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AMERICA  
*Hotel*

# REIMAGINING LUXURY VENUES FOR MEETINGS AND EVENTS: NEW STRATEGIES AND INSIGHTS

*Brought to you by The Grand America Hotel*





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## ABOUT SKIFT MEETINGS

Skift Meetings is defining the future of events.

As a Skift brand, Skift Meetings delivers insights into how business events, technology, and travel play leading roles in creating and instilling organizational — and indeed industry — culture. We believe meetings and events are the catalyst for new ideas, cultivating values, and building professional relationships.

Skift Meetings is defining the way forward and helping our global audience of business event professionals to thrive by delivering up-to-date guidance, inspiration and news analysis through our multi-platform digital content, research, and live events.

## ABOUT THE GRAND AMERICA HOTEL

From the finely trimmed topiaries and the coordinated bloom of tulips each spring to the carefully sliced tea sandwiches and the always-shimmering chandeliers, at The Grand America, excellence is in the details. Our commitment to the details is a commitment to perfect place settings at every table in the Grand Ballroom, pristine French patisserie baked in-house each morning, and a warm welcome waiting every time a bellman opens our golden doors. With an impressive 100,000 sq. ft. of indoor and outdoor meetings spaces, outfitted with soaring ceilings and Murano glass chandeliers, as well as access to professional, in-house catering and audio-visual teams, The Grand America offers an ideal canvas for your next gathering.

## ABOUT GRAND AMERICA HOTELS AND RESORTS' VICE PRESIDENT OF SALES AND MARKETING



### ANDY GRINSFELDER

VICE PRESIDENT OF SALES, AND  
MARKETING,

**Grand America Hotels and  
Resorts**

With over two decades of dedicated experience in hospitality commercial strategy, Andy Grinsfelder has established himself as a visionary leader adept at leveraging data-driven insights to orchestrate substantial revenue growth and operational efficiency. Armed with a solid foundation in data science, Andy has consistently spearheaded transformative initiatives that elevate brand visibility, drive customer acquisition, and maximize profitability.

Currently serving as the Vice President of Sales, and Marketing at Grand America Hotels and Resorts, Andy oversees revenue operations for a diverse portfolio of luxury hotels and resorts including the world renown Sun Valley Resort, and the incomparable Grand America Hotel.

Prior to his tenure at Grand America Hotels and Resorts, Andy held various executive positions at Delaware North Companies, where he demonstrated his sales, marketing and revenue management prowess in driving commercial success across internationally recognized destinations throughout the US and Australia.

Andy graduated from the University of Michigan with dual majors in Mathematics and Philosophy. His passion for the outdoors and travel led to a career in hospitality as a General Manager of lodges in a variety of beautiful destinations such as Zion and Sequoia National Parks.



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PLAN NOW

# Reimagining Luxury Venues for Meetings and Events: New Strategies and Insights

The definition of luxury may look a bit different depending on the type of group you're gathering for your next meeting — but one thing is clear across the entire events industry: Meeting the expectations of that definition is getting increasingly difficult as everything gets more expensive. According to AMEX GBT's ***2024 Global Meetings and Events Forecast***, cost is the biggest challenge for planners in 2024. Fifty-four percent of respondents in North America and 59 percent in Europe identified cost as their top concern.

As funding for meetings becomes more stringent, finding the right people to make those meetings come to life is also getting more challenging. The hospitality industry often suffers from a lack of experienced staff, and the shortage creates much bigger problems than a few frustrated leisure guests venting about the issues. Knowland's ***2024 State of the Meetings Industry*** found that more than 30 percent of planners continue to face hotel staffing problems, either due to lack of experience or outright shortages.

While those challenges are real, there is plenty of good news to celebrate. The most recent ***Freeman Trends Report*** shows that 82 percent of attendees prefer in-person events versus online programming, and 80 percent believe in-person experiences are the most trustworthy news sources — far ahead of academic institutions, company leaders, media outlets, and more.

With the meeting industry on the way to a full recovery, planners must figure out how to work around those issues to deliver the kind of VIP experience that can secure long-term attendee loyalty. Within this new landscape, high-end hotels in secondary destinations

are emerging as an ideal solution. In fact, Knowland's research found that 53 percent of planners are looking to source high-quality venues outside of tier-1 markets. "This shift presents opportunities for second and third-tier destinations, especially venues with attractive experiential value propositions, first-tier product quality, and quality service levels," shared a planner responding to Knowland's survey.

