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The changing face of the corporate meeting

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JUDITH CROWN



PRA Business Events

A coloring wall is among the various experiences that planners have introduced to put their meetings on the map.

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The Chicago office of cloud data services company NetApp wanted an unexpected venue for a summer client meeting. It ended up at Wrigley Field, where the business portion was conducted in the Bleacher Suite, followed by a private tour and an evening baseball game watched from the luxury of a corporate box. "People were excited about being in a unique place," says Chicago planner Jodi Wolf, who orchestrated the outing. "They were not sitting in a meeting room."

Planners increasingly are looking to infuse "experiences" into once-staid business meetings and conferences, where attendees trudge from one PowerPoint presentation to the next, broken up only by coffee and cookie breaks.

People can absorb only so much educational content at a time, research has found, and it can become especially challenging in a 2 p.m. session in an overheated room after a three-course lunch.

Consequently, planners experiment with activities that break up the day and incorporate wellness and sustainability. There are

yoga and stretching sessions. Attendees walk through a labyrinth, watch a magician or a whip artist. They also set aside time for a charitable activity such as assembling care packages for children in hospitals or the homeless.

"People need a layer of change and transformation," says John McHugh, CEO of Chicago-based Total Event Resources.



Paulette Wolf Events

Meetings and conferences no longer mean sitting in stuffy rooms for hours on end. Circus stunts, anyone?

These activities must translate well to social media to create a buzz beyond the venue. Food, too, must be photogenic, such as an Instagrammable lettuce wall where guests use shears to cut off greens and prepare a salad.

Instagram is only one of many technologies transforming meetings. Organizers and attendees post content on YouTube and Twitter to reach a wider audience. Mobile apps let attendees pose questions to speakers or participate in instant polls. Web technology enables planners to stream presentations. Surveys and scanners deliver reams of data, which can help planning for future meetings.

Of course, you have to know your audience, planners say. Does a large conference have to please boomers, Gen Xers and millennials? Can an audience be segmented for more targeted, specialized meetings? Magicians and yoga sessions may be fun for a sales meeting, but not appropriate for a medical association that must cover educational content for its members on a tight schedule.

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And not every conferencegoer wants to photograph their food.

"Steel and aluminum guys are not into Instagram," says Rose Manfredini, vice president of membership and events at the Metals Service Center Institute, or MSCI, in Rolling Meadows, an association for metals distributors.

SOMETHING NEW AND CREATIVE

In the quest to find the experiences that will put their meetings on the map, planners have introduced fitness sessions, meditation rooms, coloring tables and walls that mimic a kid's coloring book.

"You want something that lives on after the event," says Julie Novack, CEO and co-founder of PartySlate, a website marketplace that matches planners with event professionals and venues.



PRA Business Events

Yoga, virtual reality games, live entertainment: "People need a layer of change and transformation," says John McHugh, CEO of Total Event Resources.

Wolf, CEO of Paulette Wolf Events, has hired celebrity health and wellness expert Jim Karas for meetings of the Federal Reserve and other corporate clients. Karas, who has trained Oprah Winfrey and Diane Sawyer, gets people up and moving, Wolf says. In succinct 30- to 40-minute sessions, he advises how to eat healthy while traveling, drink plenty of water and get enough sleep. "He gets everyone moving around the room," she says.

Out-of-towners want to visit local landmarks, so Wolf schedules events at Millennium Park and the Modern Wing of the Art Institute and on architectural boat trips. In fall 2018, she arranged a reception for customers of human resources consultancy Mercer on the Willis Tower Skydeck with entertainment, food and tours. But she draws the line at tours of the homes and hangouts of infamous Chicago gangsters. "That's not real," she says.

One popular element is incorporating activities for charity, or "corporate social responsibility." Attendees may be invited to bring clothes, toys or nonperishable foods to donate to shelters or food pantries. Some planners invite guests to assemble the care packages and introduce an element of competition to make it fun.

The American Society of Anesthesiologists invites attendees at its annual meeting—which draws more than 10,000—to participate in a 5K run or walk at the start of the four-day event, says meeting planner Kara Ferguson. Runners pay a fee, and the proceeds are donated to the Wounded Warrior Project, which supports veterans wounded in post-2001 military actions.



Paulette Wolf Events

Event participants are increasingly asked to take part in charitable activities, such as donating children's books to schools.

Deerfield office products distributor Essendant (formerly United Stationers) teamed with Dutch environmental group Plastic Whale during a client incentive trip in Amsterdam last year. Attendees who wanted to participate joined a boat trip to clean up the canals. "We used nets and pulled out shoes, liquor bottles and drinking straws," says Monique Collins, senior manager for meetings and events at Essendant. The company sponsored a group of schoolchildren to do the same kind of cleanup before the corporate guests arrived.

Even the distribution of the routine but expected corporate gift such as a notebook, business card holder or water bottle can be transformed into an activity.

At several meetings abroad, Essendant has invited local artisans to bring their crafts to an art show at the meeting venue. Guests receive vouchers and select the items they like. The artisans get paid for the items selected by the attendee guests, which include pewter, leather, jewelry, apparel, textiles and soap. "We won't drop a gift bag of stuff in your room," Collins says. "We're providing the experience and not throwing away money on unwanted gifts."

Last summer, Chicago-based Atomic Brands rewarded 20 top distributors of its Monaco Cocktails with custom luggage tags. Attendees of the meeting at the Kohler American Club resort in Wisconsin picked from more than a half-dozen styles and had their names engraved on the metal disk, along with the date and name of the event, says Noelle McInerney, founder of Chicago event planner Ladidadi XM, which planned the meeting.

