



The Future of Live Events

In conversations with dozens of organizers, PCMA found that there are still more challenges than solutions. But in this in-between time when we are still living with COVID-19, we have a rare opportunity to collectively rearchitect live events to keep participants safe.

BY JENNIFER N. DIENST



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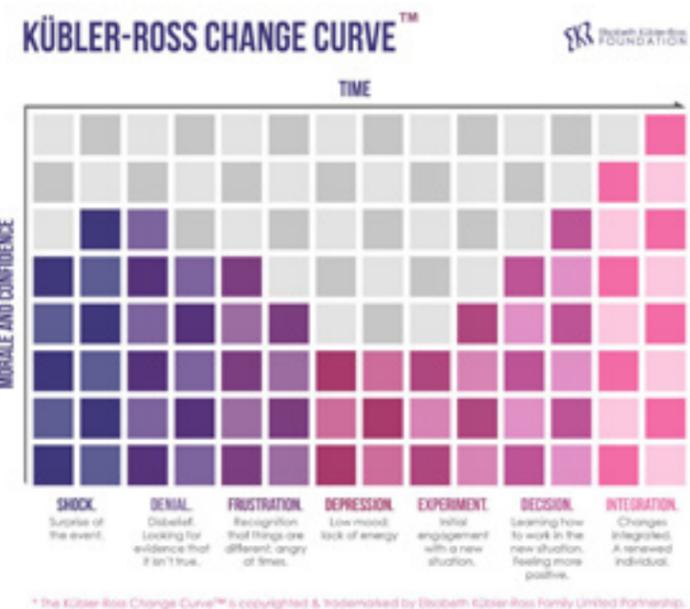
“You’re risking your brand reputation, because your members and your exhibitors are thinking that you’re just out for the money, you’re trying to hold out as long as possible.”

— *Stephanie Dylkiewicz, CMP, DES,*
senior meetings manager at the Association Management Center

In the [Kübler-Ross Change Curve](#), more commonly known as the five stages of grief, the experiment phase is when we first begin to engage with a new situation after a major event. This stage typically comes after shock, denial, frustration, and depression — although these can often overlap or follow a nonlinear path — when we finally take stock and move forward. Now, [about four months](#) after the World Health Organization declared the new coronavirus a pandemic, organizers of live events are starting to feel their way through that shift.

If there was ever a moment for conversation, it’s now. In June, the Greater Fort Lauderdale Convention & Visitors Bureau (GFLCVB) launched an exploration of what’s next for events by hosting three virtual focus groups with 39 total organizers along with a three-day, in-person

workshop for five business events professionals in Fort Lauderdale. Though discussions covered a range of issues — from room sets to risk to reputation — a common theme emerged. Organizers feel like they’re caught in a holding pattern trying to serve the needs of their constituents while working with their destination and venue partners to help them adapt or pivot. It’s symptomatic of [a larger, collective shift in priorities](#) that’s happening in society right now, but their constituents’ needs — to learn, to connect, to grow — remain. “Right now, customers are being nudged by circumstance — they are more open to looking for another solve to get their currency and needs fulfilled,” said Amy Blackman, a growth strategist, brand coach, and innovation consultant, who helped guide the conversations in the in-person workshop. That means that we need to figure out how to reprogram live events to fill their cup.



What we know, now

Travel, in all of its forms, must adapt quickly to survive the lasting effects of this pandemic. But live events face unique hurdles because, frankly, right now it’s a big ask. Colleen Phalen, chief creative officer for the American Association for Justice (AAJ), explained it well during the first of three focus group conversations: “Someone choosing to go to a Scottsdale resort on their own, because they feel comfortable traveling, is much different than someone choosing to go to Chicago to be in a convention center with thousands of other people.”

“They’re doing the best that they can, but I feel very concerned that I cannot rely on a vendor to ensure the safety of my attendees. We’re not going to move forward unless we have something concrete that we can say we followed.”