But what exactly constitutes "first-tier" quality and service now? Skift Meetings partnered with one of the premier hotels in the West, ***The Grand America Hotel in Salt Lake City***, to help event organizers keep up with evolving attendee expectations and a changing industry landscape. This guide will explore the shifting concept of luxury in an evolving era of meetings and events and topics top of mind in the industry, such as:

- The importance of partnering with a property committed to helping attendees immerse themselves in the moment and in the destination.
- The personal touches that can customize and humanize the hospitality experience, particularly in light of the industry's continuing shift to a tech-driven operations model.
- The difference that a tenured staff member can make in every piece of experience, from housekeeping to audio-visual services.
- Shifting attendee attitudes about culinary sustainability and a need to focus on a fine dining culture that rewards and respects the people who make it possible.
- The role that art, history, and culture play in luxury experiences and how art can inspire the exchange of ideas at meetings and events



# 1 Creating a **One-of-a-Kind Feeling** Is More **Crucial** Than Ever





What does luxury really mean? When it comes to hotels, it's a tricky question to answer. There is no universally accepted definition of what distinguishes a five-star property from the rest of the crowd. Consider **CNBC Travel's** analysis of how star ratings from various booking sites stack up, which sums up five-star properties as places that can offer "the highest level of comfort, service, and facilities."

Rather than focusing solely on the features of a property — multiple dining outlets or a spa, for example — you may be better served by considering how consumers view the concept of luxury as it applies to all types of products and services. When the **Financial Times** asked research participants to choose from a list of words they most associated with luxury, "distinctive" emerged as the most common choice. With that in mind, reframing a luxury experience as something that cannot be replicated anywhere else is critical. Today's attendees don't want to be in a ballroom in New York City that feels like it could also be a ballroom in San Francisco. Instead, they want to be in a rare environment that inspires a deeper connection to the place they're visiting.

That feeling can begin as soon as guests walk in the door. At The Grand America Hotel, the property cherishes its Salt Lake home and breathes an only-in-this-moment spirit. Consider the property's spring Grand Tulip display, which includes over 40,000 bulbs in bloom across nearly 10 acres, or the resort's holiday festivities that feature a life-sized gingerbread house, an interactive window stroll throughout the property that takes guests along a magical winter wonderland designed by a local artist, and a stunning display of more than 7,000 light strands that wrap around trees and bushes across the property.

While these celebrations occupy relatively small calendar windows, the property invests significant resources for each. For example, planning for the spring tulip display, which also



features specialty tulip-infused cocktails and culinary items to mark the beginning of the season, begins a full year in advance. The tulip bulbs are shipped from Europe and curated by color and age, so they are in bloom for longer. Meanwhile, the holiday setup requires more than two months of planning. This demonstrates a commitment to making these periods more memorable.

In addition to the property-wide decor, The Grand America team works with organizers to transform the 100,000 square feet of venue space into an extension of an event's brand that establishes an immersive sense of right-here, right-now magic. "While our spaces possess inherent beauty, we pride ourselves on our flexibility and willingness to collaborate with

clients to bring their visions to fruition,” said Bailee George, director of catering sales at The Grand America Hotel. “We welcome the opportunity to work closely with event planners to transform our spaces into settings that exceed expectations and leave a lasting impression on attendees.”

That ability to transform a space into an unforgettable environment shined at the most recent edition of the annual Silicon Slopes gala event, celebrating innovators and entrepreneurs who have shaped Utah’s technology scene. Organizers deftly combined the natural elegance of the property’s Grand Ballroom — a 24,000 square foot space with soaring ceilings that features the largest Moscatelli bronze and crystal chandeliers ever made — with a unique backdrop inspired by Utah’s beautiful winters. Highlights included a life-sized snow globe featuring a ballet dancer, a mock magazine cover that elevated a typical photo op area, and a ski lift installation for more photos.

