



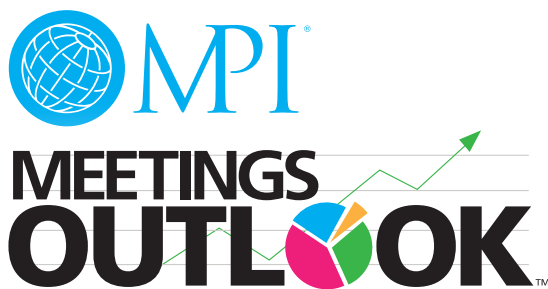
MEETINGS OUTLOOK™



With the majority of survey respondents citing their business as already back to pre-pandemic levels and 80% labelling overall business conditions as “favorable,” the meeting and event landscape appears to be showing signs of normalization.

2023 SUMMER EDITION

The future looks bright— and complex



By Elaine Pofeldt

Most event professionals are still expecting favorable overall business conditions over the next year, despite significant cost increases and ongoing hiring challenges.

Yulia Blinova has attended 25 trade shows around the world since the beginning of 2023, not including the 17 that her company, ScaleForEtail, organized.

“There are tons of trade shows in many countries,” says Blinova, whose company supports e-commerce sellers through global, in-person events. “Not only have they bounced back but they went beyond what they were before.”

But there’s one wrinkle: staffing. “It’s a little bit harder now,” she says.

Based in Germany’s Greater Leipzig area, Blinova brought her own team to Berlin to supplement the staff at one recent event her company organized.

“I don’t know where the qualified people who want to work and earn money went,” she says. “A lot of them have disappeared. I think they repurposed and re-educated

themselves during [the pandemic].”

Blinova’s experience reflects two key trends seen in MPI’s summer 2023 Meetings Outlook: a strong, ongoing recovery and staffing challenges. A full 79% of respondents said business conditions are favorable, and 52% reported their business is back to pre-pandemic levels. However, the worker shortage is throwing a monkey wrench into many meetings and events, with 53% of respondents finding it hard to fill job vacancies (up slightly from 52% in the spring).

Although business is humming, a big question for many meeting and event professionals is how to respond to opportunities in a way that is profitable for their organizations.

Mazda Miles, CMM (MPI Philadelphia Area Chapter), principal of Perfect Events in Philadelphia, found that a three-and-a-half-day national sales meeting that she and

***“What made it successful was that it was in person.
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MAZDA MILES, CMM

MPI Philadelphia Area Chapter

her team planned for a corporate client at the Wild Dunes in South Carolina in February ended up growing from 200 to 250 people.

“What made it successful was that it was in person,” Miles says. “Sales folks need to network and connect.”

She and her team avoided overprogramming the event, so the attendees had time to mingle and meet on the property, which was contained on an island. “There were pockets of time for them to do exactly that,” she says.

But against a backdrop of rising costs, Miles foresees clients like this one focusing more on the value and ROI from events shaping their industries in the months to come. Inflation has forced many to keep an eagle eye on costs that may impact the profitability of a meeting.

“Folks are taking the reins back and saying, ‘Okay, what does this look like in three to five years? We can’t do everything,’” Miles says.

She is not alone. With live events coming back but clients very careful about spending their money, Suzanne Morrell, owner and founder of Creating Environments/

STM Enterprises, a Washington, D.C.-based firm that plans sustainable events, believes planners will play an important role in helping organizations stay focused on the purpose of their events so they and their attendees get what they expect.

“I think it’s incumbent upon us as planners to really ask, ‘Why?’ and really think about the purpose and the intended outcome,” she says.

Planners with strong relationships and negotiating skills may have an edge in helping clients get the most value from their events in today’s environment.

“Costs are going WAY up—airfare, room rates, AV and especially F&B,” Robert Kraus (MPI South Florida Chapter), owner of Small Conferences in Miami, said in his survey response. “So, the properties that are willing to work to make it easier to save money—or partner with the CVB to get additional credits—will attract more business. The properties that are less flexible and won’t partner with CVBs and won’t partner with their corporate brands (which often have programs to give additional credits or incentives) will lose out. I’ve had some

BUSINESS CONDITIONS

The percentage of respondents citing “favorable” business conditions over the next 12 months has declined for the third consecutive quarter. This is not necessarily a perilous finding, rather one that may suggest the industry is on a path to more normalized business conditions.