—Colleen Phalen, chief creative officer for the American Association for Justice (AAJ)

Growing evidence points to meetings and conferences as a risky environment for transmission because of sustained face-to-face exposure. In May 2020, research published in [the *Emerging Infectious Diseases* journal](#) pointed to hand-shaking and face-to-face interaction as key to the way a pre-symptomatic attendee infected 11 out of total 13 participants at a board meeting held in late February 2020 in Munich, Germany. [The *Boston Globe*](#) reported that the now infamous Biogen leadership conference, held in Boston in late February 2020, resulted in 72 coronavirus infections.

How has all of this affected the travel confidence of attendees? There doesn’t seem to be a clear consensus yet from the focus groups. Many said it will take a while — possibly a year from now — until they would travel for a meeting. Fewer remarked that attendees would only attend a meeting after a vaccine is available, and some said the opposite — that their attendees felt more than ready to travel right now. “We’re hoping most will feel more comfortable travelling by [June 2021] — that said, we expect 15–20 percent will still not come,” one participant said. What *is* certain is that travel confidence varies from group to group and significantly depends on that group’s industry or professional sector and purpose for gathering.

A letdown

When it comes to their 2020 and 2021 meetings and events, organizers in the focus groups said they are still scrambling to make a decision — whether that means postponing, pivoting to a virtual or hybrid format, or carrying on as planned (with caveats). Some didn’t have

a choice due to travel bans or the destination shutting down, but for others it’s not such a straightforward call. To Stephanie Dylkiewicz, CMP, DES, senior meetings manager at the Association Management Center (AMC), it just doesn’t seem worth it. “You’re risking your brand reputation, because your members and your exhibitors are thinking that you’re just out for the money, you’re trying to hold out as long as possible.”

In the meantime, organizers have been stalled coming up with a Plan B (and sometimes Plan C and Plan D) because their leadership is taking months to decide on how to proceed or because they can’t pin down a safe path forward. Lack of clear social distancing and safety guidelines from the industry is preventing many from redesigning their in-person programs. Furloughs are to blame, preventing organizers from renegotiating contracts or just simply getting new room-set options.

“Our attendees and sponsors are looking to us for answers on best practices for social distancing and safety measures,” said Kasey R. McNeil, CEM, senior manager of meeting operations for the American Academy of Otolaryngology — Head and Neck Surgery. “We need to work together with our hotels, vendors, airlines, everyone to ensure we get this entire industry back to work.”

Leslie Zeck, director of meetings for the International & American Associations for Dental Research (IADR/AADR), found that when industry task forces referred her to the CDC for guidance, the CDC pointed to the states and the states pointed to the cities. Frustrated that the “wheels keep spinning and spinning and spinning,” Zeck and her team have started to build their own set

of guidelines to ensure the health and safety of attendees when the time comes to host face-to-face meetings. A handful of organizers said that they were taking similar steps and plan to incorporate them as addendums to their current contracts and seek approval from local boards of health as an additional layer of protection.

“It’s been really frustrating and really hard to get someone to commit to all of the scenarios,” said Colleen Donohoe, director of meetings and conventions for The Society for Thoracic Surgeons (STS), of hotel and venue partners. “I know we’re all going through it, but I feel like by this point they should have some kind of template [that shows], ‘this is what a meeting for X number of people will look like’ and give some guidance.” “They have no idea,” said another focus group participant, adding that the convention center’s plan was the same plan for the organization’s original meeting, postponed from March. “It’s handwashing and elbow bumping — we must have progressed at this point!” she said. “I know we don’t have all the answers but surely there are some common-sense things that have to happen. We all know that if bigger groups can meet, it’s not going to be the same as it was. We’re not going to lock chairs together.”

One supplier who has taken the leap is [PSAV, which released its “MeetSAFE” guidelines](#) in May. The retooled room designs incorporate both virtual and in-person components, including multi-room designs for larger groups that broadcast what’s

happening in one space into other spaces within the same venue. “But why am I having my meeting in person if it’s essentially a virtual meeting?” wondered a participant. “And I’m spending seven times the amount of money for AV?”

