

Conference Resilience: Guide to Doing Business in Executive Conference Facilities

The executive conference facility is one of pro AV's most resilient project bases. Here's where the opportunities are.

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For event organizers, one sure-fire way to persuade people to sit through a daylong meeting is to hold it someplace where there are ample recreational facilities—perhaps even enough so attendees might bring along the spouses and kids and wrap a family vacation around the event.

That strategy helps explain why, for example, places such as amusement parks are steadily adding executive conference facilities. Not only can such facilities represent an additional draw, but they're also a way to goose business during the off-season.

"There's been a rise in indoor water parks," says Derek Paquin, director of business development at Sensory Technologies, an Indianapolis-based integrator. "They put in large, elaborate conference centers and hotels associated with these indoor and outdoor water parks. That way, they can get conferences throughout the year."

Of course, water parks aren't an isolated example. From law firms to banks to pharmaceutical companies, executive conference facilities are being added or upgraded at a healthy pace, say integrators, vendors, and analysts. In fact, many say these bigger-than-a-conference-room but smaller-than-a-convention-center venues represent one of the few bright spots in pro AV these days.



Photo: Courtesy Videosonic

Why? Business goes on, and that means so must meetings. And because spending on an executive conference facility typically allows an enterprise to slash travel costs, it's easier to make a business case for such projects as opposed to, say, digital signage in a challenging advertising market, or a surveillance system that doesn't bolster the bottom line.

Executive conference facilities are showing up at hotels, corporations, colleges, and even large churches. Many are built as stand-alone destinations dedicated to hosting meetings (see "Growth by Necessity"). They're often characterized as much by their technology (conferencing, staging and lighting) as their functionality (auditoriums, conference rooms, and/or large halls that can be configured to accommodate one or many functions).

"We're seeing a fair amount of growth in this area," says Stephen Seable, product manager for DSP and amplifiers at Buena Park, Calif.-based Yamaha Commercial Audio Systems. "I believe mainly it's because [groups] are trying to do more in less time. Teleconferencing comes in to play a lot."

Save Money, Make Money

If the major driver behind executive conference facilities could be summed up in a single word, it would be "money." Sometimes the flow goes like this: A company rents an executive conference facility several times a year—say, for analyst meetings—to save money versus building its own venue, a big motivation in the current economic slump. That in turn means more business for the hotel, convention center, or other facility that provides these specialized spaces.

Other businesses, universities, and enterprises, on the other hand, prefer to build or expand their own conference facilities. On a corporate campus you might find an elaborate conference facility that could support company meetings, mini trade shows, or other non-corporate functions. Some companies build facilities and open them to outsiders.

"The law firms, from what we've seen, are the ones that have really capitalized on it lately and have used [conference facilities] for outreach to the community," says Sensory's Paquin.



Photo: Courtesy Sensory Technologies

Sensory Technologies integrated the training room and others at Bose McKinney & Evans' new facility (above) while Southern Business Communications put in a multiuse auditorium for Office Depot (below).

For example, a law firm that specializes in real estate might use a new executive conference facility for an open house on homeowners' rights in the face of foreclosure. In such a situation, the client often prefers a design that lets the AV fade into the background.

"We want our clients to walk in and feel they are in good hands," says Jon Miller, chief information officer at Indianapolis law firm Bose McKinney & Evans. "From the technology side, we do this by minimizing its appearance in the design, yet having it ready at the touch of a button."

Videoconferencing and telepresence equipment is increasingly common in executive conference facilities, as companies look to connect offices scattered around a region, country, or the world. That's also yet another example of the money angle: conferencing rather than traveling.

"Pharmaceutical companies, banks, and other geographically dispersed organizations" are showing the most interest in these facilities, says Jim Smith, CTS, CVE, consulting systems engineer for AV

channels at Pleasanton, Calif.-based Polycom.

Listen and Learn

Some enterprises have researched their options and have strong ideas about what they want. That was the case at Bose McKinney & Evans, where Miller and chief operating officer Vicki Bruce visited several conference centers around the country and then surveyed the firm's attorneys to determine which technologies they wanted.

"The results were a bit surprising: The items that were most important to them were audio conference calling, followed by easy scheduling," Miller says. "High on my own list was technology that disappeared when not in use and continuity of features between different conference rooms."



Photo: Grossman Photography

Office Depot's multiuse auditorium

Other enterprises aren't so well versed or articulate. "In this economy, a lot of times customers are searching for a different way of meeting," says Brian Lagestee, senior vice president of technology and business development at Long Beach, Calif.-based PSAV. "They might not know the right terminology. They might call it 'virtual meeting' or a 'webcast' when they [really] mean a videoconference. We listen to what experience they're trying to achieve."

During the design stage, it's important to understand who'll be using a facility and how—a point that's as obvious as it is complex. For example, some clients say that they want everything to be wireless because they believe that's the only solution to their concerns.

"Quite often, in high-end executive spaces, they want the technology hidden," says Scott Woolley, RCDD, CTS, product marketing director for professional audio products at Salt Lake City-based ClearOne Communications. "They say, 'We want a wireless system,' and what they're really saying is: 'I don't want to see any wires. I don't want clutter on the table.' So they've preconceived of how you achieve that."

