

COVID-19 UPDATE

Virtual Ascends After Covid-19 Cancellations

Leading up to press time, event organizer confidence that face-to-face meetings would resume in 2020 had dimmed significantly over the previous months. As Covid-19 surged in the South and Western U.S., i-Meet's weekly Planner Confidence Index survey took a turn for the worse.

The percentage of respondents who expected to restart face-to-face meetings during the fourth quarter fell from 38 percent on May 18 to 25 percent for the week ending June 21. The percentage of surveyed organizers who predicted events wouldn't return until 2021 jumped from 38 percent to 61 percent during this period.

Despite the current standstill and the gloomy outlook, strategic meetings management remains as important as ever for corporations—if not more so, since ensuring business continuity within the confines of increased cost concerns amid the pandemic has become a paramount goal for many organizations.

Here's some good news: Advances in virtual meetings technology—and increasing user familiarity with such tech—have made it possible to achieve the bedrock goals of SMM, despite the fact that many meetings and events will happen on computer screens for the near term, and beyond that a hybrid approach may prevail.

To fulfill the surge in demand for virtual events, a number of meetings management providers, including Cvent, Bizly and others, have ramped up their virtual hosting capabilities. But conducting successful virtual meetings or events requires careful planning that takes into account the inherent strengths and weaknesses of a virtual platform versus a live face-to-face environment.

First movers in this space have identified preferred technology suppliers to address different aspects of virtual meetings as a way to guide meeting organizers—who will often be unfamiliar with these platforms—through approved technology channels that have been vetted for quality and security.

Meanwhile, virtual events hold a few key advantages over in-person meetings and conferences, and meeting management leaders should position programs to take advantage of them.

When compared to the planning, booking and travel necessary to produce live events, organizers can leverage the comparative ease of virtual attendance to reduce costs and to boost registration numbers, the number and quality of presenters, and keynote speakers. Participant activity data also becomes easier to track, as each attendee leaves a digital trail throughout his or her attendance at a virtual

event—whether that's the number of times they engaged with an exhibitor, the length of time they spent in a session, the number and choice of networking meetings, or their feedback on surveys, etc.

Meeting organizers should be cautioned, however, that not everything that hits a high note for an in-person event will offer the same impact at a virtual gathering. Companies should plan from the outset to track the success of different programming, and pay close attention to session duration as well as to the efficacy of running intensive sessions back to back. That may not play well in a virtual environment.

To that end, one company BTN spoke with reformatted an annual conference, which had been scheduled to take place over four days in Las Vegas, to run instead as a series of events between May and August. The show featured live keynote speakers, customer and analyst sessions, downloadable content, technical demos and tools for setting up one-on-one meetings. In the first days of the virtual conference, the company had more than double the attendance expected for the live event.

Companies conducting virtual events aren't likely to be able to charge registration fees anywhere near what a live event could command. While the costs of hosting a virtual event are generally much lower as well, they aren't necessarily low cost. Understanding where the company can strike the return on investment will continue to be important.

But all-virtual events aren't the only option, especially as the Covid-19 crisis begins to abate. Hybrid meetings and events—which combine in-person and virtual components—are expected to proliferate as social distancing protocols relax and corporate travel returns in a limited capacity. The industry will need to adapt.

Suppliers are stepping up to meet the demand for hybrid events, with event management specialists rolling out hybrid-specific planning and hosting capabilities. To serve the in-person component of such events, major hotel companies are implementing cleanliness and hygiene protocols designed specifically for group gatherings, such as sealed meeting rooms, additional sanitization stations and a meeting-room cleanliness checklist.

Meanwhile, some hoteliers also have begun offering more flexible terms in contract agreements for meetings and events amid the lingering uncertainty around planning live events—embodying a principle of cooperation that will be key for all meetings and events stakeholders to adopt as the industry navigates its way through the unprecedented upheaval.



