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ABOUT SKIFT MEETINGS

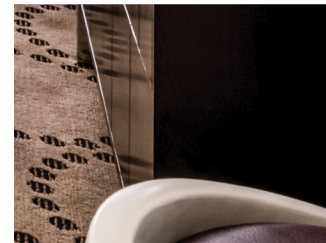
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Introduction

As the meetings industry evolves with unprecedented velocity, Skift Meetings is thrilled to present its 2024 Megatrends. This year, we delve into an array of fresh trends redefining the fabric of the industry. Our comprehensive analysis is designed to equip you with the insights to navigate these changes and conduct business with enhanced acumen going forward.

The 10 trends Skift Meetings delve into are all-encompassing. From remote work's impact on events to AI's role to polarization, rising costs, and safety, meeting professionals must be on top of far-ranging and often complicated issues.

This report aims to provide a holistic view of these forces at play, offering you the knowledge to make well-informed decisions and adapt to these dynamic trends. The future is as challenging as it is exciting, and with these 10 trends as your guide, you can steer your role in the meetings industry toward smarter, more strategic horizons for 2024 and beyond.



3 Ways to Get Ahead of 2024 Megatrends



JAMES JESSE

Chief Sales Officer,
Travel Portland

James Jesse is the chief sales officer for Travel Portland, where he leads a dedicated team of award-winning professionals with more than 30 years of experience in the industry. Jesse returned to Travel Portland following an 18-year tenure at Visit Phoenix in 2017. Jesse is actively involved in industry organizations such as PCMA and ASAE, serving on various boards and committees. In addition, he is a proud member of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc., and has been happily married to his wife Jolie for 27 years, raising three children.

Meeting professionals know that finding the right destination partner is often the first step in executing a successful event. To learn more about how destinations can help planners stay on top of the industry's biggest trends, Skift Meetings sat down with James Jesse, chief sales officer for Travel Portland. Here are three key pieces of advice he has to share for the year ahead and beyond.

1. MANAGE COSTS BY GOING BACK TO BASICS

Meetings and events are more expensive now than ever before. It's a reality for the industry, but I recommend getting back to basics when looking to reduce costs.

First, all taxes are not equal in every destination. Take a closer look at the bottom line and you may find major savings. For example, Portland has no sales tax, which can result in huge savings that aren't readily visible in the early planning stages.

Also, it can really help to have some flexibility in your dates so you can approach destinations during their shoulder season when leisure travelers aren't driving up hotel rates and their venues have more vacancy.

Finally, it's obvious but bears repeating — the larger the group and economic impact, the more likely you can negotiate with destinations to get subsidies to bring your event to them. Reach out to local tourism offices, especially Convention Visitor Bureaus or Destination Marketing Organizations early in your planning process. Our job is to make your job easier, so let us help. We know our destinations and we know the programs that may be able to provide financial incentives. And we may even know some hidden gems that provide great value in terms of off-site meetings and events.

2. ENSURE YOUR PARTNERS ARE READY TO DELIVER ON SAFETY

In regard to safety and security, it is paramount to every event anywhere. This is universal to every attendee so it is important and should be part of your early discussions with any destination.

Make your needs known early and be sure your venues can accommodate them. We find most often that people just want to know there is someone there keeping them safe, and that can be as simple as making sure people see security personnel so they know someone is monitoring security and is available to respond.

At the Oregon Convention Center in Portland, we make sure our planners meet their security team and understand how they manage safety. We help our clients communicate these safety measures to attendees if necessary.

The other part of the question is making sure attendees feel welcome. I think that has a lot to do with what happens outside of your events and that can be difficult for planners to control. Destination selection can play a big role here too. You want your host to share the values of your delegation or at the very least not stand in contrast to them. Portland is a very welcoming city to all walks of life and that is very apparent to people when they get here. Just being yourself — whoever you are — is a big part of our culture.

Find a destination that truly wants your delegates and organization, not just your business, because nothing makes someone feel more welcome than knowing they are valued, wanted and appreciated.

3. CAPITALIZE ON DESTINATIONS WITH LEISURE APPEAL

Although we have a new word for it with “bleisure,” the concept has been around forever. It’s called delegate appeal and it’s very important to planners who want to host well-attended events.

Simply put: People are more excited by meetings and conventions in destinations they want to visit for leisure. If this weren’t true, every city would just build its convention center by the airport, right?

Likewise, most of us are influenced by our partners and family. If you have a great convention in a great destination and your partner or family wants to come too, it’s a big motivator.



To capitalize on this, choose destinations that have leisure appeal beyond just the business interests of your core delegate. We know that Portland’s renowned culinary scene is a draw for meetings and conventions, but we also know leisure travelers love it as well. We know our city is family-friendly with lots of activities to keep families and partners busy during business meetings, but also offers tons of options for them to experience the city together after the name badge comes off. We’ve developed resources and destination guides to make it easy to experience Portland authentically outside of the meeting rooms and convention halls.

People want to feel like they know a destination after visiting so we encourage planners to offer real Portland experiences that have a sense of place here. Many of those experiences are draws for families, so we encourage planners to promote that as well. It can be a powerful marketing tool to drive attendance. It’s good for both the event and the destination so I really encourage planners to look for destinations eager to help with this.



1 Remote Work Leaves Lasting Impact on Business Events

By Andrea Doyle



Remote work is here to stay. Companies realized during the Covid pandemic shutdown how productive their remote teams are, and many closed headquarters offices fully embracing dispersed workforces.

According to the ***Upwork Research Institute***, which studies the future of work, by 2025, an estimated 32.6 million Americans will be working remotely. In addition, only about 50% of offices are being used daily, according to security company Kastle's 10-city ***Back to Work Barometer***.

As a result, when getting employees together, the gatherings must be impactful, building team camaraderie in the process.

Remote work is also impacting incentive travel. According to the ***2023 Incentive Travel Index***, 74% of respondents agree that incentive travel is gaining strategic importance. Of those, 79% see the need to bring together a more dispersed workforce as one of the most important factors why incentive travel is gaining strength.

Convene, a hybrid meeting, event, and workspace provider, ***reports*** that by the end of 2023, clients have had a 35% increase in spending to produce large in-person meetings and events. In addition, Convene's average contract value has seen a 79% increase compared to 2019.

"In 2024, we'll continue to see organizations spend more money on fewer, high-impact meetings throughout the year, with a focus on local meetings and events to reduce travel costs. We will also see planners consolidating their programs in 2024, resulting in fewer

overall programs throughout the year. Fewer, bigger, better, ultimately leading to more impactful meetings and events," says Ryan Simonetti, co-founder and CEO of Convene.

ONE-DAY EVENTS SUFFER

One-day events have suffered as a result of the work-from-home phenomena, according to Knowland, a provider of data-as-a-service insights on meetings and events.

