

ON THE CUTTING

EDGE

The future is now for tech breakthroughs in the meetings and events industry.

BY

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"BEAM ME UP, SCOTTY!"

Trekkies know this phrase was never actually spoken by Captain Kirk in the beloved "Star Trek" TV series, but it has become so iconic as to be embedded in popular culture. Synonymous with this phrase is the image of members of the Starship Enterprise being turned into light particles and moved instantaneously onto faraway planets. When experiencing today's tech breakthroughs for the meetings and events industries, Captain Kirk would surely say that tech has boldly gone where no person has gone before.

Whether it is VR, AR, holograms, contactless check-in, robots, or LED walls that transport, technology is now incorporated into all aspects of hospitality and group engagement. Although this might sound impersonal, it is the opposite. These innovative tools allow planners to be more creative and reach more guests while still producing that once-in-a-lifetime gathering.

Meeting and event planners can harness these tech breakthroughs to boost business. It is not just about that impressive moment of discovery, tech is how this industry will stay dynamic, inclusive, sustainable, and profitable.

THE HIGH IMPACT OF HOLOGRAMS

Nothing conjures up a futuristic, space-age event element like hologrammed keynote speakers. Talk about a wow factor—audiences get to interact in real time with presenters who are in completely different parts of the world. Larry O'Reilly, CEO of ARHT Media, understands how potent hologrammed speakers are. His company created a hologram of Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy this summer for the Founders Forum in London last June, and three other simultaneous conferences. The reach was exponential and the lasting effect on viewers was powerful. "I remember when I saw a hologram for the first time,"

Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the president of Ukraine, appears as a hologram to connect with attendees at a conference last year.



recalls O'Reilly. "I felt the same way as when I saw IMAX for the first time. It was as if my eyes and ears were deceiving me."

Hologram technology has a strong appeal for event planners because it allows presenters to attend and participate in meetings and conferences that they couldn't normally travel to. According to O'Reilly, the key factors and return on investment (ROI) are that "speakers can participate in the run of show, who normally couldn't attend, therefore, reducing travel costs and carbon footprints, while making a higher impact than live speakers."

The ramp up for this type of experience can take six weeks or longer, and the earlier in the process ARHT Media can collaborate, the better the result, O'Reilly says. Their partnership with WeWork, however, makes last-minute requests possible, with the same quality. At a conference where environmental

activist Erin Brockovich was to appear via Zoom, the event planners decided to pivot at the last minute due to the incredible audience reaction to a hologrammed speaker the day before. Enter WeWork, near Brockovich's home in the Los Angeles area, and voila!—Brockovich was hologrammed in. The power of this technology can't be overstated.

Event planners should note that this technology can be used for more than just worldwide conferences. Movie studios employ holograms to launch films and beam in actors from different time zones for premieres. The bride at a wedding received a pleasant surprise from her best friend, who appeared as a hologram at the reception because she couldn't celebrate in person. Or consider the birthday party on a yacht in Antarctica, which hosted authors as holograms each night, encouraging passionate book club discussions.



Illuminarium Experiences provides immersive audiovisual entertainment for groups.

VIRTUAL LASER IMMERSIVES

Global experiential company Illuminarium Experiences is an innovative entertainment venue with immersive audiovisual experiences. Its locations in Las Vegas, Nevada, and Atlanta, Georgia, have vast, customizable settings where planners can create a dynamic and personalized environment sure to impress. A 4K laser projection system sweeps guests around the planet—to a Japanese night market, a luminous reef beneath the ocean, or a majestic African savanna.

Brian Allen, executive vice president of technology and content integration at Illuminarium Experiences, says it well: “Illuminarium is, as we say, ‘A place that can take you any place,’ and I believe that to be true when you look at the flexible and multimodal nature of our venues.

Using the latest technology platforms across the audio [and] visual world, Illuminarium has built a robust format that allows for flexible programming and future development.”

Mix in chef-driven cuisine and full bar accommodations with expert mixologists for a robust offering that will amaze attendees. Allen concurs, “Illuminarium can host completely virtual events or a blend of in-person and online. Looking toward the future, we are always looking for ways to improve upon the guest experience and deliver the best show possible. This may come in the form of augmented layers that expand the narrative or the way we interact with guests pre-, during, and post-experience,” he says. “We believe that our content starts as soon as a ticket is purchased, and finding ways to reduce friction and effort for our guests is always a priority.”

