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# MEETINGS OUTLOOK™



*As the strength of the industry continues, meeting and event professionals are taking the opportunity to explore potentially innovative new opportunities and challenges.*

2018 FALL EDITION

# A STATE OF EXTENDED GROWTH

A healthy landscape is allowing industry professionals to explore innovation as, overall, events are getting shorter, larger, more frequent, more niche and featuring shorter sessions.



By Elaine Pofeldt

**W**hen 2,200 attendees showed up for the annual leadership meeting of a global Fortune 500 insurance company this past February, they encountered an unconventional centerpiece: blender bikes.

Once guests jumped on the bikes and started peddling, their action powered attached blenders that made healthy smoothies that they could drink. Surrounding the bikes were infographics, marketing collateral and ambassadors talking about the firm's corporate social responsibility (CSR) objectives related to energy and sustainability.

"It was really a way to build awareness that the company has made these investments, while also getting you active, involved and engaged," says Brent Turner, senior vice president of solutions for Cramer, the events and experiential marketing agency that came up with the idea. "It became a bit of an attraction. In case you were one of the people that got up on the bikes, you were in the message yourself."

The insurance company's use of the blender bikes brings together two key trends that stood out in this quarter's *Meetings Outlook* survey: meeting innovation/engagement and a greater focus on CSR.

A conceptual image showing a person in a dark suit and tie, with their hands held out in front of them. A glowing, semi-transparent clock face is superimposed over the hands. The clock has white numbers and hands on a dark blue background. The person's hands are positioned as if they are holding or presenting the clock. The overall lighting is dim, with the clock face being the primary light source.

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innovative in their meeting design.”***

**BILL VOEGELI**  
MPI Georgia Chapter  
Association Insights

Events are getting slightly shorter, slightly larger, a little more frequent, a little more niche and with shorter sessions, the survey also found. The two most significant elements here are meetings becoming more niche (cited by 58 percent of respondents) and sessions getting shorter (cited by 30 percent of respondents).

Another key finding of the survey is that meeting innovation is proliferating. The survey identified 113 distinct trends—with 90 single-mention trends such as late registrations, paperless meetings and revolutionary technology. For comparison, in 2009—in the midst of the global financial crisis—only six

trends were mentioned. The proliferation of these trends reflects the current market.

“The reason it’s even possible is the meeting industry is in a state of extended growth,” says Bill Voegeli (MPI Georgia Chapter), president of Association Insights, the firm that conducts the research for *Meetings Outlook*. “The meeting and event industry is healthy and has been for quite some time. Any time we have years of health and growth, we see people are able to be more innovative in their meeting design. They have a healthier market. They aren’t trying to squeeze everything into a single event.”





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# THE CHANGING STRUCTURE OF EVENTS



## DURATION

- 20% Events are shorter
- 74% Duration is the same
- 6% Events are longer



## TARGET ATTENDANCE

- 14% Events are smaller
- 51% Size is unchanged
- 35% Events are larger



## FREQUENCY

- 9% Events are less frequent
- 65% Frequency of events is unchanged
- 25% Events are more frequent



## FOCUS

- 58% Events are more niche
- 37% Focus of events is unchanged
- 5% Events are more general



## SESSION LENGTH

- 30% Sessions are shorter
- 60% Session length is unchanged
- 10% Sessions are longer

The increase in innovation is supported by greater employment of contractors, the survey found. When innovation is on the horizon, organizations tend to test it out with contractors, the researchers noted.

Reflecting the percolating climate of innovation, more organizers are replacing the everything-but-the-kitchen-sink type of meeting extravaganza with more frequent meetings on specific topics.

"We're hearing a more niche-oriented event has a tendency to have more value to the intended audience," Voegeli says.

In another sub-trend within a trend, there are more meetings in secondary markets and close to home, according to Voegeli. The meeting size, in these cases, may vary, but even when gatherings are larger, they are more focused on a single topic. Organizers fortunately find these meetings easier to design and market, Voegeli says.

MPI member Susannah D'Arcy (MPI Southern California Chapter), a meeting planner at Coast to Coast Conferences & Events in Long Beach, Calif., has found in her own business a trend toward "different kinds of venues, exciting spaces," as she explained in her survey comments. "The ballrooms are starting to fade. Engagement is what it is all about. Healthy foods and no-booze networking events. Spending time to touch your attendees and let them know they are important."

