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The Event Professional's Guidebook to In-Person and Hybrid Meetings, Events, and Conferences

eBook

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CHAOS IS A LADDER

In season 3 of "Game of Thrones," when Varys warns Littlefinger about the dangers of chaos in the realm resulting from all the scheming and political upheaval, Littlefinger famously responds with his "**chaos is a ladder**" speech. The gist of his argument is that chaos and confusion can bring opportunity to those who are able to "lean in" and embrace it. Despite Littlefinger being one of the least ethical characters in the show, there is something in his viewpoint that I believe can serve event professionals well during this tumultuous period.

The past 18 months have been the most convulsive and disruptive era in the history of the event industry. COVID-19 not only unleashed an entirely new experiential vehicle in virtual events, but the stop-start whiplash created as a result of our not having a consistent and smart national or global response to the pandemic, has led to ongoing confusion about whether to stick with, postpone, cancel or modify an in-person event every time we have a new surge, like now.

This chaos has made our jobs exponentially more stressful, having to grapple with questions like:

- What should we do about our in-person event coming up in X months in Y city?
- How do we institute a vaccine pass policy?
- What about state regulations that prohibit doing so?
- Does our hybrid event experience need to be the same for remote and in-person audiences? Should we charge differently?
- What needs to go in our duty of care statement?

But this same chaos also creates a unique opportunity for event professionals to prove their value. The questions above are not for the faint of heart; they cry out for a trusted advisor to lead the way. There may not be clear answers – in business there often aren't – but if we're well informed, we can certainly earn our seats at the table by having our fingers on the pulse of the industry, armed with the latest insights and best practices.

As with all our courses and other content, this Guidebook is intended to help inform event professionals with those insights, so we can all use this horrible chaos as a ladder to climb into the new future as truly valued professionals.

Sincerely,

Howard Givner

Founder + CEO
Event Leadership Institute

> **"The past 18 months have been the most convulsive and disruptive era in the history of the event industry."**

33 QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN PLANNING FOR THE RETURN OF IN-PERSON EVENTS

While safety and risk have always been a part of events, COVID-19 has tested all past assumptions. When planning in-person events, there are many new questions—about health and safety, legality, insurance, venue specifications, and more—to consider.

Read on for 33 questions to evaluate when planning for the return of in-person events, curated from planners who recently completed ELI's Pandemic Meeting & Event Design certificate course.

Keep in mind this list is just a starting point as information is changing daily, if not hourly. The answers may depend on your organization's unique needs, local requirements, and your attendees's tolerance for risk.

1 What is the event need/goal, and must the outcomes be achieved by meeting in-person?

2 How should success metrics shift to reflect the new climate?

3 What are the go-to sources of reliable information and guidelines to use when making plans and decisions around in-person events?

4 How will the extended production team be involved in the upfront planning process and be kept up to date regarding any changes?

5 What are effective strategies for communicating expectations and policies to the event's stakeholders—including attendees, the venue, and all supporting vendors and suppliers?

6 Should we have attendees sign a code of conduct/agreement? And if so, what should that agreement cover?

7 What will our vaccination policy be for guests and staff, and how will we enforce it?

8 What is the policy for attendee cancellations if they no longer feel comfortable attending in-person?

9 What is our approach toward risk transfer?

10 What should we include in our agreements about the venue's responsibility to create a safe environment? For example, what is our responsibility/liability to the venue if attendees don't abide by social distancing or mask requirements?

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11 What kinds of insurance may provide coverage for losses and claims related to the pandemic?

12 Are there other types of insurance to consider or provide for guests or suppliers?

13 When can we invoke force majeure?

14 What entity determines when a pandemic/epidemic is officially over?

15 How and under what conditions do venues/suppliers refund deposits?

16 What and how much PPE items do attendees and staff need, and how are these costs covered?

17 How will plans be modified if an infection rate is low at contract signing/booking and increases leading up to the event date?

18 What can be done to keep groups from congregating together at points such as registration, meal breaks, or waiting for transportation?

19 What measures will help manage and direct crowd flow and control?

20 How can we minimize touch points throughout the event and/or use more contactless experiences?

21 What changes should be made to food and beverage service?

22 What are the recommended best practices for room design and staging?

23 What kinds of ventilation and filtration systems are in place at the venue? When were they last updated?

24 What signage or directional instructions should be used, and where should they be placed throughout the venue?

25 Are there standard certifications or accreditations important for partners/suppliers to hold or organizations they should belong to?

26 What is our policy for enforcing health-screenings/questionnaire completion? Is it self-certified or performed by a member of our team?

27 Regarding established policies and procedures, if non-compliance issues arise from attendees, staff, or vendors, what are our de-escalation guidelines?

28 What protocols are in place for isolating attendees or staff who may develop COVID-19 symptoms or come in contact with someone now reporting symptoms? Do we have a contact tracing system in place?

29 Will our community benefit from a hybrid option?

30 Who might we be excluding from the event if no hybrid or on-demand access is given?

**31** What will our AV and technical needs look like?

32 How will we need to adjust the room design to accommodate both virtual and in-person attendees?

33 Who makes the final call about whether we need to cancel the event or move it to a virtual event?

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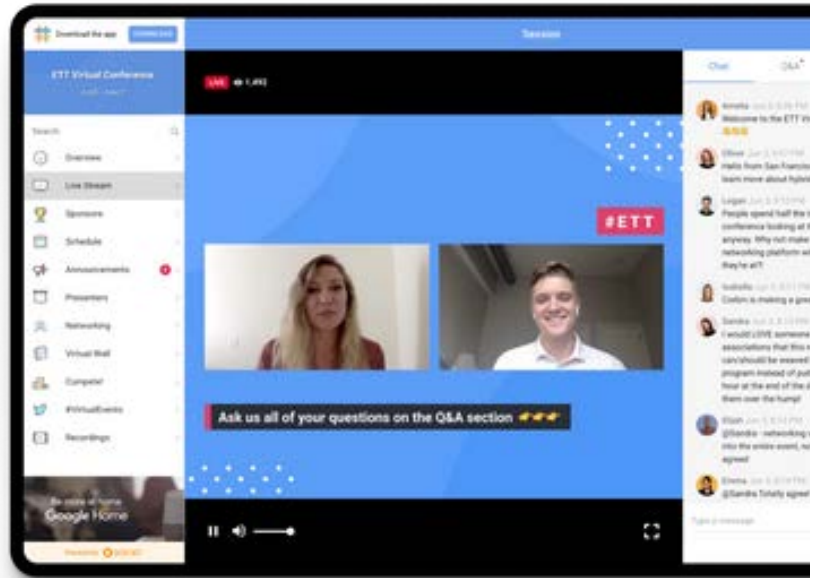
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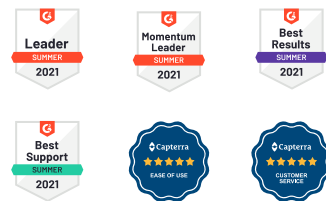
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5 THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN DESIGNING A HYBRID PROGRAM

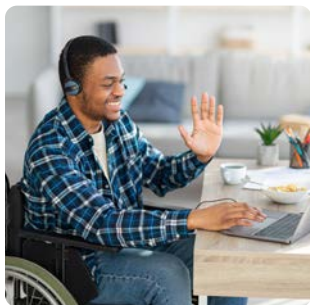These tips on design and strategy will help you plan a successful hybrid event.

Over the past few months—thanks to the development of vaccines—the events industry has started to return to in-person programming, welcoming guests back to grand exhibits and intimate venues.

But the lingering of the virus has prevented in-person events, especially large ones, from making a full-fledged comeback. In order to accommodate travel restrictions, capacity limits, and varying comfort levels, hybrid events have become a popular plan of action.

Designing hybrid programs comes with its own unique challenges. Event planners have to curate two very different, but equally engaging, experiences. In order to assist with the successful execution of these events, consider these five tips when designing a hybrid program.

1 TIME ZONES

Time zones are a crucial consideration when planning an event that has a remote component. It's easy to forget that some attendees could be tuning in from the other side of the ocean.

"Make sure the programming and information put out allows for people to join from all over the world," said Heather Sharpe, a multi-award-winning event producer and Hybrid and Virtual Event Director certificate course instructor. "That's the joy of what digital events provide us right now—the accessibility of the online version."

Although it's hard to please everyone, prioritizing accessibility is especially important when planning a hybrid event. Accommodating different time zones allows the event to reach not only a wider audience, but also a larger pool of potential speakers.

"A lot of organizations wouldn't even be able to consider certain presenters or keynote speakers (if it weren't for remote programming)," Sharpe said. "The options for content, speakers, and audience are definitely improved because of digital and online events."

2 THE NEEDS OF TWO VERY DIFFERENT AUDIENCES

Blending together an in-person and online guest list means catering to two audiences with very different needs. Just like the planning process for any other event, it's important to consider the audience's objectives at the beginning of the design phase.

For people joining a conference from home, their objective may be to simply get the information and go. But for guests who choose to attend in person, they may also have hopes to network and socialize. This means that content provided in shorter snippets would best accommodate the schedules of remote guests. In contrast, on-site guests will likely want a packed program to feel that it was worth taking the time out of their day to travel to the venue and participate in the event.

"The challenge for event planners is to be able to put themselves in the shoes of both of these audiences and ensure their needs and objectives are met," Sharpe said.

CONTINUED →

3 ENGAGEMENT FOR REMOTE GUESTS

Finding ways to engage a remote audience with the event, with other online guests, and with in-person attendees is a big part of successfully designing a hybrid event.

"It's about finding opportunities for the streams to cross, otherwise it's really not a hybrid event as much as two parallel events—one in person and one online," Sharpe said. "In my opinion, it's not truly hybrid until there is a cross connection of all attendees together."

One way to encourage engagement is to have on-site representatives of the remote audience. This could take the form of someone in the physical room who reads out questions from the remote audience, or a large screen that displays the faces of people tuning in online.

Having live streams that include shots of not just the speaker but also the in-person audience is another way to make the remote audience feel more present. Networking opportunities for the remote audience can also be a great resource and mode of engagement.

"We have the technology, it's just about putting in the time and effort to make it happen, and making it happen depends on whether it's important for your event client and audience," Sharpe said.

4 BACKUPS TO YOUR BACKUP

For both in-person and online events, having backups to your backup can help ensure the show will go on, even if a part of the plan unravels. By preparing for situations where the speaker fails to show up or the projector stops working, event planners can avoid disastrous situations.

When it comes to digital programs, however, the hiccup that event planners can't control is the flow of content between the guest's laptop and their internet connection, otherwise known as "the last mile." If an attendee's wifi isn't working, there's not much the other side can do to help.

"No matter how rock solid your prep is, you can only control what you put out, you can't control what they receive," Sharpe said.

5 STRATEGIC BUDGETING

Through strategic budgeting and smart planning, hybrid events can be much more affordable than one would think, even though they have to accommodate two different audiences. Event planners may accrue more costs for live streaming or purchasing an online platform, but they can also save on a smaller venue, less food and beverage, and less decor.

"Don't assume it's going to be more expensive until you've done your due diligence and homework to analyze it," Sharpe said.

As event planners continue to adapt to the different phases of the pandemic, it's clear that hybrid programs will be a part of the industry for the near future. In fact, Sharpe thinks they aren't ever going away.

