

Meeting Design Trends

A Whole New Level of Wow!



MPI's 2018 World Education Congress in Indianapolis, Indiana delivered more than 80 total education sessions to close to 2,200 attendees.

Planners Are 'Pushing the Envelope' for Memorable Experiences

By John Buchanan

For more than a half-century, a corporate meeting was a fairly standard undertaking. Attendees traveled to the destination that offered the best bottom-line value and/or geographical convenience, participated in meeting sessions in hotel meeting rooms, and ate most of their meals on-site. For many companies, it would be difficult for attendees, after the fact, to differentiate Chicago from Cleveland based on their experiences. Today, however, a more creative approach to planning meetings is changing the long-standing paradigm.

The 'Experiential' Meeting

The overarching trend that is redefining how meetings are conceived and

planned is a growing focus on "experiential" meetings, says Karen Shackman, president of Shackman Associates New York, a meeting/event planning and destination management company in New York City.

In other words, she says, it's no longer enough for attendees to simply show up for three days in a destination, attend sessions, eat meals in a hotel and go home. The meeting must, in some way, be exciting and memorable.

"And in a very important way, an 'experiential' strategy is also a way of better engaging attendees for a more successful meeting,"

Shackman says. "That's why it's now becoming a mainstream trend. We're just at the beginning of it now. But what you're seeing is planners looking at just how far they can push the envelope to create experiences that attendees will really remember."

One of Miami Culinary Tours' most popular experiential outings is the Wynwood Food & Art Tour which focuses on culture, cuisine and art.



Credit: Miami Culinary Tours/www.miamiculinarytours.com

John Knob, director, sourcing and proposal development, at La Jolla, California-based meeting planning and managed travel company Cadence Travel, agrees that a growing trend toward experiential meetings is driving most of the areas of specific change in how meetings are conceived.

"The factor that is really driving meetings now is how the line between your personal and professional lives is becoming blurred," Knob says. "So it's only natural that you start to see that reality affecting meetings and how companies relate to their audiences. And what we're seeing today is that attendees now do not just want to go to a meeting. They want an experience. They want an opportunity to engage in something on a personal level, not just a business level." Although the trend toward experiential meetings was largely triggered by millennials, Knob says, it has now spread to all attendees from all generations. "Everybody," he says, "is buying into it now."

Sarah Sebastian, owner and creative director at Miami-based meeting and event planning company Rose Gold Collective, agrees that the most important factor impacting her role today is that meetings, over and above their business purpose, must now be bona fide experiences that are memorable and motivational. "And any meeting planner who does not see that now," Sebastian says, "is kind of missing the boat." As a result of the trend, Rose Gold

Collective markets itself as an "experiential event agency."

The Destination

One of the pillars of an experiential meeting is the destination.

"That's the starting point if you really want to create a unique experience," Knob says. "And then, once you decide on a destination, it's no longer about just picking any meeting hotel in the destination. It's about finding a

tinuations as unique experiences rather than places on a map to prospective meeting hosts. "That's more true in the luxury market so far," Knob says, "but I'm now seeing it trickle down into the broader market. And you also see the same approach from innovative hotel brands like Kimpton, who understand that you're no longer just selling a hotel. You're selling an experience. And so brands like Kimpton now sell the destination itself, and not just the hotel, to include experiential elements."



Karen Shackman, President
Shackman Associates, New York, NY

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hotel that really captures the uniqueness and character of the destination. People no longer want to just go to a hotel that's 'in' the city. They want a hotel that is (illustrative) 'of' the city, that is part of the unique experience you'll have in the destination."

Sebastian agrees that destination selection is critical to the design of an experiential meeting. "And part of doing it successfully," she says, "is choosing destinations that are more 'aspirational,' rather than just the same old type of destination the company has always gone to."

As a result of the changes in the market, convention and visitors bureaus are now starting to sell their des-

Shackman notes that the key to success is what she calls a "hyper-local" focus on the destination in order to capitalize on its uniqueness and most interesting opportunities to create something new, different and memorable.