Getting Started with Meetings Management

I. WHY MEETINGS MANAGEMENT IS IMPORTANT

- A. Value to the business:** A strategic meetings management improves revenue, education, motivation and communication. As a content delivery channel, face-to-face meetings are a critical component of a multi-pronged communication strategy, which also includes social media, advertising and training. Money, time and resources should be used efficiently and effectively to drive successful outcomes.
- B. Value and impact for meeting stakeholders and participants:** Key performance indicators measure meeting impact, whether return on investment, return on objective or return on engagement. Participant experience is critical—education, motivation, communication—and meetings management should measure and report on all these drivers across meeting types.
- C. Service and operations:** Companies often source and plan meetings and events without the right organizational and supplier structure, duplicating efforts across meeting types, divisions and regions. Meetings management streamlines workflows and prioritizes end-user experience.
- D. Savings and reinvestment:** Spend optimization is a major driver to manage meetings. Companies with minimal existing process can reduce costs by as much as 20 percent. Companies calculate these savings as reduction to bottom-line budgets, but some reinvest or optimize spend to get more for their existing budget. Savings come from a variety of initiatives:
- 1.5% to 8% Policy modification and compliance, including demand management, preferred supplier usage, spend thresholds, moving to a hybrid or virtual meetings model.
 - 4% to 12% Rationalizing the supplier base, strategic sourcing and logistic planning savings, including leveraging the travel management company for group travel.
 - 3% to 6% Process automation for end-to-end meeting tasks and group online booking to reduce high-touch spend.
 - 2% to 4% Payment and recovery, including rebates, commissions and fee collection.
 - 3% to 5% Resource management, including material reuse and reducing duplication.
- Delivering a quality meeting with the right branding and content in the right environment and without distractions from mishandled or arduous logistics contributes to individual meeting ROI. A fully established meetings management program may also integrate with training, HR and customer relationship management capability to track longer-term outcomes for meetings ROI.
- E. Risk reduction:** Meetings management will reduce risk exposure in seven areas.
- 1. Contractual/legal/regulatory:** SMM drives a consistency through strategic sourcing, document retention, insurance and regulatory requirements. Meetings management provides pre-event visibility that ensures compliance. In many companies, planners rely on personal relationships or sign binding con-

tracts without seeking approval from a purchasing or legal department. This could lead to lawsuits. In addition, meetings must meet privacy requirements. The General Data Protection Regulation has an extraterritoriality approach so it is critical to understand what is allowable when collecting speaker and participant data, developing contracts and taking action on participant requests to change or remove data.

- 2. Financial:** Use results-based financial data on meetings spend, volume and impact to drive decisions for omnichannel and multichannel goals.
- 3. Business operations:** Develop efficient and cost-effective operational plans to support meetings, conferences and events. Ensure that duty of care and crisis management are a priority for SMM and that a proactive plan is in place for every event. Collaborate with security, HR, travel, procurement and risk to develop duty of care. These efforts will support SMM adoption.
- 4. Reputational:** Ensure integrity-based sourcing and planning for meetings and events to avoid poor public perception.
- 5. Automation and data integrity:** Enable end-to-end business processes with meeting technologies that provide participant experience along with back-end efficiency.
- 6. Market:** Ensure participant experience quality and value, and align with corporate goals, mission and vision. Use benchmarking and competitive analyses to drive improvement and avoid events that don't impact business goals.
- 7. Strategy:** Drive governance through a senior stakeholder community that supports meeting policy and adherence.

II. WHO SHOULD BE INVOLVED & WHERE

Account for diverse stakeholders: Meeting/budget owners, ad hoc meeting planners, travel, procurement, security, finance, IT, administrative assistants and even real estate. Given its complexity, a phased rollout is best practice.



A. Phase 1 is typically local in scope. A local or single-market SMM implementation can provide a template for rollouts in other markets. Starting small is a smart strategy. Even within one market, launch with a small group of meeting planners to beta-test policies, processes and technologies.

B. Phases 2 and 3 are typically regional and global in scope. Companies should consider the 80/20 rule, determining which markets are the most intensive users of meetings. Do not implement across the 80 percent simultaneously. Use a scalable approach that provides flexibility for each market. Rate each market by the following attributes to identify which to implement first:

1. Regulatory, financial and legal considerations.
2. Comparative meetings volume.
3. Meetings-associated spend.
4. Stakeholder requirements.
5. Technology readiness.
6. Ease of entry in the market.

