



Redesigned Meetings for Pandemic-Changed Attendees

Associations North | Meeting Planners Symposium

We're sick of talking about it, right? We locked down, we got really bored, we got sick, we quarantined, and, in most cases, we recovered, we got vaccinated, we got boosted, and then we ventured back out into the world. But because of the COVID-19 global pandemic, we are fundamentally different. For almost three years we were forced outside of our normal routines. We isolated from friends and family, we wore masks, we sang "Happy Birthday" (twice) while washing our hands, we sanitized our groceries, and — perhaps most importantly — we worked from home while caring for pets, kids, spouses, and other loved ones. The same is true for our members and event attendees. Based upon these lived experiences, their perspectives and preferences have changed. So, it should be no surprise that our business-as-usual, pre-pandemic meetings are going to miss the mark, resulting in lost participation, engagement, satisfaction, and revenue. During this fast-paced session, we'll acknowledge just some of the ways our attendees are different, and then translate these changes into tangible design edits you might consider for your upcoming meetings and events to better meet these new and evolving needs and expectations.

Pandemic Experience	So What?	Now What?	Resources
<p>Life as we knew it stopped abruptly in March 2020; “15 days to slow the spread” turned into more than 2 years of not quite knowing what lurked around every corner, which was only exacerbated by the onset of new COVID variants</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Members have largely become noncommittal when it comes to our events • They often wait until the last minute to register (sometimes even onsite) • They cancel the week of the event • They scramble for housing past the cut-off date 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider a range of registration rates (3+ options) to incentivize earlier registration • Institute a fair cancellation policy • When possible, encourage substitutions • Work with your venues during contracting to shorten cut-off windows and minimize attrition charges 	<p>New Pricing Models for Meetings</p>
<p>Non-essential employees began working from home while caring for pets and loved ones; the lines between our work and personal lives became even more blurred as we set up make-shift work and learning stations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We all seem to value our time differently now • What we've always attended in the past may be a considered purchase now • Daycare for children and pets may be more difficult to come by • We may also be caring for adult family members in our homes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluate and compress your event duration, where possible (the long, multi-day event may no longer be attractive) • Consider offering one-day options • Clearly articulate your event's value proposition (benefits vs. features) • Determine if childcare options might be right for your event • Consider offering a space at your event to pet and play with animals 	<p>Features vs. Benefits: Here's the Difference & Why It Matters</p>



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<p>We became incredibly reliant on technology to stay connected with family, friends, colleagues, and members; Zoom and Teams became the “new normal”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• We know that education can successfully be delivered in a remote environment• Remote participation can be easier/more anonymous• We’re at greater risk for multitasking when joining remotely• The production value of remote offerings has increased over time	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Explore digital and hybrid options• Integrate the remote and in-person audience wherever possible• Have a dedicated moderator for the virtual audience• Invest in whatever production you can afford to ensure the remote experience doesn’t fall flat	<p>The Complete Guide to Virtual Event Creation</p> <p>20 Key Considerations Before “Going Hybrid”</p>
<p>We isolated from friends and family, while slowly experimenting later in the pandemic with safe social pods; little did we know that in total we’d be cooped up for more than 2 years due to the combination of mandatory lockdown and recommended isolation/quarantine</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Introverts and extroverts were impacted differently• Virtual networking came with serious limitations• Our members are craving more in-depth, face-to-face networking opportunities• We’re out of practice when it comes to making small talk	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Allow for plenty of networking time in the event schedule• Weave networking time into education sessions, where possible• Offer structure to the networking opportunities themselves (e.g., impromptu networking)• Recognize that introverts and extroverts are affected differently by networking	<p>How the Pandemic Impacted Introverts and Extroverts Differently</p> <p>The Last Relationship-building Activity You’ll Ever Need</p>
<p>We quickly became bored; when we had enough of the puzzles and the sourdough loaves, we turned to new hobbies</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The same things don’t hold our attention• Many of us explored new hobbies• Some even turned to healthier habits, including cleaner eating and/or working out	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Revisit the event’s audience and purpose• Design a schedule responsive to current needs and expectations• Bring the wow; even small, but impactful touch points can make a big difference• Consider some healthier food options and opportunities to work out (beyond just the 6 a.m. yoga class)	<p>Pandemic Time Off Leads to New Pastimes</p> <p>Innovating Attendee Experiences Despite the Ongoing Pandemic</p>



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<p>Over time, we became somewhat accustomed to a more casual, slower paced life at home; we began to appreciate the reduction in commute times, along with a more flexible schedule; we even traded in our usual business attire for athleisurewear</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• We have little patience for wasted time• We don't generally like sitting for extended periods of time• Our days are often a mix of personal and professional tasks• We may have adopted new routines (e.g., picking up the kids from school)• We may not fit into our business attire, or we may not see the point in getting dressed up daily	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Diversify your session types and lengths with sound instructional design• Consider a shorter keynote session• Don't over crowd the schedule; offer more down time and reflection• Allow for movement/ standing during and in between sessions (e.g., a mixed room set)• Consider a later start time for those local participants driving in/out• Revisit your dress code	<p>What Can A "Gamer" Teach Us About Instructional Design?</p>
<p>Our associations were constantly being forced to "pivot"; our frontline staff needed advice, resources, and recommendations to meet their new and evolving needs and expectations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• We began seeking just-in-time professional development• Lots of remote offerings popped up, often for little or no cost• Continuing education credit became much more accessible	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Tap into your Education Committee (or other outlets) to stay on top of the current education needs/wants of your members• Identify your competition and determine what they are offering (and at what rates)• Determine and promote your competitive advantage	<p>Competitive Advantage Definition with Types and Examples</p>
<p>The C-suite staff leading our associations experienced turbulent times not seen in this lifetime; vital revenue streams from events and membership dried up seemingly overnight</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• CEOs didn't know how to navigate the workplace challenges they faced• They sought confidential spaces to meet/discuss these concerns with their peers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Consider offering a CEO Circle during your next event• Establish ground rules around confidentiality and other important considerations for sharing and safety• Explore roundtables for other functional areas, as well	<p>A CEO's Secret Weapon During Turbulent Times: Peer Groups</p>



