

Home Office Away From Home Office

From plasma screens hidden in the wall to Wi-Fi-equipped amphitheatres, hoteliers taking meeting spaces high-tech.

By Adam Kirby, Associate Editor

For hotels that depend on steady meetings and events business to drive occupancy and revenue, it is no longer enough to simply offer meeting planners a plain room with tables and chairs and an overhead projector. As teleconferencing becomes more mainstream and as expectations for flashy technology grows, hotels are increasingly pressed to provide meeting spaces that “wow” attendees and, at the very least, replicate the technological capabilities of a standard office boardroom. That means, among other things, wireless and wired Internet access, flat-screen monitors, Smart Board capabilities and, on a less high-tech note, high-quality furnishings.

The Phoenician in Scottsdale, Arizona, boasts a conference room with which even tech junkies are impressed, manned by a full-time technology butler employed by PSAV Presentation Services. The

hotel's Red Rock Boardroom offers eight flat-screen monitors that rise out of a custom-designed, 24-seat mahogany conference table. At the click of a remote, three in-room cameras swivel into place, ready for videoconferencing. With another click, a canvas painting on the wall rolls away to reveal a plasma screen.

A 65-in. (165-cm) interactive Smart Board with touch-screen capability complements the monitor, and notes that are scribbled virtually onto the board can be printed out or downloaded. If yet more display capability is required, a 72-in. (182-cm) projection screen emerges from the wall. Meeting room necessities like leather-clad chairs and wireless Internet are present, as are adjustable surround-sound and data routing systems. The Phoenician's fiber-optic infrastructure makes it an attractive conference center for the nearby Arizona Heart Institute, which

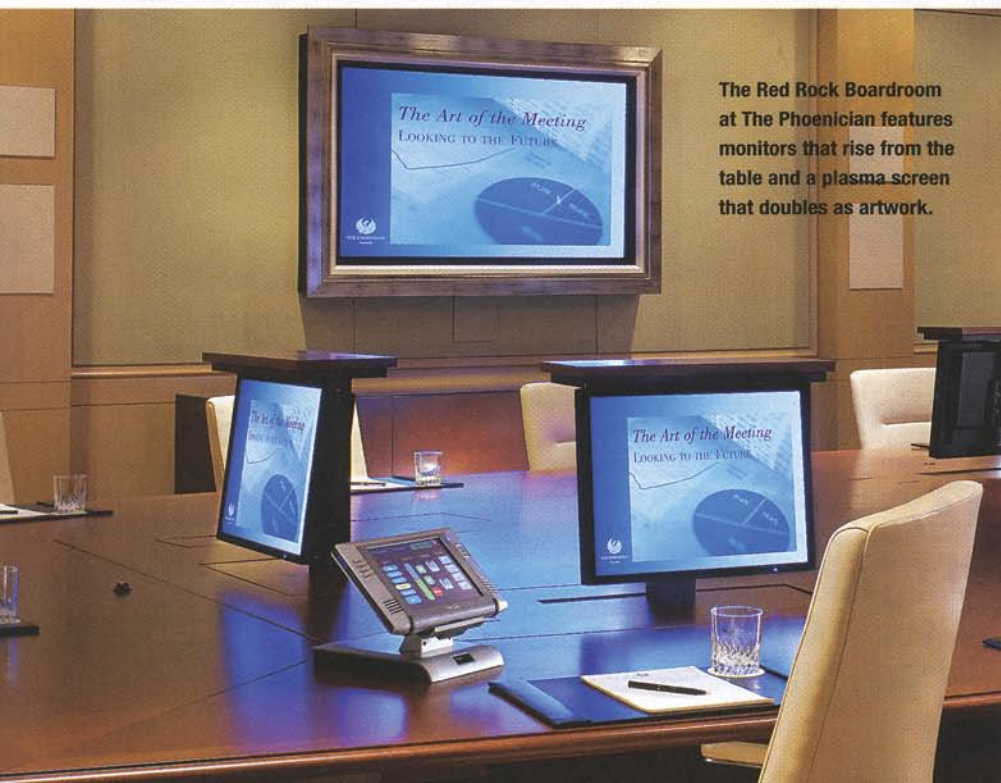
regularly beams high-definition video of live surgical procedures to groups of doctors gathered in hotel meeting spaces.