With employees scattered across the globe, one day isn't enough when companies gather them together. Companies must outlay substantial money to get employees together. From expensive airfare and hotel costs to canceled flights, getting employees into one central location is too much of a hassle for just one day.

The research shows that one-day events decreased by 57 percent in volume from 2019 to 2023. Two- to three-day events are now the sweet spot, said Patricia Shea, senior vice president of revenue for Knowland.

"Meetings have a longer length of stay, which is overall good news. If a small or mid-sized company is getting its people together once a quarter and they are flying their people in, they're going to spend two to three days, not just one," said Shea.

NONTRADITIONAL SPACES GAINING TRACTION

Another trend Knowland identified along with management company Aimbridge Hospitality is meetings in nontraditional meeting spaces. "As the makeup of what's happening in downtown areas continues to evolve, a lot of nontraditional venues such as cultural

institutions and museums are getting really creative in how they go after those smaller one-day events," Shea said.

HITTING THE ROAD

Remote workforces have also increased the popularity of regional meetings. Gathering employees in similar locations numerous times a year versus one huge annual meeting is proliferating.

Roadshows, where the event goes to the audience, saving the company on long-haul travel expenses, are gaining traction. Roadshows take place in multiple locations, aiming to reach your attendees where they are.

Creating content for roadshows can be complicated as you must provide information appropriate for the location while maintaining the unifying message.

SMALLER GATHERINGS A SWEET SPOT

Smaller, more intimate events are trending. Meetings with 200 attendees or less continue to dominate. Single-day event volume share continues to be down. It has decreased 8% from 2019, while two-to-three-day events are up 19% and four-to-seven-day events are up 43%. Group revenue shows the most significant improvement in the third quarter of this year at 103% of the same period in 2019, according to the Knowland-Amadeus Hospitality Group and Business Performance Index.

With increased remote work, after-work networking activities have become a thing of the past. You can't grab a drink or go bowling with colleagues while working solo in a remote location.



In addition, webinars are now part of a year-long event strategy for sharing information. There is no longer the need to fly in your employees to share company news when you can do it via the web.

The need to meet face-to-face is more important than ever, but the frequency has waned. There is also less need to gather everyone in one central location, and companies opt for smaller, more regional gatherings. That trend will continue into 2024.

A purple background with white decorative elements. A large white arrow curves from the top right towards the top left. On the left side, there are several overlapping white circular and curved lines. The main text is in white, featuring a large number '2' followed by the title.

2 Creativity Shines Through in a Sea of Bland AI-Powered Event Marketing

By Refugio Garcia



The arrival of artificial intelligence (AI) in the events industry has created a frenzied debate over the potential and best applications of the new technology. Event marketing has been subject to a noticeable pivot pushed by AI, giving industry professionals the ability to boost productivity and simplify otherwise tedious and time-consuming tasks amid already heavy workloads necessary to organize conferences, trade shows, and corporate meetings.

AI tools have unlocked endless possibilities through the creation of personalized experiences, enhanced networking opportunities, and improved analytics that create the ability to improve event marketing efforts – all allowing event professionals to streamline production. However, the new technology is not free of potential hazards that event marketers must be mindful of.

While the vast majority of professionals utilize AI with legitimate intentions, there remain those who seek to exploit the technology with bad intent, and the events industry is not immune to these illicit tactics. One such **instance** involved an event organizer using AI to generate fake female speakers for an event to create the illusion of diversity.

NEW STANDARDS FOR AI

While the presence and use of AI in event marketing have accelerated at break-neck speed, the standards around the technology remain murky.

Ethics are crucial in deploying AI, specifically regarding transparency and accountability. This includes disclosing to the client how AI is used for marketing purposes and taking responsibility for actions carried out by AI chatbots that **evoked** bias or generate irrelevant suggestions.

U.S. lawmakers are creating safeguards against the potential risks of using AI. In June, the AI Disclosure Act of 2023 was **introduced** to Congress, requiring all AI-generated content to be accompanied by a disclaimer if the bill were to pass. According to the bill's author, U.S. Representative Ritchie Torres, "There is danger in both under-regulating and over-regulating. The simplest place to start is disclosure. All generative AI should be required to disclose itself as AI. Disclosure is by no means a magic bullet, but it's a common-sense starting point to what will surely be a long road toward federal regulation."

The European Union recently introduced AI guardrails through its **draft** of the tentative Artificial Intelligence Act, taking an early lead in the global race to create such legislation amid the surge in the use of generative AI. The new set of laws, slated to take effect in 2025, outlines penalties for violations upwards of 35 million Euros.

The EU's AI Act was initially intended to curtail specific functions carried out by the technology ranging in levels of risk and has since been extended to regulate foundation models – systems that allow for the creation of new content based on written work and images scraped from online sources, which lawmakers fear can be used to boost the spread of misinformation, cyber-attacks, and other threats.

KEEPING CONTENT FRESH

AI tools have allowed planners to remove numerous tasks from their to-do lists, including various marketing functions primarily through automation and providing data-driven insights, helping to lighten a typically cumbersome load.

AI can enhance the productivity of marketing campaigns by **creating** social media posts, generating emails, and aiding in sourcing different assets, from speakers and sponsors to events and vendors. While AI allows event marketers to free up time by eliminating the need to focus on wording, it is crucial to consider how the technology is sourcing the provided content and what additional contributions are needed to keep content fresh.

If event marketing professionals continually use AI-generated content for similar purposes, the higher the likelihood that the resulting content will grow increasingly generic. This will require marketers to devise a well-rounded strategy to balance generative AI tools and creating original content.

Being active in defining and redefining boundary conditions of prompts is one method for adding a touch of originality to AI-generated content by creating several alternatives, according to Lakshman Rathnam, CEO at Wordly. "I think AI should be used to provide guidance for various scenarios," he said.

However, Rathnam pointed to the necessity of actively adding original content to the overall body of information, known as the corpus, to avoid the proliferation of redundant content. "You can ask AI to write a poem for you, but does that actually reflect a person's true emotions?" he asked. "That's where people need to combine their creative ideas with the process of generative AI, and that's where new content can be introduced."

WILL THE AUDIENCE STOP LISTENING?

As AI continues its surge into the mainstream toolbox of event professionals, it becomes increasingly important to stay diligent when using AI to generate public-facing content while remaining cognizant of what is being produced.

The overuse of AI-generated content can easily result in a loss of interest among audiences if content begins to appear hackneyed and thoughtless, damaging the credibility and trust of the source.

This potential pitfall is compounded by the fact that AI has a wide array of applications for events in all formats, including in-person and remote meetings. AI has undoubtedly revolutionized virtual events in all aspects of the experience for attendees, presenters, and organizers alike. AI tools are set to offer more custom-tailored and personalized experiences as every component of a virtual event can now be delegated to an AI function from marketing and session content – including AI-generated scripts for speakers – and the transcription of session content to be later repurposed.