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<p>Due to job loss, hour reduction, and concerns for our personal safety and wellbeing, some of us experienced a significant impact on our personal finances</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Our members may be unemployed or underemployed• Our members may have less disposable income• They are making tough choices about how to spend their money	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Slowly and incrementally get closer to pre-pandemic pricing models• Take a tough look at expenses and cut those items that don't directly support the event's mission/add member value• Really consider housing/travel costs before booking venues• Consider instituting a financial hardship policy• Offer appropriate employment services onsite at your event (e.g., job fair, resume review, mock interviews)	<p>Business Travel Costs Are Expected to Rise Through 2023, Industry Report Says</p>
<p>The lockdowns and the associated isolation, lack of personal face-to-face contact, and feelings of missing out on important life events (among countless other concerns) fueled issues like loneliness, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and other mental health disorders</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Our volunteers, members, event attendees, and staffs may be navigating mental health disorders• In some cases, we became more aware of these issues during the pandemic as people confided in us• Access to treatment may not be within everyone's reach	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Consider adding in some education for individuals and employers, including early warning signs and coping mechanisms• Offer a quiet room onsite at your event for those who need to get away/decompress• If feasible, have a mental health professional available onsite at your event• Consider engaging with mental health providers during your exhibit show (possibly as an affinity program)	<p>Mental Health in Post-Pandemic Healthcare: A Case for Reappraisal</p>
<p>The pandemic only deepened the country's political divisions, as feelings about how the government dealt with COVID differed based on political affiliation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Everyone has a different opinion about how your organization should be handling the pandemic• This could lead to noncompliance with your policies and procedures• In some instances, people may become vocal and/or act out	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Have clear COVID policies in place during registration• Revise and communicate COVID policies closer to the event, as needed• Determine how you will enforce COVID policies• Carefully consider how this divisiveness could play out in your organization's governance, elections, bylaws, etc.	<p>Pandemic Deepened Countries' Political Divisions, Survey Says</p>



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<p>The pandemic exacerbated and highlighted long-standing structural racial issues across the United States; just about every corner of life was affected by the renewed racial justice movement spurred by George Floyd's death</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• DEI issues are likely top of mind for your members• Your organization is likely figuring out its own DEI journey• You have a real responsibility to ensure your speakers/resources represent diverse perspectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Consider surveying your members to determine their current needs/expectations related to DEI• Offer an appropriate level of DEI training• Develop a DEI strategy for your organization and share it with your members• Intentionally recruit and feature diverse speakers and resources (e.g., publications)	<p>COVID-19 Heightened Racial Issues in the US: Report</p> <p>The Monumental Impact of George Floyd's Death on Black America</p>
<p>At the heart of the pandemic, volunteers demonstrated an exceptional display of solidarity across the world; everyday heroes responded to calls for help from their local communities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Volunteering remains an important way for members to engage with our organizations• We need volunteers to share with us their expertise and supplement our available staff resources• Members also want to give back to their local communities whenever possible	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Engage volunteers in the planning of your conference, in both big and small ways (e.g., Education Committee)• Ensure meaningful opportunities for volunteers onsite (e.g., registration support, speaking roles)• Plan activities/ fundraisers that support the local community (when appropriate, bring their voices into your event)	<p>COVID-19 Drives Global Surge in Volunteering</p> <p>Mutually Beneficial Volunteerism: Opportunities for Enhancing Association Volunteer Management Systems</p>
<p>We got sick, we quarantined, and, in most cases, we recovered, we got vaccinated, and we got boosted; in some instances, we watched our friends, family, and colleagues become ill and ultimately die</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Members have varying concern for their personal health and safety• Some may be vaccinated/boosted, but others may not• Members may be immunocompromised and have ongoing needs/concerns• Some may be traumatized from watching their friends and family become sick and/or die	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Recognize that there remains a range of attitudes, behaviors, and concerns related to the pandemic• Create areas onsite for those who would like a little more distance/personal space• Acknowledge/honor those members who passed because of the pandemic	<p>U.S. Coronavirus Vaccine Tracker</p>



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In most cases, we began to venture back out into the world, but everything was different; we may no longer be wearing masks, but fewer people are showing up in-person to events (among many other changes)

- In-person event attendance has been slow to recover
- Members are experiencing higher scrutiny by management, job/business changes, smaller/tighter travel budgets, and the like
- Vendors have seemed much more ready/eager to get back to exhibiting
- Members who do attend in-person are out of practice
- Get your save-the-dates out early
- Periodically survey members to determine their personal comfort with travel/safety, professional development budgets, etc.
- Partner with your vendors on personal invites to prospective attendees
- Ensure a robust, but fun and digestible know before you go communication with helpful reminders, tips, tricks, and recommendations

[Events Are Back: But Where Are All the Attendees?](#)



About Aaron

Aaron Wolowiec is a learning/meetings strategist, certified ToP facilitator/mentor trainer, and author, coach, and speaker. He designs engaging, multisensory learning experiences, resulting in the acquisition of new knowledge and skills, forging of new relationships, and applied learning and perspective in the workplace. Aaron is also a serial learner and entrepreneur who is nationally recognized for his professional development and facilitation work with boards, learners, staff, and volunteers.

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