In designing the Red Rock Boardroom, part of a US\$5.5 million property renovation earlier this year, The Phoenician relied on the expertise of PSAV, which serves as an onsite technology consultant at more than 700 hotels worldwide. Typically, as is the case at The Phoenician, PSAV employees are based on property and act as integrated members of the hotel's staff, ready to plan and support event technology needs.

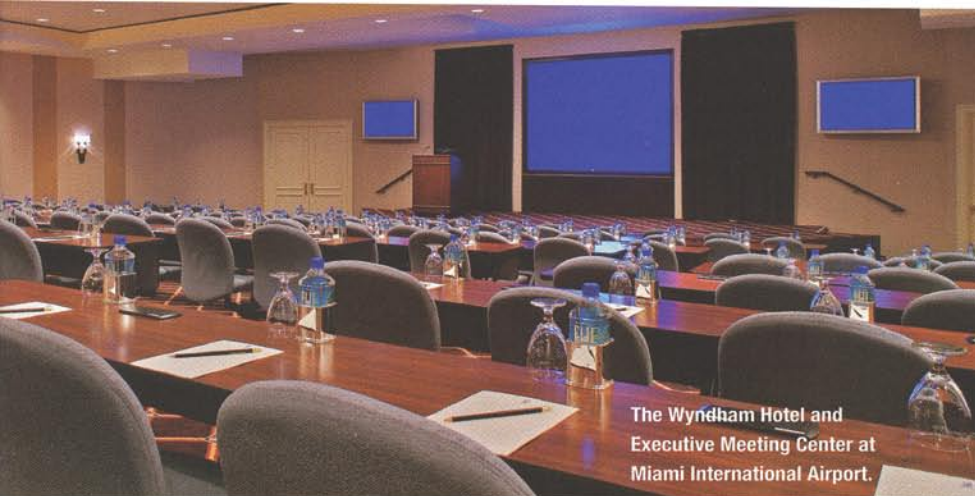
The Phoenician's director of sales and marketing, David Richard, calls the PSAV crew a valuable extension of the hotel sales team, taking the burden of understanding the ins and outs of technology off the shoulders of the rest of the hotel staff. “A hotel could not afford to keep up on all the changes in technology on a day-to-day basis,” Richard says. “That is why we want to partner with such a strong partner like PSAV, because they know what the cutting-edge technology is, and quite honestly, that is not our core competency as hoteliers.” Mike Stephenson, a PSAV employee who works as The Phoenician's director of event technology, says the primary goal is to create a working atmosphere at the hotel that is as good as or better than a group's home office.

The PSAV staff at the newly renovated Hyatt Regency O'Hare near Chicago has a similar philosophy, although without a state-of-the-art boardroom like The Phoenician. Events technology requests at this Hyatt property are handled on a more à la carte basis. “We like every meeting, more or less, to be an experience. We like to have each planner let us cater what they need for the meeting,” says Brad Wells, the hotel's director of event technology.

Technology needs and expectations vary widely from event to event, of



The Red Rock Boardroom at The Phoenician features monitors that rise from the table and a plasma screen that doubles as artwork.



The Wyndham Hotel and Executive Meeting Center at Miami International Airport.

course, but Wells says the closest thing to a standard technology package nowadays includes two rear-projection screens, a customized speaker backdrop, an optimized line-array sound system, light-emitting diode displays, moveable lights and high-capacity bandwidth. PSAV charges in the neighborhood of US\$10,000 for a few days' use of that level of equipment and service at the O'Hare Hyatt, of which the hotel gets a share of revenue, Wells says.

