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# Should We Be Holding In-Person Meetings?

Planners debate whether holding face-to-face events that demonstrate health and safety protocols is reckless — or the next step in getting back to business.



by [Loren G. Edelstein](#)

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Alan Kleinfeld, CMP, envisions a future in which the number 2020 will be synonymous with disaster. When the mood is glum, the question, "How was your day?" will be answered with "Ugh, it was a real 2020."

Nevertheless, [Kleinfeld](#) has been forging ahead with business. As director of [Arrive Conference Solutions](#), he's moved some meetings to digital and has been holding hybrid and face-to-face events since March — all with proper protocols in place and without incident. "In-person events can be planned safely," Kleinfeld insists. "I've done it. I know."

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That is the prevailing sentiment among meeting professionals: According to preliminary results, nearly two-thirds of the 850 planners who responded to Northstar's latest Pulse Survey, which has been tracking planner sentiment since March, believe in-person events can or should be taking place. Rising Covid-19 cases notwithstanding, 15 percent think we "absolutely" should be meeting face-to-face, while 48 percent think that we should meet "if all restrictions and protocols are followed and enforced."

Yet 30 percent of planners are opposed to meetings industry organizations or related businesses holding in-person meetings. Hundreds of respondents chose to add comments explaining their perspectives on the issue. (See the full survey results [here](#).)

Whether or not we should be meeting in person has become the subject of debate among meeting professionals as well as the general public. "There's a negative stigma that if you do an event, maybe you're not being a good global citizen," says [Rick Lambert](#), president of the incentive house Destinations, Inc. "We need to overcome that by showing how you can still do an event now and do it very safely."

Kleinfeld says there's no reason we shouldn't meet in person, as long as "the three Ws" are followed — wear your mask, wash your hands and watch your distance. "I've seen the industry debates on some of the listservs and whatnot. There are people saying outright, 'There's no way you can have an on-site event because you can't guarantee our safety.' But can you guarantee your safety, really?" he asks. "You can stay home 24/7/365, and unless you're growing your own vegetables and chopping your own chicken and having nothing come in from the outside, there's no way to guarantee your safety."

## All Eyes on the Meetings Industry

Should we or should we not meet? Now that the presidential election is finally over, that's the question generating the most heat on our professional social media channels. That is a particular conundrum for meetings industry associations. We all desperately want our business to recover. Shouldn't we pave the way, enacting best practices as a model for participants to replicate at their own events?

That was the hope of many industry groups, but hope has waned as the virus has raged on. In spring and summer, most of these organizations cancelled face-to-face events and pulled together scaled-down digital programs. Several rescheduled for fall, expecting that the pandemic would be under control by then. But those groups had a tough call to make as Covid-19 intensified its spread across the country.



Cathy Breden, IAEE and CEIR

Among those hopeful organizations was the [International Association of Exhibitions and Events](#), which [decided last week to cancel](#) the in-person component of its annual [Expo! Expo! Annual Meeting & Exhibition](#). Organizers had expected as many as 500 participants to attend the Dec. 8-10 event in Louisville, Ky., with a wider audience online.

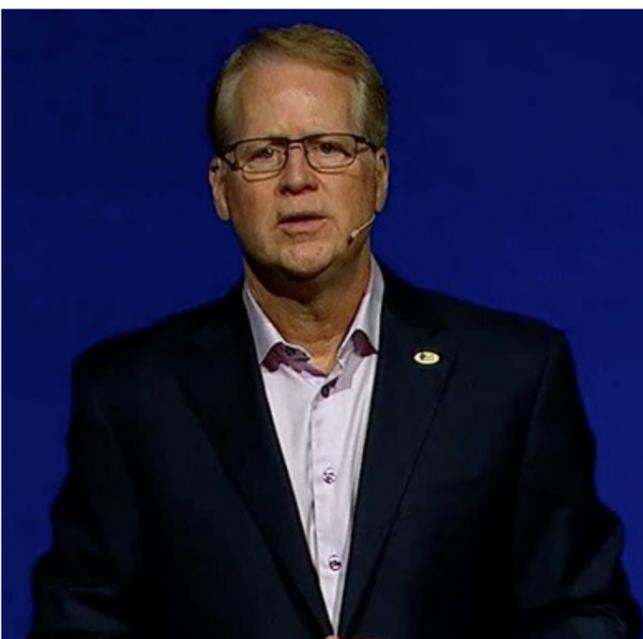
"It was a really, really difficult decision," says [Cathy Breden](#), CMP, CAE, CEM, executive vice president and COO of

IAEE. "It became apparent that this was not going to get any better, and the best decision for members and our exhibitors was to not hold the line on meeting in person."

