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ADAPTING VENUE SOURCING STRATEGIES AMIDST A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

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Planning an in-person meeting during a global pandemic, or even any crisis situation, challenges meeting planners and venues. The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged the industry globally in a way never seen before. Travel and meetings suppliers, under the guidance of governmental authorities at the local, state and country level, still are trying to understand the new processes and methods that will be needed to keep attendees and travelers as safe as possible amidst uncertainty.

This uncertainty puts planners and suppliers in a bind. Many events, especially large ones, require large lead times. Everyone is caught playing chicken—do you risk signing a contract that you may have to pay cancellation fees for later, or do you risk losing venue availability and having to change your plans? The one thing we know for sure is that in-person events will happen again, they just may look different.

This white paper is designed to highlight the necessary considerations to sourcing and working with venues for in-person events, including managing social distancing and other hygienic protocols, as well as the pandemic-related changes to the meeting contracting process.



Planning Without Precedent

As planners and suppliers figure out how to safely and effectively host events in a post-pandemic world, continued uncertainty brings added challenges. Everyone suddenly has to become an expert on hygiene and sanitization, space planning, local jurisdictional regulations and more. Add in the extra layer of understanding individual property opening statuses, and the travel regulations of each meeting attendee, and planners have hundreds of new questions to account for in organizing an event.

Such uncertainty can't be alleviated, according to the panelists of a May webinar sponsored by Cvent and presented by The BTN Group, so planners' best option is to take it into account and let it help guide site-selection decisions accordingly.

"We're encouraging people to wait until we get all-clear in a given location before booking a meeting there," Autodesk senior manager of global strategic meetings Gigi Gleason during the webinar said of government re-openings. "The danger is that we won't find space, but that seems better at this juncture than committing and canceling." A cancellation due to government lockdown or further coronavirus outbreaks might not qualify as a contractual force majeure, leaving the meeting host exposed to potential cancellation damages from the venue.

For those properties that are able to host gatherings, one important consideration will be the space available to meet. While social distancing guidelines and mandates vary by jurisdiction, many operate on the guideline set by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Protection that requires six feet of space between attendees at all times. Maintaining that space inherently limits the number of attendees that can be in one room at one time, meaning that the amount of meeting space necessary for all but the smallest meetings will be larger than it was pre-pandemic.

"Every hotel is considering what we will do with the spacing," Accor vice president of meetings and incentives Chris Ruane said during the webinar. Ruane pointed to Cvent's Social Tables event diagramming software, which lets planners and

hoteliers experiment with socially distant room designs. "Using Social Tables, you can get a quick idea," he said.

Keeping it Clean

A May 2020 survey by BCD Travel of 1,260 client business travelers worldwide found that 79 percent considered enhanced cleaning a "very" or "extremely" important action hotels could take to persuade them travel was safe, the option most cited. To that end, all major U.S. hotel chains have embraced the cleaning and safety protocols released in May by the American Hotel & Lodging Association. Many chains have put additional measures in place as well (see sidebar), but all are using the AHLA baseline, which was developed in conjunction with the CDC. The "Safe Stay" guidelines include stipulations for enhanced cleaning guest and meeting rooms and public spaces, the use of disinfectants and hand sanitizers, and an embrace of CDC's social distancing guidelines, among many others.

"We have to trust that the hotel or venue will have our attendees' safety in mind above anything else, because that's what we have to keep in mind above anything else," Gleason said.

Accor has consulted with Johns Hopkins University and is using third-party auditor Bureau Veritas for its cleanliness program, Ruane said. "There will be a two- or three-page [cleanliness program] overview and then behind that a 50-page document that will be meant for planners and risk management who want to know, similar to an emergency, how you're going to handle everything."

Keep Your Distance

Cleanliness protocols and the manners in which social distancing requirements will translate to in-person events likely will dominate discussions between planners and venues for the foreseeable future. These discussions could continue until a COVID-19 vaccine or common treatments are widely available, or herd immunity is achieved.



SAFETY RESOURCES

Every major hotel chain has developed an enhanced cleaning and hygiene program amid the COVID-19 pandemic. All incorporate AHLA “Safe Stay” standards and have incorporated CDC guidelines. Here are some highlights:

Accor’s program was developed with and vetted by testing, inspections and certification firm Bureau Veritas. The program includes a “label” for hotels to display that shows Accor’s enhanced cleanliness standards and operational procedures have been met. Hotels will not be able to display the label until approved by an Accor operational expert or third-party auditor, such as Bureau Veritas. The company also has new “guest contact measures,” including providing guests with individual sanitizer, wipes and masks, guest temperature measurement practices, and partitions at front desks, among others. <https://group.accor.com/en/Actualites/2020/05/allsafe-cleanliness-prevention-label>

Hilton Worldwide has increased the frequency of cleaning public areas and has continued the use of hospital-grade disinfectant and increased the use of hand sanitizers. It also internally has shared with managed and franchised properties extra cleaning protocols, infection control guidelines and educational material for employees, according to a company spokesperson. Hilton also will continue to adjust its food and beverage service to comply with current food safety recommendations. <https://www.hilton.com/en/corporate/covidsupport/>

Hyatt Hotels Corp. also has enhanced its cleaning measures in public areas including lobbies, fitness centers, restaurants, gift shops and business centers, engaged a third-party cleaning provider to conduct a deep cleaning across high-traffic areas of the hotel, and designated a “hygiene manager” at each property to oversee efforts. <https://www.hyatt.com/info/global-care-and-cleanliness-commitment>