III. HOW TO GET STARTED

Collect data before meeting with stakeholders so you can discuss the state of meetings at the company, options for operationalizing the meetings program, and the spend and volume—or lack of data transparency. This may take months or even years, but avoid analysis paralysis. You may never uncover every meeting planner and/or meeting cost, especially when scoping a regional or global program. Understand as much as possible. A managed meetings program, will reveal more over time.

A. Gain agreement from stakeholders. Meetings management is often grassroots in its early stages. Still, it is important to gain support among each stakeholder type, including suppliers. Corporate management will need to understand the overall strategy, while IT will need to understand goals for implementation and systems integrations. After you have gathered and shared data with stakeholders, generate support by sharing “what’s in it for them.”

1. Marketing: Interested in more touchpoints and interactions to drive messaging; help them via au-

tomation, efficiency, virtual meetings, innovative apps and return on engagement.

2. Finance: Interested in ROI, transparency into costs, how to save or reduce costs for reinvestment, how to drive consistent payment methodologies and a consolidated approach to spend reconciliation and reporting, preferably out of one tool, and integrations into financial systems.
 3. Procurement: Interested in the category strategy and contractual agreements for meetings, conferences and events. Will key into how supplier strategy fits into the program and opportunities for consolidation. Interested in addressable spend, savings, cost avoidance and driving innovation through strategic suppliers and in leading SMM efforts.
 4. Travel: Interested in using the preferred travel management company for group travel and how to consolidate travel efforts for leveraging air volume with airlines, for cost reduction and for duty of care. Supports the program through air analysis on locations, group desks and support services, e.g., visas.
 5. Security: Interested in vetting locations, venues, duty of care and crisis management.
 6. Training: Interested in making sure training programs are managed well, include having high bandwidth, and improving learning outcomes.
 7. IT: Interested in advising SMM on technology systems. Can be challenging because they may not realize the complexity of meetings. Focus on the end-to-end process and the buying systems that are robust, practical and will solve for your five-year goals.
- B.** Gather data and information on the company’s meetings payment and processes. This effort is critical building a business plan to attract resources.
1. Use accounts payable, corporate cards and supplier data to determine spending on all types of meetings and events, including internal, external, conferences,

tradeshows, booths and incentives. If using accounts payable data, look for:

- a. Individual hotel charges of \$5,000 or more. Ask hotel suppliers to detail attrition or cancellation fee payments.
 - b. Individual ground transportation charges of \$500 or more.
 - c. Spending with A/V or production suppliers or booth builders.
 - d. Spending with destination management companies and event agencies.
 - e. Individual restaurant or meal spending of \$1,000 or more.
2. Examine meetings payment processes. Current payment mechanisms are a good place to begin a search for meetings spend, particularly if the company uses purchasing cards and/or meetings cards for any meetings or events.
 3. Assess contracts with hotels and other suppliers.
 4. Examine policies or guidelines that divisions or countries may already use.
 5. Find individuals in departments that plan meetings, and assess their roles.
 6. Examine meetings sourcing processes.
 7. Suppliers like payment providers, contracted hotels, airlines, ground transportation services and agencies often track meetings spend better than clients. Go to them with a spreadsheet listing the required data, and ask for as much information as they can offer.
 8. Assess existing meetings technologies, including attendee management, mobile apps and SMM tech.
- C.** Identify budgets for ongoing, client-facing product launches, consumer roadshows, etc. Investigate pain points and map resolution to your SMM initiative. By offering a solutions, SMM leaders enlist stakeholder participation. Don’t try to bring all departments into a meetings management program at the same time. Look for scalability to demonstrate proof of concept, then add. The following groups often have the largest budgets for meetings activities:
1. Commercial, sales and marketing:



From product launches to regional sales meetings, these divisions hold high- and low-profile meetings. High-profile events may be fully or partially outsourced to third parties and likely among the company's best managed meetings. In addition to looking for meetings spend in these divisions, also review planning processes or best practices. Acknowledging them may ease buy-in for these divisions.

