Next Generation Corporate Meetings
Top trends impacting planners today & tomorrow
By Selena Chavis

Few would argue that the digital revolution has transformed the way business is conducted in many ways. And while the conveniences and efficiencies of electronic communication are here to stay, current trends suggest that some traditional methods of building strong business bonds are making a comeback: human, in-person interaction.
A recent report put out by Harvard Business Review Analytic Services – The Event Marketing Evolution: An Era of Data, Technology and Revenue Impact – notes that “in a post-digital world, building business relationships online is simply not enough” and “more than ever before, it’s crucial for business to go beyond the digital space to build meaningful relationships.”

As evidence that businesses increasingly understand this phenomenon, the number of companies organizing 20 or more events per year increased by 17 percent between 2017 and 2018, according to the 2019 Event Marketing report from Bizzabo. Findings also reveal that in 2018 a larger number of businesses considered live events to be the most critical marketing channel for achieving goals: the report revealed a 32 percent increase from the 2017 report.

Bottom line, the corporate meeting and event outlook is strong. The Events Industry Council estimated that business events generated $621.4 billion of direct gross domestic product by late 2018. Yet, as traditional in-person business models rebound, the expectations are much different in the digital age. For example, business travelers are demanding more flexible policies and travel tools like those used for personal travel. They also expect personalized experiences, which can be a tall order for many event planners.

As the meetings industry continues to grow and evolve, here are some trends that are defining next generation corporate meetings:

**Rise of Event Marketing**

According to the Harvard Business Review report, there is a connection between growth and event marketing. Notably, the fastest-growing companies have also invested the most in these in-person strategies, whether events are small customer meetings, large conferences or industry trade shows. To that end, face-to-face meetings are expected to be a greater priority in 2019 than in the past as organizations work to strengthen relationships, build capabilities, develop new skills and collaborate on innovations.

Sally Mainprize, principal of Iron Peacock Events, noted that this trend stands in stark contrast to predictions that emerged in the not-so-distant past, which suggested that event marketing would die a slow death, giving way to the cost and time efficiencies of virtual meetings. She believes three things happened that negated this projection.

First, she suggested that fears about the digital revolution served as a wake-up call to the industry. “A great deal has been done to improve content, interaction and ensure events are contributing in a tangible way to the host corporations and those who attend them,” she said.

Second, while internet research is great for narrowing down a field of suppliers, Mainprize noted that “people still buy from people,” especially when it comes to more complex products and services.

Last, she noted that the industry made the incorrect assumption that the younger generation would discount human interaction; data now suggests just the opposite. “Maybe they value human interaction because a great deal of their time is spent otherwise,” she said. “Or maybe face-to-face events give them the opportunity to post about their event experience and share what they learn and do with the rest of the world. In any case, the event industry has improved its focus and has the support of the next generation who will continue to push live events forward.”

For Mainprize’s clients, event marketing is characterized by smaller events – most welcome less than 100 guests – that are targeted and unique in presentation. “I believe the driver of this increase is a concentrated effort to specifically design the hosted event for a niche audience,” she said, pointing out that clients are curating single events for subsets of their audience with content that really hits home. “In addition to exacting content, the audience finds themselves among peers and the networking opportunity with each other is extremely valuable to them.”

Liz Klostermann, CEM, senior exhibit manager with Meeting Expectations, noted that she is also seeing an uptick in targeted event investments, including large franchise conventions. “One of these franchise clients launches their new lineup of restaurant menu items at each show,” she said. “By serving these products to their franchisees, they drive excitement and anticipation for the new items coming to their locations. In my experience, corporations recognize not only the benefits of continuing to establish their brand...
Flexible Travel Policies & Tools

A recent Skift travel report suggests that attendee expectations are increasing in tandem with more business travel. The report recommends that companies adopt a "people first" perspective that puts more control in the hands of the traveler, noting that "travelers want more control over their trips than ever before and new digital tools allow them to co-create a trip within the structure of the apps and services they already use.”

For example, TripAdvisor launched a social networking platform that allows users to choose elements of travel and save them for when they are ready to book. This approach differs from past business models built on pushing deals and options that consumers may or may not want. The new end-to-end tool improves the efficiency of planning a trip as many travelers do not have to spend time pricing activities and scheduling options for the best experience outside the application.

Options such as Airbnb and Lyft are other considerations. Klostermann noted that while it’s not commonplace yet, she is seeing a corporate practice of providing a per diem so employees can choose if they want to stay at an Airbnb instead of a hotel.

Additionally, she pointed to clients who approach travel and meetings from the “work hard, play hard” mentality. “This means mixing business with leisure and inspiring productivity by getting key stakeholders in the same, high-end locale, where activities and networking in small groups inspires business deals and progress toward business goals,” she said.

Mainprize noted that luxury is becoming more about personalized experiences and true quality within those experiences as opposed to exclusivity. For example, she said clients are requesting everything from artisanal food and beverage events in unique settings to athletic meet-and-greets at sporting events.

