



THE SUSTAINABLE FUTURE OF MEETINGS AND EVENTS

Presented by

Skift + **IHG**®

InterContinental Los Angeles Downtown

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When it comes to sustainability, the meetings and events sector is doing much more than simply going green. Today, venues and planners alike are working to reduce their environmental footprint as well as create new models for this important segment of the travel industry. Stakeholders are amping up their work to better engage attendees with creative content that goes far beyond the ballroom. Host organizations are working with venue partners to deliver results that exceed traditional definitions of return on investment and create lasting community impact. All of these changes are representative of a sector-wide effort underway to both reduce the climate impact of events and grow the already massive business of in-person meetings well into the future.

Among the companies leading the shift is InterContinental Hotels Group (IHG), which has implemented a number of sustainability initiatives to meet the sourcing needs of planners and deliver positive impacts on the many communities in which IHG operates. And with nearly 850,000 rooms around the world, these changes are having a significant impact at scale.

Many of the shifts are now being adopted by the broader meetings sector, including a “lightening up” of venues by bringing in natural light, more

interesting food and beverage options, and engaging programming. Planners are discarding scripted seminars and bland presentations in favor of collaborative moments and memory-making activities that make even corporate gatherings feel more like leisure experiences. The concept of “creating shared value,” in which groups collaborate to generate measurable social impact is gaining currency. And venues and sourcing managers alike are carefully considering risk management practices that don’t disrupt the attendee experience.

In this trend report, SkiftX will illuminate the many changes underway in the sector, examine case studies and examples of how planners and venues alike are building sustainability into their practices, and recognize a number of leaders who are creatively rethinking the sorts of meetings that are possible in the 21st century.

While much is changing, said Jonathan Kaplan, vice president of global sales strategy, IHG, “the intangible value of experiences and connections within meetings and events is rising in priority across the globe.” All the more reason to make sure those events are truly sustainable.

Kimpton Gray Hotel



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ABOUT SKIFT

Skift is the largest industry intelligence platform providing media, insights, and marketing to key sectors of travel. Skift deciphers and defines trends for global CEOs and CMOs across travel, dining, and wellness sectors through a combination of news, research, conferences, and marketing services.

ABOUT SKIFTX

SkiftX is Skift's in-house content studio. SkiftX produced this report in partnership with IHG.

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IHG AT A GLANCE

Earlier this year, Skift published a definitive “deep dive” into IHG that examined all aspects of the brand, including its development pipeline, its technology solutions, and its future revenue potential. The consensus? “While other hotel brand companies are focused on merger integrations and becoming asset-light, IHG is emerging as a leader in hospitality tech innovation and developing itself into a nimbler, more diversified company,” wrote Skift analyst Rebecca Stone. “The company’s key areas of focus are making it a smarter, better hotel company that is well-positioned no matter what the future looks like.”

Four elements of that report are of particular relevance for the meetings and events sector and its evolution into a more sustainable and forward-looking segment of the broader hospitality industry.

Brand Diversity

IHG may be best known for its Holiday Inn and Holiday Inn Express brands, which represented 61 percent of existing rooms as of March 2019, but the company is making big strides through both internal development and acquisitions. Luxury brands including Six Senses Hotels Resorts Spas, Regent Hotels & Resorts, and Kimpton Hotels & Restaurants are growing, as are others, including Avid, Hotel Indigo, and Voco. IHG is also specifically targeting guests who prioritize wellness with its Even Hotels brand.

Portfolio Growth

IHG has been on a development spree. At the end of Q1 2019, IHG had nearly 843,000 guest rooms, with more than 1,900 hotels in its development pipeline. “The company’s pipeline has increased significantly over the past couple years, as management has been focused on expanding internationally, particularly in

China. The company’s pipeline as a percentage of its total rooms is now just under 33 percent, compared to 26 percent just six years ago,” Stone wrote.

Technology Innovation

Recently, the company released IHG Concerto, a suite of next-generation hotel technology that incorporates reservations and revenue management into one flexible platform. Early feedback from owners is “overwhelmingly positive,” Stone wrote. One owner told Skift: “I see nothing but advantages for our business. The guests will be able to pick the room they want by location in the hotel, add services or remove services from that room, and this will drive greater profits for the hotels. This is a first class system.”