2. HR and training: Training and employee-development meetings are common but may be small compared with sales and marketing events.
 3. Service centers: Especially in technology companies, offsite client support and service meetings are common and may require teams to stay overnight.
 4. Executive/VIP meetings: Often organized by executive assistants, this category can be the most difficult to uncover. It is important to understand spend levels and expectations.
- D. Identify synergies with travel management, procurement and finance.**
1. Travel and meetings management converge in several areas. Leaders in these departments should conduct joint quarterly business review meetings with:
 - a. TMCs, meetings management companies and other suppliers: There are opportunities to leverage suppliers for group travel, venue sourcing and meeting planning. For transparency in tracking all meeting participants, use your TMC for all group travel, and have group agents offer high-level service. Conduct an RFP to limit the list of meeting planning agencies—before you implement a formal SMM program, various such suppliers will be in use around the company—to reduce expenses and create consistency in the attendee experience.
 - b. Hotel programs: Companies with significant global hotel spend have an opportunity to negotiate a chain-level master service agreement for group and

transient travel. Additionally, a preferred provider program for meetings hotels, on a chain and/or brand level, leverages spend, improves concessions and streamlines processes. Negotiated contracts are required for each meeting. Also, ground transport companies may offer synergy for travel and meetings.

- c. Payment programs: Improve meetings payment efficiency, obtain detailed data on spend and access card rebate programs by deploying meeting cards, P-cards, virtual cards or business travel accounts. However, understand how cards will be reconciled and how the data will be reported, e.g., through the card reporting program or enterprise resource planning system. Ensure that finance approves the reconciliation system and consider developing a payment strategy and business case for the payment solution.
 - d. Technology: Use the company's online booking tool for group travel. For hybrid events, build notifications into the travel booking process to remind travelers that they may attend the meeting virtually.
2. Meetings management can benefit from formalized procurement processes as long as they acknowledge unique event needs and stakeholders remain flexible. Procurement can uncover supplier data and support MSA efforts, combining transient and group volume for hotels, airlines and agencies. Many procurement departments hire meeting sourcing experts to understand contract nuances.
 3. Finance may support card payments and commission collection for meetings and events. Finance can identify the benefit of using a card product for deposits, ancillary charges and travel costs. Finance also can support the decision to collect, split or refuse commissions. Reductions in meetings commissions by large hotel chains may render such issues moot in the future.

IV. CONTRACT MANAGEMENT

A desire to mitigate contractual risk often drives SMM efforts. Many companies experience financial losses from agreements with poor attrition and cancellation clauses or when inexperienced meeting organizers fail to protect the company from a supplier-side cancellation. No matter what the market dynamics are, experienced contract management with tight approvals and workflow requirements is beneficial. Include required clauses or addendums during the RFP or at the start of negotiations to avoid delays later.

- A. Standardize contracts. Many organizations use a master service agreement or general services agreement with hotel chains to establish standard terms and conditions. These combine with local property task orders that may include additional negotiations based on the volume and requirements. The MSA approach may be available only for a volume of spend that warrants the hotel's time and effort. If a hotel does not want to develop a chain-level MSA, it can be done at the property level. A standard hotel contract allows companies to expedite contracting. It should address cancellation and attrition liabilities, as well as an "act of God" or force majeure clause that defines both supplier and buyer responsibilities should an unforeseeable event force cancellation.
- B. Require approval. When not using the standard contract or when implementing changes or additions to the standard contract, follow a contract-approval process through procurement or even the legal department. Specify turnaround time to avoid losing the proposal.
- C. Limit contract signing authority. This ensures the contract is reviewed by qualified personnel, centralizes visibility into activities and reduces turnaround time, which is crucial. Identify value thresholds at which contracts must have legal review.

V. OPERATIONAL CONFIGURATIONS

The choice to manage meetings internally, externally or in collaboration with a third party depends on the



complexity of the meetings program and on internal resources. Most companies find benefits in outsourcing. Companies with a handful of marquee meetings may outsource a portion of the tasks associated with larger events and delegate smaller events to occasional planners supported by internal sourcing and contract management. The following structures are common, and companies may evolve as their SMM programs mature.