In these cases, context matters, Klostermann cautioned, pointing out that “while such environments and experiences are cool, it is the specific content for that niche audience that is the key driver. In essence, it has to be about what the individual wants.” Offering another client example, she explained that the company allows for personal preferences, offering differing experiences within an event based on choices attendees can make, such as where they are seated and what is included.

“I hope we see companies who host events completely embrace the opportunity this trend holds because I think it could truly be a game changer,” she said. “It will require that event hosts really understand their attendees beyond demographics to their preferences and how they think. For the experience to be fully personalized, it means communicating in the way they prefer, delivering the experience in the way they prefer and letting the attendees really drive the total event agenda.”

According to Klostermann, any time a brand makes a personal connection, the bond between customer and brand deepens. “I see this especially during incentive events and how we focus on creating memorable, personalized experiences for attendees,” she said. “More and more, corporations are seeing the value of offering special touches for their high performers.”

For an incentive trip, she recalled sourcing yoga mats embellished with attendee names that greeted them at the morning exercise session. For another client, fabric from a banner that became a Guinness Book of World Record for largest ad was repurposed into giveaway bags, becoming part of the company’s story. “The attendees literally took a piece of the brand story home with them,” she said. “That left quite the impression.”

For incentives taking place outside of the U.S., she noted that planners focus on providing local talent and experiences so attendees immerse themselves in the destination’s culture. For example, Klostermann’s firm has sourced fire dancers in Hawaii, planned a cigar-rolling activity in Punta Cana and tequila tastings in Mexico.

“These high-end, luxury experiences help motivate high-performers to reach their goals and provide a positive, once-in-a-lifetime experience for them,” Klostermann said.
Luxury Experiences Transform Corporate Events

By Adrianne Bowen

Have your corporate groups ever been given a chance to experience luxury? Whether the finest accommodations or the most exquisite culinary adventure, true luxury seems like a rare commodity, especially when it comes to meetings.

“Luxury” and “meetings” may not be the first words you associate with each other but one of the top 2019 trends for corporate events is the incorporation of luxury experiences that refresh, delight and inspire everyone involved. According to the 2018 Skift report “Beyond the Ballroom: Rethinking Luxury Experiences in Meetings,” it’s not just about luxurious surroundings – though that’s definitely a great start. The report findings suggest that corporate planners need to consider what experiences they can offer attendees that evoke a sense of pleasure that emanates from luxurious delights.
Defining Corporate Luxury

“Luxury, in the form of experiences, has become a driver at all levels of face-to-face events,” said Karen Kotowski, president and CEO of the Events Industry Council. “More meetings are incorporating experiences as a way to help promote a destination, their other partners and to enhance learning because it’s how people are choosing to learn, network and engage.” Along with experiential luxuries, many planners are elevating their meetings by focusing on customization and the tastes of the individual. “Luxury now is about customization and the personalization of reaching your audience,” said Tonya Almond, vice president of knowledge and experience for the Professional Convention Management Association. “We want to surprise and delight attendees so they say, ‘Wow, this caught my attention,’ and they talk about the experience.”

Hillary Smith, CMP, CSEP, executive creative director of PRA Business Events’ South Florida office, plans luxury meetings for today’s corporate events. She is seeing a major shift in what “luxury” means for the meetings industry. “What we are finding in working with many of our clients – who are hosting C-suite, executive level and high-performing attendees – is how ‘luxury’ for them is changing,” she said. “It’s not about spending the most money because most of these people can afford a name-brand bag or an expensive dinner on their own. What they can’t buy is the time to take care of themselves, so incorporating wellness in a way that can stay with them after the conference is becoming a new type of luxury. For example, instead of simply doing a yoga class, we’ll enhance it by bringing in an author, doctor or life coach to bring the experience full circle – mind, body and soul. We also find a renewed energy with giveback, whether a physical activity or as part of the event. It’s about making the attendee feel good, which in turn is a huge opportunity to gain brand loyalty.”

Delighting guests is also an important part of the luxury experience, according to Smith. “In the traditional sense of luxury, there is still a request for ‘money-can’t-buy’ offerings where attendees engage with an activity, moment or location that few others get,” she said. “We can take something that’s generic, like a winery tasting, and make it extraordinary by including a special element like an invitation into a hidden wine cellar that few people in the world have seen and host a barrel tasting of exclusive wines. Take these moments and offer them to a smaller group of your attendees and create completely unexpected, luxury experiences that take ‘surprise and delight’ to a completely new level.”

Smith delivers one-of-a-kind experiences for all of her events, such as the one held at Sari Mansion in North Miami, Fla. “For a recent dinner for a small group of clients of a consulting firm, we created a luxury experience with a yacht dinner transfer to an incredible oceanside mansion for a private chef dinner,” she said. “The mansion itself was gorgeous but the real draw was that we could make it feel like it was the host attendee’s home and the other guests were all invited to a dinner party with him. There was a chef in the kitchen serving incredible fare and because the setting felt so intimate and comfortable, it created an atmosphere of camaraderie, which in turn elevated the dinner. The overall experience allowed the guests to forget they were at a meeting instead that they were with a group of friends.”