"(Hybrid programming) is now an important part of the event professional's tool chest—it's all part and parcel of planning an event," Sharpe said. "Events are changing and we as event professionals need to move forward and know all about the options that exist."
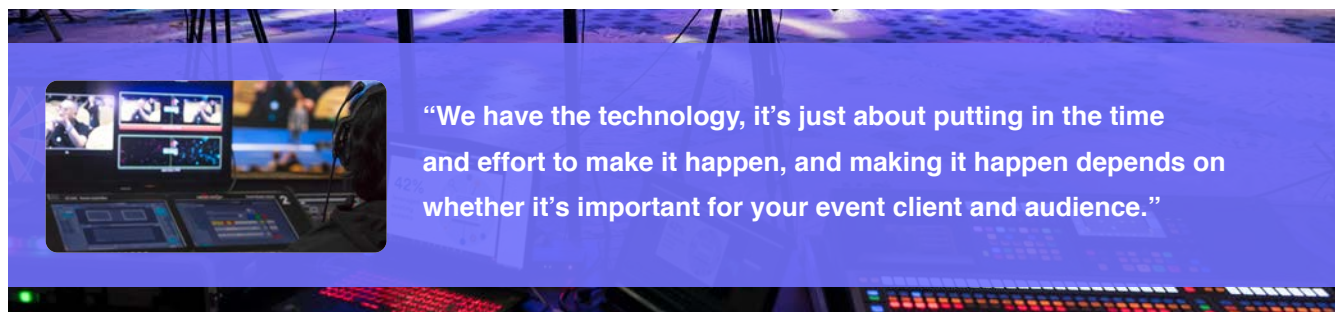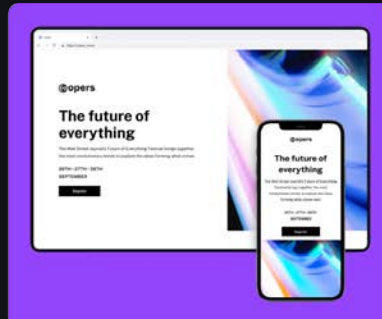
"We have the technology, it's just about putting in the time and effort to make it happen, and making it happen depends on whether it's important for your event client and audience."

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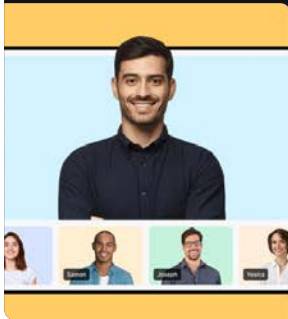
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REOPENING SOCIAL EVENTS:
BACK TO NORMAL?

Social gatherings are marking up calendars again, but not everything is the same as they were in prepandemic times.

After a year of cancellations and postponements, event planners have entered a period of high demand as social gatherings return to the calendars.

While the boom in business is an exciting chance to make back the losses from last year, many event planners are realizing that this reopening phase comes with its own set of challenges.

For Julie Lindenman, who runs her own full-service wedding and event production company, the reopening of social events has overwhelmed her business to the point that she has had to turn down requests.

"I didn't really know what to expect, but if anything I thought there would be a slow progression of returning events," Lindenman said. "Instead it's been a faucet going from nothing to a fire hydrant. It's been double, triple the amount of work in a short amount of time."

Lindenman, whose company is based in New York but available globally, started experiencing a rise in bookings starting in April. Since then, she has witnessed significantly more requests than she would in a typical year, as well as an increase in events with short turnaround times. On top of these new clients, she also has to handle several postponed events that have been rescheduled for the near future.

The surge in demand has also impacted other sectors of the event world, leading to shortages in production staff, floral services, transportation services, rental inventories, and more. This has made it particularly difficult for planners to find available vendors. Lindenman said some tenting companies she contacted had closed their books as early as May for the rest of the year.

"It's been a huge shift in how we plan and how we're trying to communicate those changes to our clients," she said. "Across the board, prices have gone up. I typically try to estimate costs in advance to stay in line, but this year there have been a lot of times where I've had to go back to people and say it's going to be a bit more than expected."

For Brandi Carson, whose Posh & Private Event Design company is based in Houston, Texas, business never really hit a pause as event requests continued to filter in throughout the pandemic. One of the biggest challenges for her has been the need to accommodate different comfort levels when executing an event.
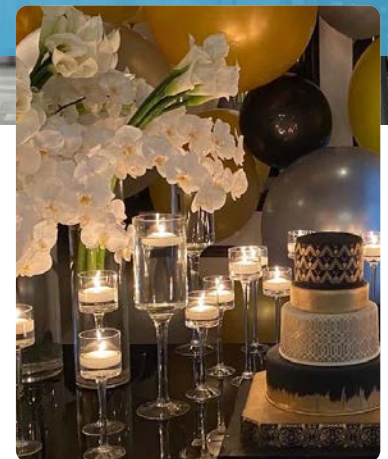
Above photos courtesy of Posh & Private Event Design
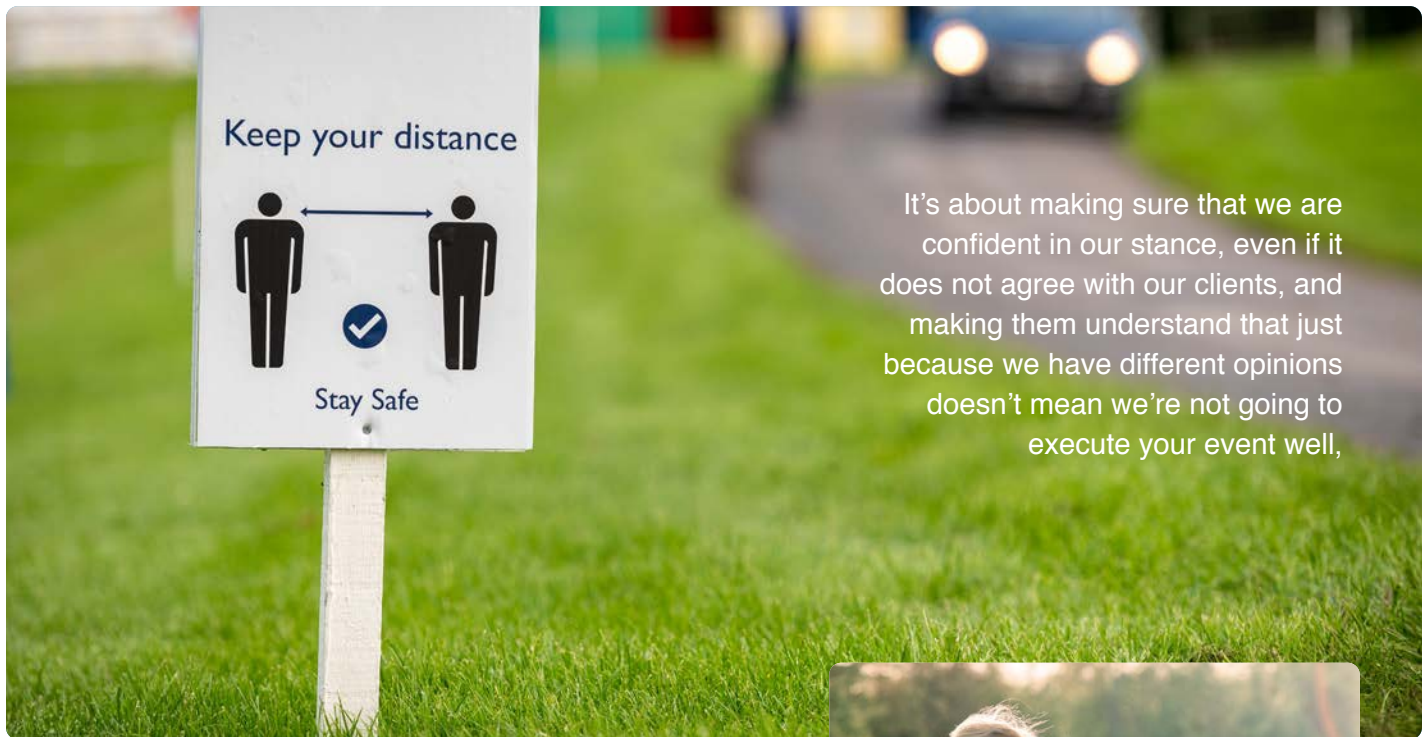
It's about making sure that we are confident in our stance, even if it does not agree with our clients, and making them understand that just because we have different opinions doesn't mean we're not going to execute your event well,

Due to her self-proclaimed low risk tolerance and having a 2-year-old at home, Carson is still requiring staff to wear masks and conducting the majority of meetings virtually. Hand sanitizing stations, increased ventilation, and proof of vaccination or a negative COVID-19 test are all part of her events at this point in time.

However, she also respects her clients' wishes and tries her best to help them move forward with the event they envision.

"It's about making sure that we are confident in our stance, even if it does not agree with our clients, and making them understand that just because we have different opinions doesn't mean we're not going to execute your event well," Carson said.

Tony Conway, founder of the Atlanta-based Legendary Events, has also chosen to keep masks a requirement for staff in the meantime. Catering at his events has also not entirely returned to normal: plexiglass separates the chef and guests at food stations, family-style dining is replaced with plated service, and receptions serve food with some type of packaging.

"I personally think this virus is going to be with us for a while, for years maybe, and we have to think that way," Conway said. "We can't think next month this will all be gone—we need to have plans in place for much longer."

Especially as the Delta variant begins to wreak havoc in various cities and states, the event industry is still very much in a place of uncertainty, teetering on the edge of safety and turmoil. During this time, event planners emphasize the importance of refining contracts on an individual basis and working with clients to agree on cancellation and postponement policies that are sensitive to the situations on both sides of the business.

"My fingers and toes are crossed," Lindenman said. "I just hope we can be smart as a society. For all of us who have put so much work into the upcoming event season, I would hate to see anything happen to it at this point."

HOW TO MAKE YOUR VIRTUAL EVENT DIGITALLY ACCESSIBLE

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As virtual events become increasingly more dynamic and immersive, ensuring digital accessibility is essential to an inclusive event.

CC

When the pandemic shut the event industry down, the evolution of hybrid and virtual events not only gave the industry new life, but also more flexibility than ever before. Just like in-person events, however, making sure virtual events are accessible is a key part to a wholly inclusive experience. That's why it's critical that event professionals consider digital accessibility when strategizing their next experience.

While more than 30% of adults have a diagnosed disability—and many more benefit from features that make an event more accessible to them—as many as 98% of virtual event platforms available are not accessible for people who rely on assistive technology, noted Samantha Evans, certification manager at the International Association of Accessibility Professionals. "Inaccessible platforms, content, and delivery essentially shut the door to prospective attendees or minimize their ability to engage, which is also a lesser-than experience," she said.

But what is digital accessibility?

According to Evans, digital accessibility is "building and delivering digital products and services to provide equal access and equal opportunity to information and engagement to people with disabilities. This includes ensuring usability regardless of the choice of assistive technology someone uses to access the digital world."

How can event professionals host more accessible virtual or hybrid events?

The first step to ensuring a digital event is accessible is to include it in the goals and strategy of the overall program, said Evans. This means selecting a virtual event platform that is digitally accessible in both navigation and engagement, including keyboard accessibility (not just a mouse click), voting, polls, chat, and accurate captions can be provided along with sign language interpreters.

Captions should go beyond simple moving text on a screen; text should be grammatically correct, and ideally, run by a live captionist (not artificial intelligence). Evans noted that event professionals should provide captionists and sign language interpreters with slides, content, and language prior to the event to familiarize them with the content.

To further ensure accessibility, Evans said event professionals can also make sure marketing materials and the registration page are both digitally accessible, which includes captions, alt-text, accessible players, no flashing content, and no auto playing sounds or videos.

It's a good idea to designate a team member to take point as the contact for further accessibility questions, as well as make sure team members are aware and available on the day of the event for troubleshooting any issues with the accommodations.

Make sure your speakers are on onboard by providing them with inclusive presentation guidelines, including slides, videos, and best practices, with a remediation timeline in place if the speaker cannot provide an accessible presentation.

While it may seem like planning a digitally accessible event is complex, Evens noted there are five actions you can take right now:

- Add alt-text to images, graphs, and images.
- Choose high color contrast for text and design.
- Caption video content and transcripts for audio-only content.
- Use the built-in accessibility checkers for documents and presentations.
- Before signing a contract, ask your vendor about their commitment to accessibility.

"Everyone can do these things today, and if you tackle these five things, you become empowered to do better, build better, and deliver better events," Evans said. "The event planning industry has not baked accessibility into their recipe for successful and inclusive events, yet. Today's a great day to start."

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NEW & IMPROVED: FIND OUT HOW MAJOR CONVENTION CENTERS INVESTED IN FACILITIES

Popular upgrades include new production studios for hybrid events and HVAC systems for better ventilation.

Major convention hubs didn't just spend the past year and a half in hibernation. They invested in upgrades to their facilities to better serve the meeting and event industry now that it's back. Large-scale conventions are already on the calendar for the remainder of 2021 and beyond. Here is a look at how major convention cities across North America have upgraded, renovated, and expanded their facilities in preparation for the return of live events.

