

What's Trending?

Top 5 Corporate Meeting Trends Every Planner Should Know

By Adrienne Bowen

Experiential Sensory Dinner: Image mapping above the dining area for Under the Sea course.

Koncept Events

It's a fact: the corporate meetings sector is changing along with the rest of the world. Topics such as security, sustainability and technology have moved to the forefront of society and the corporate meetings world has transformed dramatically with the times. Interactive meetings, a focus on going green and planning a secure event are just some of the elements that are trending right now, trends that are leading the transformation of ordinary meetings into extraordinary experiences.

According to the Carlson Wagonlit Travel (CWT) 2018 Meetings & Events Future Trends report, “Organizers should consider more precise planning of the agenda and space, a better understanding of the culture and wellness needs of the attendees, and additional customization” in order to provide the most engaging event possible. Take a look at the top five corporate meeting trends that are the leading edge of engaging events, positioning planners and attendees as corporate event rock stars.

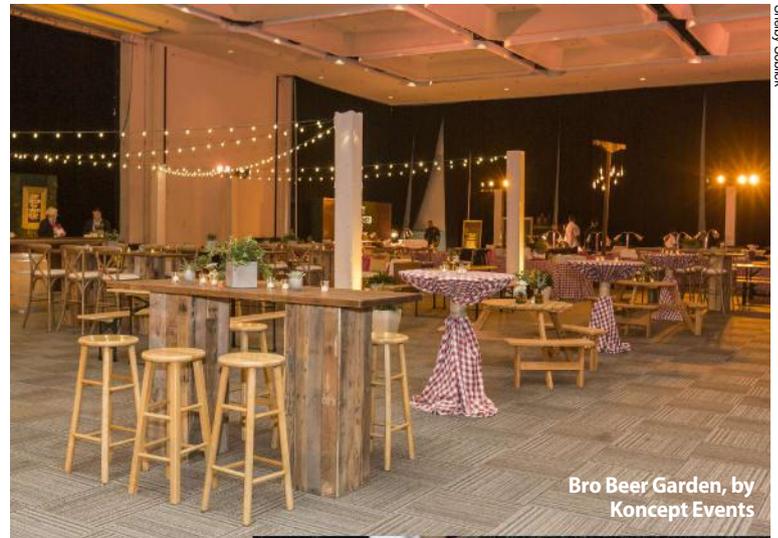
1 The Experiential Experience
“The key to experiential is making the attendee feel like you have truly thought about and care about their personal experience,” said Hillary Smith, CMP, CSEP and partner at Konzept Events headquartered in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. “Experiential experiences make the attendee feel like more than a number. They feel special because certain aspects of the conference are specifically tailored to them. The attendee will then associate your brand and your conference with a positive feeling that will last longer than a traditional event experience. Suddenly, you’ve created all of these brand ambassadors with a stronger bond to your event and message who can—and want—to help share your story. Done well, the ROI for companies who are starting to embrace this trend is incredible.”

When it comes to creating those experiential components, Smith emphasized tailoring the event to elevate the attendee experience. “Gifting is a typical component of any client conference, incentive or sales meeting,” she said. “It used to be that guests were all given the same item or gift bag. Those days are pretty much gone. Now, planners are crafting pop-up shop experiences for guests to choose from a selection of options that have been chosen, whether that is from local brands or a recognizable name such as Tommy Bahamas with a wide range of products (e.g., home décor, scarves, shoes, sunglasses

and apparel). The other option is personalization of a gift such as monogramming and/or onsite stamping of jewelry.”

Photo booths are interactive and fun for attendees but, Smith said, “We see a lot of engagement opportunities at evening functions that go beyond the photo booth. Some of our clients are incorporating gamification (virtual on app and in person) and VR (virtual reality) in order to stimulate their attendees but also to get them to interact. We’ve set up PlayStation lounges within meal breaks and VR stations at expos as well as silent DJ headphones at after-parties or in meditation and yoga/wellness rooms.”

During a corporate event for a financial company at the Boca Raton Resort & Club in Boca Raton, Fla., this past November, Konzept Events created a Bro Beer Garden. “While the event was indoors, the look created a feeling of a trendy backyard where you’d hang out with friends on a Friday night,” Smith said. “Cafe string lights and Edison lights created a warm, intimate vibe within a large ballroom, and mixed seating of picnic, communal and hotel tables allowed small or large groups to congregate. Of course, yard games were a draw as well. One of the event’s highlights, though, was a wooden tap wall bar of locally crafted beers. It was great because not only was it a local experience for the attendees, it ‘tapped’ into a current consumer who loves hanging out at the brewery and trying the varieties. It also helped the attendee experience, having something locally loved in



Bro Beer Garden, by Konzept Events



Florida right within the ballroom of the hotel. Food and beverage is actually a great opportunity to take something from typical to experiential and typically very affordable for the client, so this event also featured a ‘Get Twisted’ custom pretzel bar.”