“At The Grand, we believe that true luxury is an all-encompassing feeling,” said George. “It’s not just about ambiance or quality of amenity, but in the thoughtful touches that make our guests feel truly cared for. Without unwavering attention to detail and anticipatory service, the allure of physical luxury can feel empty. That’s why we are committed not only to having the most luxurious spaces in our hotel but also instilling the feeling of luxury through our careful service and warm hospitality.”







# When It Comes to Service, **Screens** Should Be **Secondary**



Photo Credit: Salt City Event Co. (@saltcityevent.co) & Laura Kinser (@kinserstudios)



In many parts of the hotel industry, the feeling of warm hospitality has been replaced by the warm glow of a screen. And while plenty of guests appreciate the convenience of self-service options, they should only be used for specific needs. From an invitation to “skip the front desk and get your key delivered straight to your phone” to watching robots handle guest service duties, there is a worrying sea of sameness that focuses less on the traditional “how can I help you” spirit of hospitality and more on a “do it yourself” mentality.

That’s a problem — particularly for the high-end VIPs who make up the luxury event audience. Consider ***this perspective*** from New York Times technology reporter Nellie Bowles: “The rich have grown afraid of screens. They want their children to play with blocks, and tech-free private schools are booming. Humans are more expensive, and rich people are willing and able to pay for them. Conspicuous human interaction — living without a phone for a day, quitting social networks, and not answering email — has become a status symbol. All of this has led to a curious new reality: Human contact is becoming a luxury good.”

Notably, the above section was written in 2019 — well before the pandemic fueled a shift to contactless everything. In 2024, the human touch has become an even more powerful point of differentiation in the travel industry.

However, that high-touch level of service is only possible with a workforce committed to a property’s long-term success. The Grand America Hotel offers a blueprint for not only filling staff positions but keeping those team members on board for decades with a model that puts employee satisfaction on the same level as guest satisfaction.

## A LOT OF YOUR ATTENDEES MAY BE LOOKING TO DITCH THEIR DEVICES

In addition to placing a premium on human service, it’s important to recognize that attendees at luxury properties may be looking for a way to eliminate their own screens while they’re at your meeting. ***Recent research from McKinsey*** shows that luxury travelers are two to three times more likely than typical travelers to want to meet new people and take some form of digital detox while away from home. As you plan your next experience, look for opportunities to encourage attendees to reevaluate their relationships with their devices during the program.



Consider Javier Robles, the property's banquet director. More than 20 years ago, Robles started as a banquet set-up employee and has worked his way to the top. The Grand America does more than focus on rewarding employees like Robles with promotions, though. The property shares its own stories through its ***Faces of The Grand online series*** that celebrates many of the frontline and back-of-house employees who set the event experience apart. The stories reflect the family-run business that allows for a closer connection. Employees who feel a stronger connection to the property care more about ensuring every attendee feels right at home.

"Being a family-run business shapes every aspect of how we operate," said George. "We prioritize building and nurturing relationships both within our internal teams and with our guests. This familial atmosphere creates a welcoming and inclusive environment where guests feel like a part of our extended family from the moment they walk through the doors." In addition to creating benefits for employees and attendees, the property's independent status also delivers big wins for event organizers who need staff who feel empowered to make the real-time adjustments essential to a meeting's success.

"Being a family-run business also allows us to be more adaptable in our operations," added George. "We have the flexibility to make decisions quickly, tailoring our services to meet our guests' individual needs and preferences."



# 3

## In-House Expertise Is Key for **Immersive Experiences**





Many attendees at luxury events may be aiming to leave their smartphones on “do not disturb,” but that doesn’t mean they aren’t excited about what technology can do to up-level their experience. Freeman’s research shows that 64 percent of attendees believe an immersive experience is the most important component of a meeting. The right approach to event tech integration can create a multisensory experience that helps attendees disconnect from their phone screens while getting lost in the magic of what’s happening around them.

That puts pressure on event organizers to find a property that doesn’t just pay lip service to first-class technology solutions. This can be a tall order in today’s landscape, where many hotels outsource their audio-visual needs. And if you’re planning to broadcast a portion of your event to a remote audience, top tech is even more critical. According to **research from Markletic**, 35 percent of event organizers say it’s difficult to find a venue to host a hybrid meeting.

