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# MEETINGS OUTLOOK™



*A healthy, stable business landscape sees industry professionals focusing on cultivating the entire meeting experience, with an emphasis on enhancing interaction and immersion.*

2019 SPRING EDITION

# CRAFTING UNIQUE EXPERIENCES

The business landscape remains stable—slightly favoring a seller’s market with strong indications of growth across attendance and hiring—giving meeting professionals a prime opportunity to focus on crafting unique attendee experiences.



By Elaine Pofeldt

**W**hen a small organization reached out to Destination Irvine (Calif.) for help in planning a 40-person meeting, it had one challenge: a limited budget. Given Irvine’s beautiful outdoor settings and the group’s desire to make the experience memorable as it transitioned in a new board, AnaLaura Becerra, CMP, CTA (MPI Orange County Chapter), director of corporate sales at Destination Irvine, suggested a hike on the trails near the hotel.

“Rejection—immediately,” Becerra recalls. The group worried it would be too hot or the trails would be too long for those who didn’t exercise regularly. Becerra soon came up with a way around that: electric bikes.

When the event day arrived, the attendees broke up into eight groups on their electric bikes and met at pre-designated spots along the route to discuss agenda topics, then adjourned to the hotel for lunch.

“It offered a lot of one-on-one time with the people they





*“That’s the world we live in. Meeting design has shifted to, ‘How do we create experiences and give a lot of different options?’”*

**HUGH K. LEE**

*MPI Upstate NY Chapter  
Fusion Productions*

needed to talk to,” says Becerra, noting the group ended up being very happy with the event.

Like many in the meeting industry, Becerra is experiencing a key trend in this quarter’s *Meetings Outlook* survey: the growing desire to provide unique attendee experiences.

In an increasingly on-demand world, 78 percent of respondents to the survey said the call for unique attendee experiences is rising and 37 percent said this requirement is increasing substantially, even though only 51 percent of respondents say

budgets will increase as well.

Against this backdrop, Michel Wohlmuth, owner of Creatividad and president of the MPI Mexico Chapter, looks to create a transformative experience. In March, he was involved in planning a 250-person event for an insurance company that held a conference at a local resort. During the event, attendees watched a video about a school in a small, impoverished village about an hour from the resort. At the end, the video surprised everyone with the



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Steve O'Malley, Michael Guerriero, and David Peckinpaugh (pictured left to right)  
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# FOCUSING ON THE EXPERIENCE

Creating unique attendee experiences is the largest single, overarching trend from this survey's comments with **78% of respondents saying this need is increasing**. Most respondents (66%) say this specialized need affects their venue-selection decisions.

## How significant is the demand for creating unique attendee experiences at your events?



**38%**

Increasing Substantially

**12%**

Not at all

**2%**

Decreasing Substantially

**8%**

Small Decrease

**40%**

Small Increase



message, "Tomorrow, you are going to visit the school and get to know the children."

For the attendees, actually meeting the youngsters first hand made the event unforgettable. "It was a very sensitive and emotional experience," Wohlmuth says.

The call for unique experiences often affects planners' suggestions for venues. Among survey respondents, 62 percent said the need for unique attendee experiences affects their venue-selection decisions.

Ask Annette Belding, CMP (MPI Minnesota Chapter), events and membership manager of the 194 West Chamber in Minneapolis. In planning a May fundraising event for fallen

fire fighters and police with a local nonprofit organization, she opted to hold the gathering at Clam Corporation, a nationally known manufacturer of ice houses, in the company's warehouse.

"It is a unique space," says Belding as she worked on preparations. The organizers planned to bring in a stage and sound system, and Heidi's GrowHaus, a local garden center, will be decorating the space. Attendees will be able to have the experience of driving a fire truck in the giant parking lot. "It will be a full experience."

This is not unusual.

"We hold various events in our community," she says.

"Because our community doesn't have a large convention area, a lot of times we hold them in unique spaces. It could be that we're holding them in a rec center or someone's backyard."

Becerra, too, is looking to unusual spaces to bring variety to the events she's involved in planning. When a sports organization asked for help with a 500-person reception in two weeks—on a very limited budget—Becerra suggested holding the event in the ballroom of a local barn that was usually used for weddings. The group was reluctant to try it, but a site visit changed the leadership team's minds.

The event, held in March, was a hit, with many attendees loving the novel location.

