event. For instance, some groups use Twitter with the presenter in real time to make on-the-spot revisions to the direction and focus of a session. There’s probably a small fraction of groups doing that. So centers have to make sure their clients understand that the facility’s staff has seen innovative things among other groups that impacted the quality of learning. But if we are just playing the role of order-taker rather than being a true consultant on engaging the audience through both in-person means and technological means, then we are not differentiating ourselves.”

Another suggestion: After certain sessions, the facility and the planner set up a “debriefing” area where the presenter is interviewed, along with some attendees and executives, for a “post-game show” that can be pushed out via video to those who did not attend the event. “It is just a matter of orchestrating a new experience that has value,” Potterton said.

In fact, Andrea Sullivan attended a meeting that did just that, and “it really engaged the virtual audience, because they were offered something that was geared specifically toward them.” Conference centers that can explain these possibilities to planners, and show them how other clients used technology tools to good effect, will be able to win and to keep more customers.

Topic 15: The Role of Conference Centers in Shaping the Customer Experience of the Future

John Potterton said that “we’ve been talking about this topic for a while today, but let’s crystallize our thoughts: What do you see as the customer experience of the future? What are we lacking now, and what do we need to look towards creating for our planner clients?”

Bob Dean cited the example he gave early in the discussion: the six-month learning initiative for which a few in-person events played a part. Within that process, “the most critical factor in getting such good results was all the customization we did for the 40 learners involved. So besides living in a YouTube world, we are also living in a customization world. Think about it: Amazon contacts you, reminds you exactly which books you have bought lately, and recommends others in that vein. So customization is actually expected by participants these days, and especially by the younger generation.”

Richard Flanagan added that, like the change process and the long-term learning process, there needs to be an underlying strategy for using what he calls “the performance space” for events. However, “too many people implement things without having an underlying, cohesive strategy for that. So if a conference center can look at the desired customer experience, refer back to what they have seen and done before on property, and say, ‘Here are the tools we have at your disposal so that your people go home feeling that they have been transformed in the way you want,’ then the center is playing a valuable strategic role.”

John Potterton picked up on Flanagan’s use of the term “performance space” and turned to space expert Jeff Vredevoogd. “In the universe that you create for the educational institutions you work with, do you think of them as ‘performance spaces’ when you are designing them?”

“Absolutely. We should all look at our spaces as performance spaces,” Vredevoogd said. “It’s a great term. If you are not looking at your space that way, you are missing out on a tremendous amount of opportunity. An event on your property is a performance from the minute people get out of their cars to when they get back into their cars, because all of it affects attendees’ perceptions of the event.”

Andrea Sullivan found Vredevoogd’s assessment to be consistent with how the brain operates. “The brain captures moments by attaching them to context. So if I have a hard time finding a parking space, then that’s recorded. Then if I walk to the lobby and there is some trash on the floor, or my first interaction with personnel is not friendly, that is recorded and it colors their whole experience. On the other hand, if an attendee walks in the front doors and there is nice music playing, and someone smiles and says hello and directs you to your meeting room, that’s recorded too and affects your retention of other data in the near future. And the area of the brain where we record all of this, the hippocampus, is directly connected to where the content is being stored, because it is context dependent. So my learning is going to be connected to my total experience on site; we recall both the experience and the knowledge itself.”

Potterton then raised a question about the term “transformational customer experience.” “The word ‘transformational’ is a difficult term, in that we don’t know if it resonates with planners or attendees. In fact, it sounds big and tiring. Meetings take place often for businesspeople—and they are part of a facility’s staff’s life every single day. So are we really going to be able to transform people lives every day? That seems so exhausting.”

“All that means is that you come to see things differently so that you will do some things differently,” said Richard Flanagan. “If you look at things the same way all the time, you are not going to do something different in your work. People come up with an idea, and of all the related data that’s out there, they tend to put the most stock in the data which supports their idea. But if we can retrain ours’ and others’ views of the world, then we can do things differently, and we can get meeting attendees to do things differently.”

Amy Wickenheisser added that she believed “many of our customers have been transformed. Instant gratification is what customers expect, and that is probably because these days we have everything at our fingertips. So instead of waiting for the customer experience to be recorded on a survey and waiting for that once the event is over, we need to catch the experience before departure via social media or some other way. Get their first impression and their midpoint impression in order to create a positive lasting impression.”

As a result, Wickenheisser has developed a “mid-stay evaluation.” “We need to capture that data and make adjustments to their experience before they leave, because we want their lasting impression to be, ‘The facility made a small mistake, but they fixed it very quickly.’ And let’s face it, we are not perfect—we have new hires and other things that happen along the way. So we can’t ignore this issue.”

