



Photos from Grow! 2019, a conference for landscape professionals.

Photos courtesy Iron Peacock Events

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# Next Generation Corporate Meetings

Top trends impacting planners  
today & tomorrow By Selena Chavis

Few would argue that the digital revolution has transformed the way business is conducted in many ways. And while the conveniences and efficiencies of electronic communication are here to stay, current trends suggest that some traditional methods of building strong business bonds are making a comeback: human, in-person interaction.

A recent report put out by Harvard Business Review Analytic Services – *The Event Marketing Evolution: An Era of Data, Technology and Revenue Impact* – notes that “in a post-digital world, building business relationships online is simply not enough” and “more than ever before, it’s crucial for business to go beyond the digital space to build meaningful relationships.”

As evidence that businesses increasingly understand this phenomenon, the number of companies organizing 20 or more events per year increased by 17 percent between 2017 and 2018, according to the 2019 Event Marketing report from Bizzabo. Findings also reveal that in 2018 a larger number of businesses considered live events to be the most critical marketing channel for achieving goals: the report revealed a 32 percent increase from the 2017 report.

Bottom line, the corporate meeting and event outlook is strong. The Events Industry Council estimated that business events generated \$621.4 billion of direct gross domestic product by late 2018. Yet, as traditional in-person business models rebound, the expectations are much different in the digital age. For example, business travelers are demanding more flexible policies and travel tools like those used for personal travel. They also expect personalized experience, which can be a tall order for many event planners.

As the meetings industry continues to grow and evolve, here are some trends that are defining next generation corporate meetings:

### Rise of Event Marketing

According to the Harvard Business Review report, there is a connection between growth and event marketing. Notably, the fastest-growing companies have also invested the most in these in-person strategies, whether events are small customer meetings, large conferences or industry trade shows. To that end, face-to-face meetings are expected to be a greater priority in 2019 than in the past as organizations work to strengthen relationships, build capabilities, develop new skills and collaborate on innovations.

Sally Mainprize, principal of Iron Peacock Events, noted that this trend stands in stark contrast to predictions that emerged in the no-so-distant past, which suggested that event marketing would die a slow death, giving way to the cost and time efficiencies of virtual meetings. She believes three things happened that negated this projection.

First, she suggested that fears about the digital revolution served as a wake-up call to the industry. “A great deal has been done to improve content, interaction and ensure events are contributing in a tangible way to the host corporations and those who attend them,” she said.

Second, while internet research is great for narrowing down a field of suppliers, Mainprize noted that “people still buy from people,” especially when it comes to more complex products and services.

Last, she noted that the industry made the incorrect assumption that the younger generation would discount human interaction; data now suggests just the opposite. “Maybe they value human interaction because a great deal of their time is spent otherwise,” she said. “Or maybe face-to-face events give them the opportunity to post about their event experience and share what they learn and do with the rest of the world. In any case, the event industry has improved its focus and has the support of the next generation who will continue to push live events forward.”

For Mainprize’s clients, event marketing is characterized by smaller events – most welcome less than 100 guests – that are targeted and unique in presentation. “I believe the driver of this increase is a concentrated effort to specifically design the hosted event for a niche audience,” she said, pointing out that clients are curating single events for subsets of their

audience with content that really hits home. “In addition to exacting content, the audience finds themselves among peers and the networking opportunity with each other is extremely valuable to them.”

Liz Klostermann, CEM, senior exhibit manager with Meeting Expectations, noted that she is also seeing an uptick in targeted event investments, including large franchise conventions. “One of these franchise clients launches their new lineup of restaurant menu items at each show,” she said. “By serving these products to their franchisees, they drive excitement and anticipation for the new items coming to their locations. In my experience, corporations recognize not only the benefits of continuing to establish their brand



story in the marketplace but also the importance of engaging with their customers and stakeholders in ways they mutually find important.”