The hotel, with the help of PSAV, will soon launch a Web service to simplify and expedite the speaker presentation preparation process. A PowerPoint or other presentation requiring digital visual accompaniment can be uploaded to the hotel's network in advance of arrival at the property, meaning the presentation is ready to go the moment the speaker walks into the meeting room. Because the data can be accessed remotely from anywhere on property, it also lessens the stress of a last-minute room change, Wells says.

Planners Notice Tech Upgrades

The Ritz-Carlton St. Louis used to outsource its meetings technology responsibilities, too. That was until last October, when the hotel unveiled its newly renovated 140-seat amphitheater, which got US\$600,000 worth of audio-visual technology upgrades to make it one of the premier meeting spaces in the Midwest. The Wi-Fi-equipped amphitheater's lighting systems, 16-channel sound board, projector with cinema screen, various video inputs and individual computer workstations were all designed with the novice user in mind. Although just about everything in the room can be controlled at the lectern, the hotel does keep technologically competent staff on hand during events—just in case.

The property has a traditional 19th-century European design, but the amphitheater look is entirely different, with modern furnishings and artwork, intended to emphasize the facility's high-tech capabilities. Use of the amphitheater spiked

50% following the improvements, while overall group bookings at the Ritz-Carlton are up 10% year over year, says General Manager Erich Steinbock. Just as important, the installation of live videoconferencing technology kept the hotel relevant for medical conferences held by nearby Washington University. "If we had not made the changes, we would have been very vulnerable. We had to keep up to date, otherwise we might have lost some of that business," Steinbock says.

Even though the hotel's meeting facilities offer more technology options than ever before, requests for supplementary equipment, like audio mixing boards, has actually increased as of late. "Event planners figure, 'OK, we have a good base of technology, now let's expand on that,'" Steinbock says. "Most groups want even more stuff. It was totally unexpected, and it is an extra revenue source for us now."

Another example of meetings going high-tech comes from Starwood Hotels & Resorts' new Sheraton prototype. While officials are not quite ready to discuss details, the new approach to meetings unveiled at June's NYU investment conference included plans for a "mini-link" for meeting attendees to connect during breaks; a meeting planners' "office" with high-tech tools; and a fresh take on food and beverage during breaks.

Hilton Web Tools Simplify Events Booking

Hilton Hotels Corp.'s new e-Events and Guest List Manager tools, which launched earlier this year throughout the Hilton portfolio of brands within North America, allow event planners to bypass the old request-for-proposal paradigm in favor of real-time online booking of small functions requiring fewer than 25 guestrooms.

As much as a year in advance, planners can book meeting space, high speed Internet access, food and beverage and audio-visual equipment online, with immediate confirmation of availability. The company's proprietary OnQ technology links all hotels in the Hilton group

to a single-platform system, enabling planners to see availability and pricing across the portfolio to book with e-Events. The system allows F&B to be reserved separately from facilities and equipment. "Oftentimes when you are booking a small group, you need to reserve the rooms but you are not ready to reserve the F&B component," says Bob Brooks, Hilton's vice president of e-sales. "You can come back and reserve that at another time."

The complementary technology of Guest List Manager gives guests access to a group code provided by the event planner so they may reserve their own rooms within the room block. Planners instantly can see who has booked guestrooms for the event, or they can reserve rooms on behalf of guests, either way keeping a valuable grasp of the current headcount. Hilton does not require e-Events users to be HHonors members, though they must create user accounts.

Group bookings of 25 guestrooms or less represent about 60% of incoming sales leads, Brooks says. In the first six months of e-Events' existence, Hilton booked some 800 meetings online, and the company predicts about 12,000 meetings will be booked using e-Events during 2008. ♦

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Pure Differentiation: Allergen-friendly conference rooms are a new event amenity.

Events Technology VENDORS

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