An old, but still relevant adage is to “find the right tool for the job.” Finding the right tool for the job requires knowledge of the job and realistic expectations. For example, you don’t use a straight screwdriver on a Phillips head screw, even though they perform similar tasks. An important starting point is perception – how do you and the vendor individually perceive the task at hand? Are you counting votes or gathering opinions?

First, remember that, outside of deliberative assemblies, keypads are tools most often used for gathering nonbinding opinions about some question. This is not like the way we use keypads in deliberative assemblies – to record votes. Votes are a completely different type of data – they are the result of considered deliberation by a person vested with the authority to make decisions in the best interest of the association. That difference becomes fundamental to how the keypads are used. Percentage graphs that are fine for an opinion survey are totally inappropriate for displaying the results of a vote; never use percentages or graphs for a vote – only show whole numbers. One reason is that the percentage calculations are usually rounded, making little or no difference in a survey, but possibly changing the result of a vote. And, delegates who voted are only antagonized if their percentage was so small that it wasn’t counted at all. Results of a two-thirds vote should be correctly calculated by the parliamentarian (who can do this easily by using the vote calculator in the Magic Gavel app, which has been calibrated for parliamentary accuracy).

When conducting an opinion survey, the more the merrier. However, it is vitally important in a delegate assembly or a board that only those people who have the right to vote are given access to keypads. Requiring delegates to check in at a special table for an assigned keypad is one way to manage this; don’t put keypads out on tables for just anyone to pick up.

Next comes an important logistical question: rent or buy? The long term costs should be considered; remember we’re addressing technology. It may seem attractive to make a one-time purchase, but what’s the real comparison? Cheaper keypads (or simple “clickers”) are not as well made, have fewer capabilities, and must be maintained and stored. If you are looking for options other than “yes” or “no” a simple clicker might not suffice. Someone on staff will have to take ownership of them and know how to set, use, and repair them, even as the meeting is in session. With rentals, the equipment is maintained by the vendor, who can also handle technical issues during the meeting. The useful life of inexpensive technical equipment may tip the balance in favor of renting instead of buying.

A hidden need is bandwidth. Although the technological requirements are relatively low, if the facility does not have enough bandwidth, or the sponsor does not purchase enough, or the hotel switches delegate bandwidth into that used by the keypad system (or, in one infamous case, the delegates are all downloading an iPhone update) there will be problems with the keypads communicating with the software, votes may not be recorded, and issues or elections may be lost.

Keypads can save an incredible amount of time and make things easy. For example, set a time limit and an automatic vote to extend debate if people are still waiting to speak. Use them for instant results in an election. And don’t forget – you can always use them to ask survey questions too!