ATLANTA

The first convention facility in the U.S. to achieve GBAC Star accreditation, the **Georgia World Congress Center** completed its 100,000-square-foot exhibit hall expansion in January 2020, and is now in the process of constructing a $15 million Pedestrian Mall and $18 million transportation depot. The center has also invested in enhancing health and safety measures, including upgrading each building's HVAC systems to MERV-13 filters. It will host the International Association of Venue Managers' 96th VenueConnect Annual Conference and Trade Show in August.

CHICAGO

North America's largest convention center now has a new facility for hybrid events and experiences. The ACT Hybrid Production Studio at **McCormick Place** is located in the Arie Crown Theater and has a capacity for more than 4,000 people. Its 400-square-foot 4K video wall and production studio with Hollywood-grade technology make it suitable for worldwide livestreaming events as well as in-person experiences. The convention center has also invested in public health mitigations, including cleaning protocols and disinfection techniques. Between July 2021 and December 2022 McCormick Place has 122 events scheduled.

American Express Meetings & Events used client meeting data to identify the top five meeting destinations in North America.

1. Orlando, Fla.
2. Las Vegas, Nev.
3. New York City, N.Y.
4. Washington, D.C.
5. Dallas, Tex.

(Source: Meetings Insights, American Express Meetings & Events client destination report, October 2019–September 2020.)

HOUSTON

Located inside the **George R. Brown Convention Center**, the new Avenida Houston Virtual Studio is a 5,250-square-foot, state-of-the-art studio designed to host virtual events and livestreaming conferences. The space can hold up to 4,000 people and is outfitted with a biodefense air-filtration system that officials say is 99.8% effective at eliminating COVID-19.

The Hyatt Regency Houston, located downtown near the convention center, also underwent an upgrade, completing a multimillion-dollar renovation that transformed its 955 guest rooms and updated its meeting spaces with increased broadband capacities, new carpeting, and modern LED light fixtures.

INDIANAPOLIS

Since March 2020, the **Indiana Convention Center** has invested more than $7 million in ongoing building upgrades related to health and safety. These enhancements include hospital-grade air filtration, elbow pulls on doors, touchless technology in restrooms, Clorox 360 cleaning machines, and hand sanitizing stations throughout the center. The venue reopened in July 2020 and has hosted numerous events including the 2021 NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament.

LAS VEGAS

The **Las Vegas Convention Center** debuted its $1 billion West Hall expansion in June. The 1.4 million-square-foot hall includes 600,000 square feet of exhibition space, an open-air atrium with a 10,000-square-foot digital screen, and a 14,000-square-foot terrace that can accommodate 2,000 people and offers views of the Las Vegas Strip. The new site hosted Informa Market's World of Concrete, the city's first major convention since the pandemic began.
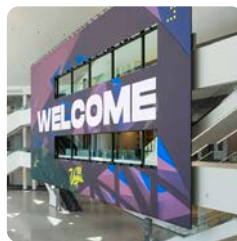
Las Vegas also welcomed the opening of Caesars Forum, a debut delayed by more than a year due to COVID-19. The conference center features more than 300,000 square feet of flexible meeting space, including four ballrooms and six boardrooms. It also offers a 100,000-square-foot outdoor plaza. In June, an estimated 2,000 guests gathered in one of the forum's ballrooms for the Meeting Professionals International's World Education Congress conference.

NEW ORLEANS

A $557 million improvement plan is underway at the **New Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center**, which includes 1.1 million square feet of prime, contiguous exhibit space. The convention center has already spent $110 million on digital signage, wayfinding kiosks, a transportation center, restroom renovation, exhibit hall lighting upgrades, HVAC projects, and a 7.5-acre pedestrian park with interactive water elements, live event space, public art installations, and shaded gathering places. In the coming months, the center will host several major events, including the International Beauty Show and North America Smart Energy Week.

NEW YORK CITY

The **Javits Center** completed construction of its $1.5 billion expansion in May, adding 1.2 million square feet of total event-related space to the center. The expansion includes a glass-enclosed rooftop pavilion that can accommodate 1,500 guests, a four-level marshaling facility, and 200,000 square feet of new exhibit and meeting room spaces that are equipped with the latest technology in light fixtures, heating and cool systems, and wireless connectivity. Once it opens in August 2021, the new expansion space will host LightFair International, an architectural and commercial lighting trade show, and LUXE PACK New York, a trade show for creative packaging.

In addition to the expansion, the Javits Center has also created a 30,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art broadcast studio that can host virtual and livestreamed events. The studio can accommodate 300 guests and includes a 50- by 10-foot video wall, two studio cameras, wireless connectivity, and wireless mics.

PHOENIX

The **Phoenix Convention Center** completed a $5 million AV infrastructure replacement project and is now at the beginning stages of a $7 million LED lighting project. It is also in the process of building a new restaurant and taproom, Huss Brewing Co. Besides these additions, the center has enhanced its health and safety measures to receive the GBAC Star accreditation, which ensures implementation of rigorous protocols in response to biorisk situations. In June, the venue hosted its first convention since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, welcoming nearly 1,000 attendees to the American Dental Hygienists' Association's 2021 Annual Conference.
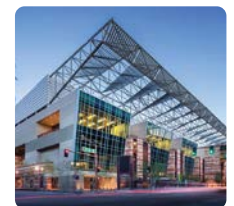
ORLANDO

Although the **Orange County Convention Center** has remained open throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, it still managed to fit in building upgrades. In November, it launched the OCCC Executive Studio, a digital broadcast center located in the West Building's Lecture Hall for hybrid conventions and tradeshows. The center has also completed enhancements on its health and safety protocols, including implementing hand sanitizer dispensers, ozonated water disinfectant, industrial-grade scrubbing machines, and a medical concierge program. In July 2020, the OCCC hosted its first large-scale events—the Amateur Athletic Union's national volleyball tournament and the Alliance Nationwide Exposition's Together Again Expo.

SAN ANTONIO

The **Henry B. González Convention Center** has implemented a range of upgrades for health and safety, including thermal scanning camera systems for temperature checks, UV lighting on escalator handrails, increased fresh air exchange and air flow, and higher-performing air filters. It will also be using a UV-light robot to help sanitize conference rooms and smaller meeting rooms. Since its reopening, the convention center has hosted several major events including the Texas Restaurant Association's Marketplace and the Texas High School Coaches Association's Convention.

SAN FRANCISCO

Since closing in March 2020, the **Moscone Center** has implemented health and safety measures to receive GBAC's Star accreditation for post-COVID protocols and has also followed ASM Global's VenueShield guidelines for live experiences. In September, the venue will welcome its first major events since reopening, hosting conventions and conferences for Salesforce's Dreamforce, California Dental Association, and the American Society for Surgery of the Hand.
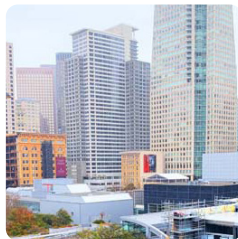
WASHINGTON, D.C.

The 2.3 million-square-foot **Walter E. Washington Convention Center** now has a 19,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art production studio for virtual experiences. Named Studio 801, the space is equipped with rigging, AV and lighting capabilities, and dynamic LED screens. The convention center has also invested in health and technology upgrades for surface disinfection, HVAC systems, and thermal scanning at entrances.
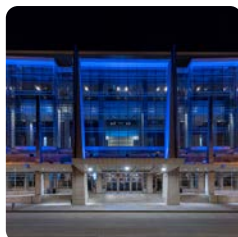
CANADA

Montreal

The **Palais des Congrès de Montréal** launched Oasis Immersion in December, a 24,000-square-foot area dedicated to immersive technology. It includes three immersive galleries, two light installations, and a lounge area with café and boutique, and it is equipped with 119 surround-sound speakers, 105 laser projections, and an LED lighting system. The Palais will be hosting the 24th International AIDS Conference in July 2022, which will be the venue's fifth largest international conference since it opened in 1983.

Toronto

The **Metro Toronto Convention Centre** has invested in a health and safety plan that includes sanitizing high-touch areas, installing hand sanitizer stations, increasing the frequency of air filter replacement and HVAC system cleaning, revising existing floor plans for social distancing, and implementing digital signage. The venue will be hosting the Canadian Meetings and Events Expo in October, its first event since reopening.

Vancouver

The **Vancouver Convention Centre** has introduced several health and safety protocols such as enhanced cleaning for rooms and high-touch surfaces, check-in processes upon arrival, and instructional signage. The venue has also created a live demonstration space, named ReDesign, that includes pandemic-related adaptations, including social distancing protocols, hanging plastic shields, and hand sanitizer stations. From March to September, the center will be serving as the venue for the immersive art exhibition "Imagine Van Gogh."

Hybrid Events Made Easy

The state of in-person, virtual and hybrid meetings is evolving, creating new opportunities, challenges, and planning considerations.

While these new possibilities are exciting, you wouldn't be alone in feeling a bit overwhelmed. So, we're making event planning easier by bringing together best-in-class event platforms, creative and production expertise and supporting technologies.

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A Hybrid Event

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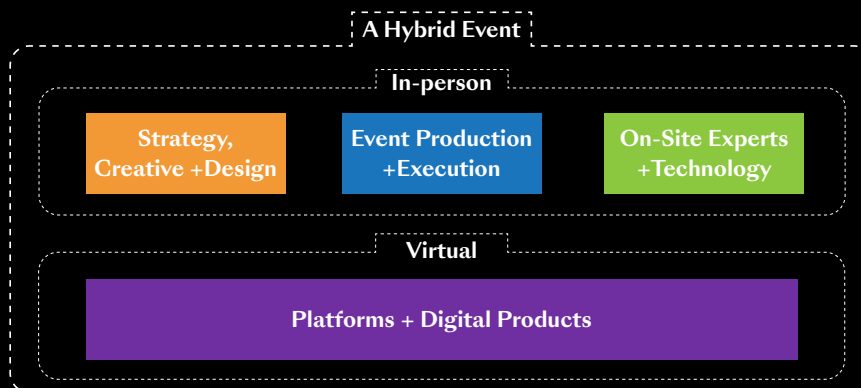
HOW CATERING HAS CHANGED SINCE THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Caterers were forced to pivot during the pandemic, and some of those changes may be here to stay.

When the COVID-19 pandemic forced people to stay at home and events to shut down, the food industry felt the shock far and wide. From farms and supermarkets to restaurants and caterers, the industry found itself scrambling to adapt to new pandemic-related guidelines and changes in consumer behavior.

For catering companies, the pandemic forced them to reimagine the ways in which they operate and prioritize providing a safe and sanitary experience. Some of those pandemic-era changes may be here to stay, even as life begins to return to normal.

"There's this hybrid lifestyle that everyone's living in right now," said Adam Crocini, global head and vice president of food and beverage brands at Hilton. "We're returning to normal dining service, but there's also still a need for the products and experiences that thrived throughout the past year and a half."

Grab-and-go meal sets, premade cocktails, and personalized plating are some of the serving changes hotel chains like Hilton implemented in response to the pandemic. These options provide a low-contact, more socially distant way to experience food and beverage that Crocini believes will continue to be a necessity during this "hybrid" phase of reopening.

"For example, we could start to see premade cocktails appearing within hotel grab-and-go markets," Crocini said. "We might also find these to-go options within bars. At some locations, guests might be able to order premade bottled Negronis, served with a beautiful glass and ice, that the guest then pours for themselves at the table."

TAKEAWAYS

- Expect a range of comfort levels among attendees
- Grab-and-go meals and premade cocktails will remain popular
- Hyper health-conscious attendees will expect healthier food option

19

Even when it comes to an event for a fully vaccinated group of people, individually packaged food and premade meals will likely still be the norm. That's because, besides prioritizing health and safety, accommodating the varying comfort levels of attendees during this time of transition is equally important. "There's still a good amount of people who prefer something that has been individually wrapped up that no one else has touched," said Morgan Bedore, vice president of creative development and sales at Constellation Culinary Group.