InterContinental Hotels Group has supplemented its health and safety resources with additional COVID-19 cleanliness guidance, training and information, including adding response teams to provide around-the-clock assistance at hotels and increased frequency

of cleaning of public areas and high-touch points in guest rooms, according to a company spokesperson. The company also is reviewing food and beverage service. <https://www.ihgplc.com/en/about-us/our-response-to-covid-19>

Marriott International launched the Marriott Global Cleanliness Council of internal leaders and external health experts. It is rolling out new sanitation technologies in the coming months, including electrostatic sprayers with disinfectants. It also provides contactless options for check-in and check-out, room access, requests and room service. <https://clean.marriott.com/>

Government and Industry Resources:

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has reams of guidelines, including for

Meetings: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/large-events/index.html>

Travel: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/>

American Hotel & Lodging Association Safe Stay: <https://www.ahla.com/safestay>

Events Industry Council COVID-19 Resource Center on Protocols: <https://eventscouncil.org/coronavirus#Protocol>

Destinations International COVID-19 Response and Recovery Hub: <https://destinationsinternational.org/covid-19-industry-resources>

Northstar Meetings Group COVID-19 Resource Center: <https://www.northstarmetingsgroup.com/Coronavirus>

U.S. Travel Association: <https://www.ustravel.org/toolkit/industry-guidance-promoting-health-and-safety-all-travelers> <https://www.ustravel.org/toolkit/emergency-preparedness-and-response-coronavirus-covid-19>

“It’s interesting, talking about all the things you’ll need to run a meeting now,” Ruane said. “We’re talking about things like what [personal protective equipment] colleagues and guests will need to wear. How will they enter the building? Will they be temperature-checked? Hundreds and hundreds of things will be slightly different, and it’s important for everyone to know that going in. Corporations we’re meeting with may have their own standards. It’s a complex problem that we’ll overcome together,” Ruane added.

Key to planning a safe meeting is to maintain open and detailed lines of communication with not only the meeting venue but also other suppliers and organizations who could affect the event.

Meetings & Incentives Worldwide senior strategic account manager Logan Downey during the webinar said she’s having those talks with “anybody who is touching the event, from a macro-level and a micro-level. We’re having conversations with local government officials, our legal counsel, CVBs, DMCs, hotels, and then we’ll go very specific into food and beverage protocols and even marketing—how are you going to communicate the rules this to meeting attendees? What are the protocols for policing how attendees are going to behave? We’re trying to find the best path moving forward.”

Ruane said Accor has developed floor plans that maintain six feet of distance for meetings, and attendees should not expect to find tables adorned with pre-pandemic standards like pens and pads of paper. He also said buffet-style food service would be shelved in favor of prepackaged meals.

Food and beverage service presents a particular challenge for planners and venues during a pandemic, as snacks, coffee and other drinks readily available in communal space may pose the risk of virus transmission at meetings of all sizes. Gleason noted that passed trays of hors d’oeuvres and dips can’t be a part of any meeting scenario, and that all silverware must be sealed in plastic wrap or wrapped in a napkin.

Both Gleason and Downey pointed to the possibility of outdoor space for F&B service, whether as part of a staggered-meal delivery strategy or a reception in the form of a picnic or drive-in movie, given the scientific evidence that COVID-19 may be more difficult to transmit outside.



Making the Deal

With so much changing in terms of meeting production due to the pandemic, contract negotiations too have changed in several ways. The uncertainty of the situation combined with the lead times necessary for many meetings results in a very high-risk environment for both planner and venue.

“Shared risk is the buzzword,” Ruane said. “We’re going with a no-attrition policy through the end of the year, with a limited policy next year. Cancellation still needs to be a part of a contract because there needs to be a commitment in place, but those kinds of things will really need to be flexible, and the planner and the hotel will need to work together to find the best solution for each situation.”

Gleason said she’s pushing in negotiations for joint monthly reviews of the Autodesk room block to assess the situation on the ground as circumstances evolve, unless hotels aren’t planning to include attrition clauses.

“We have a clause that essentially acknowledges that we have this gray area,” she said, “that says we will work together if an event cannot happen as planned, and we’ll negotiate in good faith for a rebooking, a reduction in numbers or a cancellation. It’s uncomfortable for everyone, but there’s just too much that we don’t know.”

Downey said meetings budget costs have increased 20 percent to 40 percent, triggered in large part by the increase in hotel staff required to implement cleaning protocols and maintain social distancing during the meeting—a cost that many meeting sponsors may not want to bear during a recession. Key, she said, is developing a meeting that fits whatever budget is available.

“It’s trying to identify what makes the most sense for audience, whether it’s a phased or hybrid meeting, however it works keeping attendees safe with the money you do have and getting creative with partners and exploring creative solutions to serve customers.”

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to unprecedented changes in meeting planning and venue sourcing, with no real indication of the best path forward for buyers or suppliers. But in-person meetings are beginning to be planned, and while their future isn’t entirely in planners’ or hotels’ control due to the government regulations regarding gatherings, planners and venues are negotiating contracts and planning events that take into account the need for safety and hygiene protocols and social distancing measures. A sharp focus on the details of both contacts and event production will help planners and venues move forward in the most uncertain time the industry has faced.

About CVENT, Inc.



Cvent is a leading meetings, events, and hospitality technology provider with more than 4,300 employees, 27,000 customers, and 300,000 users worldwide. The Cvent Event Cloud offers software solutions to event planners and marketers for online event registration, venue selection, event management and marketing, onsite solutions, and attendee engagement. Cvent’s suite of products automate and simplify the planning process to maximize the impact of events. The Cvent Hospitality Cloud partners with hotels and venues to help them drive group and corporate travel business. Hotels use the Cvent Hospitality Cloud’s digital marketing tools and software solutions to win business through Cvent’s sourcing platforms and to service their customers directly, efficiently and profitably—helping them grow and own their business.

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