



YOUR Mind?

This is how they communicate...

- Q&A with Keith Johnston, group vice president of OnSite Events, Inc.
- Social media and meetings/events.
- Technology's impact, trends, future.

This feature examines topics of interest to the meetings and events industry through a Q&A session with a different industry professional in each issue. In this issue: the impact of social media on the industry.

Some referred to 2007 as the “Year of Social Media.” The year 2008 has also seen its share of developments. Second Life®, YouTube, LinkedIn, Facebook, MySpace... these platforms and others inspire meetings industry discussions, educational sessions and cover stories. With all the talk of what *could* be done with the capabilities, what is being done?

Keith Johnston, group vice president of full-service event planning and production company OnSite Events, Inc. in Chicago, IL, believes that those who are now exploring are already behind. It is an industry-wide indisposition, as social media capabilities have been slow to catch on with many companies, associations and individual planners overall.

Through MeetingsTelevision.com, an online industry portal with which OnSite Events is partnered, Johnston and his colleagues hope to bring interactive media to the meeting and event planning world via online site inspections and other tools. Here, Johnston discusses the state of social media in the meetings and events industry.

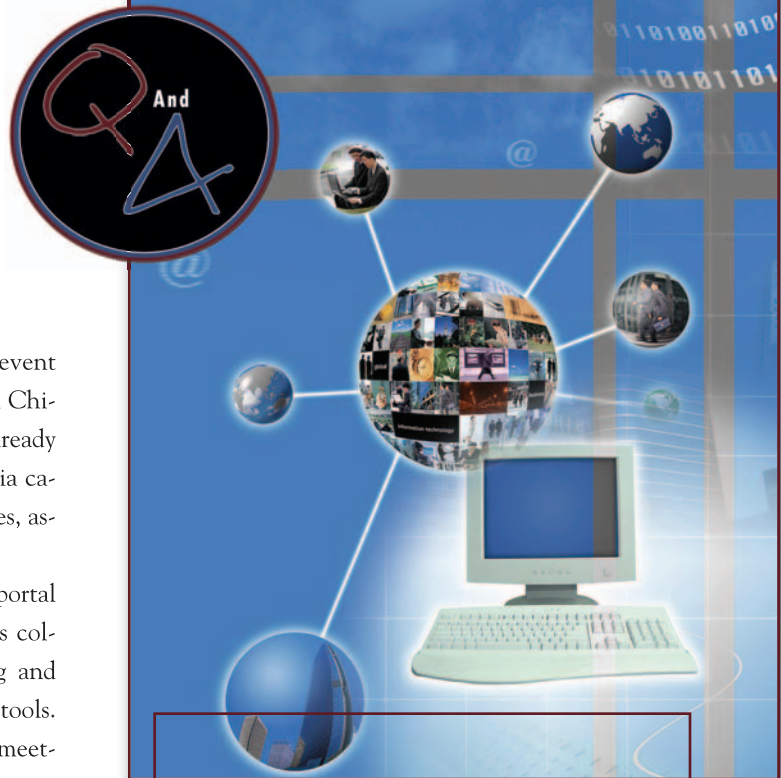
Midwest Meetings: **With all the hype about the potential uses, how is social media actually being implemented within the industry at present?**

Keith Johnston: The use of social media [has] cut a wide arc through the industry between the adopters and the non-adopters. Right now, 99% of everyone is a non-adopter. [Social media is] mostly being used in blogs and email, but the other uses of social media, such as forums and video and things like that, aren't being used - and they should be. The rest of the world is passing us by.

MM: **Which aspects of social media are most relevant to the meetings and events industry?**

KJ: It depends on what you're trying to achieve. Video is a great way for associations and companies to get attendees excited about an event. With an association that has an annual conference, what better way to get attendees excited than to have the president of the association do a video introduction? That's extremely powerful, and we don't see a lot of that.

A forum, another example of social media, is a fantastic way to get planners talking to each other. One of the things that we're trying to do with MeetingsTelevision is bring hoteliers and planners together. These are two sides that always seem to be in different camps. Although both are necessary for the success of the other, there always seems to be a line in the sand. Wouldn't it be great if you could have a forum where planners could ask



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questions of hoteliers? That would be a great use of a forum.

To the nth degree, if you could find an association that was willing to go the extra mile and put in the time and the effort and build something that was akin to a Facebook, what a great way for association members to get to know each other. Overall, it's going to increase your membership and participation in the association as a whole.

MM: **Why have some of these aspects been slow to catch on within the industry?**

KJ: The old guard won't let go. That is very much a part of it.

