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## **What Will Conferences Look Like Post COVID-19?**

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Special Edition: COVID-19 Crisis



What Will Conferences Look Like Post COVID-19? How do We Meet as we Emerge from Physical Distancing and Lead into a “New Normal”? How unnerving and ironic that just last month, our School was to have hosted a Hospitality Leadership Summit, themed *Leading in a Time of Disruption*. Never in a million years would anyone have imagined that disruption would occur to force us to cancel the event, or, significantly more dire - that disruption would manifest itself as a global health crisis. In the last decade, and until March 2020, disruption in hospitality alluded to technology, alternative forms of accommodations or food deliveries, online travel agency platforms and new methods of analytics, among others. This current scenario, was never a blip on the situation radar.

### **Preparation and Risks if the Conference Moved Forward**

As our event date approached, while all logistics were already firmly in place and ready to launch, news of the spreading virus quickly placed us into crisis mode. Measures were taken to record and livestream the learning sessions of the event to provide for those who were uncomfortable to travel. Arrangements were in gear to provide for ample hand sanitizing stations throughout the venue and even pump bottles of hand sanitizers on registration and other tables. Signs were to be printed encouraging frequent hand-washing throughout the conference and discouraging hand-shaking. Additional hotel staff were to be scheduled to attend to bathrooms for continuous and visible cleaning. Lunch set ups were modified from buffet and self-service to pre-packaged box lunches and staff-attended

coffee stations - so as to prevent multiple people handling serving tools. Discussions considered seating fewer people at each table.

With so many alterations to make, how risky this all felt. What if an attendee arrived unknowingly carrying the virus? What if an attendee was not in optimal health yet still participated? What if a speaker, sponsor, guest, hotel employee, fell ill and ultimately traced it to our event? At the time, as we looked forward and realized our student body would change and that other industry events may reschedule for a future allotted time slot; thus in our circumstance, cancellation was the proper decision.

The ability for large groups of professionals who share common niche interests to convene – to network, learn, plan - has currently vanished. Uncanny, as American Express just last year published its *2019 Global Meetings and Events Forecast* and indicated that “ten years after an economic recession threatened the global meetings and events industry...in North America it appears to be healthy and robust... Speculation that during the past two downturns that virtual events would replace a considerable proportion of the face-to-face meetings activity (and thus reduce the cost) never manifested. Virtual capabilities remain an important part of a well-rounded meetings strategy, but continued growth supports that North Americans prefer to meet in person when possible.” Well, what if it’s not possible?

### **Re-Imagining the Meeting**

These last few weeks of shelter-in-place orders and six-feet apart guidelines have enabled each of us to stop, ponder and appreciate the personal values which are so meaningful to us all (Medium.com, April 10, 2020). Togetherness with family and friends is so critical to us as a human species (bbvaopenmind.com, The Biology of Socialization). “Our personal and professional achievements are largely motivated by the approval and recognition of others.” As humans, our ability to adapt successfully is attributed to how we “interact and cooperate” with one another (bbvaopenmind.com).

And so with the time we have ahead removed from the daily bustle of our “normal” activities, we must now creatively imagine what a meeting could look like. It is our responsibility as hospitality professionals to help shape professional gatherings and their facilitation, so that we ensure safety, comfort, value, productive sessions and a successful event. As

gubernatorial and CDC guidelines are lifted, can we immediately resume with meetings in a format similar to the event our School had planned last month? Will our events operate differently, incorporating the technological tools we so quickly adapted for virtual meetings from our homes? What will a meeting look like?

### **Shortly After Pandemic**

Meeting Planners International (MPI) is the largest event and meeting association globally. The organization acts as a voice for the growth of the industry ([mpi.org](http://mpi.org)). MPI still plans to host its World Education Congress (WEC) in Texas in June 2020 (as of April 14) and as indicated on its website, as it moves ahead with planning, “will continue to place high importance on facilitating measures to ensure optimal health and sanitary conditions” for everyone onsite. So it appears as if this industry event, just two months away, is still set to move forward; other large hospitality (investment) conferences are contemplating postponement and there are others that recently moved from postponement to complete cancellation altogether.

A few items are certain for the future of meetings, though these suggestions are by far not necessarily inspired by the current pandemic:

- Crisis communications plans need to be in place so that event organizers can quickly reach out to all stakeholders, via multiple channels, to share information that is uniform and consistent to all.
- Risk assessment and emergency preparedness must be included in the strategy for the planning and execution of any event.
- Safety tips must be shared with attendees; sharing via social media, digital collateral, online videos - the messages of frequent handwashing, respiratory hygiene, when to seek medical care, etc.
- Force Majeure clauses in contracts will be written very carefully so as to protect the planners in cases as unanticipated or detrimental as a pandemic.
- Planners of larger events will consider insurance in order to protect from cancellation or other related costs.

So how does COVID-19 change meetings that occur in the short-term?

- Will we need to take temperatures as participants arrive on site?
- Should air hugs and elbow bumps be the greeting of choice?

