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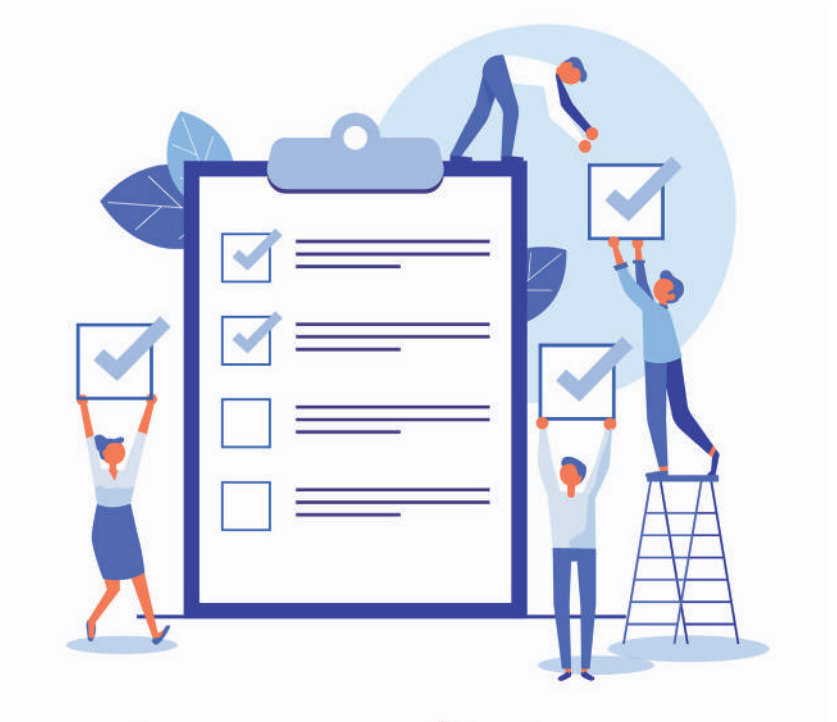
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COVID-19: **Eight Facts** Associations Need to Understand for **Successful Future Meetings**

The pandemic of the last year has left no global industry untouched, least of all the meetings industry. What were once the cornerstone of any association's activities, conferences and congresses all but came to a screeching halt in 2020-2021. Associations and their usual organising partners, including PCOs, venues and sponsors were left scrambling to redefine their meetings and, consequently, their mission. As the world ever slowly gets back to normal, where do association meetings stand, and what can associations expect for the near and, possibly, far future? We asked several partners of the World PCO Alliance to offer their insight.

1. Progress will be slow

While everyone is eager to return to large, international gatherings, Alliance partners warn that the transition will be slow. **Alain Pittet** of **Italy's Ega worldwide congresses** says that he is expecting international in-person events to only begin again in early 2022. **Andre Vietor** of **Spain's Bco Congressos** says that they do not foresee any face-to-face meetings

until the end of 2021, and while he is slightly more optimistic about 2022, "uncertainty persists." For **Gregg Talley** of **Talley Management Group Inc.**, hybrid events are planned for most clients in the third and fourth quarters of 2021, depending on audience, location and local restrictions. As he points out, "It's still a challenge assessing attendee expectations and attitudes, as things keep changing." **Caroline Knies** from **Sweden's Meetagain** says they are organising their first hybrid meeting in November, and **Kitty Wong** from **Taiwan's K&A International** is also optimistic about the fourth quarter of 2021, as more and more people get vaccinated.

2. Member engagement is the current focus

Without a major meeting in the calendar, associations have invested their effort into communicating with membership. "Not celebrating an announced meeting was the least of an association's concerns," says Vietor. "Creating a sense of community was key, either through ordinary newsletters, social media, webinars or other channels, such as "working groups" focused



on a specific topic. Knies's clients have also increased their activity on social media and are sending out more frequent newsletters.

3. Going online

All Alliance partners cite online events as the compromise that has allowed associations the ability to continue fostering relationships with members and sponsors. The digitalisation has not been restricted to meetings, either. Several partners have seen associations deliver webinars as a source of continued education for members as well as important content. But the shift online has not been an easy one for all associations. "Going virtual was the natural choice, but it was a giant step, as they were not prepared for it," says Vietor. "And I mean it in every sense: mentally and technologically. In some ways, we can call it a non-voluntary tech revolution."

While Vietor and many other PCOs have been urging associations for years to adopt innovative technological solutions, they were reluctant. Vietor points to several reasons, including an aged board member structure, an inability to see the advantages and benefits, as well as the financial bottom line. **Noel Mitchell of Ireland's Keynote PCO** has observed many associations incorporating a digital element (as well as an increase in newsletters) but feels that the full potential of technology remains unexplored.

4. Hybrid + Creativity is the new formula – at least for a while

Nina Freysen-Pretorius from South African partner **The Conference Company** says that all their conferences have had to convert to hybrid or fully virtual, with a number of elements to render the meetings more dynamic. "We like the Events Air solution with 3D exhibition ability," says Freysen-Pretorius. "We also make sure the meetings feature live and pre-recorded programmes as well as

networking engagement opportunities." Knies and her team have also gone all digital, with a mixture of live and pre-recorded sessions, and providing all recorded sessions on-demand. "Variety is important in the digital format. A nice mix of panel discussions, interviews and seminars works well," says Knies.