I went to lunch with one of the directors from an association here in Chicago, and I said, "Wow, look at all these great things we can do." He looked at me and said, "You know they won't go for that, Keith."

That is the attitude. You get the oldtimers, and they'll be there forever, but the new people aren't coming back.



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MM: What challenges do planners face when it comes to a new technological medium?

KJ: Time. I think [planners] are slow [to catch on] only because planners don't have a lot of time. The time they need to invest, to learn how to do these things, is the biggest thing holding them back.

If you have something that is easy to implement, it's going to catch on. The iPod® is a prime example. The iPod itself is not that great of a technological leap, but what Apple did was make it easy. Because it's easy, everybody can do it.

MM: Several industry associations have begun exploring social media applications. Do any examples stick out for you?

KJ: If they are exploring, then they're actually behind. They, at this point, need to be implementing.

[For] the current generation, this is how they communicate. The associations need to get on board with that if they want to grow their memberships. Everybody's doing it a little bit here, a little bit there, but no one has seemed to capture all of it and bring it all together to make a powerhouse.

MM: Last year, MPI promoted its Professional Education Conference by including, in its email newsletter, links to YouTube videos focusing on the conference's new "MeetDifferent" theme. How do you believe this reflects on MPI in relation to technology trends?

KJ: It's a good first step. It is great in that they're doing it, but they really need to go to the next step and start to integrate everything together.

Companies and associations and everybody... they'll say, "Oh, you know what, this is really great, let's put this video up." But no one sits down and says, "Okay, over the next 12 months, let's plan. Every time we have an event, let's go ahead and video that event and put that up on the web. The next time we have our conference, let's videotape the keynote. Let's start using video in our email invitations." They're taking little tiny pieces of it, which is great, but it's not a strategy.

MM: What is the difference in perception between receiving a message that is pushed to the audience vs. coming across it on one's own?

KJ: I get a link from my association, I know where it's coming from. I know it's safe. I'm absolutely likely to click on it.

If, say, MPI sends me a link to something and I think it's really interesting, I am very likely to forward that on, whereas if I stumble across something on YouTube, I'm likely to look at it and go, "Oh, wow, that's pretty cool" - and then move on.

In a perfect world, what you really want is a combination. You want to be able to send out your marketing message via email to your membership and have them pass it along. What you're also hoping to do is have content that's good enough that someone will stumble upon it on YouTube, think it is great and forward it on. Then it becomes a viral message, which is what everybody wants.

MM: Some planners say their companies restrict access to social media sites. Have some organizations lost sight of this con-

stituency by focusing on social media marketing?

K: You can't ignore the masses to please a few. With some companies, you're never going to be able to get past what they think are security issues. It's up to the association to make their content so good that the planner wants to go home and log in and take a look.

In the case of medium-sized companies, where an individual can have a say in the security protocols, you want to have [planners] go to their boss or go to their IT department and say, "Look at this; look at what we're learning; look at the good things that are happening in our department and in our company because of the content we're seeing here."

M: Is there potential for such policies to adapt as social media earns its place in the industry?

K: [This] is absolutely possible, if there's a compelling argument. If you just have funny videos up, [companies are] never going to allow [access]. But if you have compelling content, and the boss can see it and say, "You know, this is really good - you really do need to be on here during the work day," you need to be able to do that so they'll whitelist that site.

M: What must happen before social media has full credibility as an industry tool?

K: I think the YouTube buzz needs to wear off. It starts off funny, it starts off as a joke, and now people are starting to see the actual benefit. Social media is a tool. Yes, it can be a lot of fun and games, but if you use it to its fullest potential, it does have the opportunity to be something that everyone can benefit from.