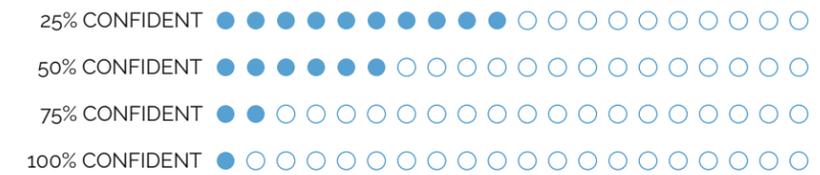
For Phalen, it’s not enough for vendors to issue their own guidelines. She said she understood that “they’re doing the best that they can, but I feel very concerned that I cannot rely on a vendor to ensure the safety of my attendees. We’re not going to move forward unless we have something concrete that we can say we followed,” she said, based on scientific guidance.

Forging ahead

Partners who have impressed organizers have responded quickly with solutions and remained flexible on contract terms. For Alex Zapple, director of meetings and member experience for the American Society of Nephrology (ASN), that was a convention center partner “giving us every bit of information before it was even available” and offering assistance when they decided to transition their 13,000-person annual event, ASN Kidney Week, to a fully digital format. Even though Zapple said that she doesn’t foresee booking anything new right now, she wants destinations to continue to engage and communicate without pushing sales too much.

Going forward, many organizers said they will include new verbiage in contracts to ensure compliance by partners. “We’re putting in our contract that the hotel has to follow state, local, federal, and CDC guidelines, and that they will have to bear the cost, within reason,” Zapple

Are organizers confident that their next booked meeting will happen? Not so much.



In late May and early June, PCMA posed this question to 39 organizers in three virtual focus groups. Roughly 5 percent responded that they felt 100 percent confident; about 10 percent said they felt 75 percent confident; about 33 percent of respondents felt 50 percent confident; and around half reported feeling 25 percent confident or less.

“Not everyone is ready — there are groups who need more time and there are venues that need more time. Even if it is technically deemed safe by the destination and venue, and even if the organizers feel confident moving forward, if there is not buy-in from the attendees, the sponsors, the board, all of the event’s stakeholders — we are in a stalemate. When proper planning and risk assessments are performed, all stakeholders have bought in, and events begin to occur again, it will be important everyone shares the results so that we can demonstrate a clear path forward.”

—*Matthew Fox, senior project manager, Meeting Management Services (MMS)*

said. So far, her partners have agreed to the terms — but she said she expects pushback. Jessica Maldonado, CMP, meetings manager for the American College of Toxicology (ACT), has begun adding clauses into her contracts for future meetings detailing social distancing mandates as well as the right to adjust food and beverage minimums and attrition if local guidelines limits their registration numbers.

It’s bound to be a challenge for both sides. Corporate budgets have been slashed, associations have and will continue to see reduced revenue from canceled live events, and suppliers are trying to make up for massive losses in revenue while [shelling out for new costs](#), from new cleaning equipment and protocols to plexiglass partitions. “Our [2020] virtual event raised about 10 percent of the revenue we were expecting for our in-person event,” said Nancy Touhill, director of meetings and events for the Wireless Infrastructure Association (WIA). She projects that even though her budget for her 2021 live event may be down, they will use the same amount of space even if they don’t have the same number of attendees.

Creative sponsorship solutions may help. Marisa Villalba, senior meeting planner at the American College of Surgeons (ACS), is rethinking their event sponsorships as yearlong partnerships, giving sponsors an opportunity to engage with their membership through a variety of mediums rather than just during their spring meeting. Likewise, the American Association of School Personnel Administrators (AASPA) extended its annual sponsorship package by six months in addition to offering its increasingly popular webinars as sponsorship

opportunities, said Sandy Wachter, CMP, AASPA’s director of meetings and events. “By looking for and focusing on where your members have needs,” Wachter said, “you can also push your sponsors to that direction.”

On the ground

But what should a live event look and feel like in a post-pandemic world? The GFLCVB and PCMA tried to answer that question during an in-person workshop held in June when five organizers agreed to fly to Fort Lauderdale to take part in one-and-a-half days of site visits and honest conversations about everything from meals to masks.

On arrival, our host hotel, the [433-room Westin Fort Lauderdale Beach Resort](#), was in full swing. The lobby was buzzing, and the check-in process was quick. All staff members were wearing masks but some guests weren’t — during our stay, local policy suggested wearing masks but it wasn’t mandatory (editor’s note — as of July 2020, a Broward County order now requires masks in all public indoor spaces). Noticeable additions included hand-sanitization stations placed in strategic locations within the public spaces, along with signs limiting four guests to an elevator. At the pool, more than half of the lounge chairs had been removed, but chairs still weren’t spaced six feet apart.