Meanwhile, Lynne D. Pryor, CMP (MPI Georgia Chapter), director of conference services at Integress Meetings and Events in Atlanta, has found, "Current trends in event planning and meeting logistics include customized event registration, securing unique venues and different stage settings with comfortable seating, unconventional room sets for increased interaction above and beyond the standard presentation, educational and productive networking events, strategically placed comfortable seating in semi-private areas of hotel lobbies and foyers for impromptu meetings."

All of the meeting innovation is keeping suppliers of related technologies busy. Franco Bondi, founder and group managing director of the Eventboost platform, is among the innovators. Eventboost, based in the U.S. and Switzerland, connects event organizers to ticket buyers and enables them to buy and sell event tickets using crypto-currency.

Eventboost is currently developing blockchain technology that

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### SUSANNAH D'ARCY

MPI Southern California Chapter  
Coast to Coast Conferences & Events



will provide smart-contract tickets to prevent fraud. The ticket will arrive in a digital wallet inside of a smart contract, which can safely execute the transaction without a middleman.

"With blockchain, you can fix major problems you have in the ticketing industry—fake tickets and scalping," Bondi says.

Eventboost has already begun testing the technology with meeting organizers and will begin marketing it in 2019. It will be available in 10 languages and in 20 different countries, he says.

Although many are excited about the new climate of innovation, it is posing challenges for some organizers, as different generations with distinct preferences for technology come together in the same room. Some attendees prefer traditional ways of doing things, as Mary Anne Whittle, CMP (MPI Arizona Sunbelt Chapter), assistant to the general manager at Able Aerospace Services, has found.

"The ever-evolving technology appealing to the Millennial subset has posed many changes and challenges to meeting design and execution, to the detriment of the other generations participating," noted Whittle in her survey response. "We have made significant changes to program design to engage as many generations as we can. However, it appears to be a constant battle. What is appealing to Millennials—for example, social media, constant 'faces in the phone syndrome' and the insatiable need to be constantly entertained—is considered an annoyance, if not downright rudeness, by their older generation counterparts. It is a tough balance to maintain and requires constant program re-evaluation."

Whittle saw this firsthand at a 60-attendee meeting for an agricultural sales team, held in a California coastal resort over four days. Speakers delivered the content in speeches involving PowerPoint presentations, one after the other, a process that Whittle says was very comfortable for Gen X and Baby Boomers at the meeting, but not for younger attendees.

"Content included very relevant topics for that meeting, but our Millennial constituents were visibly becoming increasingly disengaged with the repetitive nature of the speaker delivery of PowerPoint slides," she says. "The boredom was evident in the blatant use of mobile phones during the presentations."

The inclusion of three breaks each day was not enough to keep their attention. The organizers found that retention of the material was "dismal, as evidenced in review wrap-up sessions each day," Whittle says.

Even worse, in the evening, "seasoned staff were openly complaining about the disrespect in the room and how cell phones need to be banned"—while their younger counterparts were "grumbling about how boring the content was" and saying, "thank goodness I had my phone to keep me busy."

"It was not pretty," she says, "and we were unable to turn that program around."

Fortunately, Able Aerospace Services had another chance. When it came time for a follow-up program six months later, Able redesigned the meeting. Among the changes were shorter meeting segments that start later and end earlier to free up mornings for recreation or work (depending on the attendee's preference) and provide more opportunities for networking—where the organizers found the content was actually being discussed. The organizers also cracked down on heavy usage of PowerPoint, limiting each speaker to three slides maximum—and only if absolutely

## Business Conditions

**A stable business environment is still indicated,** with predictions for business growth over the next year stable at 2.6%.

**63%**

of respondents predict  
**FAVORABLE**  
business conditions

**22%**

of respondents predict  
**NEUTRAL**  
business conditions

**15%**

of respondents predict  
**NEGATIVE**  
business conditions

## CSR @ Events

Are you seeing more events working to do good (corporate social responsibility) for communities?

**41%**  
**YES**

**57%**

**ABOUT THE SAME**

**2%**  
**NO**

Of respondents citing an increase in CSR activities at events...