Increased Flexibility

Over the last 10-plus years, IHG has become more nimble, more profitable, and “more formidable,” Stone wrote. With the addition of Six Senses, the company has embraced wellness and sustainability; with a major push into China and new markets, it has reduced its dependence on North American hotels. And with meeting and event space as diverse as its brand portfolio, IHG is well-positioned to define the future of that segment — along with the future of hospitality more generally.

The full findings, [A Deep Dive Into IHG 2019: Leading in Tech Innovation and Staying Nimble](#), can be purchased as an individual report or via Skift Research subscription at research.skift.com. ♦

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INTERCONTINENTAL

VOCO

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SUITES

CANDLEWOOD
SUITES

avid

EVEN HOTELS

Holiday Inn
Express

A modern outdoor dining area featuring a wooden deck, green wicker chairs, and a large glass wall with a geometric pattern. The interior is visible through the glass, showing a bar and more seating.

It was proof, Adams said, of the tremendous power of the meetings business.

"We as human beings realize our greatest potential when we come together," he said. "Wherever we go, we should be making a positive impact on the communities in the places our meetings are being held."

Where Meetings Are Headed Next

That attitude shift is emblematic of the major changes underway in the broader meetings and events sector. Beyond community impact, a number of other considerations are coming to the forefront for planners and attendees. Among the factors growing in importance are environmental sustainability concerns, issues of cost and budget, and finally risk management. All of these decidedly unsexy yet incredibly important elements are occupying more of meeting planners' time these days.

Underpinning it all is the big-picture existential question of meetings and events, a major sector of the travel industry that accounts for \$120 billion in annual spend in the U.S. With so many new concerns — and with technological tools connecting the world like never before — some organizations may be asking themselves, *Why meet at all?* In an era of screen sharing, teleconferencing, and Zoom links, what is the value of flying around the world for gatherings?

"While the return on investment of face-to-face meetings remains critical, the intangible value of experiences and connections within meetings and events is rising in priority across the globe," said Jonathan Kaplan, vice president of global sales strategy, IHG.

"Bringing a company's culture to life in both large and small meetings is increasingly important," Kaplan said. "We're also seeing meetings becoming more interactive, with larger amounts of time being devoted to communal conversations and discussions."

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Today's guests arrive with very high expectations for personalization.

Bill Caswell, of North Highland

Indeed "we're all living through a period of exponential change," wrote IMEX Group in a briefing document outlining the future of meetings for 2019 and beyond. The document set the tone for IMEX, which organizes twice-yearly meetings that themselves focus on the meetings and events business. In the working paper, the group charted a forward-looking *raison d'être*: "The upside [of meetings] is that we can collaborate, share ideas, challenge assumptions, or change old models and beliefs by mobilizing people and resources from all corners, cultures, and creeds faster than ever before. We can choose to act locally, nationally, or globally, virtually at the touch of a button." For all our technological efforts to bridge distances and cultures, IMEX said, "we haven't yet found a fool-proof way to artificially replicate the imagination process."

One way planners are doing that today is through a focus on memories. "The goal for event planners is no longer to just put on an event to check a box, but to transform that event into an experience that will make a lasting impact and turn those attendees into deeply engaged prospects and repeat customers," said Rachel Andrews, director of events, Cvent. "To accommodate this, venues and event organizers are pulling out all the stops to ensure they have options that will truly elevate the attendee experience onsite."

For hospitality companies, that means a bigger focus than ever before on facilities as well as creative use of space. Hotel brands, including those under the IHG umbrella, are emphasizing their points of differentiation and the ways they can amp up attendee experience — because the market demands it.

Putting a Premium on Personalization

“Today’s hotel guests arrive with very high expectations for personalization,” said Bill Caswell, principal and hospitality practice leader at North Highland, a consultancy. “The brands and services they interact with in other parts of their daily lives know them better every day, and they expect the same from hotels. With the rise of ‘bleisure’ travel, guests want their travel experiences to include activities that appeal not just to their business travel requirements, but also fulfill their desire to keep up with their health and wellness needs while they are on the road.”

Those consumer preferences are now shaping the way planners are creating and curating events, said Kaplan, of IHG. “Smaller, more intimate groups and events are trending with generally 80 percent of meetings representing groups of 50 people or fewer. This creates more opportunity for collaborative, deeper discussions and engagement.” That trend, Kaplan said, is likely to continue.