During the pandemic, Constellation Culinary Group launched "Prepped," a virtual event program that offers meals in a tote, bento boxes, cocktail reception samplers, DIY cupcake kits, and more. Even with the resurgence of restaurant-style service in cities across North America, the culinary group has decided to preserve the "Prepped" concept and offer planners the option to have such items at grab-and-go lines.

"People are going to plan with an abundance of caution to make sure everyone at the event feels comfortable," said Barbara Brass, vice president of culinary sales at Wolfgang Puck Catering. "There are going to be situations where you're going into a conference, big or small, and some guests are just not going to be at the comfort level to eat off of a buffet."

On the topic of buffets and grazing stations, Brass says while she has seen these high-contact setups reappear at smaller, more intimate gatherings, they may take longer to return to large corporate events where there's risk of wider exposure. In the cases Bedore has seen these self-serving food stations reappear, they have often been chef-attended to minimize contact or set up with safety measures such as plexiglass shields.

Besides changes at the service and operations level, the food itself may also be shifting as a result of the pandemic. Crocini expects healthier food options to become more interesting and more popular among consumers.

"COVID-19 has opened many people's eyes to the fact that they should be living a healthier lifestyle," Crocini said. "Post-pandemic, I think people are going to be focused on living a little better and seeking ways to enjoy food that is fresh, organic, locally farmed, and locally sourced."

In a way, just like the catering industry was forced to pivot when COVID-19 hit the market, the industry is once again challenged with figuring out a new normal as it adapts to the return of live events. This time, caterers have to combine aspects of top-notch in-person service and high standards of health and safety.

"Creativity is really important right now," Bedore said. "People's budgets didn't necessarily increase, but the need to do individual packaging and have higher staffing ratios did create more cost. So being creative with guests to make experiences high on style and meet the budget while maintaining safety has been a huge hallmark in post-pandemic catering reality."

All photos courtesy of Constellation Culinary Group

VENUE VENTILATION: ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE YOUR EVENT

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As meetings return to indoor spaces, your attendees and speakers will want to know: How are you mitigating the risk of the Coronavirus?

A venue's air ventilation is a key component of any plan to reduce airborne transmission in indoor spaces, along with managing crowd density, social distancing, deep cleaning and disinfecting, and wearing masks. Many venues used the pandemic lockdown to upgrade their ventilation systems. Here's what you need to know to mitigate risk and provide a healthy environment for attendees.

HVAC QUESTIONS & SETTINGS

Mark Herrera, the director of education and life safety at the International Association of Venue Managers, spoke with the Event Leadership Institute about best practices on venue ventilation.

Herrera suggested key questions to ask about HVAC (Heating, Ventilation, & Air Conditioning) systems and air flow:

- How often are your air conditioning and ventilation systems inspected, maintained, and cleaned? Herrera said it's not necessary that venues install new HVAC systems if they follow a regular maintenance schedule. What's a regular schedule? It will depend on the specifications of the model. If venue managers do not know the answer, that's a clue they might not be following best practices.

- What is the humidity set point? Are you monitoring that and able to manage that? They should know the facility's humidity level and be able to adjust it. Herrera recommended a relative humidity level of between 55% and 50%.

- Do you have an economizer set to introduce outside air into the mechanical system? Some venues have closed-circuit systems that do not introduce outside air—avoid those.

- Do you use MERV (Minimum Efficiency Reporting Value) air filters and what is their rating? Herrera recommended that venues use MERV 13 filters or higher.

- Do you provide portable air filters? Some spaces—like your meeting or show office—are small, windowless spaces where a number of staff crowd into. A portable air unit that provides direct air flow will break up stagnant air.

CALCULATING SAFE VENUE CAPACITY

Prior to COVID, determining venue capacity was a simple function of two basic factors: square footage and room setup. Now we must also include new factors around ventilation.

Wondering how to determine capacity levels at a venue? The interactive COVID-19 Indoor Safety Guideline calculator from MIT calculates safe and accurate capacity guidelines. You enter data such as room specifications, attendee breathing rate (from resting to heavy exercise), air recirculation rate, and the program calculates safe exposure times and occupancy levels. Before COVID, the essential factors were the room's square footage and the room setup. Now, in addition to the room setup, planners have to consider the cubic footage (that's length x width x ceiling height), the air circulation rate, relative humidity, and filtration system.

The bottom line: Knowing your venue's ventilation specs are now part of the job. Ask for details during your site visits— virtual or in person—and choose accordingly.

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BACK TO IN-PERSON EVENTS:
WHAT SHOULD YOU ASK AT A SITE INSPECTION?

7 QUESTIONS

From branded masks to open-air setups to touchless technology, nearly every part of event planning has been reinvented this past year to adapt to a COVID-19 world— and the site inspection process is no exception.

As vaccination rates increase, venues are slowly reopening, albeit with modified, coronavirus-era policies and procedures. Without national or international COVID-19 standards in place, "you're not going to get certainty or standardization in this industry," says ELI instructor Kevin White, head of Boston-based experiential event agency XPL. "You're all going to have to find your path through it."

The ultimate goal is to ensure that the event will be executed safely, seamlessly, and successfully, which means it's more important than ever for meeting planners and event managers to ask the right questions during site tours, whether they are conducted in person or virtually.

> Without national or international COVID-19 standards in place, "you're not going to get certainty or standardization in this industry," says Kevin White, ELI instructor.

1. TELL ME ABOUT YOUR SAFETY STANDARDS

You can tell a lot about a venue based on how safely they treat guests. And you can gauge that based on their safety procedures.

- Find out what they actually did during the height of COVID surges
- Ask what they currently ask of staff, management, visitors and attendees
- See if their policies are in writing, clearly seen, or simply an afterthought or lip service.

If they don't have them or appear to be lax in any way, you can be assured they are probably not keeping safety in mind for your guests.

2. WHAT IS YOUR CANCELLATION POLICY?

Another good sign of a true safety partner is the priority they put on doing things safely or if they are simply out for a buck. If this pandemic has taught us anything, it's that you never know what tomorrow may bring. One day a city is open for business, the next it's shut down again, and all of this back and forth makes the planning part of event planning even more complicated than usual.

That's why you need to know about a venue's cancellation policies as early in the site selection process as possible. What happens to your deposit if you need to cancel due to government restrictions, illness, or any other reason outside of your control? Is the cancellation policy different for government-mandated shutdowns than other cancellations? If you need to call off your event, can you reschedule it without penalty?

The answers to these questions will have a major impact on determining if a venue is right for your particular event.

3. WHAT TYPE OF VENTILATION SYSTEM DO YOU USE?

Talking about proper ventilation and airflow is essential to hosting safe events. We now know that air systems outweigh cleaning procedures when it comes to transmission rates.

Relative humidity levels should range between 50% and 55% so that droplets aren't lingering, and you should rethink hosting events at sites with closed-circuit HVAC systems that don't introduce outside air. The specific type and strength of the ventilation system in place at a venue can also have a direct effect on how many people can safely occupy a particular space.

Discuss the site's current cap on attendee numbers, as well as how guests will interact. How will foot traffic flow? Where will lines form?

If the venue has small meeting spaces (1,000 square feet or less), ask if there are portable HEPA systems to filter breakout room spaces.

> If the venue has small meeting spaces (1,000 square feet or less), ask if there are portable HEPA systems to filter breakout room spaces.

WHAT ARE YOUR SOCIAL DISTANCING PROCEDURES, AND WHAT IS THE CURRENT PERCENTAGE CAPACITY ALLOWED?

Prior to 2020, site visits most definitely didn't cover the concept of social distancing, but now, it's one of the most important aspects of responsible event planning and execution. According to ELI's Pandemic On-site Protocols course, you should share the event's entire schedule with the venue as early as possible to ensure that there are no surprises—for you or for them.

Discuss the site's current cap on attendee numbers, as well as how guests will interact. How will foot traffic flow? Where will lines form? Can entrances and exits be staggered to avoid bottlenecks? Are capacities calculated differently for outdoor events? The sooner in the event planning process that you address these concerns, the easier it will be to pivot your plans, if necessary.

WHAT ARE YOUR CURRENT FOOD AND BEVERAGE PROCEDURES?

The pandemic has brought a whole new approach to the food and beverage side of events, but again, policies and procedures can vary widely among venues. Can you serve prepackaged, grab-and-go meals and snacks to limit gathering spots? Can you preorder meals via an app or have QR Code menus ready to alleviate delays in buffet lines? What are your options when it comes to plated meals vs. staffed buffets? Of course, you'll still want to ask all of your standard F&B questions (allergen information, food presentation, pricing, etc.) too.

WHAT HAPPENS IF SOMEONE TESTS POSITIVE ON-SITE?

Hopefully, this is something that you discuss but never have to implement.

You need to have a clear policy in place for how to handle a positive COVID-19 result. Is there a place to quarantine guests who test positive? What will be your communication procedure? How will you do a contact trace to determine if the event should be canceled due to too much exposure? By knowing this information, you'll be able to make sure that both coronavirus-positive and -negative attendees remain safe, comfortable, and cared for.

> You can tell a lot about a venue based on how safely they treat guests.

WHAT ARE YOUR CLEANING PROCEDURES?

Cleanliness has always been a topic to cover during site inspections, but it's never been more vital to discuss these considerations in detail than it is right now.

Questions to ask:

- How have your cleaning procedures changed as a result of COVID-19?
- How often are the various areas of the facility cleaned?
- What types of products do you use to mitigate the spread of the virus and germs?

All of this information should be readily available, as cleanliness should be a top priority for all venues.

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MASK UP

GUIDELINES AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR YOUR EVENT MASK POLICY

From the beginning of the pandemic, the most effective habits to prevent the spread of the virus has been to practice social distancing, wash your hands, and wear a mask.

After an easing of mask requirements this spring, the Delta variant of COVID-19 has prompted local governments, businesses, and event hosts to reinstate mandates while indoors in public spaces. A notable example is Las Vegas, which reinstalled its mask mandate for spaces including casinos and convention spaces effective July 30.

Mask mandates remain in place on airplanes and public transportation as well as within states, cities, and individual venues.

Your event should have its own mask policy. Read on for advice on creating a masking policy, carving out reasonable accommodations, and enforcing the policy.

WHY CREATE A MASKING POLICY?

A clear, detailed policy can help everyone understand the value and limits of wearing cloth face coverings while working or attending your event. Be sure to check with your legal team when developing new policies.

WHAT SHOULD A MASKING POLICY INCLUDE?

Events should have a clear masking policy that is available on the event website, registration materials, on-site at the event, and through social media and other communications channels. A concise masking policy advises attendees that:

- Anyone affiliated with the event must wear a face mask that adequately covers their nose and mouth while at the event.
- Masks must be worn in all indoor spaces (except your guest room) and in outdoor areas where appropriate social distancing cannot be maintained.
- Except when actively eating or drinking, individuals must be seated and masked at all times at indoor and outdoor event spaces where food and drink are served for on-site consumption.
- Not all face coverings count as masks. You may choose to list unacceptable coverings such as neck gaiters or bandanas.

WHAT IF SOMEONE CANNOT WEAR A MASK?

Before the event, identify anyone who cannot wear a mask on-site and offer them reasonable accommodations. Think of this as similar to providing alternatives to assist with medical,

mobility, special dietary needs, and other issues. Options may include refunds, credits, or virtual access to the event.

WHAT IF SOMEONE REFUSES TO WEAR A MASK?

First, refer the non-compliant individual to proper masking signage. Then offer a mask to anyone who doesn't have one while demonstrating proper masking techniques. Finally, request the individual demonstrate proper masking techniques in the presence of the compliance representative. Refer any continued noncompliance to the management level to discuss the situation in a private setting. If noncompliance continues, the person may be denied entry to the event.

TIP: Request the individual demonstrate proper masking techniques in the presence of the compliance representative.

ASK YOUR PARTNERS ABOUT THEIR MASK POLICIES

Hotels, convention centers, and other venues may have their own mask policies that you should be aware of. Share your policy with vendors so they're aware of your expectations for their staff while on-site with your group.

Hotels: Masks may be required for hotel guests and staff while in common areas, including lobbies and elevators.

Airlines: Masks are required for all interstate travel on airports and planes, trains, ferries, intercity buses, and public transportation, according to an executive order from President Joe Biden signed in January 2021. Additionally, every domestic, commercial airline has policies requiring passengers and crew members to wear face coverings throughout check-in, boarding, and the flight itself. Passengers can be denied boarding, and some airlines are suspending noncompliant passengers from future travel.