"The comment, in general, was, 'It's

*"I don't see that the economy is going to slow down, at least in our industry—not with me or with other agencies. **No one has stopped organizing events. Hotels are still running well.**"*

**MICHEL WOHLMUTH**

MPI Mexico Chapter  
Creatividad

about time,” Becerra recalls. She also heard, “I had no idea this existed” and “Kudos to whoever picked this place.”

“My client was on cloud nine,” she says.

A focus on design is another way that meeting professionals are making sure their meetings and events make an impression.

“Because of the diversity of needs and people’s expectation for personalization, they expect to come to your meeting and find what they want, when they want it,” says Hugh K. Lee (MPI Upstate NY Chapter), president of Fusion Productions in Webster, N.Y., near Rochester. “That’s the world we live in. Meeting design has shifted to, ‘How do we create experiences and give a lot of different options?’”

Lee typically has five or six options going on simultaneously, so attendees can have the experience they are looking for, no matter how diverse their needs.

“We might have workshop tracks going on in leadership,” he says. “In that same area, in a large community space, we might have a ‘future of engagement’ lab, where people can go and do hands-on demos, such as virtual reality with goggles. We’ll have galleries of augmented reality but also old-school design, with collaboration areas, chairs, tables and blackboards. We’ll also have an area called The Center, where everyone can bring one question to the keynote who spoke that morning.”

The key is bringing together people with the same interests.

“That’s kind of the secret sauce,” Lee says. “We want people who are thought leaders to talk to the keynotes.”

Rob O’Brien (MPI Greater Orlando Chapter), an account manager at OP-AV, has found that having speakers repeat a presentation several times throughout the day, to different audiences, can go a long way toward making the meeting more impactful for attendees.

“We don’t end up with our talking head just doing the rinse and repeat,” he says. “The audience is different each time, and they all have a different experience.”

O’Brien has found that lighting choices are also very important. Often, a relatively small investment in LED lighting can bring a lot of impact to a meeting, he says.

“When we invest a little bit of money in a lot of lighting, we can get that immersive experience,” he says.

Sometimes, what creates a unique user experience is the human touch. Deanna Nwosu, CMP (MPI Ohio Chapter), an event planner for Foundation Software, an accounting software for construction firms, finds that one of the biggest draws for the company’s user conference, held near its headquarters in Cleveland, is the opportunity for customers to meet in person with trainers who have worked with them online, as well as the company’s staff.

“We’re bringing them to our home, so we can really host them,” Nwosu says. “It cements our relationship further. It’s a big piece of a holistic experience.”

Sometimes, however, it can be challenging for meeting planners to create unique experiences, including those the organizers say they want—because of the tendency to default to what worked in the past.

Becerra has been trying to introduce meeting organizers to a new Hyatt House hotel in the area, where she’s been impressed by the meeting space—where AV costs, the full catering team and a huge breakfast spread is included in the reasonable price for a stay. When she’s mentioned it to organizers, she often hears that

## Business Conditions

Overall, a **2.5% increase** in business conditions is predicted for the next year.

**60%**  
of respondents predict  
**FAVORABLE**  
business conditions

**19%**  
of respondents predict  
**NEUTRAL**  
business conditions

**21%**  
of respondents predict  
**NEGATIVE**  
business conditions

## Unconscious Bias

Have you ever witnessed or been on the receiving end of unconscious bias?

**62%**  
**YES**

**38%**  
**NO**

What was the nature of this unconscious bias?

**52%**  
**GENDER**

**34%**  
**RACE**

**14%**  
**AGE**

# ATTENDANCE FORECASTS

LIVE AND VIRTUAL ATTENDANCE FIGURES OVER THE NEXT YEAR ARE EACH EXPECTED TO **GROW 2.7 PERCENT**. **LIVE ATTENDANCE PREDICTIONS ARE THE GREATEST SEEN IN THE SURVEY SINCE 2016.**



## Projected Live Attendance

**62%**  
POSITIVE

**23%**  
FLAT

**15%**  
NEGATIVE

they want a more traditional venue. “That’s the disconnect,” she says.

Another key trend to emerge this quarter is concern about overall business projections. Even though the results indicated fairly stable budget projections, strong growth in hiring and the best live attendance growth projections since 2016, the survey saw a business condition projection that indicates some hesitancy about the near future.

Financial market volatility also had an influence on meeting decisions, according to 51 percent of respondents. Only 18 percent said this volatility has not been discussed and is not influencing their decisions.

As one anonymous commenter said, “[I’m] preparing for an industry downturn due to political influence and a very long-term strong economy. My clients want to protect themselves with attrition and lowest-rate clauses so that they don’t re-live the issues that burdened them after the 2008 crash.”