Many of these events encompass a corporate social responsibility (CSR) activity that helps attendees facilitate networking connections, immerse themselves in a positive cause and makes for a memorable experience, Klostermann added. “Corporations who integrate a CSR activity within their event are creating a more organic connection with their attendees,” she said. “After the event, successful brands continue the story and interaction on social media or create ways for attendees to share the experience with team members not at the event.”

### Flexible Travel Policies & Tools

A recent Skift travel report suggests that attendee expectations are increasing in tandem with more business travel. The report recommends that companies adopt a “people first” perspective that puts more control in the hands of the traveler, noting that “travelers want more control over their trips than ever before and new digital tools allow them to co-create a trip within the structure of the apps and services they already use.”

For example, TripAdvisor launched a social networking platform that allows users to choose elements of travel and save them for when they are ready to book. This approach differs from past business models built on pushing deals and options that consumers may or may not want. The new end-to-end tool improves the efficiency of planning a trip as many travelers do not have to spend time pricing activities and scheduling options for the best experience outside the application.

Options such as Airbnb and Lyft are other considerations. Klostermann noted that while it’s not commonplace yet, she is seeing a corporate practice of providing a per diem so employees can choose if they want to stay at an Airbnb instead of a hotel.

Additionally, she pointed to clients who approach travel and meetings from the “work hard, play hard” mentality. “This means mixing business with leisure and inspiring productivity by getting key stakeholders in the same, high-end locale, where activities and networking in small groups inspires business deals and progress toward business goals,” she said.

Mainprize added that mixing business and

leisure is always top of mind for today’s event professionals and the attractiveness of a destination is central to that strategy. “We know it will affect attendance,” she said. “Also, it is common for an event to extend the hotel group rate for several days pre- and post-event for those attendees who may want to come in early and/or stay post-event.”

While companies have historically left the planning of post-event leisure activity to the attendee, Mainprize said that she saw a client shift from that practice for the first time this year by organizing a ski trip as an add-on. “I hope to see more of this business/pleasure combo in our too-busy world,” she said.

### Luxury Redefined to Mean Individualized Experiences

Mainprize noted that luxury is becoming more about personalized experiences and true quality within those experiences as opposed to exclusivity. For example, she said clients are requesting everything from artisanal food and beverage events in unique settings to athletic meet-and-greets at sporting events.

In these cases, context matters, Klostermann cautioned, pointing out that “while such environments and experiences are cool, it is the specific content for that niche audience that is the key driver. In essence, it has to be about what the individual wants.” Offering another client example, she explained that the company allows for personal preferences, offering differing experiences within an event based on choices attendees can make, such as where they are seated and what is included.

“I hope we see companies who host events completely embrace the opportunity this trend holds because I think it could truly be a game changer,” she said. “It will require that event hosts really understand their attendees beyond



demographics to their preferences and how they think. For the experience to be fully personalized, it means communicating in the way they prefer, delivering the experience in the way they prefer and letting the attendees really drive the total event agenda.”

According to Klostermann, any time a brand makes a personal connection, the bond between customer and brand deepens. “I see this especially during incentive events and how we focus on creating memorable, personalized experiences for attendees,” she said. “More and more, corporations are seeing the value of offering special touches for their high performers.”

For an incentive trip, she recalled sourcing yoga mats embellished with attendee names that greeted them at the morning exercise session. For another client, fabric from a banner that became a Guinness Book of World Record for largest ad was repurposed into giveaway bags, becoming part of the company’s story. “The attendees literally took a piece of the brand story home with them,” she said. “That left quite the impression.”

For incentives taking place outside of the U.S., she noted that planners focus on providing local talent and experiences so attendees immerse themselves in the destination’s culture. For example, Klostermann’s firm has sourced fire dancers in Hawaii, planned a cigar-rolling activity in Punta Cana and tequila tastings in Mexico. “These high-end, luxury experiences help motivate high-performers to reach their goals and provide a positive, once-in-a-lifetime experience for them,” Klostermann said. ■