In this trend report, we’ll take a deeper look at the innovative tactics that brands are using make events more sustainable. We’ll also consider the fresh ideas that can bring new perspectives into meetings, and share insights from thought leaders about what’s changing in this important industry sector. ♦



Holiday Inn Belfast City Centre

Redefining Sustainability: Going Beyond the Recycling Bin

For years, the concept of “sustainability” in the hospitality industry has been tied up with environmental concerns: Think the elimination of single-use plastics, the reduction of energy use by installing light timers or motion detectors, or minimizing the use of detergents by asking guests to reuse towels. And all those efforts are certainly important to the future of sustainable events.

“Green practices and sustainability measures are a must-have for some organizations based on their values and policies, and suppliers need to emulate those qualities to be considered,” said Jonathan Kaplan, vice president of global sales strategy, IHG.

Yet the sector’s future is dependent on far more than just “greening” the business. Meetings and events — like all sectors of travel — need new participants and a growing pool of potential consumers. New technologies need to be integrated into events without feeling gimmicky. Fresh formats that move beyond the keynote presentation, the panel discussion, and the breakout session must be embraced to help add variety and build engagement (not to mention stoke repeat business for events on annual cycles).

Planners must better manage and mitigate risk, with the help of hospitality and other venue partners. And both host organizations and attendees alike will need to better work with their host communities to generate positive impacts, whether economic, social, or environmental. In all these ways, sustainability is about way more than tossing straws or nixing paper coffee cups — it’s about the future of the sector itself.

“Right now, the focus is on plastics,” said Josh Adams, a meeting planner with Streamlinevents, “but it goes far beyond that. At the end of the day, sustainability is really about leaving the planet in a better place than it is today. How do we take care of the planet above water? How do we take care of the planet below water? How are we ensuring that we’re not contributing to unfair labor practices, for example? How are we enabling gender equality? There are all these other things that fall under ‘sustainability’ that, I think, we’ll eventually tackle.” ♦

Q&A: CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN MEETINGS IS MAKING AN IMPACT



A 19-year veteran of the hospitality industry, Jonathan Kaplan has seen countless meetings and events trends come and go. Now the vice president of global sales strategy at IHG, his responsibilities include innovation in the worldwide meetings space. He spoke with SkiftX about the future of meetings, the importance of community impact, and why personalized attention is key no matter the size of an event.

SkiftX: There's so much change happening in this sector. What are the key trends you're watching most closely?

Kaplan: While the return on investment of face-to-face meetings remains critical, the intangible value of experiences and connections within meetings and events is rising in priority across the globe. Some key

examples include the introduction of group excursion offers, community and charitable giving engagement activities, and creative experiences that aren't typical of traditional boardroom and ballroom events.

We're also seeing meetings becoming more interactive, with larger amounts of time being devoted to communal conversations and discussions. In terms of the planning process, technology is critical. Streamlined sourcing is a rising demand that aligns with the way customers buy consumer goods. Planners are asking for a more transactional model where they can book a meeting for 50 or fewer people with a few clicks on their devices. Seamless execution with real-time support and collaboration is becoming table stakes to ensure customers' needs are met quickly.

When it comes to attendees, what are they looking for — and how can planners meet those needs?

They're looking for a quality space in a great location, and they expect flawless audio-visual equipment and exceptional food and beverage (F&B). Attendees want unique experiences outside of traditional meetings and the ability to connect with both their colleagues and their friends and family back home. They want to know that their time away from the office — and potentially email — to attend the event was worthwhile. Finally, they're looking for more opportunities to extend these trips for personal enjoyment or advancement, which is why hosting meetings in a great location is increasingly more valuable.

How can hotels win new meetings and events business without major investments in facilities?

By focusing on the buying experience for the customer, which starts during the sourcing process and continues from proposal and contract to pre- and post-meeting. The experience and knowledge of the salesperson is everything and will make or break the relationship. They can also find ways to be creative and customize the experience to the customer and the organization. Start by really getting to know the customer and what matters most to them. Many customers are growing tired of the standard, U-shaped conference set-up. As a result, hotels are looking at other areas within the building to create unique locations and highlighting flexible spaces on their channels.

Do you think newer technologies are effective in making meetings and events more successful?