Communicate any changes in policy to your attendees so they're prepared with their own masks or can decide whether they feel safe attending the event.

ELI Members: See curated examples of event mask policies and guidelines in our online template, Mask Guidelines & Considerations.

TIME TO UPDATE
YOUR COVID-SPECIFIC DUTY OF CARE

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Event organizers should draft and share a duty of care statement for each event to ensure attendees' physical and mental well-being.

Many duty of care statements have been updated specifically to address the current COVID-19 pandemic. These outline new safety features including cleaning protocols as well as state their expectations for guest behavior.

Here are tips for best practices and suggested sections to include in your own statements.

BEST PRACTICES

- Involve stakeholders and leadership early in the process and solicit feedback and recommendations from vendors and staff.
- Define the event's protocols, policies, and procedures.
- Be direct and straightforward, especially when defining policies (nonnegotiable) vs. guidelines (opportunities for self-direction).
- Highlight why policies were created, how the rules are monitored and enforced, along with noncompliance consequences.
- Communicate the duty of care on the event website, in collateral, in videos, and other channels.

SECTIONS YOU SHOULD INCLUDE

MEETING PROTOCOLS:

- State the protocols in place for social distancing and traffic flow (if it's one-way, for example).
- Share all health and safety measures such as daily temperature checks and health surveys, any on-site testing programs, as well as medical staffing plans.
- Detail the venue's physical safety aspects such as ventilation systems as well as cleaning protocols.

- Advise on new registration procedures such as contactless kiosks.

EXPECTATIONS:

- Draft a code of conduct or personal accountability commitment that asks attendees and exhibitors to adhere to new norms such as bringing and wearing masks, avoiding hugs and handshakes, and abiding by other policies in place to ensure a safe environment.
- Clearly state the consequences for failing to adhere to the policies.
- Need an example? The Events Industry Council updated its code of conduct with specific COVID policies.

THE FINE PRINT:

- State whether you require a liability waiver to attend.
- Describe entry process including whether health passes or proof of vaccination is required.
- Cancellation policy: Many events through 2021 have decided to waive cancellation fees if guests decide to not attend in person based on concerns around their health or travel. Organizers should also state whether this applies to exhibitors.

Before the event, identify anyone who cannot wear a mask on-site and offer them reasonable accommodations. Think of this as similar to providing alternatives to assist with medical, mobility, special dietary needs, and other issues. Options may include refunds, credits, or virtual access to the event.

HEALTH PASSES
EXPLAINED

What you need to know now about using them for meetings and events.

As planners seek to create a safe environment at their events, a new tool known as a health pass or vaccine passport provides independent verification that a person has been vaccinated against COVID-19 or recently had a negative test.

These passports are being used at large-scale events like concerts or sports and even indoor dining at restaurants. While some are offered through the government at the federal, state, or local level, others are offered through private companies. At the same time, some states—notably Florida and Texas—have banned the use of vaccine passports.

Here are answers to key questions about the use of health passes and a look at various providers that may be suitable for your event.

How are these different from a paper vaccination record card?

Health passes or vaccine passports are digital records that do not contain personal data but provide digital proof of vaccination status or COVID test results. It's conveniently accessible on your phone or other electronic device.

Can I require proof of vaccination at my events?

For the most part, yes.

But be aware of restrictions in some states. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis has banned businesses and governments in the state from requiring proof of vaccination. Texas soon followed with a similar ban on vaccine verification requirements. Florida's ban became the subject of a lawsuit by Norwegian Cruise Lines, which challenged the ban successfully. A federal judge recently sided with the cruise line and granted a preliminary injunction against DeSantis' law, allowing it to require passengers and crew to show proof of vaccination against COVID-19.

Because vaccine availability varies across the world and some people may have health conditions that prevent them from being vaccinated, it may be too soon or unfair to require proof of vaccination. Depending on the scale of the event, consider accepting an alternative, like proof of a recent negative COVID test.

How does it work?

Organizers first need to choose a health pass provider. Users register for free and enter personal information such as name and date of birth as well as other information to confirm their identity. The apps connect to the lab or government entity that provided their vaccination or test and encrypt the data into a QR code. No personal health data is stored or tracked within the pass.

CONTINUED →

Event organizers register for an administrative version of the app (some are free, some charge for access). At an event, they scan a QR code on the attendee's smartphone. People without smartphones can print out a credential to bring to the event—similar to an airline boarding pass.

The app will then indicate whether the person can enter the event with easy-to-understand images: a green screen or check mark, or a red screen or X. IBM also recommends that you verify the name and date of birth by cross-checking with a photo ID.

Is scanning or viewing a digital pass enough?

Experts recommend double-checking the pass against a government-issued ID to verify the person's identity.

Will there be a use for health passes after the COVID-19 pandemic?

Yes. Experts have predicted that we could experience more frequent pandemics. Health scans may become a permanent part of travel and event entry much like metal detectors.

GOVERNMENT-ISSUED PASSES

FEDERAL

Neither the U.S. or Canada offers a vaccine passport on a federal level, though Canada is working on one for international travel that is slated to be ready this fall.

The European Union offers a digital COVID-19 certificate that allows EU citizens to show proof of COVID-19 vaccination, a recent negative test result, or a past COVID-19 infection. The certificate, which is free, displays a QR code and digital signature and can be printed out.

England created a COVID-19 pass through the National Health Service (NHS), which can also show proof of vaccination, recent test result, or past infection.

In August, France began requiring adults and children over 12 to utilize a health pass created by authorities showing proof of vaccine or a negative COVID test to allow people into restaurants, cinemas, bars, planes, and trains.

Only people in Israel who have a Green Pass can currently enter event venues, conference halls, culture and sporting events, restaurants, cafes, gyms, hotels, and movie theaters.

China has a QR code system that provides entry into some public spaces and orders people into different color zones depending on their health status. They also created a digital health certificate in March that shows proof of vaccine status and test results.

Australia's COVID-19 digital certificate allows people to show their vaccine status through the Australian Immunisation Register on their smartphones through the Express Plus Medicare app.

STATES & PROVINCES

New York state was one of the first with its Excelsior Pass, developed with IBM and piloted at sports events. It provides residents verification of vaccination or that the user has a recent negative COVID test. They also allow people to print out a version if they prefer a paper pass.

Hawaii created the Safe Travels program that requires visitors to produce proof of vaccination or quarantine for 10 days or the length of their stay, whichever is shorter. Visitors can use digital health passes from CLEAR or CommonPass or print a paper copy of their vaccination record.

Developed by VCI.org, the Digital COVID-19 Vaccine Record launched by the California Department of Public Health allows residents to access their immunization registry online, providing a digital record of their vaccination status and a QR code to link to it.

British Columbia is requiring residents to show proof of vaccination at restaurants, gyms, casinos, sporting events, theaters, conferences, and weddings. In September, residents will be able to access a digital vaccine card or a paper one.

Manitoba's proof-of-vaccination card allows residents to get into sporting events, restaurants, bars, and businesses.

Ontario is currently planning on unveiling a vaccine passport in the coming weeks that would be required when entering restaurants, cinemas, and other nonessential businesses.

Quebec will require anyone 13 or older to present a QR code through the government's VaxiCode app verifying a person's vaccine status to get into restaurants, bars, gyms, and more starting Sept. 1.

Prince Edward Island created a PEI Pass that allows people visiting or returning to the province to avoid isolating when coming in. Individuals are eligible for the pass as long as they've had at least one dose of a vaccine.

LOCAL

New York City announced in August that it would require proof of vaccination to enter venues such as theaters, gyms, restaurants for indoor dining, concert venues, and other locations. Attendees can use the Excelsior pass as well as the city's new NYC Covid Safe app, which stores a copy of their vaccination card. The effort, called the Key to NYC Pass, will also accept the paper version of the card.

Enforcement begins Sept. 13.

As of Aug. 12, San Francisco requires people to be fully vaccinated to enter indoor bars, restaurants, gyms, event venues, and other locations. Currently there is no specific pass; individuals are required to show their vaccination card.

New Orleans began requiring proof of at least one vaccine shot or a negative COVID-19 test to enter indoor restaurants, bars, gyms, stadiums, and large outdoor events as of Aug. 16. Currently, they are accepting vaccination cards, photos of vaccination cards, or a digital copy uploaded to the LA Wallet App as acceptable forms of proof.

PRIVATE-SECTOR PASSES

One downside to government health passes is that they are often restricted to residents of that geographic area. For events that draw attendees from across the country or internationally, a private company may offer a cleaner, standardized solution. Here are a selection of solutions:

CLEAR: Health Pass is an app that allows users to take health surveys to screen for COVID-like symptoms and link to labs to show proof of negative test results. Planners can also use CLEAR kiosks to take touchless temperatures. CLEAR also provides the option to create a digital vaccine card. Starting in September, online restaurant reservation service OpenTable will be integrating with CLEAR to streamline vaccination requirements for cities requiring proof when dining indoors. Health Pass has been used by sports teams such as the Detroit Tigers, Orlando Magic, and Los Angeles Football Club as well as the NHL during its playoffs.

CommonPass: The digital health app from Commons Project Foundation allows people to present proof of vaccination or a recent negative test and is often used in travel to satisfy country or state entry requirements. It connects with existing health data systems, government registries, or personal digital health records like CommonHealth for Android to verify data and determine whether they satisfy the health screening requirements of the place you're entering. Its destination partners are Aruba, Hawaii, and Germany to the U.S.

IBM Digital Health Pass: IBM, which developed New York's Excelsior Pass, offers its own Digital Health Pass to prove vaccination status or show negative test results. Using a combination of encryption, QR codes, and blockchain technology, it creates a secure digital health credential. The program lets the issuing organization—an event planner, venue operator, employer, or other entity—set the criteria that people need to meet for entry. The technology is integrated with other programs, such as Salesforce Work.com platform; Traveler ID for Safe Travel, Amadeus' digital health verification solution; and CLX Health's TrustAssure platform.

VeriFLY: The digital identity platform has added health credentials to its features, which include citizenship, proof of age, business memberships, and more. People can use their smartphone or biometric authentication to prove their identity. Hyatt Hotels announced in March it was exploring using VeriFLY for meetings and events.

VOW Digital Health: Designed for meetings and events, the platform verifies vaccination status and can integrate health credentials with registration software and attendee management systems. Attendees download the app, consent to the event's health protocols, and enter their test result or vaccination record. It creates custom access passes with a QR code they can scan at the entrance.

CREATING AN ON-SITE TESTING PROTOCOL FOR EVENTS

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An on-site testing program can help attendees— as well as event teams—feel safe and, most importantly, limit the spread of any infection.

Temperature checks, social distancing, hand-sanitizing stations, and contract tracing are all part of a robust health and safety program, but on-site COVID testing adds a higher standard of health monitoring. Here's a primer on how to create testing protocols before, during, and after events.

Q: Are on-site testing programs just security theater?

A: No. Asymptomatic and pre-symptomatic people are spreading the virus. If you can catch one person with this test, then you can prevent an event-wide outbreak.

Q: Why are testing protocols still relevant with the vaccine rollout?

A: If your event does not require proof of vaccination, you may have unvaccinated people at your event—either because they haven't yet received the vaccination or have declined it—so you need to manage the risk. Additionally, there have been "breakthrough" cases in which vaccinated people have contracted COVID and could possibly transmit it to others.

**Q: Who carries the financial burden of testing?**

A: Typically the organization hosting the event assumes the burden. Options to offset the cost include asking attendees to handle the pre-event testing themselves or asking if the venue can bear some of the costs. Ask vendors and suppliers to handle testing of their staff working at the event. Another option is to explore sponsorship opportunities.

Q: What should a testing protocol look like?

A: Consider requiring pre-event testing with PCR tests, the gold standard. A rigorous program would require a PCR test 14 days before the event and then again three days beforehand. Once the event begins, implement daily rapid antigen testing of all attendees, speakers, and event staff. A post-event PCR test is also a good idea.

Q: What are staffing recommendations to run the on-site testing? Do you need to hire medical staff?

