

Operations

Hotel marketers share five top meetings trends for 2019

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Hotel meetings are focusing more on wellness, sustainability, philanthropy, authenticity and locally sourced F&B.



By [Brendan Manley](#)

REPORT FROM THE U.S.—Meeting planners and their clients are exhibiting a growing preference for events-hosting hotels that demonstrate a commitment to the environment and philanthropy, while also offering a deep selection of health and wellness amenities, hyper-local experiences and farm-to-table cuisine.

These trends represent a significant move away from technological and audio-visual bells and whistles that have been deemed vital in the past, sources said.

Sustainability

As planners and meetings attendees become more environmentally conscious, smart hotel marketers are making sure to include their sustainability commitments in their sales pitches.

“We’re getting a lot more questions on sustainability than I’ve probably ever had from a group meetings perspective,” said Brandon Marshall, corporate director of sales for Mainsail Lodging & Development.

Among sustainability initiatives, the company’s managed hotels recently switched to a policy of only offering plastic straws upon request and eliminated Styrofoam use on property, in accordance with standards set by Marriott International, a main franchise partner.

“We understand that meetings produce a lot of income for the community, but we’re also starting to think about how we can affect that community down to the level of sustainability,” Marshall said.

Wellness

Health and wellness offerings also are being worked into meetings and events packages on a grand scale. One example is the Sheraton New York Times Square, which has leveraged its wellness amenities as a major selling point in the ultra-competitive Manhattan lodging market.

“We’re the only hotel in New York City with certified trainers on the floor of the fitness center from 5 a.m. until 10 p.m., and that’s allowed us to curate different opportunities, such as the largest Peloton room in New York City, outside of the actual Peloton Studio here,” Dan McCarron, director of hotel sales at the Sheraton Times Square, said.

“Our certified instructors also take groups on experiential runs through Central Park. In addition to being trainers, they can speak to some of the history around Central Park, and there are five different courses they can go through. There’s nothing more immersive than going in the world’s most famous park and becoming more familiar with the highlights and history while in a group atmosphere.”

Farm to table

Taking advantage of a growing interest among guests in food sourcing, hotel marketing teams are touting their properties’ use of local products and farm-to-table initiatives. In some cases, that commitment doubles as an experience for guests.

At the Chatham Bars Inn in Cape Cod, Massachusetts, meetings attendees are treated to farm tours and fishing excursions, in which they can collect ingredients for their meals at the hotel.

“We have an 80-acre farm that’s located about 10 minutes from us that we own,” said Simon Rodrigues, director of sales and marketing at Chatham Bars Inn. There’s a whole educational experience that you can go through by visiting the farm and talking to our master farmer, who can really get into the processes that we use and how everything is organic, and then take it from there to the table.

“We’ve had groups that will split up and have half of the group go over to the farm to pick their own vegetables, and then have the other half go out fishing, and then everybody meets together and learns about what was harvested. Then they create a menu around it and help prepare it.”

Local authenticity

Guests attending meetings or events don’t want to be confined to the hotel spaces for their entire stay, which means planners are looking to book hotels that can masterfully tap into the local scene and deliver authenticity.

That’s easier for some hotels than others.

The historic 133-year-old Driskill in Austin, Texas, emphasizes the bold flavors of Texas cuisine and the city’s longstanding reputation as a music hub. Hotel representatives said this allure can also inspire meetings attendees to extend their stays into “bleisure” trips, to take advantage of their local surroundings.

“Our customers ask us to incorporate local experiences into their on-site programming, and we try to do that primarily through food and beverage,” said Ashley Hartert, director of sales, marketing and events for the Driskill, which is in Hyatt Hotels’ Unbound Collection.

“Texas is all about barbecue and Tex-Mex cuisine, and we have some signature reception packages with whiskey and tequila tastings to pair with those,” she said. “We’re also known for being the live music capital of the world, so our customers like to incorporate local musicians into their evening experiences when they’re hosting receptions on-property.”

Corporate responsibility

Beyond sustainability, meetings groups are seeking ways to give back, whether through local charitable work conducted off-site, fundraising held in conjunction with an event, or simply choosing a hotel that has its own corporate giving policy.

Corporate responsibility is a major draw for groups that book at the Alford Inn in Winter Park, Florida, which is owned by neighboring Rollins College, and features its philanthropic efforts alongside its curated art collection.

“This hotel was built from the ground up with a business plan that all of the revenue that comes into this hotel after net operating expenses goes toward a scholarship fund at Rollins College, a liberal arts college right down the street from us, which also owns us,” said Debbie Potter, director of sales and marketing at the Alford Inn.

“The whole reason we exist is to further the education of students at the college, so it’s a very unique business model,” she said. “We’re the only hotel in the world that’s set up this way. When meeting planners and attendees know why this hotel exists, it inspires them that there’s a philanthropy piece involved in hosting their meeting here.”