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TECH

7 Steps to Get Your Event Wi-Fi Ready

By Dawn Reiss

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Planning a conference or a convention takes a lot of work. But making sure there is the appropriate amount of Wi-Fi while trying to minimize costs can be particularly challenging. The problem isn't going to get any easier as more attendees bring multiple mobile devices and wireless tablets and laptops. Convention attendees still expect the same broadband experience they receive at the office, even with hundreds of other users trying to access the same Wi-Fi signal. Ian Framson (pictured), CEO of [Trade Show Internet](#), has helped plan Wi-Fi needs for large events including the Outdoor Summer Retail Market Convention in Salt Lake City, the Shopper Marketing Expo in Chicago and the Nissan Leaf Zero Emission Tour in L.A.'s Dodger Stadium. He shares some of his tips to help you get your next event Wi-Fi ready.

1. Figure out who you're serving and what their needs are. "Not every conference needs Wi-Fi," Framson says. "Sometimes attendees can use their own network and that can go a long way. Many convention planners say Wi-Fi is nice to have, but once they realize the true costs, they have to have a business purpose to justify that cost." If a conference is more than a day, assume attendees will need Wi-Fi to help them serve needs at their day jobs.

2. Figure out what level of Wi-Fi service people expect. That can vary depending on the type of conference if it's public or private, trade show or association, corporate or nonprofit. The age of attendees matters, too. Millennials will need more than baby boomers. To understand the stakeholders and their devices, read exit surveys.

3. Understand what types of content will be consumed. It's important to know if the keynotes, breakout sessions and vendors will be streaming videos and asking attendees to engage with various presentations interactively or just listen. Will there be software training, YouTube videos, social media updates, email and mobile event apps? Then determine the usage needs according to the program schedule.

4. Know who will use the network. Decide if the network will be open to attendees and exhibitors, or if there will be a separate network for speakers and staff.

5. Consider the bandwidth, upload and download speeds. There are different tiers of bandwidth. How many megabits are transferred in a second and the speed it's done determines the bandwidth for users. The minimum, for occasionally using social media or the casual use of email, is usually 256 kilobits (Kbit), Framson says. "If you have people constantly surfing the Web, you need one-half to one megabit (Mbit) per second," Framson says. "People will start screaming if they are multitasking and you don't have that."

6. Know the number of Wi-Fi access points and their capacities. Find out about redundancy. Is there only one path to the Internet? "A lot of clients ask for redundancy with two different circuits and a failover switch so we have a full backup," Framson says.

7. Insist on service level guarantee contract with the service level provider. Get a service level guarantee in writing, Framson says, and have a financial penalty for the provider if the Wi-Fi network isn't up and running 99 percent of the time.

One important final piece of advice: It might be a good idea to allocate a Wi-Fi budget. Many event planners don't allocate a reasonable budget for Wi-Fi, Framson says, usually \$50 per attendee for a three day event, assuming most attendees have one to two devices per person.

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