A: Look for a partner organization to operate the testing site so your planning staff can focus on the event. Medical staff are recommended—and in some instances required— to supervise self-testing by attendees or swab guests themselves. Often, attendees feel more comfortable when they have a medical professional perform the swabbing for them rather than self-collecting.
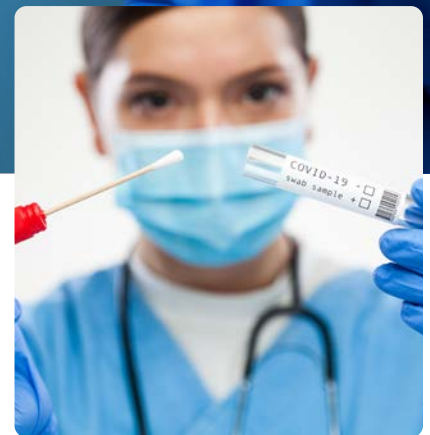
Q: When does on-site testing start, and what does it look like?

A: Here are two options: Attendees can take a rapid test immediately after arriving at the venue and then wait for the results in a designated room or outdoors. If the venue is a hotel, attendees can check in, take a rapid test, and wait for the results in their room.

Q: How do you prevent bottlenecks?

A: In your registration system or whatever platform you're using to manage the testing process, have attendees fill out a consent form, sign up for a testing appointment, and determine how they will be notified of results. The less information they have to fill out on-site, the better. Understand the flow of when guests will arrive and adjust your process and staffing accordingly.

Q: What do you do if someone doesn't take a pre-test and shows up at the event?

A: For each event, define your risk tolerance. In this situation, you could deny them access to the event, or opt to screen for symptoms and give them a rapid antigen test. In either case, it's important that you set the expectations ahead of time and train staff so they are equipped to handle the situation.

Q: What happens if someone tests positive on-site?

A: Discuss this scenario beforehand and have a clear policy in place that you communicate to attendees before the event. A reasonable way to handle a positive rapid antigen test on-site is to confirm it with a PCR test. Have that person quarantine until the results are available. If the positive results are confirmed, they need to stay in quarantine or, if they live within driving distance, return home.

Q: If someone tests positive, where does the host organization's responsibility start and stop? Do you have to provide food and lodging for 14 days of isolation?

A: That is up to the host organization. Some groups choose to provide food and lodging during a quarantine while others decline. Either way, you should communicate your policy to attendees before the event so there are no surprises.

Q: If someone is confirmed as vaccinated, do you need to test them?

A: Yes. The vaccine is not 100% effective and some people remain unvaccinated. It's also possible for someone who is vaccinated to carry the virus and spread it to others. Vaccination is protection but it is not guaranteed immunity.

Q: Should you accept immunity certificates as a substitute for testing?

A: No, it's too early for that. The FDA has advised that antibody tests cannot be used to determine immunity.

For more best practices for on-site COVID testing: Watch and listen to ELI's panel conversation with Kelly Teneyuque Chaco, CMP, director of events at Eurofins; Travis Wilkes, medical director at Eurofins SAFER@WORK™ and EmpowerDX; and Erica White, event solutions Director at ITA Group

An on-site testing program can help attendees—as well as event teams—feel safe and, most importantly, limit the spread of any infection. Which test is best, and what else should we consider when devising a testing program?

There are two main diagnostic tests, the PCR test and the rapid antigen test. The PCR test is the gold-standard test for coronavirus because it detects the virus's genetic material. Antigen tests detect specific proteins from the virus with a faster turnaround time—with results often in a matter of minutes—but with slightly less accurate results. (A third test measures antibodies, which can indicate whether someone has had COVID-19 in the past, but it's not useful as part of an in-person event testing program.)

Since no test is 100% accurate, an on-site testing program can mitigate—not eliminate—risk from COVID.

IS KEEPING YOUR AUDIENCE ENGAGED A CONCERN WHEN RUNNING VIRTUAL OR HYBRID EVENTS?

Award-winning VIBE Agency is a full-service production agency that helps corporate brands run virtual, hybrid, and live events for Fortune 500 companies.
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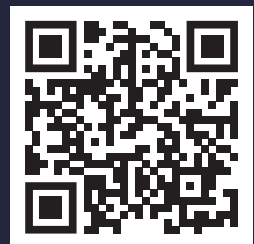
Model Health and Safety Guidelines for In-Person Events

/ / / / / / / / / / / / / / / / / / / /

Widely accepted safety and risk principles to help events run safely.

There are many components to planning a memorable, engaging event, and with the global pandemic, event professionals must also mitigate health and safety risks for their guests and staff. That's why it's helpful to understand both the relevant science and how the law enables event organizers to follow it in the interest of health and safety for all attendees and workers.

Steven Adelman, head of Adelman Law Group, PLLC and Vice President of the Event Safety Alliance, who focuses on risk and safety at live events throughout North America, has provided the following model health and safety guidelines for in-person events during the COVID-19 pandemic:

Health and Safety Guidelines

This guidance is intended to apply to workers and performers as well as guests. It is recommended that absent an express written explanation why compliance is impossible in a particular circumstance—which may be approved or denied in the event organizer's sole discretion—compliance with these guidelines should be mandatory.

1   VACCINATION

The three vaccines available in the United States are all highly effective at reducing the likelihood that a vaccinated person will become infected, reducing the likelihood of serious illness from breakthrough infections, and reducing the risk of transmitting coronavirus to others. They are also free, widely available everywhere, and have extremely rare side effects. For these reasons, in-person participants in any event, whether indoors or outdoors, must present proof that they have been fully vaccinated against COVID-19. Acceptable proof of vaccination will include a recognized app such as New York's Excelsior Pass or the Clear app, a photo of one's completed CDC-issued vaccination card, or the paper card itself. In each instance, proof of vaccination must be accompanied by a valid ID, such as a driver's license or school identification card.

Note regarding HIPAA. It is perfectly legal to require proof of vaccination status as a condition of participation in its events. This is because the Health Insurance Portability and Accounting Act of 1996 ("HIPAA") does not apply to events, only to health care providers for the purpose of providing medical care. That is obviously not what takes place at most events. Therefore, it does not infringe on any privacy right to demand proof of vaccination status. If a person prefers not to share their vaccination status, they are welcome to participate in the event virtually, where that option is available.

Exemptions. Requests for exemption from the vaccination requirement must be presented when a participant registers to attend an event or before an employee or contractor accepts a compensated position to work an event. No exemptions will be issued at the event site. The event organizer will honor legitimate requests for a religious exemption from vaccination. The organizer will accept requests for medical exemption from the vaccination requirement so long as the request is accompanied by a physician's note explaining the medical reason the individual cannot be vaccinated. For example, the CDC has issued guidance regarding vaccine allergies that makes it clear that few people will suffer allergic reactions, primarily to polyethylene glycol ("PEG"), which is a component of each of the vaccines available in the United States. Children younger than 12 years old are not yet eligible to be vaccinated, and they are therefore exempt.

Exception for State or Local Law. The only circumstance in which an organizer may not require proof of full vaccination is where state or local law precludes it making vaccination a condition of participation. Be aware that many of these state laws are currently subject to legal challenge, enforcement of some laws or executive orders has been temporarily enjoined, and new federal mandates are making vaccination a condition of employment for many workers, so check the legal situation carefully where the event will be held.

2 FACE COVERINGS

COVID-19 is transmitted by aerosolized droplets, meaning the air we breath when we exhale, sneeze, cough, speak, shout, or sing. As a supplement to vaccination, face coverings create an effective physical barrier to the transmission of coronavirus germs. For indoor events, in recognition of the relatively low air flow between individuals and correspondingly greater risk of airborne transmission of the virus, event organizers should require that all participants wear a face covering over their nose and mouth at all times during an event, except when they are eating or drinking. For outdoor events, where the greater natural air flow mitigates much of the transmission risk, face coverings are highly recommended but may not be required for vaccinated adults. Children younger than 12 years old should be required to wear a face covering at all events, both indoors and outdoors. Performers or presentation speakers may remove their face covering before they take the stage.

Exception for State or Local Law. The only circumstance in which an event organizer may not require face coverings is where state or local law precludes them from making face coverings a condition of participation. Clever event organizers who are more interested in public health than political posturing may wish to revisit the dress code for their event, which is outside the scope of most state laws and executive orders.

3 TESTING

In cases where an individual has received an exemption from the organizer's vaccination requirement, they must obtain a Polymerase Chain Reaction ("PCR") test taken not more than three days before they are scheduled to arrive at the event. PCR tests are free and available in most communities, but lab results can take up to 72 hours to be processed. It is the individual's responsibility to schedule and obtain the test and forward their test result to the organizer before the event. No individual in this circumstance should arrive at the event site without having already provided the organizer with their negative test result.

Most event organizers will not provide rapid antigen testing on-site, and they should not accept antigen test results as sufficient proof of good health. Antigen tests have lower efficacy than PCR tests, and they are most effective at identifying the source of illness for people who show symptoms. This is not especially helpful, because anyone feeling ill should stay home, many people infected with COVID-19 will never show symptoms, and even people who do eventually show symptoms are most contagious when they are pre-symptomatic.

4 SANITARY PRACTICES & HYGIENE

Although public health research is clear that COVID-19 is transmissible through the air we breathe, not by physical contact, in the interest of good sanitary practices generally, event organizers should clean high-touch surfaces regularly, and sanitary wipes or liquid sanitizer should be made widely available throughout the event site. Microphones used during an event must be designated for individual speakers and sanitized between uses according to manufacturer's specifications. These measures will reduce the risk of spreading all germs, and they will also reassure participants that health and safety are being taken seriously.

Steven A. Adelman is head of Adelman Law Group, PLLC in Scottsdale, Arizona, and Vice President of the Event Safety Alliance. His practice focuses on risk and safety at live events throughout North America, he provides health and safety consulting for event producers, and he serves as an expert witness in crowd-related lawsuits. He is principal author of the authoritative Crowd Management standard, ANSI ES1.9-2020, as well as three rounds of reopening guidance for the event industry. Steve Adelman is a law professor, author of the "Adelman on Venues" blog, and a passionate advocate for safe events. He can be reached at sadelman@adelmanlawgroup.com.

ON-SITE TESTING PROVIDERS

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On-site COVID testing can offer an added layer of safety for in-person meetings and events.

A number of companies offer PCR tests—the gold standard—or rapid-antigen tests for destinations in the U.S., Canada, and globally. Some companies were started by event industry veterans who understand the unique needs of events, while others are from long-established health care providers and medical professionals. They have established protocols for how, where, and when to test attendees, event staff, vendor partners, and anyone else who might come into contact with your meeting.

Planners also have the option of providing at-home tests, available from sources including Amazon.

Read on for a list of seven vendors who provide on-site testing for COVID. Contact the providers for information about your specific needs.

COVID CLINIC

Location: Available in 10 states: Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Nevada, New Jersey, Oregon, Texas, and Utah.

The Covid Clinic will deploy on-site testing for groups of at least 25 people (service for smaller groups is available for an extra service fee). It offers rapid antigen, rapid PCR, and rapid molecular NAAT tests with a turnaround time of between 30 minutes and an hour, and expedited PCR tests with results available in one to two days. Book at least one to two weeks in advance of the event.

Pricing: Rapid tests start at $49.

covidclinic.org

eurofins

Location: Worldwide

The life sciences company provides a range of analytical testing services. Through its SAFER@WORK™ program, Eurofins offers on-site rapid antigen and PCR testing and has experience at meetings, sports events, and more and can help develop a comprehensive testing protocol. Medical personnel collect samples and deliver results in about 15 minutes.

Pricing: At-home nasal PCR tests start at $99.

www.eurofins.com

the EVENT DOC

Location: New York and Florida

Developed by medical professionals in collaboration with notable event pros such as Michael Cerbelli, Bob Conti, Julie Roth Novack, and Steve Paster, the Event Doc provides on-site rapid testing and is ideal for small corporate gatherings or social events.