Traditional technologies including telepresence and video conferencing are becoming basic expectations. While newer technologies like real-time polling and virtual reality are entering the mix, it's important that these new technologies support the achievement of the overall objective — otherwise the benefit of using the latest and greatest is lost. Planners should be creative, but they also need to watch out for overengineering. Events needn't be too complicated. Particularly when it comes to VR, meeting planners should make sure the use of the tech is clearly tied to the objective and goals of the meeting so it's supportive not distracting.

When it comes to environmental sustainability, why is it important and what can the industry do better?

The \$120 billion meetings industry generates significant impact on the environment, whether you're thinking about energy use, resources, or

waste. It's all but mandatory for suppliers to drive sustainability measures to be in the consideration set for a customer who keeps these values at their core. A couple examples: Being able to provide to a planner the carbon footprint of a particular meeting — and how the hotel offsets that carbon footprint — demonstrates the ways in which you're helping them achieve their own goals and highlights the values you share. We've also seen hotels finding ways to tailor community impact options to individual customers by leveraging partnerships with local organizations that customers might not otherwise know about.

What's next for meetings and what trends are you keeping a close eye on?

F&B is everything in today's market. The days of lackluster F&B experiences are gone, and attendees are demanding quality, diverse F&B options. The trend toward more experiential meetings and events is only getting stronger, too. Attendees want to experience and learn something new — something that feels local to the destination. They also want places to engage with and network with each other around the meeting. Lastly, customers want to work with hotel teams they trust and that pay attention to the details — these planners still need to look good with their end customer and, just as importantly, to their guests and attendees. ♦



Crowne Plaza Manchester - Oxford Road

BRINGING THE OUTDOORS AND NATURE INTO EVENTS

Among the leading trends in event design these days is bringing nature indoors to help attendees (not to mention event staff) feel a bit more human. “Massage stations, morning yoga sessions, energy-themed breaks midday, and other enhancements that give attendees the opportunity to relax and recharge are now a necessity,” said Andrews, of Cvent. “Offering a blend of indoor and outdoor space is an attraction,” she said, that will make an event stand out.

Perhaps surprisingly, the feel-good potential of natural light, physical activity, and longer breaks that give attendees time to stretch are backed by scientific research that proves these moments enhance learning and even boost creativity.

“I was just at an event last month and five minutes of chair yoga totally changed my attention span,” said Adams, the event planner. “It put me in a more positive mindspace. And activities like these can also build camaraderie with the people you’re with. You’re all doing something positive together and that shifts the level of interaction.”

“Wellness can take a lot of different forms — meeting outside, having walking meetings, having more time for networking, letting people move and get fresh air — but whichever you choose, it’s shown to help people absorb and retain information better,” Adams continued. “You’re spending all this money to fly them in, so you really need to mix it up. It’s been proven that the hour-and-a-half keynote session isn’t going to work.”

Indeed it has. In a series of peer-reviewed studies, researchers at a number of universities have found that “getting out of your comfort zone, exploring new places, and meeting new people are



Kimpton Sawyer Hotel

scientifically proven to improve the odds you’ll have a breakthrough,” according to [a recent Skift report](#). And while it’d be impractical to stage every corporate meeting outdoors, adding elements of the outdoors — a green wall, natural light, fresh food options — can capture a bit of that spark and enhance creativity, these researchers have found.

One other benefit to bringing nature into events? It can help keep attendees off their phones, a perennial challenge for event planners and show runners, [as Skift recently reported](#). “Locking attendees in a ballroom for hours accomplishes nothing,” Christy Lamagna of Strategic Meetings & Events told Skift contributor Rayna Katz. “Breaking learning into smaller segments, catering to different learning styles for multiple generations and learning preferences, and adding breaks that stimulate energy” are all critical for building engagement and, in turn, achieving a meaningful result. ♦

Venues That Are Lightening Up

With some outdoorsy elements, these five facilities are shining a bit brighter.



San Francisco's Moscone Center has [just wrapped](#) a \$551 million renovation that added outdoor walkways and terraces with panoramic views (and plenty of fresh air) to the major convention site that now ranks among the largest in the U.S.

The Miami Beach Convention Center completed a major refit last fall, which added more floor space as well as massive windows to let light stream in. The project aims to achieve LEED Silver certification thanks in part to better energy efficiency.



The largest InterContinental hotel in the Americas, InterContinental Los Angeles Downtown, opened inside the first LEED Gold Certified building in the neighborhood, which is also the tallest skyscraper on the West Coast at 1,100 feet, encompassing 73 stories. The 889-room hotel, with nearly 100,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor event space, is outfitted with advanced technologies including building orientation, day-lighting, high-performance glazing, and thermal energy storage, all of which contribute to the building's reduced energy use.