AI can be broadly applied to a virtual event, almost eliminating any human involvement and potentially rendering the event obsolete to a human audience if potential attendees perceive all elements of an event have been generated by AI tools. As AI tools can be used to boost efficiency, the technology should not be relied on to execute all event marketing or production aspects.

Ultimately, AI-generated content cannot replace the human aspect of events. Technology, such as ChatGPT, can only effectively mimic human creativity and is not flawless in its execution.



3 The Climate Crisis Disrupts More and More Events

By Miguel Neves

The world faces unprecedented challenges in the unforgiving landscape of the 21st-century climate reality. Events are no different. The increasing ferocity with which the climate crisis asserts itself is no longer an ignorable backdrop. This transition intensifies the call for a paradigm shift in event planning, not only in making events as sustainable as possible but also in transforming contingency strategies from luxury to utter necessity.

Take, for example, the smoke from **Canadian wildfires** that impacted large swathes of the U.S. or the tragic wind-driven **Maui wildfires**. Even the typically dry Black Rock Desert became an unforeseeable muddy mess during **Burning Man**, trapping even the most rugged attendees. There are so many examples of outdoor music concerts being impacted by the climate crisis that **Billboard** created a list for 2023. These are not isolated tales of inconvenience; they're stark reminders of a new era where every outdoor event must **anticipate disruption**.

RISKS MUST BE MANAGED

Beyond the glitz and glamour, event professionals are evolving into **risk management** experts. With climate chaos as an uninvited guest, the ability to foresee, strategize, and pivot is the new currency of competence.

Avoiding, mitigating, accepting, and transferring risk are all part of the planner vocabulary. After all, risk assessment plans are part and parcel of event planning. However, many plans are copied and pasted from previous events, shelved, and rarely consulted or updated.

For multiple reasons, this is simply not good enough. For one, it endangers attendees who assume risk has been carefully identified, assessed, and managed. Keeping attendees safe is of paramount importance. It also has significant legal repercussions. The likelihood of event-organizing companies being the target of legal action will only increase. Due

diligence in risk management means ensuring all reasonable actions are taken to protect attendees in the eyes of the law.

FROM SHOULDER SEASONS TO PEAK PLANNING

As event planners grapple with the volatility of Mother Nature, date compression becomes inevitable, especially in regions with predictable climate events. One obvious example is the **Atlantic hurricane season**, which runs from June to November, with September being statistically the worst month for major hurricanes. The hurricane season should always be a consideration when booking events in places like Florida, but with more erratic and severe climate patterns, this is even more important now.

With weather patterns **harder to predict**, previously attractive shoulder seasons are now fraught with climatic risks. This, in turn, pushes more events to look for 'safer' dates. The scarcity of 'safe' dates predates fiercer competition and higher costs for planners. Likewise, destinations with seasonal climate restrictions may see bookings decrease with fewer planners willing to gamble on shoulder seasons.

PARTNER SUPPORT ESSENTIAL

In a climate of uncertainty, versatility becomes the ace up the sleeve. Venues boasting a blend of indoor and outdoor facilities are emerging as the sanctuaries of event planning. The capacity to seamlessly pivot from under the stars to under a roof is not just a value-add—it's fast becoming a deal-breaker. Events should always have a backup option for outdoor activities, so working with venues that can accommodate this is essential.

With a climate-stressed world comes a cramped emergency infrastructure. Events swarming to a locale can mean an overwhelming deluge on already thin-stretched emergency services. Acknowledging this, event planners must tap into private resources to bolster



their contingency measures. By outsourcing to private emergency services, events can avoid straining public services. The added cost is worthwhile to ensure a swift and adept response to any incident.

THE CASE FOR SMALLER EVENTS

In the quest for events to be climate resilient, there is a compelling case to be made for smaller-scale events. While these gatherings may not match the grandeur and profitability of larger spectacles, their more manageable nature offers a unique advantage in the face of climate unpredictability. Smaller events allow for greater agility, ensuring that the attendee experience can more easily be safeguarded against environmental disruptions.

Moreover, the financial risk associated with the potential disruption of a smaller event is considerably less, which, when viewed through the lens of long-term financial sustainability, becomes an attractive proposition. By reducing the scale, event planners can minimize potential losses from cancellations or emergency shifts in planning, aligning with a more sustainable business model that can weather the storms of our changing climate.

This strategic downsizing does not suggest a retreat but rather a tactical recalibration, positioning the events industry to thrive with consistency and resilience in an era where smaller, more intimate gatherings could become the cornerstone of sustainable event planning.

SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES AS EVENT IMPERATIVES

It goes without saying, but it bears repeating that business events are part of the climate crisis. Travel is responsible for the largest part of each event's carbon footprint, but almost all components of business events can be wasteful. Regrettably, the nature of business events as temporary gatherings brings tough sustainability challenges.

Several industry initiatives and consultancies are doing great work making events more sustainable. However, only the most radical events get anywhere near being carbon neutral. Nevertheless, business events must do everything possible to limit their environmental impact and leave a positive social legacy. The value of knowledge transfer is hard to measure but can at least attenuate the environmental downside of bringing people together.

In short, planners must make a conscious double commitment – to provide attendees with an enjoyable experience, safe from climate-related dangers, and minimize contributing to the global climate crisis.

As the industry adapts to the tumultuous tides of climate change, those who harness foresight, flexibility, and responsibility will thrive. This looming climate paradigm doesn't spell the end for the events industry but signifies a new chapter of resilience. Crafting experiences against the backdrop of ecological uncertainty, event planners are becoming the vanguard of adaptability, champions of sustainability, and pioneers in a world that demands nothing less than the extraordinary.





4 Organizers Are Held Accountable for Event Sustainability

By Marlene Goldman



The meetings industry will need to up its game when it comes to documenting and reporting its sustainability metrics. New standardizations and legislation changes are on tap, which question how sustainability claims are being measured. Broad brushstrokes will no longer suffice to paint a picture of sustainable events.

“Fifteen years ago, companies like Marriott were reporting that they were getting a high number of requests in the RFP process for holding meetings with some elements of sustainability. But it may have been just one or two specific things, like please don’t use single-use plastic,” said Randy Durband, CEO of the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC).

The United Nations-founded GSTC provides accreditation services for certification bodies that certify hotels/accommodations, tour operators, and destinations as sustainable and sets internationally recognized standards for sustainable travel and tourism practices. The GSTC is also aiming to standardize the accreditation process in the meetings world, which will also encompass the DEI aspect of sustainability, integral to GSTC standards.