Pricing: The Concierge Package is $7,500 and includes 50 on-site tests, medical staff, an on-site staff manager, and signage. Additional tests or staff can be added for a fee.

www.eventdoc.com

CONTINUED →

iHP InHouse Physicians

Location: Worldwide

A longtime provider of healthcare services for corporate meetings and events, InHouse Physicians now offers COVID-19 related services including on-site PCR testing as well as molecular diagnostic and antigen testing. On-site medical support as well as a virtual health security program, vaccine verification, and contract tracing services also are available. The company is able to accommodate groups ranging from small executive meetings to groups of more than 5,000 people. Planners should contact the company at least two weeks in advance to arrange on-site testing.

Pricing: Self-administered rapid antigen tests start at $29.50 plus shipping and require a minimum of 100 tests, with lower rates for larger orders.

www.inhousephysicians.com

labcorp

Location: Throughout the U.S.

Labcorp provides on-site testing for groups of at least 100 people through its Pixel program. Planners should require attendees to sign a release form so that the results can be emailed to both the planner and the attendee. For pre- or post-event testing, Labcorp offers at-home PCR tests that are self-administered.

Pricing: On-site rapid testing costs $45 per person. Pre- or post-meeting PCR testing costs $119 per person, which includes shipping (though most people choose to bill through their insurance, which typically covers the entire cost.)

www.labcorp.com

URGENT SOURCE

Location: Southern California

Urgent Source—a company from Ben Parnassi of lighting design and production company The Lighter Side—offers rapid antigen tests, promising results in 10 minutes. They can accommodate groups ranging from five to 500 people. The company requests that planners contact them at least a week in advance of an event.

Pricing: Pricing starts at $100 per person, but group rates are available.

www.urgentsource.com/covid-19

fern

Location: All U.S. states and territories. Services are also available in Mexico, Latin America, and the Caribbean, but local regulations and guidelines may limit offerings to non-U.S. citizens.

Fern Exhibitions and Event Services, in partnership with the health care tech company ShareMy.Health, launched Fern Health Check. The service offers FDA-authorized testing solutions, including at-home kits for pre-event and post-event use, as well as on-site PCR testing, rapid antigen testing, and voice biomarker testing. The service has event-friendly tools such as customizable policies based on organization, event and venue requirements; a dashboard report for event organizers that can be grouped by stakeholder segments, such as event staff, attendees and exhibitors; API Integration with industry registration and mobile app solutions; and digital management of proof of vaccination and other information in a Digital Health Passport. On-site testing with staff can require 10 to 14 days or longer depending on location.

Pricing: $4.00/person for basic vaccine and testing result upload to $125.00/person for full PCR testing.

www.fernexpo.com

MAJOR HOTEL CHAINS IMPLEMENT NEW PROTOCOLS TO KEEP GUESTS HEALTHY

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Check up on your hotel's health and safety guidelines before your next trip.

Photo Courtesy of Hilton and Kvara Media

Photo Courtesy of IHG

Now that domestic and international travel have resumed, the hotel industry is once again accommodating vacationers and business travelers. Besides the mission to provide guests with a pleasant stay, these properties now have an equally important task at hand: to keep guests healthy and safe during a time when the COVID-19 pandemic continues to be a threat. Here is a list of major hotel chains and their new health and safety protocols that address cleaning, sanitation, mask wearing, social distancing, and more.

With mask requirements and other protocols changing frequently, please refer to each website for the most up-to-date information.

Marriott

Marriott Cleanliness Council—experts in food and water safety, hygiene and infection prevention, and hotel operations—developed a COVID response plan for the mega chain of 30 brands including The Ritz-Carlton, W Hotels, St. Regis, Westin, and Gaylord Hotels.

Vaccinated guests in the U.S. are not required to wear face masks or practice social distancing, although they are suggested for unvaccinated guests. For Canada, the Caribbean, and Latin America, face coverings are required for guests and associates in all indoor public areas. Guests can use the Marriott mobile app for mobile check in, keyless entry, and service requests, including contactless food delivery.

www.marriott.com

HYATT

Hyatt's Global Care and Cleanliness Commitment outlines protocols for cleaning, hygiene, food safety, and more. Unvaccinated guests in the U.S. are required to wear face masks or coverings in indoor public areas as well as outdoors where social distancing is not feasible. Vaccinated guests in the U.S. are required to wear face coverings in indoor public areas of hotels that are located in counties with substantial or high COVID-19 transmission rates.

In all other countries in the Americas region, face coverings are required for guests and colleagues in indoor public areas and when moving around outdoor areas. The hotel also developed Together by Hyatt, a new suite of event offerings that help meeting planners prioritize attendee safety and wellbeing.

www.hyatt.com

CONTINUED →

Photo Courtesy of Convene

Hilton

Hilton's CleanStay program aims to create a cleaner experience for guests by partnering with Reckitt—maker of Lysol and Dettol. It also has a component for meetings and events through Hilton EventReady, which incorporates Hilton Team Members who help planners achieve event objectives while addressing both health and environmental concerns.

The hotel chain requires those who are unvaccinated in the U.S. to wear face masks indoors and practice social distancing. Face masks are optional for vaccinated guests in the U.S. Hilton also offers contactless arrival through the Hilton Honors app.

www.hilton.com

IHG HOTELS & RESORTS

IHG expanded its cleaning procedures to reflect the advice of regional and global health authorities. Its new program, IHG Clean Promise, includes social distancing procedures, sanitizer stations at high-touch points, reduced contact at check-in, and a modified approach to food and beverage.

For meetings, the hotel chain's Meet with Confidence solution provides hybrid and in-person offerings with updated cleaning protocols. IHG encourages guests, regardless of vaccination status, to wear face coverings in all indoor spaces in areas of substantial or high COVID-19 transmission in the U.S.

www.ihg.com

ACCOR HOTELS

Accor introduced elevated hygiene and prevention measures that include social distancing in all common areas, contactless check-in and payments, sanitizer in public areas, and reinforced cleaning protocols. Fever screening is mandatory upon arrival at the hotel, and masks are mandatory for all guests in public areas.

www.all.accor.com

FOUR SEASONS

Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts introduced an enhanced global health and safety program, Lead With Care, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The program includes increased cleaning, physical distancing measures, and training for employees.

The hotel chain does not require masks for guests, but does require all employees to wear masks indoors. Guests can limit face-to-face interactions by using the Four Seasons App to request luggage pickup, airport transfers, room service, and more.

www.fourseasons.com

RADISSON HOTELS

The Radisson does not require vaccinated guests to wear face coverings or social distance at all hotels throughout the U.S., Canada, Latin America, and the Caribbean. It also does not require vaccinated hotel team members to wear face coverings, but recommends that they continue to wear a mask when indoors and in direct contact with guests.

All Radisson hotels follow a 20-step protocol that includes guidelines for physical distancing, cleaning and disinfecting, air circulation, and more. For meetings and events, the hotel chain adopted a 10-step protocol that includes requirements for personal belongings, food safety, and disinfection among others.

www.radissonhotelsamericas.com

WYNDHAM HOTEL GROUP

To protect guests in light of COVID-19, Wyndham Hotels and Resorts launched its Count on Us initiative, which includes elevated cleanliness standards, an expanded relationship with Ecolab for EPA-approved disinfectants, and meeting spaces that accommodate social distancing and virtual attendees.

The hotel chain requires face masks in indoor public areas for unvaccinated guests, and strongly encourages mask-wearing for all other guests. Local orders and CDC guidelines may mandate masks for vaccinated guests as well.

www.wyndhamhotels.com

CAESARS REWARDS

Caesars requires that masks be worn in compliance with local guidelines and suggests guests contact specific properties for updated requirements related to health and safety. Its resorts have implemented enhanced cleaning and disinfecting procedures, hand sanitizing stations, and social distancing. Slot machines and high-touch gaming items at Caesars casinos are routinely disinfected.

www.caesars.com

BW | Best Western. Hotels & Resorts

Best Western expanded on its cleaning standards with the launch of its We Care Clean program. The program addresses cleanliness in guest rooms and common areas, as well as processes that minimize contact between guests and associates.

Unvaccinated guests in the U.S. are required to wear face coverings and practice physical distancing in hotel public areas. Vaccinated guests in the U.S. are not required to wear face coverings, unless mandated by state or local requirements. For Canadian hotels, guests are required to wear face coverings in hotel public areas.

www.bestwestern.com/

MGM RESORTS

MGM Resorts requires masks for all guests and employees in indoor public spaces, regardless of vaccination status. The resorts have also implemented enhanced sanitation and rigorous measures for HVAC controls and air quality. Digital innovations now offer guests the option for contactless check-in and payment, as well as virtual queuing at pools, restaurants, bars, and lounges.

For meetings and events, MGM partnered with CLEAR to use its new Health Pass technology to track attendees' COVID-related test results and temperature checks. MGM also offers an optional COVID-19 testing protocol that delivers results within approximately 20 minutes.

www.mgmresorts.com

Montage

Montage Hotels do not require face coverings in public spaces for vaccinated guests as long as it is in accordance with local guidelines. All Montage locations have implemented enhanced cleaning protocols and technologies, including electrostatic sprayers and particulate-level air filtration systems. Social distancing and contactless services have also been incorporated.

www.montagehotels.com
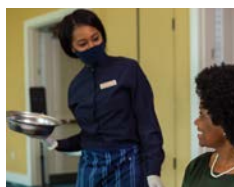
Photos Courtesy of Hilton

CONTINUED →

Photos Courtesy of Hilton

MANDARIN ORIENTAL

As part of its We Care program, Mandarin Oriental implemented enhanced standards of health and hygiene, which have been verified by Lloyds Register, an internationally recognized independent assessor. The hotel chain provides personal protective equipment for guests during their stay, conducts temperature checks for all guests and colleagues, and uses antiviral disinfection measures across facilities and surfaces.

www.mandarinoriental.com

ROSEWOOD HOTELS & RESORTS

Rosewood's Commitment to Care global health and safety program was created under the guidance of local and international health experts and in partnership with Ecolab and Diversey. Its safety and cleanliness measures include increased disinfecting of common touch points and regular cleaning of air filters and air conditioning systems. The hotel chain is also testing new technology such as electrostatic sprayers, foggers, and UVC light. Alternative check-in and check-out options are available, as are contactless services. Social distancing is required throughout hotels while mask policies vary by location.

www.rosewoodhotels.com

BELMOND

Belmond created its Trusted for Travel promise as part of its COVID response plan. The promise includes heightened health and safety protocols such as disinfection of surfaces and regular maintenance of HVAC systems. The hotels also have partnerships with local medical providers that provide COVID-19 testing services. All guests are required to confirm that they do not have COVID-19 symptoms upon check-in. For events and group activities, Belmond properties strictly adhere to local regulations and guidelines.

www.belmond.com

convene

In its Operating Standards and Safety protocols, Convene details the ways its conference locations are keeping guests safe. Starting Sept. 13, Convene will require proof of vaccination status for at least one shot for all employees, clients, members, and guests who visit its physical locations. By Oct. 4, the facilities will require proof of full vaccination status.

Convene also implemented sanitizing stations, an enhanced cleaning program, safety standards for buffets, and updated air filtration in HVAC systems as part of its COVID response.

www.convene.com

AMA

Face masks are not required for vaccinated guests at AMA Conference Centers, but masks and social distancing are required for unvaccinated guests. The conference centers have installed plexiglass shields at customer service and registration areas, suspended self-serve food and beverage services, and increased sanitizing and disinfecting of high-touch areas.

www.amaconferencecenters.org

LIVE NATION

Live Nation's health and safety measures include strict sanitation and cleanliness protocols, personal protective equipment for staff, and prominent social distancing signage at its venues. Starting in October, the entertainment company will require its employees to get vaccinated against COVID-19. It has also announced that it would let performers decide whether attendees would be required to show proof of vaccination or a negative test result.

www.specialevents.livenation.com

VIRTUAL EVENT RESOURCE GUIDE

A Q&A with Eryne Sarabin, DES, Founder & Lead Event Strategist, Tycoon Events

Sarabin and her team at Tycoon Events have created a dynamic, online resource of virtual event tools—designed to get down to the nitty gritty of what planners need to know when planning virtual events. She explains more about the resource, and offers advice when selecting vendors.