2 The Foodie Focus
Experiential elements, as Smith pointed out, often incorporate extraordinary food and beverage adventures into the mix as a focus on sumptuous cuisine and luscious libations has now become widespread in the meetings sector.

According to the CWT trends report, “there is actually a move away from providing snacks ▶

at every break, which has been the standard for years. It's now quality over quantity—locally sourced, locally inspired, healthier options. The same applies to drinks. Authentic, local flavors can differentiate an event from the corporate norm.”

Sean O’Keefe, founder of Atlanta-based Sean O’Keefe Events, leans toward creating fresh, local fare and said he is seeing a trend of moving away from the larger style of events to meetings that are “unique and boutique.” Making the meeting more interactive, O’Keefe said his top corporate clients are working with him to have smaller, more intimate events that are great for team-building and networking. “We are focusing on having attendees participating in the food experience rather than just being served,” he said, adding that one group of corporate executives was in charge of setting their tables, choosing flower arrangements and other decorations, as well as cooking their own food.

Another hot topic is food sensitivities and catering to those needs to make every attendee feel like they are important. “People have needs, including no gluten, no grains, vegan options ... how do you accommodate them? One way is to set up interactive food stations, with some catering to particular sensitivities, where attendees can order what they want,” O’Keefe said. Having different chefs participate in events

is a feature of current events that O’Keefe said is a great way to promote “meet and greet mingling. We might have 10 people at a station with a chef in the center and then have the attendees move to another station with another chef presenting their version of food.”

In addition, O’Keefe emphasized focusing on the corporation itself in planning the entire event, including food and beverage. “I am creating events that are designed around the culture of the corporation and finding a way for that culture to be used as a blueprint,” he said.

Have you heard about the latest trends in beverages? Signature cocktails created for the specific corporation and attendees, craft beers and pop-up champagne bars have become the new normal for corporate events, according to O’Keefe. “I am the king of cocktails and have created signature drinks from spirits, wine and beer,” he said. “The evolution of boutique beers is unbelievable. I’ve incorporated pop-up beer stands and even included fun games like beer pong for events. Interactive elements create conversation.” His events are well known for featuring fun, interactive stations where attendees get to help create their own drinks. Mimosa bars with a variety of fusion elements to choose from, such as strawberry puree and fresh rosemary, get guests excited to be a part of the event, and O’Keefe uses American sparkling wine, a burgeoning market for the U.S., which appeals to the desire of using fresh, regional ingredients and products.



Pop-up champagne bars have become the new normal for corporate events.

3 Sustainable Meetings and Social Responsibility

Meetings have been going green for a while now, but the focus on sustainable meetings is even more apparent in today’s corporate meetings. Chief Executive Officer Karen Kotowski of the Events Industry Council, headquartered in Washington, D.C., said, “we recently completed a survey of more than 350 event professionals on the state of sustainability in the events industry. Since 2016, when we last completed a similar survey, we’ve seen an increase in the application of practices including offering vegetarian options (up from 65 percent to 86 percent), allergy-responsible menus (up from 59 percent to

80 percent) and the use of water stations instead of bottled water has increased from 56 percent to 76 percent. We’ve also found a continued difference in expectations about including information about sustainability in RFPs and proposals: 34 percent of planners expect it to be included without asking for it, while only 25 percent of suppliers include it regularly, and 49 percent of suppliers include it only on request. This means that roughly one third of planners are expecting to see sustainability included in proposals without asking for it, and 75 percent of the time, it won’t be included.”

At a recent event held at the Gaylord Opryland Hotel in Nashville, Kotowski said many green elements were included: “we are currently redesigning the APEX/ASTM Sustainable Event Standards to make them more adoptable by the industry. As part of the process, we organized a rewriting committee meeting at the Gaylord Opryland Hotel,” she explained. “We were fortunate to be hosted by a venue that was open to working with us on practices to make the event more sustainable. Some of the practices we included were water stations instead of bottles, vegetarian options (these generally have a lower water and carbon footprint), a reduced number of food options to help minimize waste and linenless meeting room tables to reduce the need for washing. The Gaylord Opryland also actively participated in the meeting itself by sharing their expertise and provided a back-of-house tour to help us to understand their water and energy management solutions.”