In New York City, The Shed's Bloomberg Building is a multidisciplinary arts center that can also host private events under an innovative, translucent polymer shell designed by Diller Scofidio + Renfro, lead architect, and Rockwell Group, collaborating architect, that lets natural light filter in. As part of the larger Hudson Yards development, it also sits right next to the High Line, the wildly popular elevated park.



Pittsburgh's David L. Lawrence Convention Center was one of the world's first to be purposely built to meet LEED standards. It currently holds platinum certification, the highest possible, thanks in part to the daylight and views the riverfront facility enjoys.

A FOCUS ON FESTIVALIZATION: THE SHIFT FROM MEETINGS TO MOMENTS



Kimpton Hotel Monaco Washington DC

While sustainability is one popular buzzword in meetings, another related concept is hot on its heels. Festivalization is on trend – and it represents a significant shift for the sector. It follows from changes in the travel industry more broadly, which has seen a swing to experiences, rather than souvenirs, becoming the new social currency. Millennials in particular value what they can do much more than what they can buy. Hospitality brands large and small are rethinking the way they approach this new consumer mindset, activating lobbies, partnering with pioneering restaurant operators, and developing new ways of explaining surrounding neighborhood.

By tapping into these broader consumer trends, the meetings and events sector can extend its relevance,

capture new attendees, and deepen connections with those who already attend functions.

How is it working in practice? Working with renowned restaurant partners was key for Lightstone Group, a hotel developer in New York City. For one recent project, Lightstone tapped the family-owned Antica Pesa restaurant group to provide both an all-day cafe as well as a fine-dining concept, in partnership with Tao Group. While there may be countless hotel dining rooms with Italian menus, this project promises something different, a New York Times restaurant columnist recently observed: “The food,” wrote Florence Fabricant in March, “is classic Italian, with some alluring highlights like gnocchi fritto, fried dough served here with mortadella and Parmesan

foam; pappardelle with wild boar; and swordfish with cherry tomatoes, eggplant and basil cooked together in a jar.” It’s a fresh spin on hotel dining and a differentiator for the property, which is actively working to secure [small meetings business](#).

When it comes to activities nearby, numerous hotel groups are thinking about meeting attendees and business travelers more generally. “Many hotel brands are already expanding their local and experiential offerings,” said Caswell, the hospitality practice leader at North Highland. “These will naturally become part of what they provide as part of their meeting and event offerings.”

To take one example, staff at the Crowne Plaza Atlanta Perimeter at Ravinia in Atlanta offer guests personalized advice on the best ways to see local attractions — like the Georgia Aquarium and The National Center for Civil and Human Rights — as well as their tips on the best shops nearby. Another example: Kimpton Hotels & Restaurants nationwide make local neighborhoods easier to access through a convenient and free cycle sharing program in partnership with Public Bikes.

Rethinking ‘Return on Investment’

Moments also matter to brands and attendees that are eager to make a difference. Yes, “return on investment” is still important, but the definition of “return” has expanded to mean much more than direct financial impact.

One way organizations are choosing to rethink returns is by emphasizing programming based on the concept of [Creating Shared Value](#), as described in a landmark 2011 Harvard Business Review article. The concept, as authors Mark R. Kramer and Michael E. Porter wrote, is this: “Companies could bring business and society back together if they redefined their purpose as creating ‘shared value’—generating economic value in a way that also produces value for society by addressing its challenges. Firms can do this in three ways: by reconceiving products and markets, redefining productivity in the value chain, and building supportive industry clusters near their locations.”

Organizations are demonstrating their embrace of this concept is by giving attendees the opportunity to go hands-on, Caswell said. “The need for greater interaction among attendees is being reflected in

InterContinental Dubai - Festival City





Voco Gold Coast

more active entertainment options including local cultural adventure, local dining, and volunteer or charity events intertwined with meetings,” he said. Hospitality executives are seeing the same thing, including a big uptick in “community and charitable giving engagement activities,” said Kaplan, of IHG. “Team building activities that tie in charitable and community engagement elements have always been a good experience. These activities are even more in demand these days because they can fuel engagement and camaraderie.”