IAEE was particularly resistant to going virtual "in the early days" of the pandemic, says Breden. "We're all about face-to-face," and as the voice of the exhibitions industry, it was crushing to realize, "Oh my gosh, we can't do this. We've got to — and I hate the word — pivot. We have to shift our mindset now and look at how it's going to help, rather than hurt, the live event industry. Still, it is not ideal."

## Holding the Line

Of the major industry associations, [Meeting Professionals International](#) was the standout, holding fast to the promise that its annual [World Education Congress](#), after being moved from June 6-9 to Nov. 3-6, would bring the industry together again to "Reunite for Recovery." The host destination — Grapevine, Texas — was deemed a red zone for Covid-19 risk at the time, but the show [went forward as a hybrid event](#), drawing 600 participants in person and another 1,000 online.



Paul Van Deventer, president and CEO, MPI

"WEC Reunite for Recovery is not just a tagline," [Paul Van Deventer](#), MPI president and CEO, told the media during the event. "To me, it is about fulfilling the mission of what we do when we meet: We change the world. Business events are critical to innovation. They're critical to the economy, and they're critical to economic recovery...We've been committed to hosting WEC if we could do so safely. And that is the intent this week: To demonstrate how a live event can be done in a new normal, a conference with safety and wellness at

the forefront of everything that we do."

Cancelling would have sent the wrong message to the industry and the public, believes Van Deventer. The right message is that we can – and should – meet face to face. "As Spider Man said, 'With great power comes great responsibility,'" he said at the event. "We have a great responsibility in hosting this and hosting it well, because the industry is looking to us."

## Taking the Heat

MPI's decision was met with both glowing praise and harsh criticism from the planner community. "I believe the decision to hold an in-person event of that scope is both reckless and indulgent," says Elizabeth Zielinski, CMM, a special education advocate, meeting planner and consultant. "The hospitality industry does need business right now, no doubt. But it can't help itself in the short term only to harm itself in the long term. Case in point: Connect."

The case she references was a hosted-buyer conference with 600 participants hosted by media and events company Connect Meetings in Orlando on Oct. 19-21. Backlash flooded social media when an attendee posted photos of unmasked minglers at a cocktail reception. A week after the meeting, participants received an email to inform them that four attendees had tested positive shortly after the event wrapped up. (When contacted by Northstar, Connect president Chris Collinson said he preferred not to comment on the meeting.)

IAEE's Breden is quick to note that she does not judge any other organization for deciding to hold their meetings as planned. In fact, she spent a day at MPI's WEC, where she found smart precautions that were "very well thought out." But she saw that it was more difficult to maintain safe practices at dinners and receptions. "People let their guard down and take their masks off because they're eating or they're drinking," says Breden, which poses a risk of transmission – not to mention the risk to a brand's reputation. "Nobody wants to be that event that becomes a superspreader," she says.

## Drinks Up, Masks Down

Of particular concern to Zielinski was MPI's Rendezvous party, which would be "indoors, crowded, filled with food and drink – which means mask removal," she says. "When you add loud music and dancing, you have people who are either breathing heavily or shouting to be heard over the music. If the planners of this event don't see the risk, they are bad at their jobs. If they do see the risk and left the event design unchanged anyway, that's appalling."

While Zielinski chose not to attend MPI, many who did participate report that the organization did an admirable job of adhering to safety protocols. Among them is [Carolyn Creek-McCallister](#), senior national sales manager for Visit Park City, who has taken about nine trips since March. "I have done three weeks back-to-back of industry events," she recounts. "I went to Connect in Florida, I went to Destination West, and MPI's WEC."

Of Connect, which hosted a reported 600 people in Orlando, she explained that buyers and suppliers sat at opposite ends of 8-foot tables for their individual meetings. At that distance, it was difficult to hear one another: "People were asking if it was OK to move closer." But good connections were made, she said, and with follow-up calls she would get more information about planners' needs and intentions.

A week later, during Northstar's [Destination West in Arizona](#), held at the [Wigwam Resort](#), Creek-McCallister and a few other participants received an email from Connect notifying them that four Connect meeting participants had tested positive for Covid-19. The news was not met with alarm. "Who knows if they got it at Connect?" says Creek-McCallister, adding: "Four out of 600 is not a bad average."

