November Quarterly Education Session Recap

by Linné Diiorio, CMP

As we approach the close of another year in the ever-evolving landscape of events, it’s time to reflect on our first quarterly education event, held in November, highlighting what we learned and what will keep our curiosity piqued into the New Year. In this recap, I’ll review the topics that were covered and the speakers who offered their time and expertise to our chapter as we tried something new by gathering for two days of education and networking with some of our favorite friends and colleagues. Once again we’d like to sincerely thank the Graduate Richmond Hotel for their excellent hospitality and event management while we were in their care.

The first day kicked off on Thursday, November 2nd with a State of the Industry update from Virginia Tourism’s Dan Roberts and Lindsey Norment. This power duo is well-versed in delivering the good news when it comes to tourism trends, data, and revenue spread across the Commonwealth. The first big takeaway was that we are just now reaping the benefits of the pandemic-era funding that VTC took advantage of to penetrate new markets that had not been touched before. It’s comforting to know that the Virginia is for Lovers messaging and campaign is reaching new audiences in the same way that North Carolina, West Virginia, DC, and Michigan market to Virginians. The second takeaway revealed that our state welcomed 42.2 million overnight visitors last year, and those guests spent 30 billion dollars while enjoying everything Virginia has to offer. Not to mention our industry represents 210,000 jobs statewide. It’s fun to dig into the data and tease out crucial information you can use in your sales pitches and with stakeholders. Thanks again to Lindsey for always sharing the creativity and LOVE that our state’s marketing brings to the table, and Dan, our resident Steve Kornacki of tourism data analytics!

Next up, Matt Robinette, with Richmond Region Tourism, presented Accessibility as a Part of Your DEI Efforts and got us thinking about the properties we represent, the hotels we tour and source, and overall event experience design in general. A few scenarios were presented to the audience and there was a healthy exchange between Matt and attendees with personal experience in navigating the accessibility waters with their family members, let alone guests and colleagues. How often have you quickly walked up a short flight of stairs to enter a building’s foyer without missing a beat? Now put yourself in the shoes of a guest in a wheelchair. How
would they navigate that same entrance? Is there another entrance that’s more accommodating and accessible? Does the signage also offer braille for the visually impaired? Are your audio-visual technicians well-versed in providing hearing-assistive devices for guests that might ask? Have you considered food allergies and sensitivities when choosing the menu for your conference? Are you setting the meeting rooms in such a way that guests of all abilities can navigate the aisles, stages, and refreshments freely and comfortably? Maybe your main event venue is accessible, but did you consider the venues and pathways leading to your offsite excursions? We’re not perfect, and we certainly cannot possibly think of every scenario that could come up while executing an event, but Matt encouraged our planners and suppliers to plan with empathy, ask questions well in advance, subject your property to an accessibility audit, and seek ideas and guidance from a diverse group of people who may come up with solutions you haven’t thought of yet. Thanks again, Matt!

With that, we were off to our networking reception on the ground floor of the Graduate Richmond where we were spoiled with delicious food and drink. Kudos again to their team for taking such great care of us.

To keep the networking and momentum flowing from the day before, we flipped our programming around Friday morning and launched a session we like to call Industry Connections with MPI Virginia. During this segment, we took a deep dive into why industry involvement has been vital to so many of our careers. Members, past presidents, and the current board of directors shared their experiences while encouraging attendees to self-nominate for currently open board positions. Please reach out to Megan Hazzard if you’re interested in learning more about serving on MPI Virginia’s board – even if all you can offer is one or two hours a month.

Our opening education session featured Andréea Lyons from All About Presentation, an international event-planning company based in RVA. She brought her expertise to the fore with her interactive presentation on Event Design Using AI. We feverishly took notes and tried to keep up as she revealed how certain tools could be used to generate proposed event designs so clients could envision how their dream event could become a reality at a given property. This technology will quickly be preferred by planners as traditional floor plans simply don’t express depth, color, theme, or even the time of day as accurately as generative AI. Being able to generate a sample image, based on thoughtful prompts that included the details we were looking for, took our collective breath away. A word of caution, though. As a best practice, you should only present images of generative event designs to your clients that your venue and team can execute. Otherwise, it’s simply false advertising. Connect with Andréea and her team to learn more about how they’re integrating this technology into their pitches and planning practices.

We wrapped up our time together with a panel discussion comprised of industry experts who
elaborated on **Emerging Trends and their Impact Across the Planning Industry**. We welcomed Paige Harrar from **CVENT**, Kate Franzen with **Glint Events**, and Sarah Smith of **PRA**. I had the pleasure of moderating the discussion. After getting to know each of these talented practitioners during our planning call, I was excited to dig into some hot topics facing our industry in front of a captive audience. We landed on hot-button issues like attendee behavior when it comes to registration, what to do when dietary restrictions get out of hand, and how to balance expectations amongst a multi-generational attendee base. The trends we touched on included mocktails are here to stay; how important it is to engage with your audience before, during, and after the event; and that corporate planners are burned out due to staffing shortages which leads to last-minute bookings – which keeps sales, events, and food & beverage departments on their toes when very little information is available in those early planning stages. It was refreshing for some to hear that they are not alone in what they are experiencing at their properties, and we could all empathize with the planners who are forced to make tough decisions on shrinking budgets with limited staff. We thank Paige, Kate, and Sarah for sharing their time and talents with us.

Now, more than ever, it’s important to come together and share our stories, experiences, and best practices so we can serve as a resource to our fellow members. The best way to do this is to show up for one another. MPI Virginia is providing another unique opportunity to meet, educate, and fund our organization at our next Quarterly Meeting. We’ll be at the beautiful Delta by Marriott Virginia Beach Waterfront on February 6-7, 2024. Registration is open, and so is our call for silent auction items. If you know MPI, you know our chapter goes all out when it comes to auctions. We know we have creative members out there, so feel free to put together unique tours/experiences, date nights, wine/beer packages, getaways, Valentine’s gifts, and much more. Feel free to re-gift something you received during the holidays...we won’t tell! We truly appreciate and need your support to make this event a success. We’re excited to visit another area of the Commonwealth as we spread the love and network with our friends and colleagues from Virginia Beach and surrounding coastal regions. Register today - we hope to see you there!