	Fall ‘22	Winter ‘22/‘23	Spring ‘23	Summer ‘23
Favorable	86%	85%	81%	80%
Neutral	7%	10%	9%	10%
Negative	8%	5%	9%	11%

properties and locations that have had zero flexibility. They've lost our business for now."

Molly Marsh, CMP (MPI Kentucky Bluegrass Chapter), a Lexington, Ky.-based director of education and events at MMR Management services, finds that with both high costs and staffing shortages putting pressure on association business, she is turning a close eye to both internal processes and contracts with external partners.

"We are reworking our contracting and site selection process to ask better questions and get contractual language to ensure we have partners that are able to accommodate our meetings and work with us to avoid exponential cost increases in AV, F&B and fees between contract signing and the event," she wrote in her survey response.

High-tech costs are a big factor for many. After several years of virtual and hybrid meetings, attendees now expect the best technology at events—but the skyrocketing cost of audiovisual equipment and services is burdening many vendors and meeting organizers.

In some cases, organizers are taking a fresh look at whether events should be hybrid or virtual anymore.

"Hybrid and virtual meetings are an additional cost,

and it can be expensive," Miles says. "What's the ROI? What's the value-add? Is it a nice-to-have? Is it a have-to-have? The conversations that we're having this year are much more strategic. We're being brought on to consult to give them a real picture of what is sustainable for the long term. Is this a hybrid event forever or for this year and potentially next year?"

With questions like these increasing, audiovisual vendors are under pressure to keep raising the bar to keep attendees engaged.

"Hybrid events have become the new normal, but I think they are now in their preteen years. A little awkward," wrote Timothy Neill (MPI Oregon Chapter), hub manager at Seamless Event Solutions. "[Often,] the virtual element doesn't engage, or the live element suffers. A good hybrid event takes a great deal of consideration early in the process, even before the venue is chosen. That's where working with a company experienced in hybrid meetings needs to be engaged. What works and what doesn't. How to script. What type of action will appeal to both the live and virtual? How to keep attention. Certain types of events need to be just one or the other."

HIRING CHALLENGES

Over the past year, the percentage of respondents to say they're finding it difficult to fill job vacancies has been slowly decreasing. While at first glance that trend appears to have stalled, the percentage of respondents to say they are *not* having difficulty filling open positions is the greatest it has been since introducing this question more than a year ago.

Are you finding it difficult to fill job vacancies at your organization?

	Fall '22	Winter '22/'23	Spring '23	Summer '23
Yes	62%	58%	52%	53%
No	27%	36%	34%	38%
Unsure	11%	7%	14%	9%

“The first thing we did was look at our marketing strategy, take what we were doing, throw that out the window and go in a new direction.”

MELISSA MCELROY TURPIN

MPI Potomac Chapter

SUSTAINABILITY TAKING ROOT

How important is it to you that events which you plan and/or work are sustainable?

Very important	34%
Somewhat important	56%
Not important	8%

How much more are you willing to spend for sustainable event options?

	Planners	Suppliers
Not willing to spend more	37%	16%
Up to 5% more	50%	52%
6%-10% more	11%	27%
11%-15% more	1%	4%
More than 16% more	1%	0%

How, if at all, do you anticipate your incorporation of sustainable practices will change over the next 12-24 months?

	Planners	Suppliers
Increase significantly	19%	16%
Increase slightly	54%	62%
No change	26%	22%
Decrease slightly	1%	0%
Decrease significantly	0%	1%

Attendance & ROI

Many planners are now turning their attention to changing up their events in other, low-tech ways to make sure they achieve the best possible engagement and high attendance. Meeting planner Melissa McElroy Turpin (MPI Potomac Chapter) finds that attendees seeking experience-driven events are increasingly seeking personalized experiences that cater to their interests and needs.

