BY IAN FRAMSON

Help in Planning Your Wi-Fi Network

We live in a connected world where many of today's meetings require Internet connectivity and Wi-Fi access. If your event takes place at a hotel or convention center, the venue will almost always have some capacity to provide a network. Non-traditional spaces like art galleries, museums and restaurants may have limited network infrastructure or none at all.

Since network planning doesn't usually fall within the normal skill set of an exhibition or conference planner, how do you evaluate the scope of your event's needs and verify a venue's ability to provide?

Working with an independent network consultant can help any event organizer:

■ Create a network plan for the event.
■ Analyze venue infrastructure to identify risks.
■ Competitively bid to replace the in-house Internet provider.

Having a "geek" on your team puts you on a level playing field with your venue and gives you negotiating leverage when it comes to big-ticket items like bandwidth and Wi-Fi buyouts. A consultant can help you assess the scale of your group's networking needs; communicate those needs in "tech speak" to your venue; identify areas of potential savings; and provide options, if necessary, to augment the network.

To engage a consultant, the best

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strategy is to start early, during your site selection process. Venues are notorious for including Internet "exclusivity" clauses in their agreements, so make sure you read your contract and **negotiate early to remove these types of restrictions** and any attached surcharges. Not doing so could limit your ability to utilize some of your consultant's services, should you decide to contract with a third-party networking team.

You'll want to include a sentence like this one in your RFP and venue contract (of course, consult your legal counsel):

> Meeting Group reserves the right to utilize the supplier of its choice for services or rentals for any telecommunications service, including Internet connectivity, with no surcharge from the venue or its in-house supplier.

If there is a disconnect between your needs and your venue's ability to provide (or their price), many consultants offer a full range of network engineering services, such as Wi-Fi network deployment (by room or a buyout of the whole facility) and Ethernet drops. They may also provide additional network services — procuring bandwidth; offering on-site support; and setting up virtual local area networks (VLANs), service set identifiers (SSIDs), firewalls and network fail-over equipment.

Independent consultants **work directly for the planner**, in contrast with in-house providers who work for the venue. They are not bound by fixed in-

frastructure or forced to share revenue with the venue. They operate in a competitive environment with more latitude to provide economical pricing, negotiate contracts with bandwidth providers and procure the latest equipment.

Before approaching a third-party consultant, meeting professionals should prepare the following **baseline information** about their event:

■ Floor plans of the venue (include meal hall, keynote, expo floor, breakouts, foyers, patios, all public space, staff office, speaker-ready room).
■ Proposed space allocation with specific usage requirements and capacity per room (for example, Wi-Fi for 50 people in each breakout room, one Ethernet drop at each speaker podium).
■ General Wi-Fi expectations from attendees, speakers, staff and vendors.
■ Types of devices (laptops, smartphones, tablets) and the types of content expected to be consumed (e-mail, social networking, video, mobile apps).
■ Peak usage times in the program schedule.
■ Technical assistance requirements (roaming network engineers, physical help desk).
■ Last year's bandwidth usage report and invoice, if available.

Due Diligence. Selecting an independent network consulting company requires some due diligence. Internet connectivity should be their primary or sole line of work; a network consultancy/travel agency/espresso bar may not be completely invested in providing top-tier Internet services. They should also carry general liability insurance and be well versed in the unique attributes

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and requirements of limited-duration events.

Other hallmarks of good network providers: The company's experience with events of a similar size and technical scope is important. Ask for referrals. The expertise of the personnel — specifically network engineers — is critical. You would never ask your plumber to paint your house. Don't assume that an audio/visual technician who can plug in a router is trained in network engineering.

Planners should ask about professional certifications held by each network engineer. The Computing Technology Industry Association (CompTIA) issues such educational certifications for network engineering as A+, CASP and Network+. Certified Wireless Network Professional (CWNP) is another vendor-neutral certifying body that issues CWNA, CWNE and CWSP certifications. If your network team plans to operate equipment from Cisco, HP, MikroTik, or Xirrus, ask if they carry manufacturer-specific certifications.

In addition to certifications, consultants should be able to **guarantee their work** by providing a written service-level agreement. They should monitor social networking sites like Twitter during your event and be able to quickly resolve network-related issues voiced by your attendees. Make sure you receive daily updates of usage and access to issues and resolutions as they happen. And finally, you should request a post-event usage report to help with future planning.

Cost. Depending on how you use your network consultant, you can expect to pay an hourly fee or receive a bid to provide the network for your entire event. A bid will generally include three basic components:

■ *Bandwidth.* Contracting with a local provider to bring a circuit into the building or purchasing bandwidth from the venue. (You may need more than one circuit for redundancy.)

■ *Labor.* Network engineers to design, set up and manage the network, run Ethernet drops and provide on-site technical support.

■ *Equipment Rental.* Wireless access points or arrays, routers, switches, load balancers, servers and Ethernet cabling.

In addition to the network consultant's service, your venue may try to charge for drayage, electrical, cross-connections, telecom closet access and other surcharges (to make up for lost revenue when the in-house supplier is not utilized). Some venues even charge a hefty fee to disable their own network to ensure it does not interfere with your consultant's equipment.

Your consultant should be competent in soliciting your venue's unpublished price list and negotiating to reduce or remove these fees. You have the right to review in advance all costs for Internet-related services from your consultant and your venue. There should be no surprises.

Whether your motivation is a higher quality network, ensuring a competitive price or some combination of both, make sure you negotiate with your venue early to remove the Internet exclusivity contract clause and any associated surcharges. With your newfound negotiating leverage (and your network consultant), you can be confident making an informed decision about your event's use of Wi-Fi and Internet connectivity. ■