

# Changing the Trade Show Industry

*with a New Breed of Apps*



By Michelle Bruno, CEM

The term “software” is fast becoming obsolete. What once referred to the programs used to run computers and do the real work of computing is now associated with the outdated idea of a “shrink-wrapped” product installed locally on a computer. Most of the software discussions today revolve around systems, applications (apps) and platforms that are Web-based or designed for use with mobile devices. The efficiency of the Internet has opened the door to advances that are changing the exhibition industry more rapidly than previously predicted. A new breed of applications is improving business processes and enhancing the face-to-face experience.

The use of technology on the trade show floor is exploding, experts say. “We are at the knee of exponential growth,” says Corbin Ball, a meetings industry technology consultant and speaker. “What we have seen pretty consistently for the last 50 to 60 years is the doubling of computer capabilities

every 18 months. What you have in your pocket now is more powerful than a room-sized computer from MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] from 1962,” Ball says.

Corbin Ball has seen huge recent advances in the areas of social media, social review and mobile applications. “One service offered by Core-Apps offers GPS-type sensitivity to route attendees to their intended booth using a mobile phone. When exhibitors know [attendee] preferences, they can offer specials based on interest profiles,” Ball explains. Pathable, a social networking platform that Ball has reviewed, connects Facebook and LinkedIn with the attendee registration system so that exhibitors, attendees and speakers can begin networking before the meeting.

Application developers are working to address flaws in the legacy systems that have become obsolete. “For example,” says Ball, “The lead retrieval

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paradigm is glaringly broken." Exhibitors pay lead retrieval providers a fee to collect "one-way data only in the booth," he explains. Mobile applications offer the possibility of networking and exchanging leads on a broader level between show participants of all types in a larger physical area than ever before.

One company to address the issue of lead retrieval in a new way is BusyEvent, developers of a "social event bookmarking" application. BusyEvent combines social networking, lead management, session tracking and audience response functions using a tiny device called a "BeLinker." The device captures digital information such as company

environmental issues. Web-based applications such as BusyEvent and others help address the shift of the industry toward user needs and preferences. "For us, the thing we have enjoyed most is watching people utilize tools in unique ways and how it has changed their relationship with the event itself. It's a different kind of experience," Slawin says.

With an eye toward simplification and integration, Toronto-based ShowCare is introducing the next generation platform that integrates event registration, housing, contact exchange, networking and lead management. It offers event organizers a customizable "executive dashboard" functionality that displays such details as registration numbers, room pick-up and financial forecasts in multiple graphic representations (bars, speedometers, etc.).

In ShowCare's application, attendees are introduced to a portal structure much like a shopping cart system that allows them to choose among various options for registration, housing, social networking and bookmarking session materials. The system will collect historical data and pre-populate fields and preferences as attendees return to the event year after year. "The faster you make the experience for the attendee, the higher the revenue. Faster registration means a better experience that more people will complete and pay for," says Kristian Lavereau, vice president business development for ShowCare.

The exhibition industry is undergoing a major restructuring with a new breed of applications addressing stakeholder "pains" in innovative ways according to Lavereau. "The economic downturn has forced event organizers to play a major role in sustainability, profitability and enhancing the attendee experience. The increasing savvy of the event executive is the impetus behind the push for tools that reduce costs and increase value. Facilities are updating the infrastructure of convention centers to help suppliers expand their capabilities, and a migration to virtual events is causing organizers to examine current business models and revenue streams," he says. <sup>2</sup>

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brochures, contact information, speaker notes and survey information and sends it wirelessly, in real time, to a personal Web site.

BusyEvent's bookmarking system streamlines the competing technologies on the trade show floor. It consolidates a range of functions onto a single platform. "The more technology we layer into events, the worse it will get. We have things like Twitter, virtual environments on the iPhone, floor-mapping gadgets, and nothing talks to each other. [BusyEvent] uses a common platform and a series of tools that allows everyone to be part of the conversation," says Brian Slawin, president of the Panamedia Group, developers of the BusyEvent application.

Slawin identifies three overriding themes in the current industry that have guided his firm's development of applications; real time interaction, convergence of the virtual experience with the real life experience and a conscientious focus on