



# 5 Program Design Changes to Add Value to Your Conference

We're seeing a trend that association leadership is more open to making changes to the annual conference than ever before. It's about time.

Author: Dave Lutz, CMP



Hallway conversations are going to be even more highly valued in future conferences, Dave Lutz says, so planners should consider chopping 15 minutes off of concurrent sessions to create longer breaks. (Jacob Slaton Photograph)

"Never let a good crisis go to waste" has become a popular adage in the business world over the past year, for good reason. As it becomes more apparent that face-to-face events will return in some form this year, conference organizers have an opportunity to make changes that would have been more difficult to sell up the ladder in the past. While there is a pent-up demand to get back to in-person events, planners should challenge their organizations to make that experience more valuable than ever.

## 5 Program Design Change Trends

As we work with conference organizers to plan the return of their major conferences, five conference design trends have emerged, which may be useful to keep in mind as you design your own events.

**Purposeful abandonment:** This is a nicer way of saying that you need to barbecue some sacred cows. Long-term traditions can deter next-generation conference participants. Some organizers are cutting back on pomp and circumstance in general sessions. No more opening prayers, recognizing those who have passed, obligatory leadership speeches, and long-winded awards presentations or processions. Others are reimagining their President's Reception as a networking reception — with a focus on the attendee, not the leadership.

**Double-down on the main room:** This is where you can have the biggest impact. The conference that brings the industry back together and tugs at the emotional heartstrings will create a lasting impression. Instead of a general session in the morning and breakouts all day, some organizers are consolidating sessions into a main stage presentation.

Hey there! 🙋 Mind if I ask you a quick question?

**More white space:** Hallway conversations are going to be even more highly valued in our conference future. Consider chopping 15 minutes off of your concurrent sessions and planning 30-minute breaks. Attendees have been drowning in content. Draw a line in the sand and commit to having participant activities and small-group discussions in every session, which can spill over into hallway conversations.

**Community spaces:** Invest more into creating spaces that encourage attendee networking. Create a town-square-like environment that blends micro-learning, member services, refreshments, and entertainment. Delivering on community has never been more critical to your business events future.

**Leadership access:** If your leadership spends most of the conference at invite-only experiences, it's time to set them free. Committees and boards have gotten really good at doing business via Zoom and Teams. Encourage them to continue this so that more of their time at the conference can be with the core attendee and member.

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## Hybrid Reality Check

Many organizations are planning a hybrid experience for the fall of 2021 and finding it difficult to make the numbers work. Here are three strategies that may help with that:

- Virtual expos don't work for virtual or hybrid offerings. Sponsorship does.
- The face-to-face audience wants to connect with each other, not with the virtual audience.
- The cost/benefit of streaming everything doesn't work for most. Start small.

*Dave Lutz, CMP, is managing director of Velvet Chainsaw Consulting, [velvetchainsaw.com](https://velvetchainsaw.com/) (<https://velvetchainsaw.com/>).*

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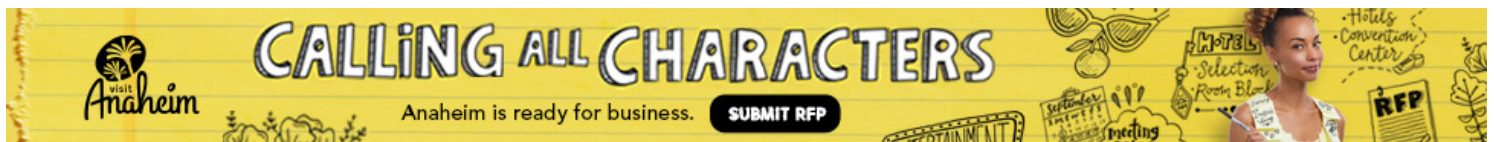
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