Examples of such initiatives include two partnerships that IHG has with Clean the World in the Americas and Soap for Hope in Asia. Through those efforts, “nearly 450 IHG-branded hotels have collectively prevented more than 550,000 pounds of soap from going to waste,” an IHG spokesperson said. “Instead of heading to landfills, the soap has been recycled into nearly three million new bars for redistribution to communities who need it the most.”

Another IHG project is aimed squarely at meetings and events planners as well as corporate travel managers. “We know that sustainability is important to our corporate clients, and every year, more travel buyers ask us for information about the environmental footprint of our hotels, so that they can make more sustainable choices in their travel procurement,” an IHG spokesperson said. That’s one reason the company partnered in 2016 with the Global Business Travel Association (GBTA) to take “a leading role in developing sustainability benchmarking tools that support travel buyers to assess their managed travel and sustainability programs,” the spokesperson continued. “In 2018, almost 60 percent of our business accounts asked for this information, such as carbon footprint and waste diversion rates, using the GBTA corporate responsibility module.”

These initiatives and hands-on programs — which positively impact communities, which generate measurable returns, and which engage attendees — are sure to rise in popularity. “People crave new ways to engage,” said Andrews, of Cvent. ♦

Q&A: THE FRONT-LINE VIEW OF MAKING SUSTAINABLE MEETINGS WORK



In his role as director of sales at Crowne Plaza Atlanta Perimeter at Ravinia, Tim Cahill is in constant communication with both event planners and attendees. He spoke with SkiftX about the real-world challenges of making meetings sustainable, the trends he's seeing in the business, and the importance of staying flexible.

SkiftX: How are attendee tastes changing when it comes to meetings and events?

Cahill: The greatest change is with F&B. It's now incumbent on us to provide a robust selection of offerings. The more we orient menus toward healthy and lighter options — and the more we're inclusive of restricted diets — the more we'll properly serve the evolving nature of attendees. They're getting younger, and F&B is a critical touchpoint for the younger guest. We consistently field requests for customized offerings; it's very rare for our planners to opt for a standard menu.

Good technology is now table stakes. High speed internet, good connectivity, and access to power are must haves. It's now assumed that we will provide good, high-speed internet — not just the base option but a higher level of performance. Our internet solution, IHG Connect, enables us to deliver on this.

Lastly, they look for a hotel team that is well-trained with local expertise. They must know the attendees well enough to understand their needs and be prepared to meet them. The whole experience for the attendee should be absolutely seamless.

How important is it that the meetings sector make environmental sustainability and community impact key parts of events in the future?

It's of the utmost importance. And it's not just about being responsible — it's also about knowing the customer. They want to know we're good citizens, even down to simple things like not over-printing or working to reducing waste. They also appreciate that, if we can't meet a particular need for some reason, we're transparent about it.

We've seen an increase in requests for proposals (RFPs) asking about sustainability and metrics. Our customers want to know that green initiatives are important to the hotel, so they want to know that we've lowered our carbon footprint, that we recycle, and that we can reuse things like badges. So we're having these dialogues with customers about what's important to each of them.

What specific environmental or community impact initiatives have you been impressed by recently?

The human element of hospitality is what moves me, and I'm especially moved by initiatives to help local food banks. We need to have gratitude every day, and when you see how to help those less fortunate, especially kids, it's so important. Our property also led a drive for hurricane victims in Puerto Rico. Our General Manager Sharon Kilmartin partnered with IHG at the corporate level to rally our team. Together, more than 60 IHG volunteers offered more than 500 hours of time, filling a 53-foot shipping container with vital supplies. It was delivered to the InterContinental San Juan, and that team distributed its contents to colleagues at our five Puerto Rico hotels. The effort also involved IHG employees who assembled more than 2,200 Clean the World hygiene kits. It was incredible to see how much helping others brought us all together.

How important are safety and security considerations for meeting planners and have their expectations changed in recent years?

Like with sustainability, we see more and more RFPs that ask us about our practices, that ask for a deeper understanding of what the staff is like, if there are security cameras, what's our film retention policy, and so on. So we'll help potential clients visualize our secure environment. It's about a dialogue with our customers and ensuring we meet their needs.

When it comes to creativity in events, what are some of the most interesting experiences you'd like to see more of?

I always love live concerts. When a brand hires known talent to perform, attendees feel very valued, and there is a lot of excitement around the event.

