

Opinions

How hotels should adapt meetings and events

01 JULY 2020 7:39 AM

The coronavirus pandemic will change how hotels host meetings and events, which if done correctly can help the industry in the short and long term.



By Robert Rauch and Sarah Andersen

In this time of great uncertainty, how can we best prepare for a new landscape in the hospitality and events industry post-COVID-19?

The timing for recovery in 2020 is going to be dependent on consumers and businesses having confidence that our cities and venues are safe again. We won't be seeing any events in June or July but expect Q4 events in the fall to start up again. In the first 90 days of resumed business travel, intimate gatherings are going to recover more quickly than mass gatherings.

The recession will cause a natural attrition rate for event attendance when accounting for those who have been furloughed and those that have reduced "out of pocket" money. Distancing standards will also significantly reduce attendance numbers, resulting in a possible 50% reduction in overall event attendance to close out 2020.

Remember how flying changed after 9/11? Well, COVID-19 will change how we attend events. Here are a few changes we will see immediately in 2020:

1. Temperature checks will be conducted before entering an event

Anyone with an elevated temperature or fever will not be allowed into events. This practice is approved under the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's Pandemic Preparedness in the Workplace and the Americans with Disabilities Act. Mass temperature checks may create a false sense of security, so this will be done in conjunction with other safety measures, such as face masks and physical distancing.

2. Masks will be required for attendees and staff at a minimum

Attendees will be given masks, gloves, hand sanitizer and/or sanitizing wipes along with their standard conference materials. Touchless hand sanitizer stations will be plentiful and disinfectant foggers will be placed in indoor convention spaces. We will see professional disinfectant electrostatic sprayers continuously disinfect the air and neutralize germs.

3. Venue spaces will be creatively diagrammed

For receptions, education sessions and other breakouts during event programming, planners will find creative ways to use indoor/outdoor spaces. Larger aisle ways with dedicated travel lanes will help manage traffic and prevent crowding in certain areas. Spaces will also have 6-foot space markers for attendees to follow so they know an acceptable amount of space to leave in between each other.

4. F&B will be provided in a no-contact way

Service staff will be wearing gloves, masks and protective gear. Grab and go pre-made alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks and other items will be ready and sanitized at receptions. There will be pre-packaged food, pre-packaged silverware and no self-serve buffets.

Recovery realities

It's been more than a decade since the last downturn, so early to mid-career hotel sales professionals will need swift training on conducting business in this buyer's market. Room rates should be adjusted to keep attendees from booking outside the block and food-and-beverage minimums should be reduced without the threat of attrition penalties. Everyone will need to be more familiar with contracting terms going forward with event cancellations and postponements increasing by the day. While it's unlikely we'll see "COVID-19" clauses in future contracts, keep a close eye on what's included under your force majeure clause.

Helping external event planners explore your hotel's venue digitally will be critical to securing their future business. With online technology offering diagramming, you can easily show planners the benefits of your venue, as well as each room's unique layout and your entire campus map so they can see how the rooms fit together. Add 3D virtual tour experiences that will replace onsite walkthroughs in the short term and may continue to be a reliable way to

showcase your space for the long term. Digital diagramming platforms will help take the art out of event planning, making the standard 6-foot distancing set-up more of a science.

Additional meeting expenses will be incurred with more professional multimedia technicians, video-conferencing systems that allow live streaming, additional staff to take care of the live stream (camera person) and a highly capable internet connection to handle streaming. Catering expenses will also increase, as service will have to be individualized and the spaces will be larger. Partners that help organizers through this difficult time should be rewarded with additional business and referrals.

The bottom line

Hotels and the entire events supply chain need to understand that we won't fully recover until we help conference and meeting organizers regain their top-line attendance and revenue. The industry is hurting, and initially hotels will be in a period of "any deal goes." However, it won't last forever, and once hotels have enough business on the books, we will shift into protection mode and demand more financial security upfront. Now is the time to consider what changes may occur and what opportunities lie within them.

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