“For months we had low attendance, and we had to turn that all around and think of new ideas to draw our members in to register for our conference,” she wrote. “The first thing we did was look at our marketing strategy, take what we were doing, throw that out the window and go in a new direction. We also started doing giveaways—things like the first 200 to register receive a one-of-a-kind blanket to giving away free hotel nights if they booked their hotel and registered by a certain date. We did random giveaways on social media. We even looked at our program and saw it was missing the fun factor. We revamped it to include special, memorable experiences

that attendees now seek.

“The biggest struggle was convincing the higher-ups that since the pandemic changed the entire world, we need to make changes, too, as the ‘new’ world is so different now—as they expect more than ever without increasing pricing on our end. Since these changes, we have held the first conference incorporating those changes. You could see the big smiles, hear their laughter, and all the networking going on. The feeling in the air during the conference was the positive energy our members were giving off... The feedback results were so complimentary, positive and appreciative. Things they used to complain about before escaped their minds as this new experience put the WOW in it for them.”

As organizers make their ROI calculations, many are not booking events until the last minute—adding another factor to the mix of challenges.

“Clients are booking closer to the event date and not happy when they get a rush fee added,” wrote Gary Bordman (MPI Southern California Chapter), an interactive experience designer at Amusement, Exhibit & Event

ATTENDANCE FORECASTS

Projected Live Attendance

	Fall '22	Winter '22/'23	Spring '23	Summer '23
Positive	80%	82%	83%	82%
Flat	6%	8%	8%	10%
Negative	14%	10%	8%	8%

Projected Virtual Attendance

	Fall '22	Winter '22/'23	Spring '23	Summer '23
Positive	19%	13%	18%	17%
Flat	30%	28%	24%	30%
Negative	49%	59%	57%	50%

“What’s the ROI? What’s the value-add? Is it a nice-to-have? Is it a have-to-have? The conversations that we’re having this year are much more strategic.”

MOLLY MARSH, CMP

MPI Kentucky Bluegrass Chapter

Services in Las Vegas.

Marling Vali, general manager at the Anvil Centre in New Westminster, British Columbia, noted that short-notice bookings used to be 6-12 months out—now they’re less than three months out.

The need to do business on the fly is leaving meeting planners scrambling. Some find that their go-to venues are often full even when they book on a normal turnaround.

“The biggest trend for me is sourcing and contracting venues,” said Nicole Roames, CMP (MPI Potomac Chapter), a senior manager of meetings and events at the National Council of Architectural Registration Boards in Washington, D.C., wrote. “Space is tight, and it feels like fewer new hotels are coming online. We have to plan further out to get any space, not even the best deal, but we are already behind because of COVID cancellations.”

Staffing

Then there’s the issue of staffing—which remains a significant challenge across the industry.

“Labor issues have affected the quality of our meetings and delegate experience,” wrote Mary Anne Whittle, CMP, president of the MPI Arizona Sunbelt Chapter and operations and events manager at the Arizona Farm Bureau Federation. “We are making sure we set the delegate expectation early and often to mitigate the service issues.”

With his company’s conferences booming, Richard Attias has been searching high and low for talent as

executive chairman of Richard Attias Associates, a New York City-based consulting and advisory firm that specializes in nation branding.

“The business is back—no question—and in some regions at a much higher speed than others,” Attias says. “In the Middle East and the Gulf countries like the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, it’s booming. This region is leading today’s event industry by far.”

However, keeping event staff is requiring a lot of legwork. He lost some team members who were working from home after asking them to come back to the office, and now he is facing recruiting challenges.

“Many people left the industry during COVID and decided to do something else,” he says.

Janet Davis, CEO of JADE Jamaican Grill Inc. in Hamilton, N.J., often caters four or five conference center events each week for 150 people, primarily for state agencies and organizations. She has been so short staffed at times that she has had to manage these gatherings with only her 20-year-old son and one or two other people working with her, instead of the five or six she really needs.

“Working people are nowhere to be found,” she says. “I’ve turned over every stone with community colleges, high schools, etc. The additional staffer I have is a culinary student in high school. You just try to be resourceful, whoever you have.”

For many meeting professionals, being resourceful is the only viable approach right now. ■



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