Then again, “we also want to hear the good things. If something works well, we will want to keep doing it,” she added. “And if something is not working well, tell us and we will fix it as fast as we can.” One interesting consumer-research finding Wickenheisser cited is that “fixing a mistake often gets you a higher satisfaction score than being consistently good. If you provide that instant gratification in a imperfect situation, people remember and appreciate that. A slip-up is not fatal if you show that you can recover quickly. But it can be fatal if you don’t provide that instant gratification, because there is Twitter right in their hands, and then that story is out in the world forever. In fact, one of the toughest things we face nowadays is that people don’t complain to us—instead, they just vent on Twitter or Facebook.”

Bob Dean noted that “JD Power has made a huge business about customer satisfaction. But what about measuring customer sacrifice, which means the customer thinks, ‘There is nothing you can do about this situation, so I guess I have to live with it.’ But if you can find out where the customer sacrifice is while the event is still going on, that could bring great loyalty. In fact, customer satisfaction does not necessarily lead to loyalty. Rather, the elimination of customer sacrifice more likely leads to customer loyalty.”

Dean gave a relevant example: “I am trying to use a projector in a meeting, and the image is all washed out—people can’t see it well, and the room’s switches don’t allow for the lighting in the front of the room to be altered in a way that will help me. So I go to my conference services person before the session with the expectation that I am about to sacrifice the experience I am offering attendees. But then the CSM says, ‘Let’s unscrew some bulbs up front, and if that does not work we will get a flat-screen for you to connect to.’ The CSM just eliminated the sacrifice and actually created customer surprise. The planner thinks, ‘Wow, I thought this was not something you could solve in time.’” And in a meeting facility, “there can be a huge amount of sacrifice: the comfort of the chairs, the quality of the lighting, the temperature of the room, the ambient noise coming from outside,” Flanagan added. “People will endure it, but they surely aren’t happy about it. In fact, they will focus disproportionately on the bad chair or whatever, and not on the rest of the experience that you and the planner worked so hard to create. What a waste!”

Dean pointed out that “IACC guidelines eliminate much of these things, but I would still advise that centers look more at the service areas beyond the facility and equipment itself, to see where people are making sacrifices.”

By repeatedly monitoring customer feedback all through a meeting, Wickenheisser is doing just that. “I see a report every day on how our facility is faring on the various social media outlets, and also on the hospitality platforms like Trip Advisor and Orbitz. So we know what comments have been put online about us, and about our competitors too.”

When asked how she finds the time to take on such a task, she said that “I get help from others on property. My assistant responds to about 30 percent of all our feedback, and another manager helps me with the rest. We respond to all comments within three days.”

The result of doing this can be significant. “We came across a few Twitter entries where someone commented that their guest room was kind of small. I was able to find out who the guest was based on the name they used online, and while she was still on property I asked her if she would want to move to a different room. Seeing the surprise in her face was really fun! If we are going to keep up with customers, constant monitoring of planner and attendee sentiment is necessary.”

To bring to life the idea of a memorable customer experience, Potterton once took his entire facility staff on a learning excursion in downtown Chicago. “We went into several chocolate stores and, using all of our senses, we rated the customer experience in each location. The first one was a great experience: One woman came out from behind the counter to greet us right away, and showed us to the various samples they offered that day. She also explained the history of the neighborhood and how the chocolate store, a longtime fixture, fit into that.” But at the next store, the experience was quite different. “We were the only ones in the store, but the counter person did not greet us. And the only way that we interacted with that employee was when we asked questions. Rather than feeling welcome, we felt more like a nuisance. So we left quickly.”

His advice: “Take your staff on an excursion to businesses not in your niche but which must deliver customer service, and look for the sacrifices and the surprises they create. Then go back to your facility and have a debrief session. I can tell you that our excursion was 10 years ago, but if I ask those people right now what they learned that day about creating an experience when people come through their front door, they will say, ‘I know it should be the way we had it at the Fannie May chocolate store.’”

In the end, veteran planner Terri Breining sought to put the idea of transformation into perspective. “I’d say it has to occur incrementally. You only have a few truly transformative moments in your life, and even then it usually does not hit you all at once. So it’s not about always creating the best meeting anyone has ever created—it is about the small things that planners or facilities can do. What are the most important small things that will create the behavioral change and thus the results we want? Sometimes we think we must create some huge event or else the experience won’t resonate with participants—but that can cause us to fall back on using cool gadgets to impress people rather than doing the things that would best fulfill that meeting’s strategy and make a useful impact.”

“The less-daunting word is change,” noted fellow customer Dean. “All meetings taking place at conference centers are about some change that is going on in that organization or in that organization’s industry. So change is the word that everyone can relate to. Change is constant,

and it is why meetings are planned. So centers have to ask their customers, “What specific change are you trying to accomplish here?””

Flanagan added that “neither the planner nor the facility should forget about the task of extending the meeting after the in-person portion ends, so that it is seen not as a single event but as a continuous part of the change process.” Potterton agreed. “In most organizations, meetings are at the center of the change process,” which is both a promising sign and a significant opportunity for the conference center industry.