



# Event Management Software

## the next generation

Web-based software, and the internet, are in the process of fundamentally changing the way business is transacted in the conference, event and exhibition industries.

From simple beginnings providing information about an event we are now entering a mature phase where full online event management systems are becoming available. This gives an event organiser a much wider choice of options to acquire software and services and the result is a wide range of benefits to organisers, participants and suppliers alike.

But how do these new systems sit with existing, typically Windows-based solutions, and how can an event organiser successfully deploy this new technology?

### Maturing technology is now offering new solutions

These new fully online systems are being made possible by the latest generation of development software, and cheap telecommunications, which, until now, have been struggling to keep up with the growth in use of the web.

We can all see that relatively simple online technology such

e-mailing has rapidly become the norm for business to business communication, when only a few years ago having a fax was the essential business tool. Fully online transactional systems are now set for the same growth and level of market penetration.

The web brought immediate benefits to the events industry in the publishing of event information — especially where a global audience was involved — in its ability to slash courier, post and fax costs and quickly publish up to date amendments to an event.

Transactional business is a different issue all together. Initially the web was harnessed by graphical designers who were quickly pushed into becoming form and database designers — much against their wishes on most occasions.

Registration forms were printed and entered manually, then collected in files or spreadsheets and downloaded into a Windows-based event management system.

Early efforts to develop online transactional systems were fuelled by the dot com revolution during which huge sums were invested in industrial strength and size transactional systems but these were way outside the budget of the average event organiser.

Some web database technology from startup companies did start to become available but these solutions have been risky to use both from a technical and financial standpoint.

With the release in February this year of Microsoft's Visual Studio.net we have now reached a stage of maturity where development software that enables the delivery of cost-effective

web-based event management systems has arrived. Importantly this environment will embrace the pervasive Microsoft Office environment.

Software companies have been working with this development platform in test mode for the last few months and a new generation of event management systems will soon start to appear.

These systems will be browser based but can be used on the web, in a controlled environment — an extranet, or on an intranet — i.e. a local environment such as an event organiser's office or an event itself.

Typically there will be a choice of where these systems are hosted and how they are paid for, although with the current generation of solutions — particularly in North America, they are primarily hosted by the Software Company — know as an ASP (Application Service or Software Provider).

Rather than purchasing a normal perpetual software licence it is possible to licence the use of these new systems for individual events, enabling event organisers to experience the benefits that new technology brings without having to 'bet the company' on it — and, importantly, re-aligning the system supplier to become more of a partner in producing an event.

Equally the demands of an individual event — particularly what may be needed onsite — will determine whether the online solution needs to be integrated with an offline solution.

## What are the benefits of the new online event management systems?

In the initial stages of an event if details of potential attendees can be uploaded to the web database, invitations can be e-mailed and the result is that participants have an easier task to complete their registration — they are given a user log on and password to access their details.

There are also a range of benefits, such as cost and immediacy, from the various forms of online event marketing.

Events that need participant approval can be set up such that once a participant has registered their details are queued to a person responsible for approving their attendance.

Because the event database is now held online, it can be made accessible, in a tailored way, to participants, clients, organisers and suppliers. This has a significant time saving benefit for the organiser in so far as they are able to let participants, clients and suppliers access information and data at will. It also leads to greater information accuracy as each type of user takes responsibility for their data.

Registering for an event has moved forward substantially from simply completing an online form which was printed and keyed into a back office system. Registration can now be a fully online experience allowing participants to have multiple registration options — based on their participant type, checking inventory availability, completing payments, amending and cancelling online.

This year will see the arrival of integration with airline GDS allowing data to be passed back and forth between an event system and a GDS.

Online reporting is immediately available globally 24 x 7 and can be tailored to the needs of the client, organiser and supplier, both in advance and at run-time.

Following an event, online surveys and ongoing discussion boards can keep the event alive and the participants in touch with each other — and serve as a springboard for marketing the next event.

We are also on the brink of a huge growth in personal interactive devices at an event itself. We believe this will be primarily driven by the next generation of pda devices which will encompass new 3G mobile phones to be launched in the next

12 months. In the meanwhile you will see a growth in SMS messaging as a way of reaching participants at an event and other experimental solutions.

These benefits can be summarised into two main areas — time saving and improvement in information integrity. It is worth noting that to ensure this is the case a new role should be created by the event organiser to regularly check and oversee the data — the rubbish in, rubbish out rule applies even more in this potentially unmoderated environment.

## Choosing a supplier and deploying an online system

One of the benefits of the web is that suppliers who offer niche solutions — such as event management software can easily be located from around the world. Access to online event management systems can be purchased from anywhere in the world but there are a number of issues to bear in mind:

Many new companies offering online event solutions are venture capital funded and in danger of collapse if they do not secure their next round of financing. This is much harder to check if a company is based outside the UK.

US suppliers can tend to focus on city-wide events, air is typically based on event deals into the location with one carrier, and they do not appreciate the European need for Charters, Multi-Currency, Multi-language and legal issues such as the Data Protection Act.

Ask for a number of customer references and speak with them — be particularly careful that you ask for, and are given, clients who have operated a similar event to yours.

Where possible look online at solutions already implemented by the supplier — again try to find an event like your own.

Check the credentials of your potential supplier — one UK supplier recently lost a major court case brought by a disgruntled customer which has been well reported in the trade press.

Where possible avoid involving too many suppliers — graphical design can be delivered just as well from a competent supplier of online systems — but if you need a themed approach to the whole event just ask the graphical designer to supply a background only to the online system provider.

Think about your onsite requirements — it may be that you require an intranet or access to a traditional Windows-based system on site — or it may be that at a city wide event, for example, it is better to connect to the online database. A good supplier should be able to offer a range of options to suit your needs.

If you do decide to purchase a Windows-based system for in-house use check the supplier's plans for replacing it with a completely redesigned solution and the basis on which you will be able to acquire the new solution.

Ask what other services the supplier can offer — these may include such options as a delegate help desk, a range of badge production options and on-site staff.

Security is still an issue that should be born in mind but these systems are generally hosted on servers with substantial firewalls and virus protection — check what your potential supplier is providing.

In this period of transition there are many excellent solutions available. Both fully browser-based online, and Windows-based offline systems will have their part to play in the short term but ignore the new solutions at your peril!

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