Southern-Style Luxury

Timeless elegance and sumptuous surroundings have always resonated throughout the South. But many grand venues offer even more for planners searching for that extra special experience tailor-made for today’s corporate events.

At the Kiawah Island Golf Resort, a lush and scenic retreat in South Carolina’s Low Country just 21 miles south of Charleston, a multitude of major projects are underway, including 10 new Har-Tru HydroCourts for tennis (as well as renovations for existing courts), a new boutique hotel and luxury meeting accommodations. “As part of our resortwide expansions, new developments at the resort’s West Beach will be transformative,” said Marty Coach, director of sales for the resort. “We engaged world-renowned architectural firm Robert A.M. Stern to design a collection of new facilities that are stylistically complementary and linked with walkways to create a true pedestrian-friendly village experience. This development is highlighted by a new conference center scheduled to open next summer that will feature 23,000 square feet of pre-event and meeting space; a stunning new clubhouse for Cougar Point Golf Club set to open this May that will offer an exciting new restaurant and bar along with other hospitality space; and a luxurious new boutique oceanfront hotel set to open as early as 2021 that will provide oceanfront dining and banquet facilities. The transformation of West Beach Village, along with the other islandwide expansions, will greatly enhance the luxury experience groups already associate with Kiawah Island Golf Resort and it will also allow us to host larger groups than we can currently accommodate.”

Jordan Turchin, principal manager of The Horse Shoe Farm, says the new Hendersonville,
N.C., venue offers completely customizable corporate events exuding luxury. "Nestled in the highlands of the Blue Ridge Mountains sits The Horse Shoe Farm, an 85-acre riverfront estate," Turcich said. "Luxury starts from the moment you arrive and you are taken aback by the vastness and the fact that the whole property is yours to craft a customized retreat for your group. With a selection of individual upscale homes for up to 50 guests, three farm-to-fork meals a day in the elegant Silo and an unparalleled spa experience at The Stable Spa (an authentic renovated barn), luxury and the permission to relax and retreat is built into the foundation of the whole experience. Add on top of that a high-end concierge service for all guests' needs and a variety of different workshop/breakout spaces to utilize as you see fit, The Horse Shoe Farm is able to program and accommodate almost any desire. Some luxury experiences that can be customized for corporate retreats include body treatments in the spa for every attending guest, private yoga and meditation classes in The Sanctuary, an evening fire ceremony focusing on yearly goals, a farm-style dinner under the stars, a sound bath, cooking classes and excursions to the waterfalls, wineries and breweries that abound near the destination.

"At the iconic Diplomat Beach Resort (in Hollywood, Fla.), we provide each of our clients innovative and creative ideas to ensure a memorable experience for event attendees," said Gloriann Torres-Corso, MBA, CMP, assistant director of events and catering. "We focus on what’s important to each client. Our team incorporates different elements from creating an ice beer bar and ice sculpture seafood displays to designing exclusive signature dishes and cocktails that incorporate the client’s logo or colors. We have also covered the pool area to create amplified spaces." Torres-Corso says it’s about delivering an indelible impression: "We are here to create unforgettable experiences for our clients and ensure a successful event that will leave a remarkable imprint on each attendee."

The BMO Capital Markets 2019 Global Metals & Mining Conference was held at the Diplomat this year. The event took advantage of the resort’s lush surroundings, including the infinity pool. "Given that this is one of our repeat clients, we needed to make sure we came up with a concept that will satisfy the clients’ vision," Torres-Corso said. "The group covered the infinity pool deck with plexiglass, creating a unique and chic ambiance for the group’s welcome event. The team worked very hard with the client’s vision to provide a memorable and unique experience for the attendees." The hub of the South presents Southern luxury in many of its venues, and one of the most elegant is the St. Regis Atlanta. "The St. Regis Atlanta has a long history of creating luxurious experiences whether it be for a leisure guest or a corporate or social event," said Director of Catering and Event Management Julia McKeelvey. "The hotel just underwent a property-wide renovation in celebration of the hotel’s 10 Year Anniversary. The luxurious Buckhead property added a three-story meeting and event space, Maisonette, which presents a modern alternative to their classic Astor Ballroom and other event spaces."

Maisonette comprises three distinct levels, according to McKeelvey, providing "guests flexibility while maintaining exclusivity from high-level executive meetings to intimate social affairs. Within Maisonette, the Gallery and Pavilion are stunning spaces with natural lighting and state-of-the-art sound and visual technology and on the lower level, the full-service Chef’s demo kitchen gives groups of up to 24 an exclusive and intimate culinary experience. In addition to refined comfort and upscale amenities, planners will enjoy personal assistance from The St. Regis Atlanta’s seasoned event team and Meetings Butler who will help plan and orchestrate every event detail with signature St. Regis grace and style." McKeelvey emphasized some luxury experiences created at the venue including Champagne Sabering Lessons, a Custom Bourbon Barrel blending session during the planning phase that is then served during a reception or dinner event during their program, and custom culinary offerings such as an entire menu inspired by Bison and offered as part of a 5-course meal.