

Online Ticketing Takes Off at North American Events

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For readers who may not be fully up to speed on the ever-changing technology available to show management, online ticketing or e-ticketing as it is often called, is a web-based credit card payment and data gathering service specifically designed to meet the needs of consumer shows across North America, or for that matter, around the world. These services use real-time payment over a dedicated connection, usually utilizing the North American credit card processing network. This online tool can be customized and seamlessly integrated into existing event websites.

E-ticketing is a cost-effective innovation, designed for show organizers wishing to sell advance tickets online. The steps are very simple. The e-ticketing company provides a secure web page, often with the same look and feel as the event's website, using the event's graphics and adding data-gathering fields such as name, address, telephone number and e-mail address. To offset any e-ticketing charges to the visitor, many events offer an incentive to buy an advance ticket. It might be \$1 off admission, a printable voucher for free parking or the chance to win a special prize.

The attendee logs on to the event site and clicks on the "Buy your Tickets Here" button. The creation of this link is the only work required by show management. The attendee then chooses the type and quantity of e-ticket(s) to be purchased (i.e. adult, family pass, etc.). Once this choice has been made, attendee information is captured (name, address, telephone number, e-mail address, as well as any information required by show management). These details are held in a secure database for later use, but sensitive credit card data never gets stored online, to ensure maximum security. The attendee then confirms the purchase and provides credit card payment information. The credit card is processed in under 10 seconds and an authorization to proceed is given to the e-ticketing company. The attendee now has a screen printable receipt and confirmation of the e-ticket(s) purchased. E-tickets can be printed or saved for later printing. Within moments, a personalized e-mail confirmation, including link to e-ticket(s) purchased and receipt is sent to the attendee. The e-tickets page printed by the attendee can include a map to the event, dates

and hours, floor plan, keynote speakers, special event areas, etc. Attendees are returned to the host event website, often not even aware that they had left. E-ticketing is an amazing tool, if from nothing else but a cash management point of view. Money is collected from visitors before they even arrive at the show.

Security is always an issue. Companies in the online ticket business have to maintain the highest possible level of security to minimize the risk associated with accepting online credit card payments. However, there is little to worry about since it's the same technology used by financial institutions for online banking services. In addition, double firewalls are used today to keep the systems safe from external security threats. All sensitive data is heavily encrypted when traveling over the internet. Most online registration services have a direct connection to the central credit card processing center. This means that credit cards are approved or declined in less than 10 seconds. Security features are constantly reviewed by the credit card processing authorities to ensure credit card information is never accessible online.

In this day and age, when consumers are busy and impatient, they are pleased to be able to purchase their tickets online, and then go straight through the VIP entrance. It's easy and fast. The attendee arrives at the event with e-ticket(s) in hand. A gate terminal is in place at a designated entry point and all e-tickets are scanned to verify authenticity. The gate software time-and-date stamps the ticket. A green "Access Granted", a red "Duplicated Ticket" or a red "Invalid Ticket" message is displayed on the screen. This process prevents the use of a duplicate ticket. A strongly-worded warning is on each e-ticket, discouraging duplication.

The gate terminal also presents a wonderful opportunity for show management to capture data. The system may be customized to accept, count and sort various passes including V.I.P. passes, complimentary passes and exhibitor guest passes, eliminating the need to count and sort these after the event. Reports can be generated and a host of previously complex and time-consuming data can be

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Online Ticketing, continued from reverse side <<<

processed almost immediately. The exhibitor, media and speaker badges can be scanned, providing additional information to show management, including the comings and goings of each badge. Badge transfers are a concern at certain shows and this is an effective means of control.

"E-ticketing is another way to make the visitor experience hassle free", says Kevin LeGallais, with dmg world media. "Attendees get to prepay their tickets, reducing their wait time on site. We get to capture valuable information about our visitors. With this information, we can reinforce or adjust our marketing initiatives".

The e-ticketing process can be monitored by show management in real time. E-ticketing companies can provide the program administrator with back-end access, allowing show staff to display current enrollment, view information and/or monies collected or easily download data. This service is provided at pre-determined intervals by the online ticketing company, or show staff may do it themselves.

Most e-ticketing programs have been designed to be used with on-site computerized consumer show ticketing systems. Although the complete package of technology provides a seamless process for the show visitor, each module will usually operate independently.

When it comes to the cost of e-ticketing for consumer events, there are two models available to show managers. Show management can pay a setup fee that starts at about \$500 and increases depending on complexity. Then there is a fee for each ticket, ranging between 50 cents and \$1.00. The money collected can be deposited directly into a show client's account or the e-ticketing company can act as the banker. The onsite scanning stations are included in the fee. In the other model, the visitor pays a convenience fee of between \$1.00 and \$2.00 depending on ticket price. There is no setup fee to show management. Once again, funds can be deposited directly into the clients account or the online company can serve as banker. Scanning stations are again included, however minimum ticket quantities are often required or a fee is charged to show management.

It is important to note that research is the key to building a business relationship with an online registration company. As technology costs drop and more people are comfortable with e-ticketing, prices are going down. It seems that charges to show management are starting to vary widely depending on the number of registrants or

tickets issued. Some companies charge the traditional setup fee for the service and a monthly administration fee, but bill only about half of one percent of the ticket price for a consumer show ticket. So a \$12 ticket costs the organizer only six cents. In some cases that fee is waived in favor of a flat fee for the service. Research will lead show managers to the most suitable online registration and e-ticketing company.

"Our e-ticketing response varies widely from show to show. When we do a good job advertising our internet express tickets and include free parking with each ticket purchase, we get as much as an 18 percent participation", says Mike Wilbraham, Vice President of ShowSpan. Based in Grand Rapids, ShowSpan produces 14 home and garden, boat, fishing, sport, golf, RV, auto and travel events in Michigan and Wisconsin. "When we do not include a good premium, the use of e-ticketing may drop to three or four percent", he says. ShowSpan offers e-tickets primarily as an information-gathering tool. "In order to download a ticket, a buyer must provide a valid e-mail address so I can alert them about the show the following year. When I e-mail the show reminder the following year, it includes a link to the show website where they can purchase tickets." Wilbraham points out that he must allow people to opt out of the reminder, but almost nobody does. And in the four years ShowSpan has been offering e-tickets, only once has someone tried to use a photocopied ticket.

E-ticketing may seem daunting at first, but once in place, it's very simple to administer and removes a considerable burden from show management, who are at their busiest as an event prepares to open its doors. If you are not doing it now, chances are you will be doing it sooner than you think.

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