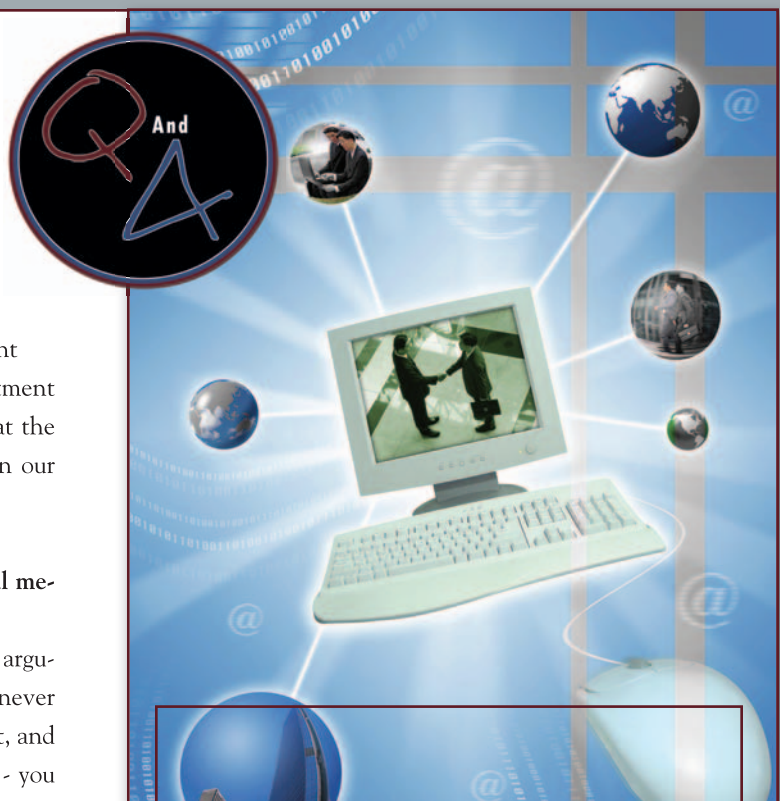
M: Do generational differences define who will embrace these capabilities?

K: The twentysomethings, the kids right out of college, they've already embraced it. It's a part of the fabric of their lives. Then you have the people of my generation, where it's there, but it's not 100%. I don't have a MySpace page. Everyone tells me I should, but I don't. People of the generation above mine [are] probably a lot less likely.

If you have a tool that is so useful that people cannot ignore it, then even the oldest generation will give it a try.

M: In light of some of the recent multi-million and -billion dollar transactions in the social media realm, how will these capabilities fare in the future?

K: Social media, the event community notwithstanding, is



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becoming a part of... who we are. Regardless of whether you think you use social media, if you subscribe to a blog, you're using social media. If you participate in a forum, if you go on to YouTube and look at a video, you're participating in social media. It's becoming a part of our lives and things we do every day. I think the future is absolutely, positively, 100% bright.

I do think it will also level off. You had radio in the '30s and '40s, [then] all of a sudden you had TV, so radio hit a plateau, and that's where it stayed. Television was king for a long, long time - that's where people spent hours and hours a day. Then, all of a sudden, here's the internet - well, TV kind of leveled off.

I think it's going to go that way, but I don't think it will ever go away. People need to start thinking about it and actually adopting it in the way that they run their events. That is the trend. You don't want to get left behind.



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MM: Where will social media go in the future? Are we on our way toward meeting with others as holograms?

KJ: Absolutely. I do think that is somewhere we're actually going to go. I was reading an article a couple of weeks ago [about experiments] with how to get the hologram to move.

Luckily for planners, nothing will ever take the place of meeting face-to-face. There is something fantastic and energizing about getting people together as a group that you can never, ever take away.

I do see more 3D interaction - Second Life, for example. I don't think it's going to go anywhere, especially in the meeting world. It's a good fad. It's a great way to get the younger generation in there to look at your company. But it takes a lot of time. It's not very easy, especially for people who have never used Second Life. To get your avatar to move can be an absolute nightmare. So that will never catch on.

I do think one of the next steps we're going to see are video forums, where people will... all talk face-to-face. I think that's kind of the direction we're going in now.

What Are You Doing?



Christy Bareijsza,
CMP, CMM

How it can work...

- One planner on social media.

As an experiment in social media usage, Midwest Meetings explored MySpace in search of planners who are currently using this site to enhance their online exposure. We found Christy Bareijsza, CMP, CMM of The Red Carpet Events, who has posted a profile of her company on MySpace.

Professionally, Bareijsza uses MySpace, LinkedIn and Facebook. These platforms, she says, allow her to make personal connections with potential clients.

"I use social media to present my past meetings and events, along with current media coverage, in a fun, unique fashion," Bareijsza says. "It's another way to introduce the client to the business on a more personal level, along with allowing them to see a face behind a corporation."

Through her use of social media sites, Bareijsza has gained valuable networking tools that have allowed her to "cross-market" with colleagues and acquaintances. This ability, she says, has enhanced her referral-driven business. However, Bareijsza cautions that some care must be taken with social media usage.

"Social media will allow the client to have a more layered view of the company, which can have both a positive and negative outcome," Bareijsza says. "It can be a positive experience with networking and building business relationships, but can also allow a sense of vulnerability to the corporation by allowing the client to see more of the internal workings. As long as you can be in control of what is exposed to the internet, social media is a marketing advantage for the meeting and event industry."



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