Venues

In keeping with the theme of meetings that deliver unique experiences, Shackman says that another trend is the use of singular local offsite venues. In New York, one example is the new Pier 17 dining-entertainment complex, located on the East River in the Seaport District of southern Manhattan and now making its much-anticipated debut. "A venue like that allows you to



Credit: Cadence Meetings & Incentive Travel



Credit: Meetin' Professionals International



Credit: Chad Baumer

The Destination Lounge in the Orange County Convention Center, Orlando, Florida.

U envision entirely new ways of staging a meeting," Shackman says, "because, for example, you can use things like the spectacular New York City skyline as a design element."

Shackman sees more and more corporate meetings moving away from the traditional meeting space in hotels and toward what she calls "evocative" spaces, such as historic and restored New York City bank buildings, art galleries, lofts or yachts.

That, in turn, is changing the fundamental physical aspects of meeting sessions.

"Historically," Shackman says, "you always saw things like classroom-style seating that was very structured. What's happening now is that you're seeing much more a 'lounge' style of environment being created, which allows attendees and presenters or speakers to be much more relaxed and creative in the ways they think and perform. That new kind of environment also means the session is more interactive."

Knob also sees more clients moving away from the traditional hotel model, for both meeting space and food-and-beverage. "But budget is still a huge driver of how those kinds of decisions are made," he says. "So one of the challenges of taking a meeting outside the hotel is that you usually have to bring in everything that you need, which would just be there if you were in the hotel. But as a result of that, we are also

now seeing day-rental offsite meeting spaces opening up more and more in major destinations. But all of the details of that have not quite been figured out yet, so that's something that's still evolving. Yet it is true that we're seeing more and more clients who are open to that kind of possibility."

A related trend he is seeing, when it comes to venues, is the use of more interesting offsite settings for events such as opening night receptions or closing night banquets. "That used to be more

related to incentive programs, but now we're seeing more meeting clients who want to take their opening night reception to a local venue like a museum," he says. "And that's just another example of the things companies are doing to deliver a real experience and not just a meeting. And to do that, the idea of getting outside the hotel is increasingly important. It's absolutely a trend now."

Sebastian agrees there is a strong trend toward the use of more creative offsite function spaces. "In making a venue choice, of course you're influenced by the type of content you'll be presenting," she says. "But today, you should also pay attention to the kind of mood and vibe you want to bring to the session. So that's another reason why more and more companies are moving away from the standard hotel venues."

Another element of innovative venue selection and use is what Sebastian calls "teambuilding within the room." And that's related to how people interact and brainstorm together in small groups. "When you have people collaborate in small groups, then come back together, you get a better level of conversation and feedback," she says. "And one thing I've found that contrib-



Credit: Statue of Liberty Ellis Island Foundation, Inc.

The new 26,000-sf Statue of Liberty Museum (rendering above) is set to open May 2019.

utes to that is more of a 'lounge' setting, or more casual seating. That means you can move your chairs around and get more intimate with people. You can be more collaborative. You're not just sitting there classroom-style. That kind of alternative won't work in some more serious meetings, where a lot of very formal or technical content has to be presented. But it's also true, in general, that people want to be more relaxed and comfortable. So you have to be able to find that balance."

Yet another kind of innovation Knob has started to observe and promote is the use of aromatherapy or meditation in the meeting room. "That's happening because clients now want to deliver a multi-sensory experience," he says. "Another example of that would be more interesting and calming lighting to create a better environment."

Food & Beverage

Yet another change that has become a genuine trend is the use of more creative menu planning that leverages offsite dining opportunities. "The F&B element is also becoming an important piece of the 'hyper-local' strategy," Shackman says. "And that is meaning, more frequently, seeking out top local chefs or celebrity chefs. And often, doing something unique and wonderful is no more expensive than doing the meal in the hotel. But even if you're doing your meals in the hotel, you have to be able to come up with something new and different, because that's what attendees want and expect now. And that is especially true of younger attendees."

Knob concurs that the time-honored and tired model of standard hotel banquet fare is giving way more frequently to farm-to-table treatment and celebrity chefs, as well as leveraging local cuisines such as Cajun food in New Orleans.

