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Five ways to prepare for the return of meetings and events

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With vaccination efforts underway around the world, governments are looking to ease Covid restrictions and corporate meeting planners are gradually preparing themselves for a return to in-person meetings and events.

The past 12 months have been dominated by meetings in the digital realm

but while virtual meetings have their advantages, they aren't a perfect substitute for face-to-face interactions. It's harder to sustain people's attention and form meaningful connections in a virtual setting, or make employees feel valued and motivated in a way that can be achieved through an incentive trip.

It is, therefore, of little surprise that there's a strong appetite and pent-up demand to restart in-person meetings. While companies are taking different approaches in resuming live events – influenced by several factors such as their industry, primary business locations and corporate culture – at CWT Meetings & Events we're already seeing a steady stream of enquiries and RFPs coming in for the end of 2021 and early 2022.

Here are some things that planners should be thinking about now, in preparation for a return to in-person meetings and events:

1. Have a meticulous health and safety plan

Safety was high on the agenda for meeting and event planners even before the pandemic but now there are so many additional elements that you must take into consideration.

For example, consider which government-mandated Covid restrictions and safety measures you need to comply with. What precautions will you put in place to minimise the risk of transmission between attendees, such as testing and mask wearing? How will you manage the movement of attendees on site to ensure social distancing? How will meals and networking breaks be organised?

You should also consider communicating details of the safety measures to participants before the event so they know exactly what to expect.

2. Choose your supplier partners wisely

Organising a meeting or event can require working with many different suppliers, from airlines, to hotels, venues, transportation providers, and F&B caterers. With the move towards greater digitalisation and the emergence of hybrid events, we are seeing even more players brought into the mix, such as event management platforms, audiovisual (AV) providers, and studios, so it's

important to integrate these into your overall strategy as well.

Make sure you have a clear understanding of the Covid-prevention plans and measures that each of your supplier partners have in place. Many suppliers are obtaining certifications from third-party agencies that assess and accredit their safety procedures and, in some instances, these might prove helpful when deciding which suppliers to work with.

Also remember to ask your suppliers about their cancellation policies in case you need to call off or postpone your event at short notice. This is particularly important in the prevailing environment where regulations and requirements can change from one day to the next.

3. Get a handle on small meetings

As restrictions are gradually eased we can expect to see small, local meetings (i.e. with attendees who are all based in the same city or country) restart first. However, many organisations still don't have standardised processes or solutions to manage small meetings the way they do for large events or transient business travel. When it comes to small meetings, employees are often left to their own devices to book venues and make arrangements as they please.

Companies should use online booking tools for small meetings that make it easy for their employees to instantly search and book venues and ancillaries, such as F&B and AV equipment, from an approved list of suppliers. At the same time, companies should establish a clear approval process for arranging small meetings.

Not only will this create a better experience for employees, it will also help the organisation consolidate crucial information about their meetings spend and activities, which will enable better cost control and risk management.

4. Use hybrid meetings to your advantage

The concept of hybrid meetings and events, which combine both in-person and virtual elements, is hardly new but it's suddenly in the spotlight and generating a lot of interest from corporate meeting planners.

I believe hybrid meetings will form a key component of corporate meeting programmes in the long-term, even after restrictions have been lifted, as they can offer planners the best of both worlds. You can achieve higher levels of engagement and create valuable networking opportunities that are only possible through face-to-face interactions. Meanwhile, having some attendees join virtually could mean lower costs, a smaller carbon footprint, and compliance with health and safety requirements.

That said, managing hybrid meetings can become complicated as you are essentially organising two meetings simultaneously – one for the in-person attendees and another for those joining virtually. My colleague Ian Cummings has compiled a handy list of dos and don'ts for hybrid meetings.

5. Don't lose sight of sustainability

With Earth Day right around the corner, it serves as an important reminder that the challenges of climate change and environmental sustainability have not gone away. While ensuring the safety and wellbeing of attendees is by far the top priority for event planners at the moment, creating more sustainable meetings and events should remain high on the agenda.

The shift towards virtual and hybrid meetings as a result of the pandemic will certainly play a role in creating more 'green' corporate meeting programmes as there will be fewer carbon emissions generated from travel. Companies can use data to better understand the ROI that different types of meetings generate for their business and then calibrate their programmes to achieve the right mix between in-person and virtual engagement.

There are also other steps that businesses can take to reduce the impact of their meetings on the environment. For instance, using seasonal, local produce for their F&B, adopting digital solutions instead of printing physical invites and agendas, and working with hotels, venues and other suppliers who have strong eco-credentials.

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