Our group’s meet-and-greet that evening in the lobby led to some interesting revelations. Some felt uncomfortable when others showed up mask in hand instead of mask on face. Some felt strongly that we, as

“With constantly changing variables that shift on an almost day basis, this situation presents challenges unlike anything we have faced previously. But the commitment to coming together and an unapparelled level of expertise allows us to solve problems and is at the heart of the hospitality industry.”

—*Sondra Lynnette Williams,
manager, member and staff engagement, American Benefits Council*

members of the hospitality community, should set a precedent by always wearing a mask, as a sign of respect. Dinner in a semi-private room at Lona Cocina, the hotel’s indoor-outdoor restaurant, was a delicious release but the crowded bar we had to walk through on the way out left many in the group, myself included, feeling unsafe.

Reality check

Take what we know about the coronavirus and then think about everyday items — something as simple as a pen, which has been a staple in hotel rooms. How do you ensure and convey that the pen has been properly sanitized? Can it be sanitized and reused again, or should it just be disposed of? To uncomplicate things, some hotels have chosen to just eliminate high-touch items altogether — the Westin, for example, will remove difficult-to-sanitize items like coffee makers from guest rooms on request, and housekeeping has also been paused after check-in as part of [their new safety protocol](#).

For meetings, that means communal F&B setups like buffets or water stations should be scrapped, which could put sustainability efforts in the backseat. “It feels a little like a step back,” said Laurie Johnson, director of sales and marketing at The Westin Fort Lauderdale Beach Resort. That said, our grab-and-go morning breakfast setup the next morning ticked most boxes. Executive chef Michael Mayer set out prewrapped individual items like breakfast sandwiches, hash browns, and fruit parfaits (we collectively decided to nix tongs). A few feet away, a gloved and masked attendant managed a coffee station.

In considering this setup for their own meetings, organizers commented that it would make sense to space

the food, hand sanitation, and coffee stations farther apart to prevent crowding. Another pointed out that they would prefer a sign at the coffee station informing attendees that the attendant will make and serve the coffee to prevent attendees from handling items themselves. Adapted for larger groups, Johnson suggested adding another attendant to direct guests, floor decals with directional arrows, as well as entrance and exit signs to keep traffic flowing. When we toured examples of room sets reworked for social distancing, organizers were shocked by the loss of capacity when finally seeing them up close. For example, the Westin’s 10,829-square-foot Las Olas Ballroom typically holds 360 attendees in a classroom-style setup. When reconfigured so that each attendee would have their own six-foot table, the capacity shot down to 172. Other requirements quickly became apparent — the need for additional, wider aisles; the elimination of head tables; and signage dictating traffic flow.

Organizers will be scrambling for time as well as space. “I’m just thinking about the general session, when everyone has to use the bathroom or get on the elevator to head back to the room — what then?” asked one organizer, referring to the limits placed on the number of people occupying a restroom and elevator. Another suggested getting rid of breaks altogether, and instead telling attendees to take individual breaks as needed. Not only would this decrease foot-traffic jams but help free up time in overpacked schedules. “As meeting planners, we have to look at the fact that the format is going to have to change,” said Jamie Woodside, CEM, exhibits manager for the Association of the United States Army (AUSA). “It has to.”



A combined effort

Then there is the issue of enforcing safety protocols. Currently, CDC guidelines only suggest wearing a mask, so organizers should next consult state and local regulations as well as the policies of the hotel or venue. But who should enforce them? Woodside believes that it should be a combined effort that includes her staff, service providers, and facilities. She and others feel strongly that mandating these guidelines is a must. “If we say ‘suggested’ — we all know that there are people who aren’t going to wear it,” she said.

When it comes to working with hotels on enforcing these new guidelines, Heiko Dobrikow, executive vice president of The Las Olas Company and general manager of the Riverside Hotel, encourages organizers to strongly assert their needs. “Don’t put out guidelines, put out requirements,” he said. “Put it back on the hotels — it’s a partnership. I want you to be hard with me. I’m good with that. It’s only going to make our entire industry better, make us recover faster, and get people back to work.”