During the grand opening of another hotel, we had an artist sketch the Atlanta skyline on a temporary wall. Attendees and guests were encouraged to come and paint to fill in the colors. It drew people in, and everyone interacted with one other. It brought the event to life in a truly engaging way. It was so successful that we adapted the idea for monthly customer events.

One other idea — and this isn't as innovative a concept as it once was — but I really enjoy smartphones to glean instantaneous input from attendees. Live trivia can be fun and engaging, and polls can give immediate feedback that helps make business decisions.

Any other technologies you see making a bigger impact on meetings in the future?

At the end of the day, we're still a human business. Personal interaction and excellent service can never be replaced. We win by challenging ourselves to make the customer feel better than our competition can.

To take one small example, we've installed a digital message board that can tell our guests where our shuttles are. It sounds simple, but this service is a great enhancement to the attendee experience. It gives them the option to choose how and where they want to go — and perhaps opt for our services over those of a rideshare. It's already getting great feedback. ♦



Crowne Plaza Atlanta Perimeter at Ravinia

MANAGING RISK AND KEEPING EVENTS SAFE



The massive size of the global meetings and events business means that the sector, like others in the travel industry, has become both a source of risk and a target for outside actors. These days, planners and host venues alike need to place risk management and attendee safety at the forefront of everything they do, industry sources said.

“It’s absolutely critical,” said Kaplan, of IHG. “The demands on meeting planners have greatly changed. Organizations are even more concerned with the safety and security of their travelers than ever before.”

At the same time, security and risk-management practices shouldn’t impact attendee experiences, sources told Skift. “Duty of care and emergency preparedness should run quietly and seamlessly in the background,” Padraic Gilligan, the chief marketing officer of the Society for Incentive Travel Excellence, [told Skift contributor Allan Leibowitz](#). “It need not

directly impinge on the program itself other than in the reassuring security briefings and communications” issued ahead of an event, Gilligan said. Event managers can integrate layers of tools — including “access control and bag inspections” as well as “wider use of electronic chip technology in event lanyards,” Leibowitz reported — to increase the security quotient of events without inconveniencing attendees.

Climate change represents another threat, both in terms of acute danger on-site and in the travel disruptions that it can cause. While local weather conditions and individual catastrophes like hurricanes or floods aren’t the same as climate change, the travel sector is “highly vulnerable” to the latter phenomenon, [according to the UNWTO](#). “Threats for the sector are diverse, including direct and indirect impacts such as more extreme weather events; increasing insurance costs and safety concerns; water shortages; biodiversity loss; and damage to assets and attractions

at destinations,” according to the agency. “Continued climate-driven degradation and disruption to cultural and natural heritage will negatively affect the tourism sector, reduce the attractiveness of destinations, and lessen economic opportunities for local communities.” There are no easy solutions to these challenges, though the UNWTO did recommend that “lowering energy consumption” is one positive step that the hospitality sector can — and should — adopt.

Finally, stakeholders’ concerns around both data security and data privacy continue to be elevated due to the prevalence of highly sophisticated hackers and hacking tool sets. In addition, increased regulation as a result of new laws in Europe (including the General Data Protection Regulation) and in the U.S. (the forthcoming California Consumer Privacy Act) has put strict limits on the sharing of personal data.

“The requirement for high speed and secure access to the internet and the ability to stream content directly from any device at any time must be balanced with protecting the rights of the individuals,” said David Jordan, IHG’s chief information security officer. “Hotel brands working together with meeting planners must provide a faster network environment with enhanced protective and detective controls to better ensure the confidentiality and availability of sensitive information.” ♦



WHAT COMES NEXT FOR MEETINGS AND EVENTS

Without a doubt, challenges for the sector will demand bold solutions and creative thinking. Yet the future of meetings and events remains incredibly bright, planners said.

One key reason why is that digitally native millennials and Generation Z attendees have embraced the importance of gathering face to face, said Lindsay Ezykowich, a meeting planner for Forbes who spearheads the brand's Under 30 events — including one event that draws more than 10,000 participants. "We've noticed that our Under 30 community is really prominent across all of our events [not just those for a younger cohort]," she said. "It's really cool: They'll come to our events and they'll find each other, collaborate with each other, and they'll grow their business using those connections. It just shows how much we, at Forbes, are invested in our individual communities and making sure we have Under 30 visibility, showcasing what they are doing."