A. Internal organizational structure:

1. **Centralized meeting department:** All meetings funnel through a single meeting planning department that allocates resources, makes approvals, sources and plans logistics. The meeting owner is free to concentrate on meeting content and delivery.
2. **Decentralized planning, plus internal sourcing support:** Often adopted by organizations with small meetings, this approach relies on strong policy compliance to drive sourcing and contracting through proper channels while meeting owners handle logistics and content. Meetings registration in a centralized “calendar” is critical.
3. **Centralized department, plus occasional planners, plus internal sourcing support:** Even for organizations with large meetings volume and complex programs, a partially decentralized structure can be effective. Professional planners in a centralized meetings center likely handle large and/or complex meetings while smaller meetings with fewer vectors for risk remain the purview of the meeting owners. Meeting registration in a central tool is key, along with tight workflows and approvals that prevent contract missteps.

B. Hybrid and outsourced support: If partially or fully outsourcing an SMM program, ensure that all third parties support the company’s meetings policy and workflow guidelines. If you have implemented a meetings technology solution, require partners to use it. Contracts with third-party suppliers should include KPIs and, depending upon the depth of the

relationship, include incentives for achieving goals.

1. **External sourcing support:** an Agency or meetings sourcing specialist will research venues, manage the RFP, negotiate benefits and facilitate contracting. Third-party partners may garner better rates and inclusions thanks to better leverage. In many cases, the venue where the meeting is placed compensates the sourcing specialist, but recent commercial changes at major hotel brands have made this less lucrative for third parties.
2. **External sourcing and planning support:** In addition to sourcing support, agency and meeting partners offer logistical planning. Companies may find this valuable for large and/or complex meetings. Companies also may rely on outsourced logistical and planning when dealing with large meetings volume, allowing internal planners to concentrate on content and strategy.
3. **Fully outsourced SMM:** Because meetings management is not a core business, companies often outsource SMM oversight, sourcing, planning, implementation and maintenance to a third party or parties, particularly when the SMM program is regional or global. Choosing a single partner or a regional or local strategy depends on company culture.

VI. MEETINGS POLICY

A meetings policy should reflect the company culture, align with the travel policy, include approval workflows and identify exceptions to the general policy. Recognizing the diverse objectives of their meetings, some SMM teams create tiered policies, according to meeting types, for budgeting, assigning the appropriate venue, class of service, and food and beverage. Some companies implement different levels of approval for small meetings versus larger ones, resulting in different workflows. In general a meetings policy should define roles and responsibilities for meeting planners and stakeholders.

A. Meetings policy components:

1. Registration and approval criteria.
 2. Supplier sourcing guidelines for air, hotel and ground transport and A/V.
 3. Contracting, workflows and approvals.
 4. Use of supplier sourcing tools.
 5. Budgeting guidelines.
 6. Preferred payment method or methods.
 7. Attendee registration & management tools.
 8. Food and beverage guidelines.
 9. Ethics, including points, free rooms, etc.
 10. Guest and spouse attendance.
 11. Attendee safety and security and procedures that support corporate duty of care.
 12. Consequences for noncompliance.
- B. Communication:** Meetings policy should be accessible via an organization’s intranet, but posting policy guidelines is rarely effective alone. Specific communications and trainings drive compliance. Companies with extensive meetings programs establish ongoing education sessions for skill development and awareness.
- C. Implementation:** Embed policy and workflow parameters in a meetings management technology tool for consistency.
- D. Monitoring:** Review policies annually for relevance. Pay attention to communications about SMM policies or training. It should not be one size fits all. Identify various channels and post relevant content.

VII. TECHNOLOGY

SMM technology creates a central data repository for meetings activities, standardizes workflow and may dictate certain choices to ensure meeting planners remain within policy. Meetings technology tends to be modular, but more tech providers are working on end-to-end solutions that can accommodate both simple, self-service meetings and ultra large and complex events with planning tools and apps that enhance and extend the participant experience.