- Elements of a conference may remain on-site and other elements will be online. Let's not be surprised if sessions are livestreamed so that attendees who are uncomfortable to resume travel still have the opportunity to learn.
- Meetings may be less expensive to operate if there are less breakout sessions and more virtual activities. On the other hand, do we need to split (and spread) a general session into three rooms and use technology so all can hear the speakers?
- Do we expect loosened cancellation and attrition policies?
- Food and beverage options are to be pre-packaged. Passed hors d'oeuvres and fingers foods will no longer prevail.
- The innately habitual business handshake will make way for a polite "namaste" or uncomfortable elbow bump to avoid skin-to-skin contact.
- Collateral and marketing materials will be digital-only.
- Hand sanitizing pumps will be valuable amenity on all tables or in all swag bags.
- Meeting and event planners will urge hotels and venues to share housekeeping and communications activities publicly, on site.
- Will we need larger venues to accommodate seating for social distancing?

### **Long After this Pandemic?**

A recent survey conducted by Association Laboratory found that "given the focus on COVID-19's impact on face-to-face/in-person meetings, any association without reserves equal to or greater than anticipated meetings outcome can be designated as 'at-risk'" (pcma.org). The survey also indicated that virtual events will be a major strategy (for associations) moving forward.

Akshar Patel, Vice President of Conventions for the Asian American Hotel Owners Association (AAHOA), assembles the world's largest convention annually: 8,000 hotel owners convening to share best operations and investment practices for hospitality real estate. Patel says, "Now is the time for event professionals and service providers to begin collaborating about what the event space will look like post-pandemic. We need to be discussing what conditions will allow for the successful relaunch of our industry. How will contracts be structured? What concerns will be on the minds of venues, vendors, and organizations? What steps must parties

take to make attendees comfortable enough to move past the aversions to large gatherings that will inevitably emerge from this pandemic?

“I expect that as businesses slowly reopen and a cautious public begins to venture out from stay-at-home orders, we will most likely see small scale events and meetings being scheduled,” he continues. “I think many in the industry will be watching these events, perhaps viewing them as a test phase that can teach us a lot about how people will view larger gatherings and what measures event coordinators can take to ensure the health, well-being, comfort, and confidence of attendees.”

In his coverage of the Pandemic’s first online hospitality conference facilitated by Bench Events, *Hotel News Now’s* London-based reporter Terrence Baker states, “None of this (online conferencing) will replace the original method of meeting, and no one expects it to, so the hope is that we’ll all be leaving the online conference world as soon as possible.”

How would COVID-10 change the meetings field for the long run?

- Conferences will place more emphasis and effort to support the values that we now treasure more than pre-quarantine: sustainability, environmental-friendliness, health and wellness.
- Registration of attendees may move online altogether, easing the concern for physical distancing. Will the Conference develop an app to streamline the registration, communication, and information processes.
- Attendees may take comfort in seeing masked and gloved housekeeping staff in the front of the house at all times, rather than behind the scenes. Demonstrated accountability by venues to show dedication to cleanliness and sanitation will be appreciated.
- Buffets will become ancient food and beverage history; coffee bars will be staffed; snacks and breaks will be individually packaged.
- Tier-pricing can become a norm, enabling rate varieties for in-person and remote attendees.
- Meeting planners, who already incorporate the destination arrival and departure before and after the event as part of the event experience, will proactively drive efforts with the local Convention & Visitors Bureau to assure that attendees are comfortable with the travel portion of their visit.

- While medical personnel are pre-arranged for larger conventions and symposiums, now plans for a doctor on site may be the norm for smaller symposiums or seminars as well.
- Opportunities for new sponsors arise. For hospitality events, many o companies have furloughed employees and thus sponsorship spend may look frivolous and be reduced or cut altogether. Perhaps cleaning supply products, audio visual or technology companies, health and wellness brands, sanitizers and food packaging companies might be more willing to participate in events? Consider new entrants in the sponsorship space.
- Or will we resume some sense of meetings normalcy as new situations arise and take our focus off this?

In a recent virtual discussion arranged and facilitated by Unique Venues CEO Chuck Salem, panelist Tiffany Melton, CMP, Vice President for Strategic Meetings Management for SPARGO Inc, - the largest independently owned full-service event management company in the United States - shared helpful advice for the recovery of meetings. Melton cautioned that we not expect events to immediately return to the capacities or programming that they may have had through 2019. Less people will attend. Planning for hybrid meetings (in-person meetings combined with online virtual programming) may become the norm, and on a positive note, allow for a broader spectrum of participation. Ultimately, the business will come back, but it may be in phases and not sudden.

“Despite the current uncertainty, and acknowledging that the chemistry of how we meet, where we meet and what meetings look like post C19, there are encouraging signs,” shares Salem. “In a recent poll of over 300 planners, 20% indicated that they see a decrease in the number of events they will plan post crisis. In that same poll, 50% of planners indicated that they foresee the number of events they plan to remain the same. Most encouraging, however, is that 30% of planners indicated that they foresee an increase in their number of planned events and meetings. Therefore, it is important that we, as an industry, proactively innovate ways for meetings to adapt to the aftermath of the C19 crisis and provide leadership to those we work with.”

### **Where do we Go From Here?**

According to a study by independent global public affairs and strategic communications consultancy APCO Worldwide, as more than 300 million

Americans find themselves working from home, 83% say they miss attending in-person business meetings and conventions (Northstarmetingsgroup.com). And 78% say they plan to attend as many, or more, when the threat of COVID-19 passes and it is safe. So now is the time to begin visualizing what your meeting will look like, to ensure a safe, healthy and positive experience. Shift this period of uncertainty into a chapter of reimagination and innovation.

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