Getting new attendees into the world of meetings and events is key for long-term sector health. Perhaps surprisingly, these newcomers are largely there for the same reasons as everyone else, Ezykowich said. "Honestly, we don't go into an event targeting 40 to 60 year olds, [thinking] we have to make it a certain way," she said, "or that we have to do things differently for 20 to 40 year olds, or whatever it is." At the end of the day, everyone is looking for a fun and memorable experience, she said, plus some demonstrable return on investment, however an attendee wants to define that return.

Yet others in the sector do forecast a shift to younger attendees over the long term. "Millennials plan to attend more events than Gen X or Baby Boomer peers over the course of the next year," reported Skift's Andrew Sheivachman, citing a Cvent and Edelman survey.



Even Hotel Seattle - South Lake Union

Regardless of age, attendees are fundamentally about the basics, planners said. "It's really important for our audience to see that we're helping businesses grow," Ezykowich said. "People want to be part of a community. There's something about gathering in person that makes you feel like you're part of a community, that you're more connected to the individuals in that community, and that you'll all find more opportunities."

For Adams, whose client helped build that Boys & Girls Club in Kauai, making meetings sustainable and growing the overall business aren't contradictory pursuits. In fact, building in community impact, considering environmental stewardship, and enticing new audiences are three factors that will make the meetings and events sector better than ever.

"Visibility is going to help shift people's actions and attitudes in the future. And while you can't make wholesale changes overnight, I think we are seeing some major, major shifts," Adams said. "There's really nothing more powerful than being able to look someone in the eyes and say, 'I hear you, I acknowledge you, and I appreciate you.'" ♦

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ “IHG is emerging as a leader in hospitality tech innovation and developing itself into a nimbler, more diversified company,” according to a recent Skift report, and one major factor in the company’s continued evolution is an embrace of meetings and events. This huge segment of the travel industry, already valued at \$120 billion a year in the U.S. alone, represents major growth potential.
- ◆ A number of considerations beyond “return on investment” are coming to the forefront for planners and attendees. Among them are environmental sustainability concerns, risk management, and community impact.
- ◆ Sustainability is about more than just “greening” meetings. Planners and attendees alike are demanding “more human” events, with wellness programming, reasonable schedules, and top-flight food and beverage options.
- ◆ Festivalization describes a new way of thinking about meetings, a transformation of the event from obligation to experience. By tapping into contemporary consumer preferences, planners and venues can entice a new generation of attendees.
- ◆ The massive size of the global meetings and events business means that the sector, like others in the travel industry, has become both a source of risk and a target for outside actors. Addressing planner concerns is “absolutely critical,” said Jonathan Kaplan, vice president of global sales strategy at IHG.
- ◆ Communicating the social impact of events and managing their environmental impact are two ways that planners and hospitality companies alike are working to secure the sustainable future of the meetings sector. “We as human beings realize our greatest potential when we come together,” said one planner.

Kimpton Rowan Palm Springs Hotel



ABOUT SKIFT

Skift is the largest intelligence platform in travel, providing media, insights, marketing to key sectors of the industry. Through daily news, research, podcasts, and Skift Global Forum conferences, Skift deciphers and defines the trends that matter to the marketers, strategists, and technologists shaping the industry.

SkiftX is Skift's in-house content marketing studio, working collaboratively with partners like Adobe, Airbnb, Hyatt, Lyft, Mastercard, and many more on custom projects to engage the world's largest audience of travel influencers and decision makers.

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ABOUT IHG

IHG® (InterContinental Hotels Group) [LON:IHG, NYSE:IHG (ADRs)] is a global organization with a broad portfolio of hotel brands, including Six Senses Hotels Resorts Spas, Regent Hotels & Resorts, InterContinental® Hotels & Resorts, Kimpton® Hotels & Restaurants, Hotel Indigo®, Even Hotels®, Hualuxe® Hotels and Resorts, Crowne Plaza® Hotels & Resorts, Voco™ Hotels, Holiday Inn®, Holiday Inn Express®, Holiday Inn Club Vacations®, Holiday Inn Resorts®, Avid™ hotels, Staybridge Suites®, and Candlewood Suites®.

IHG franchises, leases, manages, or owns more than 5,600 hotels and nearly 843,000 guest rooms in more than 100 countries, with over 1,900 hotels in its development pipeline. IHG also manages IHG® Rewards Club, our global loyalty program, which has more than 100 million enrolled members.

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