If the client's current facility has a rat's nest of cables, that can tip off the integrator about what they really want. Asking them to explain why they prefer wireless is another way to ferret out the real motivation.

The answer isn't trivial because following that guidance could result in an installation that's unnecessarily complex or a budget-buster. The same advice applies to many other types of requests.

"They'll say, 'I need a connection for everybody who has a laptop so anybody can display [a presentation],'" Woolley says. "The natural inclination of an AV person is to put an individual jack in for everyone. Now you need a big [RGB] switcher to route all of those signals. The solution may simply be putting a piece of software on their computer that lets them log onto a server, which is

connected to the projector."

That solution highlights the importance of understanding who will be using the facility. If it primarily will be employees, then software might be the best bet. But if many of the users will be visitors, then asking them to load software onto their laptops might not be a practical solution.

For facilities that will host a lot of visitors, one option is to include a computer in the design and then put a USB port at every seat.

"You can take a flash drive and just plug it into the table, and then you can use the computer in the room to display," says Lagestee, who frequently uses this design. "We also have multiple connections so they can connect their laptops if it's something that they need to run on their own machine."

Networking Skills Key

Accommodating laptops isn't the only reason IT skills are key for integrators looking to target the executive conference facilities market. Networking skills—such as knowing how much bandwidth a hotel, for example, needs to support all its videoconferencing—are key for integrators working in executive conference facilities. And on corporate campuses, they're critical. AV pros who lack basic IT know-how—at least enough to hold a conversation with the client's IT department—put the project at risk.

"Conferencing communication technology all use the corporate data network for the end-to-end communication path," says Polycom's Smith. "It is that environment which will cause untold hours of excess labor if the AV team has little fundamental understanding."

IT skills also can help integrators find elegant, cost-effective solutions, such as using software on laptops rather than RGB switchers to enable presentations. "It's looking at those [situations] and saying, 'There may be something out of my realm and in the IT world that I ought to look at to solve this problem,'" says ClearOne's Woolley.

Chances are the AV pro will know more about IT than a conference facility's ultimate users, and there's no rule of thumb for whether an executive conference facility should have a technology operator.

"There are many environments which would actually benefit from being operator-free, but the corporate culture demands a hand-holder be present," says Smith. "So the system design must accommodate the need for operator intervention or not. Make sure this is considered in the design as it's difficult to change behaviors later."

That flexibility was a requirement for a multiuse auditorium in a Florida health care facility. The auditorium uses Polycom's SoundStructure conferencing platform, which is configured with dual output paths: one that allows the room to be fully manual and the other fully automated.

"In case of difficulties, they could also just 'pull the plug' and revert the room to a conventional AV room with no DSP," Smith says. "This satisfied their need for event reliability under any circumstance."

Bose McKinney & Evans also took a mixed approach. "With 10 minutes of training, our attorneys can walk into any conference room and operate the basic functions," Miller says. "Our IT help desk can remote control the touchpanel controllers in the conference center, so we can hop on and help

them access more advanced features if they need them."

The location of the touch panel is another factor.

"A lot of times they put the AMX, Crestron or whatever control right in the middle of the boardroom table or in a spot where only the people attending the meetings can manage it effectively," Lagestee says.

The Configurable Space

Wherever central control ultimately is located, it may not be practical if, for example, the room can be configured into a much larger (or smaller) space. It's one of the defining characteristics of today's executive conference facility: a multipurpose space that can accommodate a variety of functions—often at the same time—so that their operators can get as much use as possible out of their facility, and thus realize the greatest return on their investment.

Reconfigurable spaces have some unique requirements. For example, DSPs that automatically sense whether the space has been expanded or partitioned can adjust the audio settings accordingly. Wireless devices such as mics can also provide flexibility as rooms are altered.

Flexibility also comes in the form of a mix of installed equipment and rental/staging. For example, to win business, some facilities prefer to install AV staples such as projectors and have a rental/staging company lined up to provide additional types of gear.

"Having 'tricks in your bag,' such as telepresence, that you can pull out as clients demand it gives the facility an edge that other facilities might not have," says Russell Gentner, president of Listen Technologies, a Bluffdale, Utah-based manufacturer of wireless audio products.

Some facilities include DJ inputs to accommodate rental/staging gear.

"DJs would bring their own equipment but can send a feed to the 'house system' so that the music and announcements can carry to breakout rooms and other spaces during an event," says Glenn Polly, owner of VideoSonic, a New York-based integrator.

If the facility sometimes will host press conferences and other events that are broadcast or webcast, then the design needs to make it easy for equipment to be plugged in.

"We've provided press box inputs and splitters at various locations," Polly says. "We've even done a full-blown broadcast plate with triax connectors installed in a loading dock where a TV production truck can park."

Which types of venues are most likely to use rental/staging? The answer: it depends.

"The casinos, conference centers, resorts, and indoor water parks want to be stand-alone and internally capable of providing all that," says Sensory's Paquin. "But [at] stand-alone hotels not connected to a convention center or entertainment facility, you see more simple installs supported by a majority of rental."

"Facilities such as hotels get a percentage of the AV rental that comes in," says Jeanne Stiernberg, principal consultant at Sherman Oaks, Calif.-based Stiernberg Consulting. "It's a revenue-contribution item for them."