ACCESS THE FULL ONLINE DIRECTORY HERE
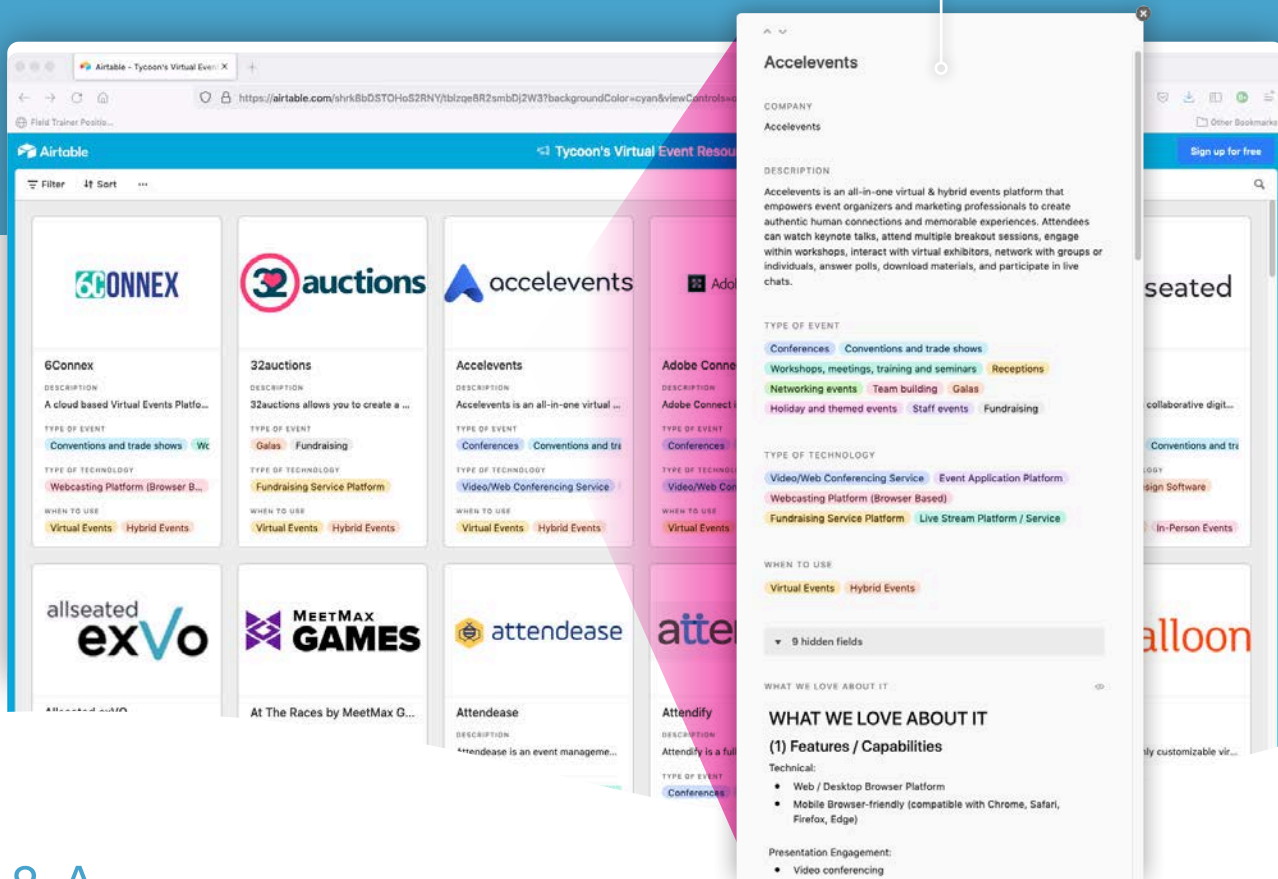
Q&A

Q: How did you decide to compile the database—and to offer it as a free resource to planners?

A: When the pandemic started and all of our own events, including the industry as a whole, had to transition to a digital space, we knew that we had to educate and equip ourselves with the tools and resources that we needed in order to pivot and stay relevant. Since we were educating ourselves, we thought it would be worthwhile to share it with others rather than keep it to ourselves, because if we were strengthening our business we could potentially strengthen our industry.

When the pandemic happened, we found very quickly that we were being approached by sales, business development, and marketing people with sales pitches for their platforms. As they weren't event planners, they didn't understand what our

needs were. We needed to research and vet the platforms and apps through the lens of an event planner and cut through the jargon. In the end, we had a list of what worked, what didn't, and what was of true value to us and our clients.

Q: How much do your clients expect you to know about event tech? How much of this process was getting your team to learn new skills?

A: Our clients expect us to know a lot about event technology, as we are fully immersed in it everyday and they assume we have the answers to everything. The biggest problem is that our clients often make a lot of assumptions about virtual events without asking questions or saying, "I don't know," so we might

know the answer but we're not often given the opportunity to weigh in. They also sometimes struggle to understand that not absolutely everything is possible, that there are limitations, and that there is often a price tag to be aware of.

In terms of new skills, during 'regular times,' we were often strengthening skill sets that we already had and processes that were already in place. With virtual, everything is more contingent on how you're communicating, what you're communicating, and how much information you're providing people with, so we got better at those elements. We also learned how to navigate technology better than we would have before; we are more confident with navigating a virtual space than we used to be. Now, we often find ourselves in the position of being a tech support for attendees. Before we would never feel comfortable doing that, or offering that as a service, and since the pandemic we've just had to do it.

Q: What did this teach you and your team about the universe of event tech?

A: The platforms that stand out the most are the ones with great customer service and support you through the process, as opposed to selling you a product. At the end of the day, all of these platforms are a product that people are trying to sell, but what's really important is how you feel supported and the level of customer service they can provide. Once these platforms sell you their product, make you jump through all the hoops of getting it set up and understanding the platform, a lot of questions come up, and you want to make sure that you have the support in place if something goes wrong.

You also have to ask a lot of questions. You have to be able to say, "I don't know."

Q: How have you used the list for your events?

A: We use it all the time because we already put in all the hours to research all the platforms and learn the different types of events that each platform best supports, it helps us curate our shortlist of platforms for clients a lot easier. With the filtering in place, it helps people choose a platform based on specific technology, or a particular type of event.

Q: The sheer number of choices can be overwhelming. Where do you suggest planners begin?

A: Always start by understanding the type of event you want to plan. I think people often think, 'I just need a virtual platform based on price point,' and yes, price point does play a big factor, but different platforms are suited to different types of events. So if you don't really understand what your needs are and what you need the platform to provide to you, it will feel overwhelming.

Q: What's your biggest piece of advice when selecting a vendor?

A: Customer service and day-of support is huge. We encourage people to consider support over a slick look and feel of a platform, because although the platform can look pretty, if the support isn't there and the platform isn't working, that's not helpful to anyone. Sometimes people associate low-cost platforms as being 'duds,' but at the end of the day, if they have fantastic customer service and day-of support, that's essential. It's important to remember that sometimes, the platforms have a marketing or sales person talking to you, but once that sale is over, you don't hear from them again.

Q: Where do event tech companies still need to innovate?

A: I would say, their accessibility functions and features, their customer service, again—it's a recurring issues—and their ability to create connections with people and be user-friendly. If a virtual event is all about making content accessible to people, it also has to be barrierless. If the platform is acting as the tool to create event content, it has to be easy for people to navigate and understand.

Q: Can the smaller companies compete with the heavy hitters?

A: One hundred percent! Even the heavy hitters don't have all the kinks worked out. Whether you're a large company or a small company, it really doesn't make a difference at the end of the day. We've worked with both ends of that spectrum. I think the smaller companies tend to have better customer service, because they better understand the nuances of what people want from their events and don't treat your event as just a transaction. It ultimately comes down to the platform and if it's a good fit or not; it has to be well suited to your event.

Q: Will you continue to update the resource? What's its future?

A: Yes! We're currently in the process of reviewing all of our listings and resources that exist in the Virtual Event Resource. We are refining them in terms of how hybrid-friendly they are and if they've made updates and adjustments to support a hybrid environment. We will continue to add new resources as they come to us but the resource will continue to evolve.

This started as a project where we knew we needed to educate ourselves as event professionals who were transitioning to a virtual space, and so it will continue to be an educational tool for us. We will transition back to live one day, but we know that virtual and hybrid is here to stay. There will always be a need to know what resources exist and are available to us.

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Terms to Know for Hybrid and Virtual Event Planning

These keywords are essential to communicating in today's event industry.

Pandemic-related restrictions may be easing, but hybrid and virtual events seem to be here to stay. Over the past year, conference centers have invested in new technology and event professionals have shifted their focus to digital engagement. This is the new normal.

As the industry embraces the new event landscape, it's time for everyone involved to update their lingo. Here are some must-know terms for hybrid and virtual event planning.

Event Types

On-site: Events where people get together, face to face, in-person.

Virtual: Events that use technology to deliver an entirely online experience, which may include keynote speakers, small breakout sessions, and audience interactivity.

Hybrid: A mixture of a physical event and elements of a virtual event to connect in-person and remote participants from multiple locations, usually running simultaneously.

Virtual Presentations

Livestream: Live transmission of video and audio coverage of an event over the internet.

On-demand: Recorded programming that attendees can access on their own schedule. Many times, planners record a live keynote or session, and then make the recording available to watch anytime.

Simulive: Short for "simulating live," these kinds of events broadcast pre-recorded content at a specific time and usually include a live Q&A after the presentation. In many cases the audience shouldn't or wouldn't be able to tell that the presentation isn't being delivered live.

Webcast: A live or pre-recorded broadcast of an event over the web, with a TV-studio like quality for events such as town halls, conferences, panel discussions, product launches and more. Webcasts are generally designed to reach large audiences and tend to focus on speakers and panel discussions instead of visual aids like PowerPoint.

Webinar: Typically a 45- to 80-minute online presentation, session, or seminar that uses visual aids, a webcam, or screenshare with accompanying audio. Webinars can be live or pre-recorded.

Asynchronous: When speakers present at one time and the participants watch or learn at a later time.

Synchronous: When speakers present and participants watch at the same time, allowing them to interact on the spot and give or receive immediate feedback.

Audiovisual Attributes

Aspect ratio: The dimensions of an on-screen graphic (4:3 for classic, 16:9 for widescreen)

IMAG (Image Magnification): Using a camera to take a close-up shot that is projected on a larger video screen for people to see at a distance.

Video switcher: The person who directs and assesses all the visual content coming in and determines what goes on screen when.

Transcoder: Creates multiple video sizes and resolutions to optimize playback for participants' different devices and internet speeds.

VoIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol): Allows for voice transmission over the internet that doesn't require participants to call in for the audio portion (think of "Joining by Computer Audio" in an online meeting platform like WebEx or GoToMeeting).

Speech-to-text transcription: The ability to create a script of any spoken presentation, talk, or lecture, usually through an app.

Live translation: The ability to translate a script to another language as it is being delivered, usually through an app. This is especially helpful for events with an international or multilingual audience.

Technology and Engagement

Integration: Refers to the ability to share data between two different platforms.

Integrated speaker interactions: The ability for the virtual audience to interact in real time with the live speaker and audience, and vice versa.

Live feed: The ability to link and show content on the big screen, including questions submitted by attendees in real time.

ARS (Audience Response Software): A technology used to conduct audience engagement, such as polling and Q&A sessions.

Gamification: Leveraging interactive game components, such as trivia games, networking games, and quizzes, to help achieve event objectives. Leaderboards are often employed to encourage participation and competition.

KPI (Key Performance Indicators): The basis for analysis and assessment of a successful performance.

Conversion rate: The percentage of visitors who complete a specific goal. For virtual events, conversion rates are typically measured by "visits to registrants" and "registrants to attendees."

Bandwidth: A measurement of how much data is delivered over time for a network or internet connection. Bandwidth is measured in bits, most often in megabits per second (Mbps).

AR (Augmented Reality): A technology that superimposes a computer-generated image on a user's view of the real world, thus providing a composite view.

VR (Virtual Reality): A computer-generated simulation of a three-dimensional image or environment that users can interact with in a seemingly real or physical way.

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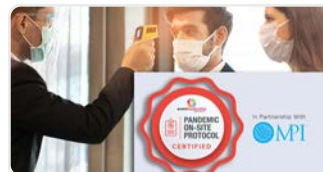

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