PHOTO: ILLUMINARIUM EXPERIENCES



ROBOTS TO THE RESCUE

The hotel and resort industry also embraces the latest technology for out-of-this-galaxy group hospitality experiences. The new Lake Nona Wave Hotel in Orlando, Florida, greets guests with a futuristic facade of curved glass inspired by a wavelength of energy, but inside is where the tech comes to life. R2D2, please meet the riveting Rosie the Robot Butler. This AI charmer serves drinks to groups during meeting breaks.

Suzie Yang, the general manager of Lake Nona Wave Hotel, reflects on the future of hotel technology for guests: “We have found that travelers—now more than ever—are looking to customize their trips, whether it’s for business or leisure. Technology is essential in making this a reality by allowing them to make choices they couldn’t before. For example, giving them the option of how they would like to check-in, how to customize their room upon arrival, and even envisioning their events on-site through VR [virtual reality] before they happen.”

As Yang points out, these tech enhancements all cater to the guest experience. “Our team carefully incorporated tech-forward features into the hotel that serve to enhance the guest experience. We see this approach as the future of travel, and I’m proud to be part of a team that is paving the way in that sector.”

Nona Wave Hotel is home to Well+ech by Wave, a collection of guest rooms equipped with inventions to perfect health and sleep. Groups can wear VR headsets for group meditation, site inspections, and strolling the Sculpture Garden to visualize future event setups. Top it off with contactless check-in, group agendas, and in-room iPads, and planners have access to the best of the next generation.

MAGIC DOORS, APP CHATS, AND VIRTUAL TOURS

Long lines at the check-in counter leave less time to explore the hotels that resort guests have traveled to enjoy. Thompson Seattle and Thompson Denver offer the World of Hyatt app for contactless check-in that has a “Mobile Key” to unlock the room door. Thompson Seattle embraces hybrid events with The Owl, a voice-activated, advanced webcam that swivels to move the camera toward whomever is speaking, projecting the image of the person to virtual guests. Thompson Denver provides a text platform that allows communication in real-time

with guests. This way of answering questions is the new standard for service and hospitality.

Cassie Conching, director of group sales at Four Seasons Resort Oahu at Ko Olina agrees, saying that “The Four Seasons App Chat is a valuable technology tool for planners and attendees, both in the planning stages and once the program is on-site. Attendees can connect in real time, directly with our team, to coordinate any special requests, from activity reservations and dining to jobs as simple as printing documents.” The property’s 360 and 3D models assist planners and make their jobs more efficient and accurate. Conching adds, “At Four Seasons Resort Oahu, our team understands how busy and time-consuming the meeting-planning process can be for our partners and clients. These in-depth visuals of the property’s various meeting spaces and guest rooms allow meeting planners and their clients [to see] a true representation and visualization of the event space through our advanced technology.”

Convention centers are also partaking in the breakthrough technology trend. Idaho’s Boise Centre has used LED walls up to 100 feet long for mesmerizing event design, to promote sponsors, and use as content screens. Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center in South Carolina draws on its SKYNAV platform for virtual tours of the destination. This technology is a meeting planner’s dream during the selection and planning processes and gives attendees a real look at the destination before arriving at the event. Seattle Convention Center’s new Summit building incorporates technology for sustainability. Summit’s kitchen and scullery include food waste dehydrators that rely on high heat recirculation to dehydrate the waste food, reducing the volume and weight by up to 90%. The output becomes fertilizer to use or to sell.

When President Zelenskyy spoke as a hologram to attendees at one conference in Europe, he wore a “Star Wars” T-shirt. He discussed the tech sector in Ukraine, its opportunities, and a borderless free trade zone for tech. Much like the movie “Star Wars”—and “Star Trek” before it—technology connects all walks of life, all over the planet. These tech breakthroughs might seem futuristic now, but advancements keep moving at the speed of light. One day, when talking about holograms, the discussion will begin with: “A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.” **m+e**

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