FROM CHECKLISTS TO IMPERATIVES

Sustainability is no longer a checklist in the RFP process. A recent *trends report* published by French hotel company Accor concludes that sustainability, including DEI initiatives, is now more frequently seen as an imperative. An *Ipsos report* found that 82% of European and 75% of American travelers will avoid activities that aren’t socially responsible.

There is also buy-in among stakeholders within the meetings industry. In the *2024 Global Meetings and Events Forecast*, conducted by American Express Global Business Travel Meetings & Events, more than two-thirds of respondents globally said that sustainability is “very” or “extremely” important when planning meetings and events.

STANDARDIZED REPORTING NEEDED

However, real progress has been hindered by the lack of global standards. Organizations like the Event Industry Council target their sustainability standards largely for the U.S. In addition, sustainability certifications are far from uniform, as companies often bring in outside consultants. “It’s been a consultant’s dream,” Durband said.

One company that has made an effort at standardized reporting is Hilton with its Travel with Purpose — Hilton’s Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) strategy to drive responsible travel and tourism globally. As part of its ESG efforts, Hilton has worked toward greater transparency with a tool called LightStay, which measures the use of energy, water, and waste at every Hilton-branded hotel across the globe and makes these metrics available in easy-to-understand reports. LightStay meets the criteria of the GSTC.

“In terms of major brands, Hilton is absolutely out in front. In a sense, they’re important to study, but don’t look at them as indicative of the industry,” said Durband. “Much of the industry doesn’t even know what accreditation is, and they’re about to find out.”

NEW STANDARDS FOR SUSTAINABILITY REPORTING

For the most part, Durband said he would argue that there’s not adequate reporting anywhere in the world. But the European Union is ready to change all that as it prepares to enforce its Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD), starting early 2024. The new reporting requirements will affect not only E.U.-based companies but all companies with significant operations in E.U. jurisdictions, including U.S.-based companies with as little as one subsidiary or branch in the European Union. “The directive has everybody sharpening their pencils to figure out their ESG reporting,” Durband said. “How are we really going to report in a more standardized way?”

Companies subject to the CSRD, originally published at the end of 2022, will have to report according to European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS), requiring more detailed sustainability reporting for more than 50,000 companies.

Meanwhile, the corporate world also has a new set of standards from the International Sustainability Standards Board (ISSB). In June, the ISSB issued its inaugural climate-related disclosure standard that includes mandatory scope three emissions reporting.

Compared to scope one and two emissions (which refer to the direct emissions from owned or controlled sources, emissions from an event's host building or purchased electricity), scope three emissions include indirect emissions that derive from an organization's supply chain. Scope three emissions are estimated to take up more than 70% of a business' total carbon emissions on average, and in the event space would include everything from business travel for the attendees to transportation and distribution tied to suppliers.

EVENT-SPECIFIC SUSTAINABILITY EFFORTS

The trade show sector has been doubling down on sustainability efforts in light of studies showing that events produce ten percent of the world's carbon. The Net Zero Carbon Events initiative, which has rallied more than 600 organizations worldwide, aims to halve greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 and reach net zero for the industry by 2050.

The pledges by companies to the Net Zero initiative will be difficult to measure without standard tools, according to Durband. "These issues of commonality and universal approaches to measurement or reporting have to be addressed, otherwise, how are they going to build their case that they're net zero?" JMIC is addressing the standardization question with the latest ***seven best practices documents*** launched at ExCeL London in December.






As the industry grapples with new legislation and rules on reporting sustainability measures and impacts, it will also need to address the main culprits for creating a heavy carbon footprint. Travel to and from in-person meetings significantly impact the environment no matter how hard companies and planners work to green the industry. Research suggests that up to 85% of carbon emissions are generated by attendee transport.

Food waste is also an important factor. According to Durband, food waste is the third largest identifiable source of greenhouse gas in the world. "If you think about food, it takes carbon to produce fertilizers and tractors, and it takes carbon to bring it from the farm to the wholesale level and the wholesale level to the retail level onto the table. And then, if we don't consume what's on the plate, it goes into a landfill. The methane produced from food, from that organic material, is a terrible contributor to greenhouse gasses."

The bottom line is that upcoming directives and refinements to event sustainability criteria will force planners and corporations to read the fine print and comply with a tighter set of regulations. Tangible metrics are being enforced with global standards and stricter accountability throughout the process.

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5 New Normal in a World of Polarizing Politics

By Andrea Doyle

Wars, political divides, contentious laws — polarization in the world is just getting worse. Hotly debated issues, including reproductive rights, immigration, equality, and LGBTQ equity, are making it more challenging to choose a meeting and convention destination where everyone will feel accepted. Unfortunately, there is no end to the divisiveness in sight.

“It’s the global North versus South reality,” says David Jefferys, executive director of the newly-formed Global Diversity Alliance (GDA), a global association focused on diversity. “This reality is not just in the U.S. but across the globe. Marginalized communities abound.”

Meeting professionals are in a tough position navigating these issues. They are uncovering alternative approaches.

Many groups have backed boycotting destinations with politics in place that don’t align with their values. Some groups have pulled out of cities because of contentious politics. Others have silently boycotted, eliminating certain cities from consideration. It’s hard to say how many groups have silently boycotted, but this is gaining traction and will impact destinations long into the future.

Not only are meetings being impacted, but incentive travel as well. According to the 2023 Incentive Travel Index, 51% of respondents agree that political considerations will override other destination considerations.

Instead of boycotting, meeting professionals are encouraged to go ahead with their gathering and take a stance thoughtfully and productively so the people in the destination supporting the controversial laws will hear the message. In other words, make a tangible impact on the segment of the society that is affected. In addition, a public relations push about the actions can bring news coverage aimed at the elected leaders.

While the intention behind a boycott may be positive, it impacts the wrong people – residents and businesses that rely on the meetings and events for their business.

TACKLING BOYCOTTS HEAD-ON

One of the Global Diversity Alliance’s first initiatives was to compile a comprehensive guide for meeting professionals entitled: ***Banning the Boycott - How to Do Business in Times of Discrimination***. This resource offers pathways to navigate the challenges of planning events in destinations with discriminatory legislation.

While the intention behind a boycott is good, the reality is it impacts residents and businesses that rely on the meetings and events industries for their income.

“The Global Diversity Alliance believes that the meeting planning community has an opportunity to have a long-term impact. Our first offering provides meeting planners, hospitality, and destination professionals the blueprint for beginning to make lasting change in meeting destinations,” said Péter Kakucska, President, GDA.

Some of the tips in “Banning the Boycott” include identifying local diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I) organizations and communities to partner with. It also suggests collaborating with the destination’s political representatives.

Curating narratives and facts on the merits of DE&I from a human rights perspective and an economic one is also advised.

A DE&I pledge and code of conduct should be created that explicitly states your expectations and standards.

