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BEST PRACTICES

January 2005

Best Practices: Hands-free

Name badge uses RFID technology to track satellite session attendance, proving value for grantors who underwrite the sessions

By Cathy Chatfield-Taylor

Go through the buffet line to fill a plate and pour a beverage, then line up with your breakfast and belongings to attend a free educational session. Now wonder, how will you juggle it all when you need to sign in?

That was no problem for the nearly 500 healthcare professionals who attended the MASCC/ISOO 16th International Symposium on Supportive Care in Cancer, held June 24-27, 2004, at the Loews Miami Beach Hotel. Name badges embedded with radio frequency identification (RFID) chips could be scanned from several inches away, even if the badges were oriented the wrong way.

“Our reader will scan the badges in less than a second, and it does that whether they’re facing out or in,” says Karl Ludwig, President of Chicago-based Hightech Knowledge Inc., which supplied the RFID system for the symposium. “The speed and accuracy for people coming into sessions is a quantum leap forward.”

Organized by the Cleveland Clinic, Lyndhurst, OH, for the Multinational Association of Supportive Care in Cancer (MASCC) and the International Society of Oral Oncology (ISOO), the symposium included 84 scientific sessions and 37 exhibits, plus 11 satellite sessions that were underwritten by grantors such as Amgen and Merck.

In past years, registration had been managed the old-fashioned way, with delegates sending in their forms and organizers entering names in a database and printing name badges, then manually checking in registrants for paid sessions. The free satellite sessions used a simple sign-in sheet, which grantors then took away with them.

This year, The Cleveland Clinic introduced electronic registration with two goals in mind: gathering demographic data and tracking attendance at simultaneous satellite sessions, which would be held up to three at a time over breakfast and lunch.

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“MASCC didn’t have access to the attendee lists for each of the satellite sessions,” says Steven Foster of UNITECH Communications, a subsidiary of Cleveland Clinic charged with organizing the symposium. “They knew people attended, but they couldn’t analyze after the fact how many went to which satellites, and how important it was to them.”

Using custom software installed on the registration computers, the RFID badges encoded name and contact information in a pin-size chip that could be read via radio waves. Each badge printed on a standard barcode printer in about five seconds.

Satellite session entrances were equipped with two handheld scanners each, which enabled an average of 120 attendees to enter without stopping to sign in. Although mid- to long-range antennas are available, this setup used short-range antennas to prevent badges from being scanned without the wearer’s knowledge. The RFID readers processed people in about one third the time it would have taken using barcode scanners or magnetic stripe readers.

“It enabled us to use a quick process to scan their badges as they walked into the sessions,” Foster says. “Using RFID, the scanner didn’t have to be as close, and it didn’t have a laser shooting out at folks. It was very nonintrusive.”

Badges were also printed with 2-D barcodes that could be scanned by exhibitors using barcode scanners for lead retrieval. The more widely used equipment was less expensive to include in the booth packages than RFID scanners, which rented for around \$400 each.

The total cost of RFID is hard to break out, since the badge stock, scanners and software were packaged with registration computers, printers and technical support. As a rule, RFID is comparable in cost to 2-D barcodes, with one exception. Badge stock is slightly more expensive, at about \$1.29 per badge. Costs were recouped in the all-inclusive satellite session packages charged back to grantors.

The dual system added value for attendees, who enjoyed the hands-free convenience of RFID; exhibitors, who benefited from cost-effective lead retrieval; and MASCC, which gained control of satellite session reports. The reports revealed just how popular the free education is — a point that will not be lost on future grantors.

Cathy Chatfield-Taylor is a freelance writer/ editor. E-mail cathy@cc-tunlimited.com.

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Sidebar: MASCC/ISOO Symposium strategy

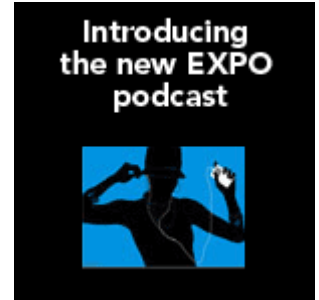
Goal: Report value of sponsored education.

Objective: Track demographic data for satellite session attendance.

Strategy: Use radio frequency identification (RFID) to provide convenient, contactless name badge reading.

Tactics: Encode RFID badges with contact information, equip satellite session entrances with two handheld scanners each, and collect recorded data for analysis about attendee preferences.

Results: Eleven satellite sessions attracted an average of 120 attendees each.





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