"Another thing that's interesting is that the underlying trend that is really driving food choices is interest in wellness," Knob



F&B offerings include encouraging healthier eating at meetings and conferences. Shown above, Hilton's Meet With Purpose (wellness program) "cut and create" salad setup.

says. "That continues to be a major trend. In every survey we conduct, wellness continues to be most important to attendees. And if you're looking at wellness, as a planner, food and beverage is the easiest thing to dive into. We're seeing the results of that now with more interest in organic food and locally-sourced farm-to-table."

Companies and meeting stakeholders and planners, he says, also now comprehend that a healthily fed attendee is going to be more attentive and capable of learning than someone consuming a less healthy diet.

A focus on wellness is no longer just a trend, Sebastian says. "It's mainstream these days. And it's not just about healthier food. It's about things like offering yoga classes in the morning

or meditation before a sessions starts. And instead of traditional snack foods, now you see healthier options like smoothie stations for breaks. And all of those kinds of things are happening because more and more companies want to take better care of their employees, and that includes at meetings, because it makes attendees more attentive."

Another example of effective food-related activities, Knob says, is cooking classes, where attendees eat a meal they have prepared. "Cooking classes are great," he says, "because they make your F&B experience participatory and interactive."

Technology Tricks

The innovative use of technology is now also a critical factor in how effective meetings are executed.



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John Knob, Director, Sourcing and Proposal Development
Cadence Travel, La Jolla, CA



Some companies are including 'gamification' in their meeting apps to engage attendees.

"Social media now offers a huge opportunity for meeting planners and stakeholders to reach out to their audience long before a meeting," Knob says. "And most companies today are creating apps for their meetings. And the apps we're seeing today aren't just related to things like the agenda. They include elements like the capability for live polling during sessions and social walls or gamification. Those kinds of things are now all part of the 'standard'

the most people at the meeting. They also gave the most points to people who actually shared information related to the objectives of the meeting. Then, at the awards dinner, they gave out awards for those who were most engaged with the app."

Given its popularity and impact, gamification is also evolving into more creative applications of its unique power. "And as the apps become smarter and

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Rose Gold Collective, Miami, FL**



app you're seeing at meetings now. And everyone is using them."

Gamification is arguably the most impactful tool today, Knob says. "And it's not just being used before the meeting, it's being used during the meeting, as well. I just attended a conference where, on the event app, at the beginning of the meeting they set up a game that rewarded the attendees who connected and interacted with

more customizable, that allows planners to apply more creativity to how gamification is done," Knob says. "For example, it isn't just about games anymore. It's also about tracking your business goals with regard to what's going on at the meeting."

Shackman notes that social media is also being deployed in more innovative ways, in order to engage attendees before, during and after the meeting.

"That is becoming increasingly important," Shackman says. "And more and more, that social media activity is focused precisely on the purpose of the meeting and the message that is going to be communicated via the meeting. And if that social media engagement is done well, it becomes one of the overriding experiential aspects of the meeting. It has been used in bits and pieces for years. For example, a lot of companies just used it to build excitement for the meeting before people arrived in the destination. But what we're seeing now is a much more integrated and comprehensive approach to using social media."

Until fairly recently, she says, Facebook and Twitter were the primary tools used to reach attendees. Today, there is an ever-growing roster of social media tools available, such as Instagram and Snapchat. "And right now," Shackman says, "that is confusing a lot of planners, because they don't always know which is the best to use for their audience."

The Central Message

At the core of any informed discussion of the ways in which meetings are changing and evolving are the issues of

how innovation and originality are directly related to the mission of the meeting.

"At least in my world," Sebastian says, "companies today are more and more looking for something unique. And they're looking for unique experiences and unique moments that are part of the meeting. So I always tell clients to think outside the box, shake things up. The point is to get people excited."

Shackman observes that given the numerous ways in which the design or creation and execution of meetings are evolving, she offers a simple guideline for companies that aspire to be on the leading edge of the revolution.

"Everybody now wants to do something that has never been done before," she says. "It's all about creating unique experiences and a whole new level of the wow factor."

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