The downside of these innovations is the pressure to come up with something new and creative. Since these activities are continually posted on social media, planners know they can't copycat. "You constantly are reinventing the wheel," says Heather Brown, general manager at PRA Business Events in

Chicago, a destination management company that handles logistics for planners. "The bar gets higher—that forces you to be on your game."



CSI DMC

This green wall by CSI DMC is for attendees to cut lettuces for salads. All the better to photograph for social media.

A WALL OF GREENS

Technology has transformed all kinds of meetings, whether a festive sales gathering or a technical medical conference.

Planners use metrics to assemble the data needed to assess a meeting's success and plan for the future. For example, RFID tags show which booths generated the most traffic, who attended particular breakout sessions, or which presentations drew the most conversation, notes McHugh of Total Event

Resources. Surveys reveal attendee satisfaction. And social media postings show which talks and activities cut through the clutter.

"These are no longer stand-alone endeavors; they are measured against an organization's larger strategic goals," McHugh says. "How does this roll up into the bigger picture? Is this helping drive sales, or should we do something else? There's a lot more quantifiable data and measures than as recently as five years ago."

Web streaming or webinars let the host reach people who don't travel to the venue. "The ability to stream has been a game changer," says Barbara Connell, CEO of the American Society of Gastrointestinal Endoscopy, or ASGE, and national chair of an Events Industry Council committee for planners. "People can be halfway across the world. They don't have to wait weeks or months to see presentations."

Agendas, schedules and presentations, attendee lists and speaker bios are posted to mobile apps and websites, doing away with printed materials.

"After the conference, we send out emails with links to the presentations," says Manfredini of MSCI. "We're replacing all that paper, so it's more (environmentally) sustainable."

Mobile apps are useful for interactions with the audience, such as a quick survey or questions for a speaker. They also provide news and updates. Essendant's meeting app was particularly helpful in 2015 when an ice storm in Nashville, Tenn., hit on the arrival day of a show for customers and suppliers. Attendees were stuck as the airport was closed.

"Having the app was critical for bulletins as the program was turned upside down," Collins recalls. "We pushed back the general session. People trickled in; a few hundred didn't make it at all."

Then, of course, there's ubiquitous social media, used by meeting sponsors as well as attendees to post content, observations, praise, criticism and photos. Posting content on YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and other platforms enables the conference to amplify its content, reach a wider audience and extend the life of a show.

ASGE begins promoting content on social media before an event to "generate interest and attract the right people to the content," Connell says.

Every element of a show is fodder for Instagram, and food pictures are a favorite, whether a barista manning a coffee bar, a chocolate dessert fountain or a sushi display.

"Everything must look playful, beautiful and organic because everyone is taking photos," says Jodi Fyfe, founder and CEO of caterer Paramount Events. Platters and baskets don't work because photogenic displays require height. Paramount uses illuminated blocks, raised wooden boards and etageres to present food.

A lettuce wall was a well-photographed attraction at a May event for about 85 meeting planners on Michigan Avenue hosted by a convention visitors bureau, says Micayla Diener, director of sales in Chicago at event planning company CSI DMC, which handled the logistics. Guests went up to the wall of greens with a pair of shears and snipped off romaine and red leaf to mix their own salads.

The salad wall tied into the event's "healthy living," theme, Diener says, and impressed the seasoned group of planners.



Paramount Catering

"Everything must look playful, beautiful and organic because everyone is taking photos," says Jodi Fyfe, founder and CEO of caterer Paramount Events.

Caterers must accommodate attendees with allergies and preferences such as gluten free, dairy free, peanut free, vegetarian and vegan, and all items on a buffet must be labeled. Planners say they are trying to incorporate healthier items such as frittatas, yogurt, fruit and oatmeal at breakfast and salads and lighter entrees at lunch.

Instead of cakes and pies, Paramount may offer dark chocolate, nuts, fruit and cheeses for dessert, Fyfe says.

But wellness only goes so far. "People go for the cookie," says Manfredini of MSCI. She avoids trendy options such as tapas or dainty hors d'oeuvres served in a spoon. "My fellows would need 50 of these," she says. "They would just get frustrated."

One of her most popular dinners featured the cuisines of five NFL cities. "The one they loved the most was Green Bay (for the Packers)," she says. "There were cheese curds, onion rings and brats."

CUSTOMIZED AND TAILORED

Despite the interest in flashy, Instagrammable moments, companies and associates are still tight with budgets, planners say. "People want it, but they don't want to pay for it, so that's always interesting," says Paramount's Fyfe. "It's rearranging the dollars spent." For example, a planner may substitute a cocktail reception for a seated dinner and limit liquor to beer and wine. That frees up money for breakfast and lunch, she says.

Other priorities are shifting. There's less spending on pricey floral arrangements and fine linens. In the interest of sustainability, there's no need for flashy disposable items such as napkins and stirrers. For some clients, Wolf of Paulette Wolf

Events has created pillows with a corporate logo, which are part of the decor but can be taken home as swag, so they're not wasted.

It comes down to understanding the demographics, habits and preferences of meeting attendees—whether boomer, Gen Xer or millennial, in an old-line industrial industry or fast-growing technology startup. How much do they care about wellness and sustainability? Do they want to sightsee or settle in for educational sessions?

"Everything has to be customized and tailored," says McHugh of Total Event Resources.

MSCI conference attendees are mostly men in their 50s, 60s and 70s. "If I tried to do yoga," Manfredini says, "they would say, 'What are you smoking?'"

Inline Play

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