Banning the Boycott also recommends expanding your contract language by demanding a “Force Majeure/Excuse of Performance” clause during negotiations. It allows a planner to back out of a contract without liability or damage costs if that city, state, or country begins enacting anti-marginalized community legislation between signing the contract and the time of program execution.

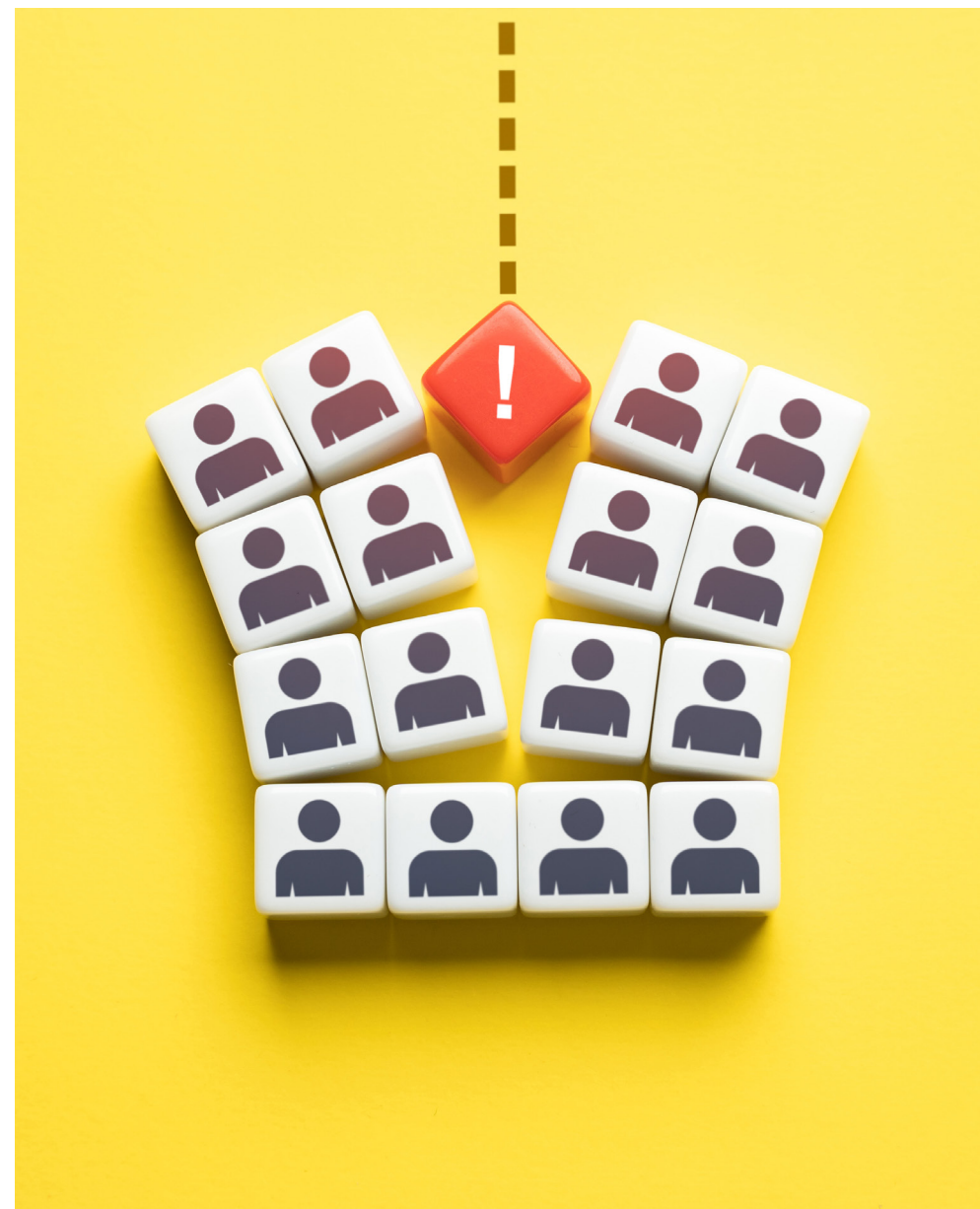
“If the security of attendees can be guaranteed and the local marginalized community believes that your meeting will bring positive impact, and your RFP includes DEI criteria and benchmarks, then you should definitely not boycott the destination, but work together,” says Kakucska. “Simply put, convene with intent.”

NO END TO CONTENTION IN SIGHT

“We are concerned that divisiveness is going to get worse as we enter a political year and that events will again be used as a weapon in the debate,” said David Peckinpugh, president and CEO of Maritz.

Maritz is looking to recommend to its clients and their attendees **SocialOffset**, a 501c3 nonprofit organization that provides socially conscious alternatives to event and destination boycotts.

“Local donations coupled with people not boycotting will make a difference to local economies, hospitality workers’ jobs, and, of course, the connections and thought leadership that are critical components of in-person events,” said Elena Gerstmann, Ph.D., FASAE, CAE, executive director at INFORMS, an international association for professionals in analytics and operations research and founder of SocialOffset.





SocialOffset vets charities to make sure they are legitimate and have a good record of direct service. “We provide easy and safe access to a few charities as options, and we provide 100% of the money given to the charities. We are proud that SocialOffset does not take anything from the donations,” says Gerstmann.

Similar to a carbon offset model, SocialOffset enables a charitable donation that offsets tax dollars spent in a destination with values that may be different from your attendees. One hundred percent of all contributions go to the cause selected.

“In today’s world, boycotts are not moving the needle,” said Gerstmann.

Founding partners of SocialOffset include Visit Austin, Visit Seattle, Nashville Music City, and Visit Baltimore, and additional destinations are partnering with the organization rapidly.

Although the future concerning divisiveness may seem grim, it is important to focus on the fact that even one person can help make a difference. Remember, as meeting professionals, you can do your part as each action builds upon another to bring about systemic change.



6

Event Costs Reach a Tipping Point

By Refugio Garcia

It is no secret that the U.S. economy has been tumultuous of late, with the events industry not impervious to current economic conditions. When surveyed, event planners pointed to budgetary restraints amid higher costs, with fewer than 40% indicating that their budgets have increased. In a similar vein, the majority of organizations indicated they have less to allocate for meetings and events – especially for incentive travel.

Budgetary issues are further exacerbated by other factors such as struggling attendance numbers, rising cost of airfare, lower inventory of hotels and venues, consistently higher costs across the supply chain, and staffing levels still in recovery.

GETTING CREATIVE WITH LESS

Client expectations are still pushing event planners for high standards of service despite budget constraints amid rising costs and inflation, an issue that is further compounded by a lack of understanding of increased costs among clients that want more for less, according to the ***MPI Meetings Outlook - 2023 Fall Edition***.