O’Brien had a different perspective.

“The economy is not slowing down,” he says. “I can tell you from the AV standpoint, 10 years ago, I could count on the fact that I would spend May or June cleaning up my desk, spending

*“We know now is the time to upgrade our capability to get business events from around the world.”*

### YUMI YASUDA

MPI Japan Chapter  
Chiba Convention Bureau & International Center

time reorganizing with the warehouse guys or going on vacation. That’s not happening anymore. We don’t have a quiet time. We always have something going on.”

In Mexico, Wohlmuth does not see storm clouds ahead, either.

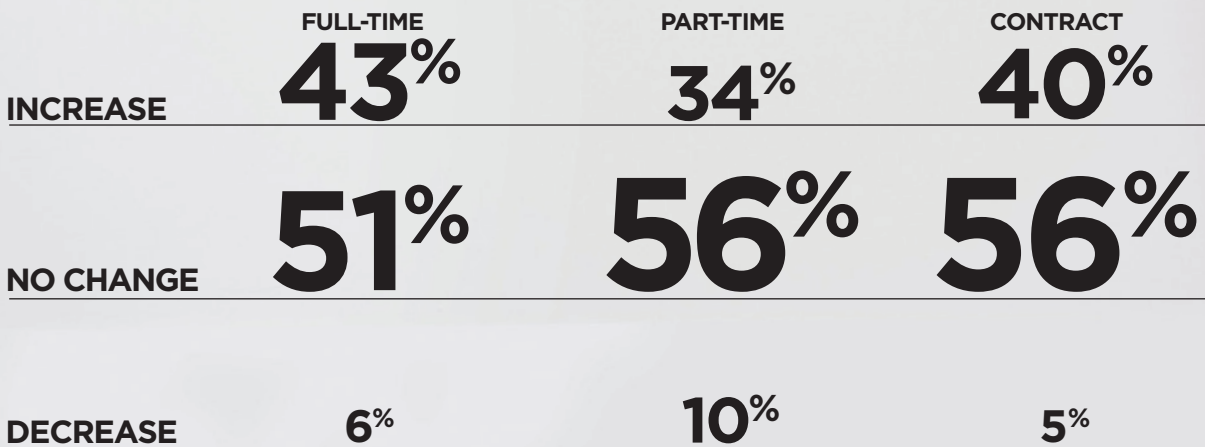
“I don’t see that the economy is going to slow down, at least in our industry—not with me or with other agencies,” he says. “No one has stopped organizing events. Hotels are still running well.”

And in Japan, Yumi Yasuda, convention manager at the Chiba Convention Bureau & International Center and president of the MPI Japan Chapter, said the environment is optimistic, given upcoming events such as the Rugby World Cup, the 2020 Olympics and Japan Expo 2025.



## GLIMPSE AT CURRENT EMPLOYMENT TRENDS

ALL TYPES OF EMPLOYMENT ARE SHOWING STRONG GROWTH, WITH FULL-TIME JOBS INCREASING AT THE LARGEST RATE SINCE 2016.



“Many infrastructure projects are planned or being implemented now, very aggressively,” Yasuda explained in an email. “Meanwhile, we know now is the time to upgrade our capability to get business events from around the world. Under the strong leadership of the current prime minister, tourism promotion is one of the top prioritized policies since 2003.”

The issue of unconscious bias is another topic that emerged as a concern in the survey, with 62 percent of respondents saying they have witnessed or experienced it.

Chase Brunson (MPI Oregon Chapter), conference manager for the Oregon Society of CPAs near Portland, says his organization has been partaking in diversity and inclusion training, including MPI’s, to make sure the group’s meetings are not faltering on this front. This has kept the group on top of questions such as, “Are you adding pronouns to your name tag?” “Do you have gender-neutral bathrooms?” and “Do you have an ADA-compliant bathroom and a family bathroom?” he says.

But many respondents say there is work to be done, and unconscious bias may come from unexpected places.

Heather Mason (MPI Southern California Chapter), founder and CEO of Caspian Agency, has sometimes experi-

enced it from other women. While male clients usually understand they don’t have the skills professional meeting planners do, women often think they know as much as [a planner] does because they’ve organized a few events informally, she has found.

“Women need to respect this as a profession, they can’t just do simply because they are female and have been involved in organizing some outing or luncheon,” she says. “We have a professional skill set honed by years and years of work.” ■



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