Vietor has observed some associations using virtual meetings as an opportunity to deepen the association's relationship with its members. "Many virtual conferences are offered free of charge to members." Equally important, says Vietor, is to establish closer partnerships on an institutional level. "This was a big shift for some associations that traditionally approach companies for congress-related sponsorship only." Even when we do eventually shift back to the classic formula of in-person meetings, the hybrid format can still be ideal to discuss current "hot" topics which cannot wait ten or more months for the live conference. But **Jean-Paul de Lavison of Canada's JPdL International Inc.** points out that there is a cost element to the hybrid format that associations need to take into account. "There is the 'studio' production, whose costs need to supplement the face-to-face meeting production. Virtual requires an approach different from face-to-face, so there is the implication of double work."

5. Associations need to think "small"

Several Alliance partners predict that those events returning to the in-person format will do so on a smaller scale. "In-person attendance will be much smaller in size," says **Nancy Tan** from **Singapore's ACE:Dayton's Direct**. "An initial phase would be to target strategic countries. Then, as global vaccination rates increase, we can see meetings opening up to the entire world." Talley agrees. "I'm seeing more 'micro meetings' and smaller events in multiple cities."

Pittet says the multi-hub model can work well, where attendees are scattered across continents. There is a conference chair at the centre to manage the flow of the meeting, and every continent (time zone) has a smaller in-person meeting which is connected virtually to one big (hybrid) conference. The predicted smaller scale has obvious implications for venues. "We anticipate that the overall required amount of space at a venue is going to shrink in the years 2022 and 2023, as physical attendance might be less than in pre-COVID years," says Vietor.

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6. Be prepared for higher expectations

One of the biggest unknowns is how readily people will begin attending live events. How will travel restrictions develop in the short-term, as well as the overall perception of the value of an in-person conference versus a virtual option? According to Mitchell, “This is why it is so important to clearly present the benefits of the physical meeting, while still enabling some level of virtual participation. The same considerations will need to be given to sponsors.” Attendees are also expressing higher expectations of what an association can provide, in terms of education and the content congress online. These expectations are also affecting venues, which are being asked to offer state-of-the-art technological solutions.

Another factor to consider is that associations will be competing for attendees’ time and money like never before, especially in the post-COVID reality of potential lower budgets and attendee willingness to travel. The Return on Relevance and Experience will have to meet a high bar for employees to get approval and to be willing to travel. “Associations have to entice attendees and deliver like never before. This means they will be looking for more ideas and examples from destinations and production partners,” says Talley.

7. Flexibility and safety are the key destination criteria

According to Nancy Tan, every association should examine the following criteria when assessing a destination: strong infrastructure, high level of hospitality and telecommunications networks, and a high vaccination rate. Flexible contracts are also becoming the norm. With nobody in a position to predict where we will be in a year or two, associations are considering future in-person meetings with a layer of caution. Many associations are delaying contract signing with both venues and PCOs, and asking them to be flexible with regards to cancellation and

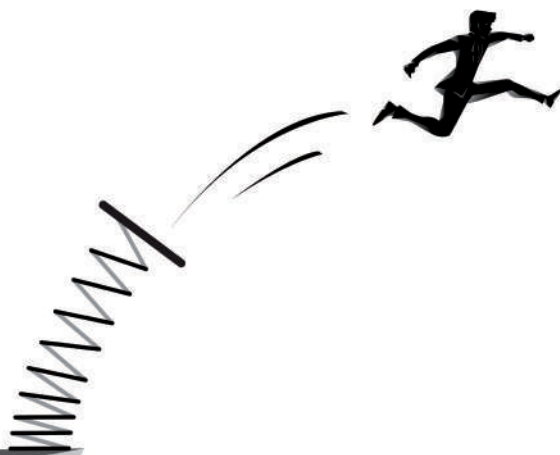
postponement policies. Says Pittet, “Cancellation terms must provide lower costs if participant numbers drop, and there should be no cancellation fee if a conference has to be postponed due to governmental restrictions.”

Knies sees other destination criteria gaining in perceived value, including sustainability, diversity, ethics, safety, digitalisation, and cooperation. Talley adds mission alignment to the list. “Basically, how flexible and cohesive is the destination to help us make this work in an uncertain time and place?” Freysen-Pretorius also encourages associations to examine a destination’s commitment to the conference topic, along with safe access to the destination and competitive pricing.

8. PCOs are more valuable than ever

PCOs have always made it their job to offer astute guidance in selecting destinations, approaching partners and negotiating supplier contracts, and this expertise has probably never been more valuable. “The PCO can accurately describe/secure the best from the venue and destination while also presenting the path to success to the association client, the delegate, and sponsors,” says Mitchell. PCOs also enjoy longstanding relationships on the local level that can be leveraged, particularly now. “We are well connected with the local government agencies as well as different industry stakeholders locally and have the know-how to execute the events better than the associations,” says Nancy Tan.

With the right PCO by its side, an association can navigate all these changes knowing that their best interests and finances are at the top of the list. “During this crisis, PCOs will be the ones who will be helping associations negotiate with venues and contractors,” says Talley. “We have broader knowledge and experience in this new space than any single client, and we have the relationships that will be even more critical for successful events.”



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