

Planning Your Face To Face Comeback

Associations were quick to convert their conferences to virtual events when COVID-19 halted in-person meetings. Looking ahead, associations and their attendees are eager to get back together face to face. But how?

While many associations are planning for their “comeback” in-person event after coronavirus-related shutdowns, much remains uncertain. Federal, state, and local rules and guidelines are still in flux, and budgets are tight. How do you plan when you don’t know how many people can travel? How do you adjust the physical space so that people can stay six feet away from each other? How do you deliver the content attendees expect while also addressing their health and safety concerns?

In-person meetings will need to be redesigned from top to bottom, from the agenda to the expo hall to meals. All these things are doable—associations just need to be more creative and adaptable than ever.

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“I think we just have to take the viewpoint of, ‘We can do something,’” says Aaron Wolowiec, CMP, CTF/MT, CAE, president and CEO of Event Garde. “It’s not like our hands are completely tied. We just have to return to in-person meetings slowly and get more creative.”

SPACE AND TIME

When event production company PSAV started thinking about the return of in-person meetings in the earliest phases of recovery, the team considered the logistics required to host meetings with up to 25 people per room, then how to deliver the same presentation to 50 people in two rooms at the same location simultaneously, and then how to extend that across multiple venues, says Matt Johnsen, vice president of product management. This might mean “multiple rooms and multiple venues across multiple regions, but still being able to connect everyone together through various platforms, so that they can have that unified meeting experience.”

Rooms that are big enough for social distancing might require larger projectors and screens, as well as more microphones for both presenters and attendees. “The core technology required to host these types of meetings is going to be available pretty much across all markets,” Johnsen says. “The key difference here is that you’re likely going to be utilizing some of this equipment that you normally would use in a larger meeting setting.”

Associations also are considering how to safely hold educational breakout sessions. “I’m very concerned about making sure that we can provide access to that education, even if folks aren’t able to get into a particular room,” says Bethany Chirico, CMP, CAE, managing director of global meetings and business development at the American Industrial Hygiene Association. Planners will need to figure out what to do when a room hits its capacity, which could mean providing overflow space or a way for some attendees to access the session remotely, she said.

Planning for the 65 to 70 committee and volunteer groups that typically meet at AIHA’s annual conference has also been challenging. “How are we going to encourage engagement year-round with these volunteers if we don’t have them in a single room?” Chirico says. AIHA is considering limiting each

room to committee leaders, a staff member, and a board representative, and then setting up video or call-in access for other attendees.

Wolowiec recommends considering outdoor options, including tenting a space, hosting a break outside, or holding an event at a park within walking distance of the primary conference location. Heading outdoors both extends the meeting space you can use and allows people to feel more comfortable being near each other, while still maintaining six feet of space around them.

You might need to revamp your agenda as well. Staggering schedules will be key “to make sure that not everybody is following the same agenda, so that you can lighten the load a little bit in terms of traffic,” Johnsen says. “Attendees may feel more comfortable with shorter sessions, so they’re not in one particular room for an extended period of time.”

More time may be needed between session blocks as well, to allow people to get in and out of rooms while staying socially distant. Wolowiec says his team has been talking about staggering break times so that not everyone rushes to the restroom at the same time.

A NEW LOOK FOR NETWORKING

Networking receptions will look a lot different too, since attendees will no longer be able to walk in, grab a drink, and start shaking hands with people. Associations will need to plan proactively, Wolowiec says, “to set up the rules and expectations and to set up the room, the food, the drinks, and the activities in a way that will encourage social distancing.” Without this structure, attendees may fall into old habits of gathering that bring them too close together.

So, what might a networking event look like? For one, there will be fewer highboy tables for people to stand around and fewer long lines for the bar or hors d’oeuvres table. “Instead, don’t be surprised to see entry and exit protocols, one-way traffic flow, seating assignments at traditional banquet rounds, designated bars and food stations assigned by table, and a well-choreographed agenda of activities,” Wolowiec says. These might include trivia games that attendees can download to their phones to play.

IF YOU BUILD IT, WILL THEY COME?

Because different areas of the country are in various stages of shutdown and reopening, and (at press time) it’s not known when a vaccine will be available, it’s hard to predict when people will be able to travel to an in-person meeting.

Surveying members is critical. “For some of our clients, we’re seeing numbers as low as 3 and 5 percent of members who say that they’re permitted to or interested in attending an in-person event right now,” Wolowiec says. He recommends asking prospective attendees whether they feel comfortable attending, whether they have employer-imposed travel restrictions, and whether their professional development budget has been cut.

“I can host the safest in-person meeting I want, but if people just can’t come, they can’t come,” he says.

AIHA is currently planning for its May 2021 annual conference in Dallas. “Will we in fact be one of the first shows to come back? Or will there be folks coming back in January, February, March, and what will we learn from them as we move forward?” Chirico says.

Budget uncertainty also makes planning difficult. “We have no idea how many people are going to come to see us in Dallas,” Chirico says. “Are we budgeting for half the [usual] number, a quarter of the number?” The association also doesn’t know whether the revenue the meeting brings in will cover the cost of everything needed to create a safe environment.

The Spray Polyurethane Foam Alliance is also moving forward with plans for its 2021 Sprayfoam Show in February. “We are preparing to host it and committed 100 percent to it being on until we are told it cannot be,” says Executive Director Kurt Riesenber.

In negotiations with the hotel and venue, SPFA has built in as much flexibility as possible and has not scheduled its 2022 show anywhere, so if the 2021 show needs to be cancelled, the 2022 event will be held there. “The whole world could change twice by the time the show comes around,” he says.

Planning for the unknown also requires more collaboration than usual among association leaders and staff. “Now is not a time to set a meeting planner or meetings department out on their own as an island,” Wolowiec says. CEOs and top leadership, including the board of directors, should also be included in these conversations.

For in-person conferences, Wolowiec recommends starting small, such as a local or regional event for 100 people or fewer.

“It’s an opportunity to let people dip their toes in something that doesn’t seem incredibly overwhelming, allows venues to start to get some practice, and allows the association to figure out what they did well and what they could improve for the future,” he says. “Don’t let those key lessons learned be on your biggest event of the year.”

Ultimately, flexibility and creativity will be necessary for resuming in-person events. “There are lots of different ways to get to outcome Z that don’t involve starting at the letter A,” Chirico says. “This is our time to get creative and try some unique things.”

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