

## CONVENTION CENTERS:

# EXPERIENTIAL MEETINGS KEEPING CONVENTION CENTRES RELEVANT

By Carrie Paolone, CMP, CEM, CVP



We are currently living in a digital era where communicating and connecting are supposed to be significantly easier than decades ago. Everyone walks around today with a smartphone in hand, making messaging quick and response time demands higher. For all that technology does to bring people together, we also have to admit how much it can distance us from real human contact. So,

what can convention centres do to encourage more in-person engagement, and what would this look like? Relaying their attendees' wishes, the clients at our facility regularly ask for our advice on creating experiential meetings with a focus on quality face-to-face interaction, keeping Convention Centres relevant. There are new trends to help make this happen with innovative and unique meeting set ups, making the centre an extension of the destination and helping people get social.

### EXPERIENTIAL MEETING SPACE SETUPS

Thirty years ago, traditional meetings and events included classroom style setups in rooms with a stage and a screen, and maybe an exhibit space with conventional booths. While some of this still applies today, convention centres have become social hubs that must also adapt to be more flexible and responsive. If you want these spaces to be perceived for their learning potential, as is often the case, then room setups and furniture placement need to project that image. For instance, consider hosting small breakouts in pre-function areas, and utilize casual furniture to promote friendly conversation or intensive one-on-one learning.

On many occasions, we have worked with groups to create relaxing social areas on tradeshow floors, complete with comfortable couches and sofa chairs where people can slow down, unwind, and conduct a little business. We have also welcomed the opportunity for our clients to utilize unconventional meeting spaces, like in-house kitchens to do interactive cooking demonstrations and outdoor lounges to hold early morning yoga sessions. These alternatives, like the use of café style booths instead of traditional booths, help to create more dynamic experiential learning environments that engage the senses and simulate real-world conditions. Rather than reproduce the same old tired setups, convention centres can really lead the way in breaking with tradition and injecting creativity into the “big empty box.”

### CONVENTION CENTRE AS AN EXTENSION OF THE DESTINATION

In Niagara Falls, we tend to be pretty famous for our big waterfall. Much like us, we have to assume every convention centre has at least one major attraction that motivates planners to choose their destination. Before we even begin to sell our convention centre and its fea-

tures, our approach is always to present the destination of Niagara Falls as an attractive option to host a meeting or event. Once we've accomplished that goal, our job then is to demonstrate that the destination can be seen, felt, and experienced while inside our building. As big and beautiful as a building can be, it won't feel like anything special unless it connects in some way to the place that houses it. An extension of the destination, if you will. Our entire building was designed with the destination in mind. Floor-to-ceiling windows bring views of the landscape in, and our interior colour scheme reflects a natural landscape of blue river waters, grey rock formations and wooded field crops from the Niagara Fruit Belt.

With respect to food and beverage, our chef injects as much of the destination and its ingredients into his menus as possible. With all the amazing local products we have in our region, it's a must for attendees to experience cuisine unique to Niagara. To top it all off, being located in the heart of wine country with more than 120 wineries within a 50 km radius is a huge plus for convention attendees. We frequently invite winery representatives to receptions and events, where they get the chance to offer samples, guided tastings, and teachings of the different grape varietals and growing methods used throughout Niagara. At least this way, attendees who aren't lucky enough to explore the destination can say they got to enjoy flavours from the region. It was so re-

freshing to see the same thing done at IAVM's VenueConnect this year, with lunch offerings that made us feel more immersed in Chicago food culture.

### GETTING SOCIAL

Getting social and networking are one of the most important benefits of attending conferences. Networking with peers and making those face-to-face connections must be the most important part of a conference/event. Creating time and activities for social connections is key to the success of a conference or association. Technology if used effectively can aid in bring-

ing people closer together. All events are now using of hashtags and conference apps to push information out in a social way. This helps to make everyone in attendance at the event feel a part of something. Screens are being added throughout the conference space for twitter walls. We are often seeing photo op areas becoming required as part of meeting set ups with a backdrop that is Instagram-able. People want to come together and get in the picture with their friends, to share with the world the experience they are having. Creating these opportunities gives attendees a sense of belonging greater than just attending a meeting.

We are so lucky to work in the venue industry, where we can be a part of bringing people together. In this ever-changing digital age we live in, it is important to still maintain the human connection and value of face to face meetings. Convention centres play a big role and will continue to be a vehicle that can create these connections. Offering more experiential meetings and working with trends will ensure Convention Centres stay relevant. **FM**

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