



2017 Meeting and Event Trends

Simple Steps to 'Amp-Up' Your Next Meeting or Event

We've combined the best of what we are seeing, hearing and reading, to bring you a comprehensive list of trends and idea starters to help you kick your meetings and events up a notch.

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Brands need to start
“storydoing.”

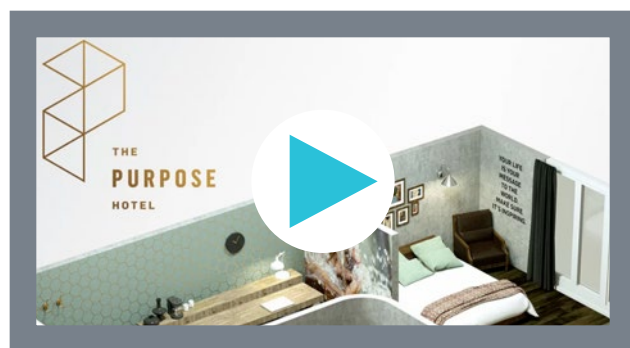
1. Co-Creation

We’ve all become *storytellers* with unlimited platforms to publish on. But actually allowing humans to interact with your brand and co-create in a real way will become the storytelling of the future. It’s time to “blow up” the conference model. In an interview with *Convene Magazine*, Charlie Melcher, founder of the FoST Summit (Future of Storytelling), said that’s exactly what he did to create a community and allow participants to learn from one another. “We’re not here to just attend the Future of Storytelling. Together, we are here to create it.” In a traditional conference setup, the speaker might mingle with the audience at a networking event; but with co-creation, the speaker is engaging in conversation during their “presentation” and is learning just as much from the audience.

Design and innovation consultancy, Fjord, believes that brands need to start “storydoing.” Take LEGO for example. Its Ideas website allows for the submission of new LEGO creations that are voted on, reviewed by LEGO and, if approved, sold and marketed worldwide. Original creators even receive a percentage of the sales! Here’s an example of a co-created product that sold out and another that received the required votes and went under review.



When people are invited to co-create, they become inextricably invested in the content and outcome. They become stakeholders in the experience. An example of this is Jeremy Cowart’s Purpose Hotel. He began crowdfunding his passion-project on Kickstarter, and promises a hotel that will create better lives for others. According to Cowart, “Your life inside the building improves the world around it. Everything you interact with will be stunningly designed and will actively benefit great causes.” The Purpose Hotel now has over four thousand “co-founders” who have financially backed the project (some more than others), and whose photos will appear as artwork around the properties.



When you give participants something tangible to partake in, a benefit granted by face-to-face interaction, you can be confident they'll take away a valuable lesson or lasting memory.

How to Co-Create:

When you think of participants as stakeholders, it's easy to acknowledge that their input matters. And while you can wait until after the event to send a survey, you've already missed an opportunity to make your event more valuable in real-time. When you give participants something tangible to partake in, a benefit granted by face-to-face interaction, you can be confident they'll take away a valuable lesson or lasting memory.

- **Crowdsource:** Companies are using social media for instant feedback at meetings and beyond. Airbnb's CEO took to Twitter to crowdsource ideas on what to launch in 2017 and BuzzFeed held a dance battle on Facebook Live that adapted according to the comments from viewers. Utilize this concept at B2B events by gathering topics from suppliers, employees and customers through the event registration website, private Facebook groups or your intranet.



- **Shared Experience:** The term teambuilding has gotten a bad rap. But when done well, its effectiveness can't be denied. These shared experiences can be the perfect opportunity to allow hands-on creating and even tie to a company CSR initiative. Collaborative projects give participants a feeling of accomplishment, contribution and altruism. Bring your group together to build prosthetic hands for those without them or beehives to combat colony collapse disorder.



- **Art:** When most people think about creation, they think art. Meetings are a great place to put this into action – no design degree required. Create a color mural like the one at SXSW,ⁱⁱ or a hashtag picture mosaic by Lusterⁱⁱⁱ. Besides immediate engagement, the visuals will live on as they are shared on social media.



2. Convergence

Convergence transpires when disparate elements gradually change until they become similar or develop a common thread. A modern example of convergence is the innovative obsession with the Internet of Things: non-related objects are becoming connected through the Internet. Similarly, in meeting content, an approach focused on convergence can help connect participants in new ways and on new levels. Diverse topics and interactions also help broaden appeal to new audiences by engaging participants on a personal and professional level. No event does convergence better than SXSW, where music, film and interactive experiences help foster creative growth and inspire new connections. Another example is the San Francisco event, Outside Lands,^{iv} where local chefs, DJs and magicians meet onstage for an interactive culinary experience.