**22%**

**say it's now a normal piece of the planning process**

**56%**

**say it's a little more effort**

**22%**

**say incorporating CSR is a big added effort**

# ATTENDANCE FORECASTS

LIVE AND VIRTUAL ATTENDANCE FIGURES OVER THE NEXT YEAR **ARE EXPECTED TO GROW 2.3% AND 2.6%, RESPECTIVELY.**



## Projected Live Attendance

**61%**  
POSITIVE

**23%**  
FLAT

**16%**  
NEGATIVE

necessary. Instead, presenters could write with markers on flip charts, whiteboards and glass walls.

The organizers also changed up the meeting space, using outside areas on the properties. Because it was a meeting of the agricultural sales team, they brought in some presentations to active fields and engaged growers as speakers.

Whittle's conclusion was that by changing up some simple aspects of the meeting that didn't add much to the budget, the company was able to turn the program around and give all generations something that appealed to them.

"Cell phone use is still considered rude by the older generations and does cause tension—they do not want hashtags or Twitter feeds—so we do not incorporate them in our meetings, which irritates the younger participants," she says. "This is where balance gets a bit dicey, but it is a work in progress."

As for CSR, 41 percent of planners said they're seeing more of it, while only 2 percent said they're seeing less in the survey. The practice is increasingly becoming a regular part of the event-planning process, as 22 percent of respondents noted.

Many are using CSR-related activities for interactive team building to engage employees, among them younger ones, Voegeli notes.

***"We have made significant changes to program design to engage as many generations as we can."***

**MARY ANNE WHITTLE, CMP**  
MPI Arizona Sunbelt Chapter  
Able Aerospace Services

"The No. 1 group that's singled out as a beneficiary or target of CSR is younger attendees," Voegeli says. "CSR is believed to make the meeting more relevant to younger attendees."

Technological innovation is supporting organizations' efforts to bring more CSR to meetings. That was the case for Box, a file storage company. It deployed Phone2Action software at the 3,000-attendee BoxWorks conference from Aug. 29-30, 2018, to raise money for three nonprofits—International Rescue Organization, Think of Us and Black Girls Code. Phone2Action software is designed to mobilize audiences around an issue.

After a brief introduction to the causes, the attendees were asked to text BOX to the number 52886 on their phones, where they received links to a website offering information on the nonprofits.



## GLIMPSE AT CURRENT EMPLOYMENT TRENDS

	FULL-TIME	PART-TIME	CONTRACT
<b>INCREASE</b>	<b>37%</b>	<b>34%</b>	<b>43%</b>
<b>NO CHANGE</b>	<b>52%</b>	<b>59%</b>	<b>49%</b>
<b>DECREASE</b>	<b>11%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>8%</b>

"The attendees ended up raising more than US\$30,000 in just a couple of minutes during the event," says Jeb Ory, co-founder and CEO of Phone2Action in Washington, D.C.

Programs like Phone2Action can often be integrated with other technologies. At the 2017 annual Bio International Convention, a biotechnology industry event, attendees were invited to text BIO to a designed phone number using the software. As they responded to the call to action, their support was registered on a giant electronic map on stage, which sparked high participation. "They were able to see their action displayed and tallied," Ory says.

But not all of the social sustainability activities require high-tech support. Cramer's Turner has found his firm's sustainability-minded clients experimenting with water-related themes.

"Instead of handing out plastic water bottles, you have water on tap," he says. "You're not doing plastic cups. You show up on day one and all of the attendees are handed a S'well bottle," referring to a popular brand of reusable stainless-steel water bottles.

Some organizers have opted for clean-water themed workshops where they give back to people in need.

"You can hand-build water filters for a nonprofit," Turner says. "They get shipped to Africa, so communities can have

water devices and filters. We did this for Fidelity last year."

Adding interactive workshops that have a giving-back element is also catching on. For instance, if a company wants to support local artists, it might invite them to an event to give a workshop, Turner says.

"If your firm is thinking about the next generation of talent in your community, there will be things like paint nights," Turner says.

With both innovation and CSR picking up steam, meeting professionals are likely to see a lot more variations on themes like this in the future. ■



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