During the past few months, Dobrikow has gone to [great lengths](#) to make the guest experience at the 231-room Riverside Hotel safer and more comfortable, choosing to [implement safety protocols developed by the American Hotel & Lodging Association](#) as well as [reopening guidance issued by the National Restaurant Association](#) and the [Florida Restaurant & Lodging Association](#). To our group of organizers, Dobrikow and his staff’s attention to detail, communication efforts, and willingness to require, not suggest, protocols like wearing masks made all the difference. One organizer remarked

she would not hesitate to host a meeting here in the near future.

Instead of valet service, the hotel currently offers self-parking next door that guests can pay for via app. Straddling Las Olas Boulevard and the Intracoastal Waterway, the hotel has more than 30,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor meeting space and typically hosts groups of around 150 indoors or 500 outdoors. (Side note: [water taxis](#), which we took here, provide an open-air alternative for attendees to move around the city). Bright yellow floor markers designate where guests can stand in the outdoor area in front of the main lobby. Inside, [Hikvision](#) thermal cameras capture the temperature of anyone who walks through the door. If a temperature registers over 100.4, the staff uses facial-recognition technology to identify the guest and discreetly pull them aside.

At the front desk, which has been lined with plexiglass, a “hygiene host” ensures guests stay six feet apart and keeps all high-touch areas disinfected. At Wild Sea, the hotel’s seafood restaurant where we had lunch, the staff again uses [infrared thermometers](#) to take guests’ temperatures and requires them to wear masks any time they are not seated at their table. Inside, tables have been spaced six feet apart and are separated by dividers. Even the booths feature custom partitions on the back of the seat for added protection. Menus can be accessed virtually via QR codes on printouts placed on every table and disposable paper menus can also be provided. Outside, capacity has been reduced by 50 percent to allow for more space between tables as well as from the adjacent pedestrian walkway that runs along busy Las Olas Boulevard.

Prior to the pandemic, what are the top three reasons most often cited by attendees for attending live events?



The quick answer? Meeting new people and learning.

According to the 39 organizers who participated in PCMA’s virtual focus groups in May and June of 2020, networking received 27 votes, education 23 votes, and business leads five votes.

The hotel gym, which is open to both the public and hotel guests, enforces strict rules — masks must be worn any time a guest is moving around the space and capacity has been limited to 10 people. In the guest rooms, high-touch items like magazines have been eliminated. Guests can scan a QR code to read magazines digitally, instead. Housekeepers also roam the property with [electrostatic sprayers](#), also used by the Westin, to sanitize all surface areas multiple times a day. When meetings start up again, Dobrikow said the team will use them to disinfect rooms in between sessions. “You just want to make sure that you show attendees that safety is the top priority,” he said.

Resetting for the future of live events

Stepping back to look at the big picture, many believe the future is hybrid and virtual formats. The former may be the key to getting both sides through the next couple of years, in which organizers fulfill their contracts with abbreviated in-person gatherings for those who can travel complemented by a digital component for attendees who can’t or won’t travel. The financial cost, of course, won’t be minimal — but there is great opportunity to increase sponsorships and attendance.

Data and metrics captured by hybrid and virtual events “will be a huge selling point” for sponsors, said Jeremy Figoten, director of conferences and sponsorship for the International City/County Management Association (ICMA). “In a digital environment, you can capture such great data on who is looking at what,” he added. Some foresee this digital opening of borders as

a slam dunk in boosting attendance. “We’re hoping this is going to help make our attendees be less averse to technology,” said Maldonado, who adds that she thinks it could push ACT toward a hybrid format in 2021. “That could allow us to pull that attendance of people who haven’t been able to travel.” ASN’s Zapple echoed that. “I’m actually really excited about this digital move,” she said. “We’re looking at it as an opportunity to reach a greater audience globally.”

“Much like after 9/11, we’re going to change how we do things,” said Ken Morton, conference meeting manager at the Nuclear Energy Institute (NEI). “We’re going to have to be more nimble, we’re going to have to be more open with our contracts.” But he also recalls how exciting it felt when he was finally able to gather with his colleagues again after 9/11. “That’s what I wait for.” ●