The Grand America is an exception. The property’s in-house audio-visual team includes a staff with over two decades of experience. So, rather than simply being audio-visual experts, the team consists of professionals who specialize in the specific gear and spaces at the hotel. That’s a key difference that fuels immediate solutions versus minutes of troubleshooting.

“We think of ourselves as the blood pressure medicine,” said Matt Ballif, senior director of IT and event technology at The Grand America. “You’ve been planning the event for months, fine-tuning the design, and reworking the logistics. When you arrive on-site, the rest of the details are on us to allow you to enjoy the fruits of your labor and see the experience come to life.”

## WHAT THE INDUSTRY IS SAYING

As The Grand America continues to upgrade its studio and streaming capabilities regularly, attendees feel like they’re part of a high-end experience — even if they’re sitting at home.

“The virtual attendee feedback has been outstanding, as those who have participated virtually feel just as engaged as those in person,” said Heidi Walker, chief operating officer of the Salt Lake Chamber. “The Grand America Hotel staff’s attention to detail, excellent customer service, and skillful adaptation all resulted in very successful hybrid events.”

# 4

# It's Time to Redefine **Fine Dining**





When attendees aren't immersed in what's happening on stage, they'll be impressed with what's on their plates. Research from American Express Travel shows that 81 percent of travelers say that trying local foods is what they're most excited about on their trips. Planners can further deepen the connection with the host destination by giving attendees a dish with a story about where the ingredients came from. It's no longer another dinner at another event. Instead, the plate inspires attendees to snap a photo and never forget it.

"We firmly believe you eat with your eyes first, which is why we are committed to designing dish presentations that look just as remarkable as they taste," said George at The Grand America. "Our chefs go above and beyond to accommodate customizations and cater to dietary restrictions. Our priority is to ensure that every guest receives the same exceptional dining experience, regardless of their dietary needs."

In addition to ensuring guests feel like stars, the kitchen culture at the property is a 180-degree turn from the often brutal environment that makes fine dining so difficult for the staff elsewhere.

## WHAT'S LEFT OVER IS EQUALLY IMPORTANT

Today's luxury travelers want to know that their presence at the table is good for the planet. ***Research from Virtuoso*** shows that 74 percent of luxury travelers say they're willing to pay more to travel responsibly. One way to make that happen is to select a property committed to limiting food waste.

***The Grand America's composting program*** offers a source of inspiration for the events industry. Since 2018, the property has partnered with Wasatch Resource Recovery to divert 94 tons of leftover food from banquet services, restaurants, and its employee cafeteria. The efforts help supply renewable energy to approximately 15,000 homes.





At The Grand America, Executive Chef Fernando Soberanis and Chef Tomas Olvera operate with the same philosophy as the rest of the property: If people love their work, they will make things that guests and attendees will love, too.

It's a spirit highlighted in another installment in the Faces of the Grand series. "[The two chefs] work together to change the culture of working in a fast-paced, high-pressure kitchen. 'I don't want my team to just say, 'Oh, Chef Tomas was a good chef, no...!' Olvera clarifies, 'I want them to remember, 'Chef Tomas was a kind person. He really helped me.'"

It's not only a positive and collaborative environment — it's a kitchen committed to the success of all its members. "I don't want to train cooks," said Chef Tomas, "I want to create chefs."

## PAVING A PARKING LOT TO PUT UP A CULINARY PARADISE

When a prestigious tech company needed to utilize every inch of Grand America's 100,000 square feet of flexible event space, there wasn't room left indoors for dining. The solution? Turn the parking lot into a stunning dining room. Storage sections of the parking lot became food service and steward stations, while carpeting and a combination of palm trees and other foliage helped the space look nothing like a place to leave a car. The property's operational team developed entirely new protocols to accommodate food service while working to match the theme of the rest of the event. Attendees enjoyed a fine dining experience with the unforgettable ambiance of the Salt Lake stars.



# 5 True Luxury Celebrates **Art, History, and Culture**

According to research conducted by 11 art museums in the U.S., 95 percent of visitors report benefits to their well-being after exploring a collection of creativity. Attendees of high-end meetings and events should be able to get some of those benefits without ever leaving the property. As more hotels have begun exploring ways to uplevel their collections, The Grand America sets the gold standard for giving guests an opportunity to feel a closer connection to culture at every corner.