But despite these expectations, many potential attendees are taking a pass on events for a number of reasons, including flight hassles, budgetary restraints, a growing fear of mass shootings, and having little to no desire to venture out after becoming accustomed to remote work, according to the report. However, these obstacles also create an opportunity for event professionals to reshape their approach and create experiences that are more relevant to attendees, according to Michael Scott, the MPI Chapter President of Greater New York.

“Groups that want to get people back to in-person meetings will have to recreate how they are delivering content and dial down to what’s really important and why people are coming to these meetings,” Scott said.

HOTEL AND VENUE PRICES STAY HIGH

The shortage of available venues and hotels has become a significant challenge in various regions, resulting in an increase in venue prices. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for businesses and event planners to navigate challenges and make informed decisions.

The pandemic continues to cast influence over the events industry with certain destinations softening their prices while some urban markets are bumping prices up due to a higher demand, according to a report on industry trends ***published*** by Maritz.

This bodes well for planners producing incentive trips and not so much for those planning city conferences, as the cost at resorts is rising slower than urban venues – largely brought on by a higher business group demand. The revenue per available room (RevPAR) for resorts has seen a 5% increase compared to 2022, while hotels in major cities have risen 15% during the same period.

While hotel pricing remained consistent before and during the pandemic, current prices in hospitality across the board have now surpassed pre-pandemic levels. Lodging prices, regardless of scale, have risen 12% compared to prices in 2019, with a 23% increase in airfares and a 25% increase in food and beverage bills. This increase in hotel pricing is compounded by a 20% increase in wages for workers in the hospitality industry when compared to pre-pandemic levels.

As budgets of many corporations across the country remain flat, clients are faced with making tradeoffs such as inviting fewer guests, planning events with shorter durations, and scaling back experiences.



Creating an impactful event by creating something radically different involves a large investment. The bottom line comes down to the ability of an event to create a ripple effect for the attendee and their network, making the investment worthwhile.

According to Forbes, 80% of marketers report that live events play a major role in the success of the companies they work with. In addition, nearly 70% of attendees report that B2B conferences and events are the best way to learn about new products and services, according to a report published by ***Bizzabo***.

HYBRID AND ONLINE EVENTS OFFER ROBUST SOLUTION

Creating successful events in terms of impact and ROI can often be a numbers game. If a large-scale, high-budget event falls flat, time, money, and effort are wasted. Casting a wider net by hosting smaller, more focused events can be an effective solution to high-priced risks.

To hedge bets even further, planners and their clients can leverage technology to expand their reach while reducing costs, including webinars. While virtual events were the only feasible option to meet during the pandemic, they remain a mainstay in the meetings landscape. In a report ***published*** by Splash, of the 670 event professionals who responded to the survey, only 30% said they focus exclusively on live events, while 43% said they work with a combination of both.

The mix of event modalities offers businesses the opportunity to increase visibility while taking a cost-effective approach to event iteration to evaluate the best fit depending on a business's overall marketing strategy, with 41% of respondents saying that virtual events were more impactful than they initially expected and another 38% saying virtual events were cost-effective.



7 Data-Driven Event Planning Becomes the Norm

By Marlene Goldman



While in-person events continue to focus on networking opportunities and community-building, the ongoing advancements in technology make them key platforms to glean data and analytics, which in turn has added a host of new responsibilities to the already overflowing event organizers' plate. Event professionals are now taking on roles as content managers and data experts in an ever-changing technology landscape.

Some of the most integral aspects of event professionals' work now revolve around data collection and interpretation, as well as using that data to show potential sponsors and exhibitors the value of attending.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is emerging as a clutch time-saving option for planners. AI technology is already a powerful resource for planners in many areas, including venue sourcing, event marketing, and reviewing contracts. The capabilities are expanding, which has been a benefit to planners.

INNOVATING EVENT PLANNING

In the AMEX's [***2024 Global Meetings and Events Forecast report***](#), 42% of respondents say they plan to use AI in some capacity in 2024, with many meeting professionals utilizing AI for things like destination research, event communication, and automating event registration.

Some of the ***event-related tasks*** AI tools can help with include designing agendas, writing blog posts, creating run of shows, and other content creation. With the right data input into an AI system, a task that would have taken planners 30 minutes or more can now be done in 30 seconds or less, according to Bruce MacMillan, chief operating officer of PCMA.

PCMA developed ***Project Spark***, an AI-based solution for event professionals, in partnership with Singapore-based event technology company ***Gevme***.

THE DATA-DRIVEN EVOLUTION

While large event and trade show companies have had the upper hand regarding resources for content production and collecting and analyzing data, AI and other technology are helping level the playing field for independent and smaller event organizers. The difference between the two has grown exponentially as mergers and acquisitions in the events industry are on the rise, with companies like Informa and RX leading the charge. But as long as the quality of the data is there, there are tools for organizers to get the most benefit. "If you don't have great data, you're not going to get the results that you seek," MacMillan said.

MacMillan noted that a tradeshow is a marketplace, and every transaction or connection is a data point. "Tracking that data, capturing that data is critical," MacMillan said. "If you're a big corporate brand and you're spending \$100,000 to be part of a tradeshow, you want to find out not just who came to the booth but what their interests were." The quality of the data is key to having an AI tool synthesize that data down to the top insights, not just quantitative but qualitative as well.

MacMillan added, "You get your post-event survey. [...] In the past, somebody would have to get a business intelligence use platform to generate the results, and it would take a few days, maybe a week. Now, you just literally upload the files."

KEEPING VALUABLE EVENT DATA SAFE

The industry is keeping a watchful eye on the healthcare industry for legality around data. Washington state recently passed the ***My Health My Data Act***, which is intended to protect consumer health data. The Act, which goes into effect on March 31, 2024, imposes new requirements and restrictions on regulated entities, which some experts predict will lead to an increase in consumer lawsuits and follow-on insurance coverage disputes.

“There are great tools, and new tools come out every day. But the question you have to ask yourself is, ‘Who am I giving my data to?’ And that’s a big issue,” MacMillan said. “I think it’s going to continue to be an issue because it’s so easy now to deploy the tools, but if you don’t have the data protection, compliance protection, and privacy commitments, you’re taking a risk.”

MacMillan said the number one question PCMA gets regarding Project Spark is, ‘How secure is your data?’ “We have gone to great lengths to get the proper ISO certification and compliance because we know that when people are making queries or sharing their data, that it’s their data, and we don’t have access to the data. It’s fully secure once somebody exits out of Spark. The data is not accessible by us to train the AI model. It’s not accessible by our team, and it’s not accessible by anybody else.”

While some event professionals are already reaping the benefits of using advanced technology such as AI in their planning, some are concerned AI will soon take their place. “We like to say, AI is not going to take your job, but somebody using AI properly will take your job because it’s a tool, and it’s arrived,” MacMillan said.