The Arizona meeting was significantly smaller, with 58 participants including staff and speakers. "The Wigwam did a fabulous job," says Creek McCallister. "Everybody felt really safe." Planners [Christy Froehlich, CMP](#), and [Britt Schwendinger, DES](#), intentionally omitted cocktail receptions that could lead to close mingling without masks, as well as off-site outings that would require group transportation.

"Receptions are the riskiest," says Froehlich. "We had to strike a balance between control and networking." Rather than a kickoff cocktail party, a plated dinner was served outside, with assigned seating at distanced round tables. "We wanted to set the precedent that this meeting was going to be different," she adds.

## People Are the Problem

"Right now, people are the weakest link in all of this activity," according to global security expert [Bruce McIndoe](#), founder of [WorldAware](#) and [McIndoe Risk Advisory](#). Based on his own observations at recent conferences, he says, "95 or 98 percent of the time people are doing the right thing. But as the night wears on and the drinks are flowing and people want to do karaoke, they drop their guard. It's that little bit of weakness that suddenly puts people at risk. It's up to the destination and the planner and the people who are actually running the program to create an environment that encourages safe behavior."



Bruce McIndoe, WorldAware and McIndoe Risk Advisory

Even with every known safety measure in place, maintaining physical distance at all times is difficult for most people in a group setting. During MPI's event, participants were seated at round tables for general sessions, with only four seats per table, says Creek-McCallister. "The seats were supposed to be evenly spaced, but people couldn't hear each other, so they scooched forward."

That's human nature, she added, and it did not upset her. "People who haven't seen each other in months are so needing the connection, they bring their guard down — and maybe too much. It's just that people forget sometimes when they see their friends. I admit I've hugged a few people, with my mask on, facing away. We're a very huggy industry."

"Everybody is on a different comfort level," Creek-McCallister acknowledges. "I've always been comfortable. I have friends who wouldn't even go out to eat because they're so afraid. You can't let fear consume you." At industry events, she says, "Everybody is being extremely mindful because they have to show they can make it happen."

## Keep Moving Forward

Meetings industry associations are also thinking long-term, with multiple collaborative efforts to provide support for immediate relief as well as long-term growth. To that end, they've collaborated to provide effective messaging about the vital importance of meetings and travel, and to lobby for federal funding to support those struggling businesses, including CVBs.

Among those efforts is [Go Live Together](#), supported by IAEE and [CEIR, the Center for Exhibition Research](#) (of which IAEE's Cathy Breden is CEO). The campaign's mission notes: "While our immediate concern is to mitigate the spread and impact of COVID-19 by offering our industry's considerable expertise to aid the recovery — supporting everything from building ventilators and PPE, to setting up temporary medical and testing facilities — we recognize the need to mobilize our resources now to ensure local, state and federal legislators support policies that will accelerate recovery for the events industry workers and businesses, when the time is right to consider such legislation."

### Need Help Deciding?

Events Industry Council has updated its [Meeting and Event Design Accepted Practices Guide](#) to address the challenges presented by Covid-19. The resource offers a "decision grid," providing suggested actions based on the risk level in the destination. At times of high virus transmission rates, virtual meetings and events are "strongly recommended." The EIC guide links to other trusted resources, too, including a detailed [risk-assessment tool](#) from the World Health Organization.

To help navigate the process of meeting in a pandemic, the [Events Industry Council](#) formed an [APEX Covid-19 Business Recovery Task Force](#) that has been diligently working to provide consistent guidance on how to meet responsibly.

Meanwhile, the [Meetings Mean Business](#) coalition, supported by the [U.S. Travel Association](#), is doggedly lobbying for federal aid — and hopeful that the Biden administration will bring positive changes, not only in terms of support, but also infrastructure improvement and jobs.

One point of universal agreement: "We need to get back to travel," says McIndoe. "We need to get back to business long before a global vaccine is going to tamp this thing down." Although he tends to err on the side of caution when advising global corporations on risk, McIndoe thinks we can do it now. "We have the tools today to manage this at a level that is likely to be better than the protection we'll get from the first vaccines."

"Whether it's responsible to meet depends upon the relative view of the majority of your members," adds [David Blansfield](#), executive vice president of Northstar Meetings Group.

"If your members or your customers want to meet, you should meet – if all agree on the protocols. The proviso is if you plan to come, you agree to be safe."

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