Combining with green practices, social responsibility is another key factor for events, according to corporate planners. Choosing charities to endorse and incorporating projects like Habitat for Humanity into teambuilding can really put the spotlight on corporations and their role as leaders in promoting social responsibility, especially during corporate events.

4 Innovative Technology and Virtual Attendance

“Venue Wi-Fi should be capable of handling the fleet of attendee devices. Wi-Fi is something organizers should think about from the outset so they can negotiate it into the contract. This applies as much to meetings as it does to events and conferences,” states CWT’s 2018 Meetings & Events Future Trends report.

In addition, planners are using live broadcasting to offer attendees virtual attendance. Jerome Bruce, CAE, CMM, CMP, CEM, director of meetings and exhibits for the Alexandria, Va.-based Association of Government Accountants (AGA), said, “We offer a virtual option to attend our meetings for people who are unable to travel or have travel budget restrictions. Virtual attendees can view the sessions live and receive continuing education credits. Virtual attendees are able to post questions in each session and participate in polling and discussions in real time via chat rooms.”

Bruce also mentioned the benefit for attendees who come to the events. “In-person and virtual-option attendees have access to on-demand recordings of the sessions for up to one year after the event at no additional cost. No need to rearrange your schedule to view a particular session; access the recording at your leisure,” said Bruce.

Incorporating technology in ways that will enhance the event is important in 2018. Bruce uses Social Q&A to give the attendees an anonymous forum that helps promote interaction. “We’re using an audience response system (Social Q&A) to engage attendees,” he said. “Attendees can ask and up-vote questions through the app. All questions are submitted anonymously. Converting attendees to participants, asking and voting questions, and participating in polling engages attendees with the speakers and session. Effective learning happens when attendees are participating and engaged.”

5 Amped-Up Security

In the age of mass shootings and cyber attacks, security is one of the most important trends for 2018.

Antonio Revilla, founder of O&R Protective Services in Glendale, Calif., a national leader in complex event security projects and an AS Solution company, along with Christian West, founder and CEO of AS Solution in Bellevue, Wash., discussed top security trends. Highlighting CES 2018, the largest trade show in the U.S. held in Las Vegas, they offered security tips to planners for their events. “Event planners and CSOs will want to make sure that security providers can provide robust proof of how they will protect highly valuable physical assets,” West said. “From build-up to tear-down

and everywhere in between. Maintaining a friendly and open guest experience, while at the same time protecting against everything from simple theft to sophisticated industrial espionage, is a challenge for all of us working in event security.”

When discussing security with Revilla, he said, “AS Solution’s primary job and primary day-in, day-out security is for the executive himself. We intertwine an executive protection team with a corporate event security team. We have embedded people in all our big client events because it made a lot of sense.”

Security has changed along with the growth of events, according to Revilla. “The one thing that has happened in the last two years is the parameter of the event has grown,” he said. “Now we’re worried about softer targets as well as security within the event. We are watching them from the time they enter the parking lot. We have to have a better view of the overall event from the time of the load in to the load out.”

Jessie States, CMM, manager of professional development at Meeting Professionals International based in Dallas, said security is something that every planner needs to incorporate.

“Less than half of meeting professionals have a true safety and security plan for their meetings and events, and many of those are static strategies that organizations copy-paste from one event to the next,” she said. “If this was ever a tenable approach, it can’t be anymore. Meeting professionals must treat their safety and security plans as living documents that change based not only on destination and venue but on event type, content, speakers, audience makeup and size, stakeholders, media coverage and likely threats.

“Recent events in North America and Europe have raised the profile of some threat types—active shooters, vehicular violence, stampedes, protests—and meeting professionals, if they have not already done so, will be adding these



Walden Kirschhnel/Corporation

to the list of threats they prepare for. Meeting professionals are now working much more closely with their internal IT teams as well as outside consultants and agencies to combat the growing number of cyber threats—from mal- and ransomware to botnets, fishing and data breaches. Cyber insurance has become one of a number of line items organizations are adding to their safety and security processes.” ■

CWT’s Top 5 Tech Advances

The CWT 2018 Meetings & Events Future Trends report gets to the heart of current corporate event planning and one of the major focuses is on using advanced technology to engage attendees. Check out these top five app advances from CWT that will help you take your meetings to the next level:

1. **Artificial Intelligence:** Getting insights about attendees’ social media interaction and habits
2. **Virtual Reality:** Providing a much more immersive experience
3. **Chatbots and Concierge:** Delivering information quickly and efficiently
4. **Matchmaking:** Drawing data from multiple sources to create a detailed picture of each attendee
5. **Social Extension:** Capturing qualitative data about the event and providing a forum to speak about the event ■