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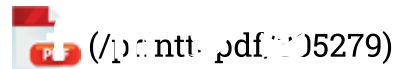


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Attendee health a major focus for future events

18 NOVEMBER 2020 9:51 AM

A change in health risks and traveler's concerns will necessitate the ways event companies operate, experts said during the 42nd Annual NYU International Hospitality Industry Investment Conference webinar series.

NYU CONFERENCE



THE FUTURE OF EVENTS

From left: Clear's Caryn Seidman-Becker, BizBash's David Adler, Hotels' Jeff Weinstein, NYC & Company's Fred Dixon, and Expedia Business Services' Ariane Gorin. (Illustration: Rachel Daub)

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REPORT FROM THE U.S.—The health and safety of attendees will be a major focus for event planners going forward, to the extent that planners will now include medical teams as part of events, experts said.

Speaking during the “Future of events and travel” session of the 42nd Annual NYU International Hospitality Industry Investment Conference webinar series (<https://hotelnewsnow.com/Articles/305233/NYU-2020>), David Adler, chairman and founder of BizBash, said the health of the events business will be reliant on both trust in future stability and the prevalence of COVID-19 testing.

“In the trade show business, the No. 1 thing they’re worrying about is on-site testing to make sure that when you’re in there you feel confident,” he said. “That’s going to be the biggest problem, though, is people are still not confident about travel to get to those events.”

For testing to make a big difference at in-person events, Adler said there needs to be affordable tests with immediate results.

“From what I hear, those things are starting to happen, and the big trade show companies are relying on that,” he said.

In the regions of the world where events business is starting to return—largely China—there is a necessary change in attendee behaviors and event staffing.

“We’re going to see that every event is going to have a medical team as part of it now,” he said. “And you’re going to see people go through scanners that take their temperature automatically.”

Adler noted events in Asia have prevalent mask and glove wearing. And that, in the end, could be an opportunity for some businesses.

“You’re seeing a lot of the trade show companies and event companies are trying to turn every aspect of it into an experience, with sponsoring the masks and things like that,” he said.

Pandemic accelerates changes

Ariane Gorin, president of Expedia Business Services, said some of the experiential changes hotels made for guests during the pandemic to ensure safety will likely stick around as things normalize.

“When you look at the consumer trends—people want more flexibility, they want to know what’s happening from health and safety standards, they’re more interested in keyless entry—I think all of those things are just going to become normal,” she said.

She said there’s been a wave of hotels investing in audio/visual equipment and technology to enable potential new streams of demand that come out of the pandemic.

“The idea is: Can people come work here,” she said. “Can you do smaller meetings in which you’re connecting instead of one big group meeting? Can you have meetings that connect people in various countries? So, they’ve had to invest in that, and I think that will continue.”

That small-meetings business could grow more vital as more offices go to remote work, she said.

Fred Dixon, president and CEO of NYC & Company, said he expects the technological changes that enable things like hybrid events are also “here to stay.”

“The investments that venues and hotels are making in these broadcasts are very different than what was happening in the past to this point,” he said. “It isn’t just a simple webcam. This is sophisticated television broadcasting that requires a control room and off-site direction.”

He said there’s a possibility of more networked hybrid events, where different portions are broadcast from different destinations.

“It’s an exciting time from an engagement standpoint,” he said. “We are going to learn how to build audiences out of this.”

Ultimately, that could open the possibility for greater revenue in events because it opens up the opportunity to sell more registrations for events than what could fit in to a traditional in-person event.

Balancing high tech and high touch

While customer interactions are by necessity limited for the time being, businesses that are built on customer service like hotels are going to have to find a new equilibrium, said Clear chairman and CEO Caryn Seidman-Becker.

“People love people. And using people for their highest and best use may not be manually checking IDs at the check-in desk of a hotel, no different than the check-in desk of an airport,” she said. “So, I think it’s really important to bring technology to empower people and enable

people and bring hospitality really even more front and center.”

Gorin said part of this will include better conversations between hotels and guests to make things more seamless from the time of planning through the actual stay.

“I think if we had this conversation a little while ago, there would have been quite a discussion in the industry of who’s going to own the traveler and at what point and how’s it going to work,” she said. “I think what we’ve seen over the last few months is the discussion has become much more about how do we take care of the traveler throughout.”

Virtual events won't take over

A reoccurring theme in the panel is there is no expectation that video conferencing or other forms of technology will be a complete replacement of in-person events and meetings.

“Everybody is convinced that in-person meetings are important,” Gorin said. “People do business with people. That’s why I think virtual events aren’t just going to take over for these in-person events.”

The difficulty in the short to intermediate term, though, is corporate budgets might not account for them.

“Budgets have gone down deeply this year, so people are going to be asking about the returns (of attending events),” Seidman-Becker said. They’ll ask “‘Did our sales suffer? What return were we getting from that conference?’ And I do think there’s going to be a need to justify why I need to go back to that conference once it comes back.”

Dixon noted there has never been a point where meetings planners are more stressed than right now because “everything is completely new in every way.” So, the hotels that are able to alleviate that stress will be the best positioned going forward.

“I think the hotels and the venues that can provide expertise that can give peace of mind to planners are going to have a clear advantage when it comes to sales,” he said.



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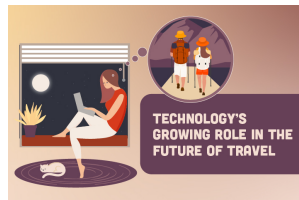
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