A. Required capabilities:

1. Event registration and central calendar.
2. Electronic RFP and supplier data.



3. Budgeted, negotiated and actual costs.
 4. Invitations, websites and attendee info.
 5. Reporting on spend, savings, suppliers and attendees; ability to adhere to GDPR.
 6. Data from mobile apps, especially real-time engagement and feedback.
 7. Business intelligence.
 8. Integrations with other enterprise tech.
- B. Configuration:**
1. A full technology suite is powerful for SMM, but even small implementations make an impact, e.g. companies that require event registration in a central calendar can drive approval processes and improve visibility into all meetings. Companies may choose to implement certain modules first, then add as the SMM matures.
 2. Simplify workflows and minimize data entry. Meetings tools offer invaluable policy and workflow configurations for customization. These may be tempting, but it may not be worth it. Creating “lite” forms and workflows for simple meetings and more complex data capture for larger events can drive adoption and reduce training.
 3. Especially for global programs, look for a multi-lingual tech platform with local customization. For data collection, allow only local customizations that support data consolidation across regions.
- C. Technology integrations:** Advanced SMM programs integrate meetings tech with transient travel tools and other systems like SAP and Oracle.
1. Particularly for internal meetings, online booking tools can help companies understand what portion of business travel is related to meetings.
 2. Integrating with GDSs and OBTs offers real visibility into room-block availability.
 3. Integrating with payment tools can facilitate spend reconciliation.
 4. Some companies integrate meetings tools, particularly apps, with CRM tools to track engagement and quantify ROI.
- D. Virtual meetings:** Consider webcast,

real-time and collaboration technologies to support virtual or hybrid strategy.

VIII. MEETINGS PAYMENT

Consider using a specialized meetings payment card for all meetings purchases. This offers an easier way to categorize meeting line items, reconcile accounts and streamline the payment process. Best practices:

- A.** Consolidate meetings spend with a single provider. This will allow the organization to drive better rebates based on total meetings spend volume. Consider using the same provider as the corporate card to leverage joint volume.
- B.** Current best practice is to generate an individual card for each meeting to track spend and ease reconciliation. This may require expedited request and disbursement. Some companies prefer one parent card for all meetings and then match expenses with a meeting identifier. Other organizations allow multiple card products per region.
- C.** Alternatives like integrated payment solutions or small meeting technology solutions that incorporate payment are coming to the market.

IX. DRIVING ADOPTION

Many companies do the legwork to understand meetings spend, analyze their markets, source good suppliers and invest in technology only to stumble when it comes to adoption efforts. To succeed, companies must budget and plan effectively for change management and create a realistic adoption road map. Strategies to maximize SMM:

- A.** Allow meeting planners of all levels to have a voice when designing a program.
- B.** Position as a resource. Market SMM as a support structure. Show planners how tools and processes alleviate pain points.
- C.** Test the program with a select group of planners to work out major glitches. Get feedback, and make changes.
- D.** Communicate and train: A communications campaign should go beyond a one-time promotion. Offer lunch-and-learn sessions, online learning and a dynamic “planner community”

resource. When rolling out SMM or making significant changes to process, road shows educate stakeholders and increase adoption.

- E.** Create a channel for ongoing feedback. Planners of all levels can suggest refinements. Look for ineffective tool configurations or workflows, and change them.
- F.** Regardless of the range of suppliers chosen or the number of meeting tiers included in policy, consider an official approval process for allowing planners to book nonpreferred suppliers.
- G.** Understand stakeholder needs and drivers in order to improve adoption.
- H.** Without executive stakeholder support and champions, deployment will be challenging. Close the loop by ensuring executive stakeholders get monthly high-level summaries of SMM successes and gaps, and ask for their help to close gaps and assist with noncompliant departments.

X. MEASURING SUCCESS

Measure meetings management benefits. As SMM and data collection and analysis improve, more advanced metrics are also in the works.

- A.** Determine the impact of sales revenue using an ROI calculation that isolates the meeting channel versus the other channels, such as advertising and social media. After considering the cost of all channels, isolate the positive effects, e.g., increased revenue from each channel, and then calculate the ROI.
- B.** Compare and contrast cost per participant per day by meeting type, looking for spend variances across divisions, suppliers and regions.
- C.** Determine the value of the program’s reach or interaction—improved communication, increased motivation, or enhanced learning, e.g., return on objective, return on engagement or return on experience—by measuring the perspectives of participants.
- D.** Measure the reduction of suppliers that operationalize meetings and events.
- E.** Measure the reduction in time spent sourcing and planning meetings through automation and efficiency.
- F.** Gauge service level agreement metrics achieved among meeting owners, meeting planners and suppliers. ■