As event professionals harness the power of AI and data, they’re crafting experiences that are not only more efficient and impactful but also richer in opportunities for engagement and growth. The data revolution in event planning is not just a trend; it’s the dawn of an era where every connection made and every insight gained propels the industry forward. As AI continues to spark new possibilities, planners are setting the tempo for the future of professional gatherings.





8

Hybrid Events Thrive in New Formats

By Miguel Neves



The concept of hybrid events is not new by any stretch of the imagination. Yet, their spotlight moment arose not by design but by necessity during the Covid pandemic. Once a rarity, a curiosity in the expansive realm of gatherings powered by rudimentary video streaming technology, hybrid events have become common. Tentpole events such as **CES**, **Dream-force**, **SXSW**, **Mobile World Congress**, and **Web Summit** stream key sessions throughout, free of charge.

Today's hybrid events are not simply confined to the timespan of the in-person gathering. A new model is emerging — one that extends the lifecycle of an event through online components both before and after the physical meetup. Pre-event webinars, virtual networking, and post-event content libraries are becoming standard, creating a continuum of connection that maximizes the impact and extends the reach of an event far beyond the live dates.

The technically challenging "**true hybrid**" event — where online and on-site audiences interact seamlessly — is rare. Taking a much more open-ended perspective of the hybrid event concept opens up a world of possibilities. The opportunity to consume content digitally and connect people who share the same interests can be separated by location and time.

Events create a focus point for a topic or an industry to gather. Participants appreciate having options on how they want to do so.

Innovative event professionals are exploring hybrid event formats. Some are driven by necessity, while others push creativity to the limits. Hybrid events are not just surviving; many are flourishing. No longer confined to the shadows of their pre-Covid-pandemic existence, hybrid events have stepped into their own, embodying the changes sweeping through how we connect, learn, and network.

A FRESH KALEIDOSCOPE OF FORMATS

Envision multi-hub conferences seamlessly bringing together thought leaders in **war-torn areas**. Imagine **public events** pulsating with energy as live streams marry the physical to the virtual. Think of companies running a series of internal events, some online, some in-person, but all connected to form a uniquely curated employee journey.

These scenarios aren't distant dreams but tangible realities. Hybrid events thrive as they adapt to varied formats, catalyzing an evolution from their original models. Hybrid event strategies, which combine events in different formats, perfectly embody omnichannel marketing.

In some sense, all in-person events are also hybrid. When was the last time you registered for an event not using an online form? Registration is done online, but researching an event starts long before that. It's a long-form courting ritual that is intrinsically connected with the event experience. Some events take this to the next level, with curated content and networking opportunities presented to participants before the physical gathering.

LEARNINGS FROM THE COVID PANDEMIC

The scales tipped towards online events amid lockdowns and social distancing during the Covid pandemic. Now, armed with data and extensive insights, but free from the constraints of social distancing, planners are applying these learnings. The emphasis has shifted towards deliberate event design rather than reactionary measures, resulting in experiences that resonate deeper and engage more effectively.

Breakthroughs in technology have been pivotal, with platforms offering more than just a stage — they're creating immersive worlds. Yet, in this high-tech renaissance, the true essence of a successful hybrid event lies in its design. Ultimately, participants want a good

user experience, and they want to feel like their time at an event is well spent. The most crucial component is undoubtedly the networking and interaction between attendees, followed by the content they can access. Surrounding this, attendees demand technology that works seamlessly, be it the virtual platform or the on-site audiovisuals.

Hybrid events shine by giving participants options on how they can participate. If they need to take a last-minute meeting or travel plans change, they still want to be able to access content online, either live or later on demand.

Connecting with fellow participants remotely is more challenging. When participants can only join online, they are aware that virtual handshakes are nowhere as effective as in-person ones. There is no virtual champagne to make online small talk more palatable. Nevertheless, just having the opportunity to connect with fellow attendees at the same event, physically or online, is also valuable. Even if the connection starts from a cold email or LinkedIn message, that commonality makes a difference; sometimes, it makes all the difference.

BALANCING TIGHT BUDGETS AND NEW MARKETING DEMANDS

Cost considerations continue to be a jigsaw puzzle for event organizers. Raising costs and budgets that are not keeping pace with inflation add to the pressure. At the same time, digital marketing efforts are proving ineffective, particularly with tighter legislation and upcoming tracking **restrictions**. This means marketing dollars are now redirected towards live experiences, recognizing their unmatched power to create lasting impacts.

With budgets being reallocated, the added costs involved in hybrid events are more acceptable. This shift gives hybrid events a fighting chance to receive internal support and funding, supported by the notion that their value can extend beyond the boundaries of location and



time. Companies also recognize that the reach and data-driven insights gleaned from online audiences can be as consequential as the buzz generated from live attendees.

In the resurrection of the event industry, hybrid events stand tall, no longer an interim solution but a forward-thinking strategy that's here to stay. They have demonstrated resilience, adaptability, and the capacity to redefine our collective experience of coming together.



9

Events Focus on Being Safe Spaces for All

By Andrea Doyle



It is the duty of a meeting professional to make sure not only an attendee is safe, but also that they feel safe. Sure, there is physical safety, keeping an attendee out of harm's way. But safety is a much larger issue, encompassing emotional and psychological safe spaces, as well as the perception of safety. It's up to meeting professionals to earn the trust of their attendees because once that critical bond is broken, it is hard, if not impossible, to get back.

TRUST PLUMMETS—EVENTS OFFER AN ANTIDOTE

Recently, a conference organizer destroyed all trust by allegedly creating ***fake women speakers*** with AI-generated images to create the illusion of diversity. The fact that Eduards Sizovs, who organizes the DevTernity conference, did this is deceitful and wrong. Since this has come to light, he has canceled the conference, and his reputation is tainted.

Sizovs has also broken trust, which has fallen dramatically to an alarming 20 percent, near historic lows, since the 1960s. This is according to a ***Pew Research Center report*** on public trust.

Clearly, people no longer have faith in their leaders or governments. Events, however, can be an antidote, a place for interaction and dialogue. Freeman ***research*** found that in-person events are the most trustworthy source of information for all attendees. For the next generation event goer, 20- to 44-years-old, they lag only behind academic leaders, but rank in-person events higher than academic institutions and media outlets.

But this is where the rubber meets the road. For events to be effective, participants need to feel safe, not just physically but also psychologically. This is especially important when events push people out of their comfort zone to enact change. "Managing this balance can be tricky, but the more we acknowledge the challenge, the better our chance of overcoming it," event entrepreneur Janice Cardinale, founder of Event Minds Matter, said.

Cardinale attributes the increased lack of trust to the state of the world a few years after the pandemic brought the industry to a complete standstill. "Not only do people not trust their leaders, but there are many who feel unsafe in their workspaces. There have been no safe spaces built within the organization to converse about one's struggle with mental health, coming from stress, anxiety, and burnout," Cardinale said.

