

Dust Off That Luggage – A Planner Hits the Road

In April, as I pulled out my suitcase to begin packing for a trip, I couldn't stop laughing at the irony. My last business travel had been in February 2020. And on advice from a good friend who is a hospital pharmacist, I had taken masks and extra hand sanitizer. So insightful!

As mentioned, in April I attended IPEC, the Independent Planners Educational Conference, hosted by Northstar Media in Louisville. It was the first business travel in 14 months. It had been well over 25 years since I'd gone that long between air travel. I flew Delta as somehow, Delta is my go-to airline. I managed to retain my status and enjoy being a member of the Sky Club. With my first trip since the COVID shut down, I wanted as many advantages as I could muster.

Booking the ticket was essentially the same . . . except what a rush! There were a few additional disclaimers about contact tracing and exposure to people with COVID, but nothing uncomfortable. It was uneventful – my favorite word when describing travel. I was ticketed and ready to travel!

TSA pre-check at RDU felt just a little different when they asked me to remove my mask after scanning my ID. If TSA agents were allowed to have much of a sense of humor, I would have said "Peek-a-Boo"! Everyone seemed to be following protocols and there really was very little difference at first glance. A closer look showed a lot of RDU outlets closed. Whether lack of travelers meant lack of revenue OR if staffing was an issue, I don't know. But it was disappointing.

My flights were uneventful, the best kind. Delta was still leaving the middle seat open at that point. The flight while mostly full, didn't feel at all crowded. Everyone was masked. They even offered drink and snack service. The flight attendants were masked and gloved. One thing that did surprise me was the mention that it was against federal law to remove your mask while on the plane. I hadn't realized.

Our hosts organized airport transfers. That was status quo except for blocking every other seat on the sprinter. That just made it more comfortable for everyone. Arrival and check-in at the hotel were easy. Each front desk agent had a plexi-glass set up on their station. There was very little contact and hand sanitizer pumps were very accessible. The stanchions at the elevator bank were the first noteworthy difference. First to keep embarking and disembarking traffic flow separated. And then there were floor markers for distancing while queuing for the lifts. Inside the elevator was signage noting capacity limits. Most people followed the recommendations.

The guest room looked normal at first glance. But, after a minute, I noticed the remote was in a sealed bag that had been sanitized. The mini bar, while tempting with a nice variety of bourbon, was locked and no key offered. There were no destination books or room service menus. It was all very clean and streamlined. Housekeeping was an opt-in situation. I understand if you did opt-in, your bed was left alone unless you requested a linen change.

The meeting adjustments were more noticeable, and technology played a significant role! As Planners, we were advised when we registered that we would need a negative COVID test result within three days of the meeting's start. What was interesting was this information was uploaded to a third-party provider. This allowed attendees to feel confident that "health data" was being kept secure. The "proof" we provided could be as simple as a screen shot of the test notification. For those who were vaccinated, they showed proof of complete vaccination at least 14 days prior to the meeting.

Meeting Check-In was a series of stops. Before receiving your name badge, the same third-party team asked a series of questions (no exposure, agree to social distancing, etc.) and took our temperature. They uploaded this to their cloud. We then received our name badge and one of three stickers (a different color for each day). **Photo: Johnson Badge.** Then, we checked in with another vendor, Volan Technology. This was fascinating. We each were given a GPS device to wear for contact tracing. Volan had “geofenced” all our meeting spaces that our devices would register. Then, after the meeting, if an attendee became ill and reported it, Volan could pinpoint anyone who had direct contact. Volan’s technology was developed to track attendees’ presence in a CE session. Their software changed to people positioning that increases site safety.

Every day, we were asked to reaffirm our agreement with the “terms and conditions” of attending the conference: social distancing, wearing a mask; refrain from hugging (we all agreed to try); and be mindful of others’ comfort levels. That last term was important. Whereas my friend from Dallas was very comfortable with no mask, a planner I met from Philly was not. It’s important to be sensitive to both.

Our room sets for meals and meetings were rounds with four attendees. **Photo: Table Set.** However, there was no assigned seating. The tables were sanitized between sessions so we could sit with different people throughout the 2.5-day conference. There were no table linens but finished tabletops. No centerpieces. Breakfast and lunch were served plated. Dietary restrictions accommodated. Condiments were on request the first day, but the second day, a few items were set. Water service consisted of a table of bottled waters that were self-serve.

The Omni Hotel Louisville did an amazing job with their service staff. After a year of furloughs, layoffs, rehires, new ways of serving and everything else, we were happy to see so many banquet team members working! Could we tell there were a few recent hires? Sure. Did everyone have a terrific attitude? You bet!

The first night reception offered great food! Sliders prepared to order, coconut shrimp with an amazing sauce, s’mores, and a few other tidbits that slip my mind. However, each station had a Chef and a server attendant. **Photo: Break Station** Both were masked, gloved and I believe, wearing a hat. Each item was handed to us from behind a plexiglass shield. Very few disposable service items, but a constant flow of staff clearing dishes.

Break service was well thought out. The coffee station had only paper cups with signage that requested using a new cup for each visit. **Photo: Hotel Signage.** All other items were disposable. With so many more disposable items being used, the solid waste increase is troubling to me. However, in chatting with the Omni members, we were assured that recycling and composting efforts were really increased.

Floor mics were sanitized after each person finished their time speaking. Presenters from the stage used individual mics and did not share. There were no major differences in their arrangements that I could notice as an attendee.

What was very interesting to me was our off-site evening events. One evening was hosted at a museum with a plated meal and another at a sports facility with a buffet. While we could see that the catering teams were exercising caution, there were no new “practices” like we saw at the hotel. The servers were masked, and buffet items were pre-portioned, desserts even pre-packaged. But no dividers of any type and self-service was available.

Seeing these new practices in place makes me wonder. What will this do to our banquet costs? While the food costs, per se, may not increase, I believe we can expect changes in labor. And what about labor? Will the industry be able to rebound from the current labor shortages in time for the face-to-face meetings that are coming? Will the banquets norm continue to have displays and buffets completely attended? Will we return to self-serve? Will 10 people squeezed around a 60" banquet table be comfortable? Will we pass a gravy boat of salad dressing around? I really feel like the more I learn about the new norms, the more questions I have. Questions that will change as the mandates are relaxed and people's tolerances return to normal.

I know that I will continue to offer the best experience I can to our meeting attendees. And hope that they bring their best outlook as we figure out together what works best.

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