"The Holding family, owners of Grand America Hotels & Resorts, meticulously curated the collection at the Grand America Hotel," said Juliana Mehic, project manager. "They traveled to Italy to handpick the marble and contributed to the design of the exquisite hand-blown glass Barovier and Tosso chandeliers in the salon spaces. The art tour at Grand America showcases the family's dedication to creating a museum-quality environment."

While the marble came from Italy, the family traveled to many other countries to select various fittings and furnishings. For example, Mr. Holding visited Russia to see an installation of Bethel Granite before committing to installing it at The Grand America. The entire exterior of the building — approximately 450,000 square feet — has been clad in the unique white stone ever since.

Whether attendees are strolling to the Grand Ballroom or networking in the lobby, they'll find woven wool and silk French tapestries from the 18th century, a 19th-century Louis XVI gold leaf mirror, Henri Bouvet oil paintings, and more. The collection also includes a celebration of local contemporary artist Courtney Derrick with oil paintings of nearby landmarks, including 9,026-foot Mount Olympus, 11,750-foot Mount Timpanogos, and Big Cottonwood Canyon at Solitude Ski Resort.

## HOW ART BUILDS MORE BRAIN POWER

As you look for the right ingredients to inspire more fruitful idea exchanges at your next meeting, consider these key ways that ***art can impact the brain***, according to the American Congress of Rehabilitation Medicine:

- Increase serotonin levels
- Increase blood flow to the part of the brain associated with pleasure
- Foster new ways of thinking
- Imagine a more hopeful future



# Conclusion

Professionals have always been mindful of how they spend their most precious resource: their time. But today's always-connected business environment can make them even more wary of saying yes to another meeting. If people already spend more time with their professional responsibilities than ever, how can you inspire them to participate in a two- or three-day program? For meetings at luxury properties, which inevitably carry a higher price tag, there's more pressure to justify the investment of time and money.

Ultimately, the answer begins — and ends — with the destination. While the speakers in the education lineup and networking opportunities will always be weighed heavily, the venue lays the foundation for whether to attend. Of course, the elegant spaces inside the host venue aren't everything — the stuff inside those four walls makes all the difference. Despite the wave of technological innovation reshaping the hospitality industry, the spirit of luxury still relies on partnering with a property that recruits and retains top-tier talent who recognize the importance of building relationships with every attendee who walks through the doors. In the digital age, The Grand America serves as a reminder of a lesson that will fuel the future of luxury experiences: The human touch is a special ingredient.





Get a closer look at what makes The Grand America the go-to choice for event organizers looking for a property committed to unforgettable attendee experiences.

### THE GRAND BALLROOM:

A 24,000-sq.-ft. venue with soaring ceilings that reflect the tradition of the property's elevated sense of elegance. The largest Moscatelli bronze and crystal chandeliers made – 12 feet in diameter – feature crystals hidden in the Czechoslovakian countryside during World War II before being transported to Milan via wagon.

### IMPERIAL BALLROOM:

The second largest ballroom on the property, with 13,000 square feet of sectional space, accommodates up to 1,350 attendees.

### GRAND SALON:

This 3,400-sq.-ft. space with 24-foot-high ceilings and two fireplaces can accommodate up to 400 guests. Its signature patio allows attendees to enjoy the Salt Lake City skies.



## CENTER COURTYARD:

The 35,000-sq.-ft. space, with room for up to 1,500 attendees, offers a blank canvas for event organizers to give groups more time to enjoy the sun or the stars, depending on the season.

## THE GIBSON LOUNGE:

With classical pianists and jazz musicians providing the soundtrack and master mixologists making Martinis and Old Fashioneds, this is an ideal environment for post-reception conversations.

## SNOWBASIN RESORT:

Part of The Grand America Hotels and Resorts Family, this site played host to part of the 2022 Winter Olympic Games and is just 40 minutes from downtown Salt Lake City. It offers the perfect pairing for any event, with skiing in the winter and mountain biking throughout the spring, summer, and fall.

## THE GRAND SPA:

The ultimate spa experience in Salt Lake City gives attendees more opportunities to escape the everyday and reclaim their inner sense of calm with a rejuvenating treatment.





## CMP CREDITS

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This report is worth 1 CMP Credit under the Strategic Planner category.

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