Cardinale asks the obvious question: Why has human sustainability become such a problem within the industry? Is it because people just don't want to return to an environment where they don't feel like they belong? "The younger generation, who we really built Event Minds Matter for, are hesitant to come into our industry. This is why we are working very diligently to bring mental health training to the industry and have it mandated," Cardinale said.

BUILDING TRUST BY ADEQUATELY MANAGING RISK

Trust in an event starts at its earliest planning stages. Attendees need to know what to expect. Where will the gathering be held? What are the realities of the destination? What will the conference look like?

Extensive pre-planning with conference organizers and city officials can help anticipate potentially unsafe conditions (street construction might make sidewalks unsafe for walking) to help plan for a friendly and safe environment. Once again, the responsibility falls to meeting professionals to step up and anticipate all possible scenarios that may negatively impact an event.

For instance, if you are planning a meeting on a Caribbean island at the height of hurricane season, you had better warn your attendees well ahead of time, as well as update your contingency plans if a hurricane does indeed strike.

Attendees must feel confident that you are sharing all available and pertinent information and that they can rely on you. This is especially important when it comes to safety and security. Risk management is of the utmost importance for events, and unfortunately, will only likely worsen.

“It’s not a matter of if; it’s a matter of when something is going to happen,” said Gary LaBranche, CEO of the Risk and Insurance Management Society (RIMS), whose own conference was impacted by a shooting. “You have to prepare for all threats, all hazards. It can’t just be theoretical, on a piece of paper, or in a file somewhere. You must have a clear plan where your team knows its roles and responsibilities and practices them.”

MAKING SPACE FOR ALL

According to consultancy and auditing firm Deloitte, up to 20% of the global population has some form of neurodivergence. The unique needs of neurodivergent people, such as those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, epilepsy, and Tourette Syndrome, are often inadvertently overlooked by meeting professionals.

Quiet rooms are proliferating, and although they may have been initially designed to support those with neurodivergent needs, they actually benefit everyone as a space to decompress from the stimulation of a conference or trade show floor.

Creating a sense of safety for all is not an issue that can be swept under the rug. It is being addressed, and solutions are being created. As meeting professionals focus on safety more than ever, attendees can let go of worry and thrive.



The essence of a successful event lies in its capacity to not only engage but also to protect and nurture every participant. The role of meeting professionals stretches far beyond logistical management; it is about weaving trust, inclusivity, and safety into the very fabric of their events.

A collective commitment to creating environments where everyone can thrive, regardless of physical or psychological needs, is not just a standard—it’s the bedrock of transformative experiences. Meeting professionals, now armed with a deeper understanding, have the opportunity to make gatherings havens of human connection and progress, where every attendee leaves feeling valued, heard, and above all, safe.



10

Glamour Cautiously Returns to Incentive Travel

By Refugio Garcia

Incentive travel, seen by many as a sound business investment that drives social and economic prosperity, is an instrument used by business leaders to achieve objectives and strengthen organizations. The pandemic, along with many companies making the subsequent shift to working in remote or hybrid environments, has heightened the importance of teams meeting in person to collaborate and facilitate company culture — allowing them to focus on enhancing programs by making targeted improvements.

The ***2023 Incentive Travel Index*** projects growth through 2025 for both the number of people participating in incentive travel as well as per-person spend — good news for incentive travel. However, it also warns that tangible financial ROI and concerns around cost are higher than in previous years and links these to uncertainty around geopolitical, economic, and environmental issues.

Economic uncertainty, concerns about inflation, and an unstable job market cast incentive travel in an unfavorable light as a frivolous expense as many large companies continue to make cuts and tighten budgets amid rising costs and inflation. While meetings directly relate to companies making strides towards their goals, incentive travel at high-end venues can potentially draw scrutiny as a waste of resources.

PROVING INCENTIVE TRAVEL IS A WORTHWHILE INVESTMENT

Part of the criticism toward incentive travel starts with claims that they are extravagant affairs serving as excuses for executives and sales teams to engage in excessive leisure and entertainment at a company's expense. This scrutiny was only exacerbated by the 2008 financial crisis, when companies taking public funds were criticized for a lack of transparency regarding event budgets and expenditures, leading to suspicions of ***wasteful spending and extravagance***.

While incentive travel may provide attendees with an escape from a strenuous workload with some much needed rest and relaxation at a resort, they also present companies with a tremendous opportunity to drive sales while receiving the desired ROI.

Incentive travel can, in fact, drive sales and help businesses achieve their marketing goals. One example ***published*** by Maritz Global Events showcases how incentive travel is used by agricultural cooperative Growmark to better support member companies. Growmark has been running an incentive program for its member companies for roughly seven decades. A study revealed that award trips were top-rated among member company salespeople. It also indicated that coaching about sales goals and how to hit them was needed.

“We discovered that we had a big opportunity to do more onboarding of our incentive program participants,” said Dana Weaver, senior manager of marketing services at Growmark.

THE FUTURE OF INCENTIVE TRAVEL

Despite apprehensions surrounding cost increases and inflation, the outlook for incentive travel looks positive heading into 2024 and beyond. The 2023 Incentive Travel Index includes a number of data points that give incentive travel executives good reasons to smile.

The search for new destinations continues to be very important for incentive travel buyers, with 71% actively looking for new locations to work with. Of these new locations, urban settings are less desired going forward.

Despite any suggestions that newer generations are less interested in incentive travel, there are indications of the opposite. More than two-thirds (68%) agree that incentive travel is

shifting from a tool to motivate individual performance toward promoting company culture, relationships, and overall performance. Furthermore, 66% agree that the social prestige of incentive travel has become even more important.

Perhaps the most important data point is an expected increase in spend per person. More than half (59%) of buyers expect to have more money for each attendee in 2024, and almost two-thirds (64%) expect more funds in 2025.

This trend of increasing investment is a clear indicator that businesses recognize the value of incentive travel not just as a means of reward but as a strategic tool for fostering engagement, loyalty, and a high-performance culture. The focus is gradually shifting towards creating unique, meaningful experiences that resonate with employees and encourage a stronger alignment with company values and objectives.

By investing more per attendee, companies are able to offer more personalized and impactful experiences, which can lead to a higher level of satisfaction and motivation among employees. Customized experiences are becoming increasingly popular, allowing participants to choose activities that align with their personal interests and values, creating a sense of agency and appreciation.

As companies continue to navigate the complexities of a post-pandemic world, the strategic use of incentive travel is likely to become an even more critical component of talent management and performance strategies. With the potential for improved employee well-being, stronger team dynamics, and increased productivity, the upward trend in incentive travel spending appears to be a wise investment in the workforce.



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