An even easier way to visualize the concept is what Skift calls festivalization: “The formula behind these events is generally the same: Pull together the most inspiring minds in business, tech, media, science, education, art and culture inside a cross-section of colorful venues and collaborative spaces. Then hit “blend” with integrated online and offline catalysts, virtual and augmented reality experiences, startup pitch competitions, live music performances and art exhibits, and local offsite experiences to create spontaneous collisions between participants in unprecedented ways.”^v

How to Festival-ize Your Meeting:

- **The Attendees:** This type of conference design attracts curious minds but can be a shock for those not primed for it. Occasionally, certain preparation – whether a mindset shift or actual research – could be required so that all participants can get the most out of the experience. An unwilling or unequipped attendee can also throw off the vibe for others.
- **The Content:** A multidisciplinary approach is paramount. Diverse topics allow for participants to explore different interests. Perhaps even more importantly, diverse speaker and participant backgrounds help eliminate confirmation bias and upend closed-minded thinking.



- **The Activities:** Especially in a B2B context, inserting a little fun will go a long way. Consumer events are known for their entertainment qualities, but business people want to enjoy themselves just the same. Take for example Oracle’s event, OpenWorld, which featured a giant ball pit, encouraging attendees to “immerse themselves in the cloud.”^{vi} You can add activities just for fun, or for a purpose. Encourage teambuilding by organizing a “Food Truck Face-Off” or ease the stress of networking by planning a cocktail mixology lesson – “Mix and Mingle,” if you will.

Inspiration can hit anytime, anywhere. And when participants have a chance to expose themselves to endless possibilities in conversation and relationship building, there's no telling where their ideas might take them.



Change of behavior is the only mechanism known to mankind that creates value in the event.

3. Design with Participants as the Focus

Not just about picking pretty centerpieces anymore, event design and design thinking are exploding as hot topics in the industry. Meghan Trainor might say it's "All about that bass," but we say it's "All about that change!" According to Elling Hamso, Managing Partner at Event ROI Institute, "Change of behavior is the only mechanism known to mankind that creates value in the event."^{viii} If this is truly the case, then we have to become experts in the psychology behind behavior change.

How to Implement Design Thinking:

Meetings and events offer the perfect opportunity to put design thinking concepts into practice and actually see an immediate transformation and prolonged return on investment. Anyone can employ design thinking. While there are many methodologies, here are five simple phases of design thinking as defined by Christopher Isak at techacute.com,^{viii} and how you can use it for your next event.

- 1. Empathize:** Understand the needs and requirements of all stakeholders. When design thinking for product creation, this includes immersing yourself as the user of the product. For meetings and events, this requires stepping into the role of event participant and identifying a participant touchpoint journey. Think of how you can take the participants on a transformative journey by picturing pre-event excitement, a surprising reveal at the event and post-event reflection.
- 2. Define:** Prepare a meaningful and actionable problem statement. Clearly articulate the purpose of your meeting and the behavior you are trying to change or create. This will serve as a lens through which to filter future program ideas. Do they detract from or support the primary goal? In some cases this filter might be considered the meeting theme.
- 3. Ideate:** Think and brainstorm for possible solutions. This includes meeting content, activities, transportation, communication and all elements that will logistically make the event happen, but also ways to enhance the touchpoints. More on this later when we outline event design.

4. Prototype: Build a conceptual, yet functional, solution. Some of the ideas generated in the last phase might be incredible, but impossible to pull off. Meetings and events all have budget and logistical constraints, so compile a plan that's as close to reasonable as possible.

5. Test: Try the prototype, let others try it and gather feedback. With live meetings and events, you'll only truly be able to test your prototype at showtime. Gather feedback in real-time or with post-event surveys to see what you can change next time.

According to Linda Naiman, founder of Creativity at Work, "Design Thinking draws upon logic, imagination, intuition, and systemic reasoning, to explore possibilities of what could be – and to create desired outcomes that benefit the end user (the customer)."^{ix} Many planners are wired to think in a chronological sequence. When in the design thinking mentality, this inclination should be set aside and the focus set on possibilities rather than limits – time or otherwise. Only when an imaginative approach is implemented, can magic be created.

How to Design Events with Participants as the Focus:

Colors, patterns and themes evolve, but experiential and human-centered design is not going away.

Celebrity event designer Preston Bailey warns against following too many fads because it can stifle creativity. We do, however, feel obliged to tell you that there is a relaxed transition from Shabby Chic to Modern^x manifesting in event furniture, and the 2017 Pantone color is Greenery.^{xi}



Now back to the timeless advice. The best designed experiences exist at the intersection of six key components, which can be seen in [Creative Group's ixperience model](#). The ability to inspire the audience to be intrigued and actively involved; facilitate their absorption of knowledge; and immerse them in a multi-sensory and out-of-the-ordinary environment, will ensure a memorable and transformative experience.

Event design should be considered a creative process rather than a checklist, but here are some thought starters to keep you focused on the important elements.

- What inspires my audience? What is the story I am trying to tell? Will this message inspire them?
- What will participants find entertaining? Should they just sit back and enjoy, or actively participate?
- What are the participants coming to learn about? What am I trying to teach them? How do they learn best?
- What will appeal to the five senses? Will simple visuals or intense fabrics and textures help participants understand my message?
- What is the daily life of a participant like? How can I disrupt the status quo?
- What will make the participants feel immersed in co-creating or experiencing the story for themselves?

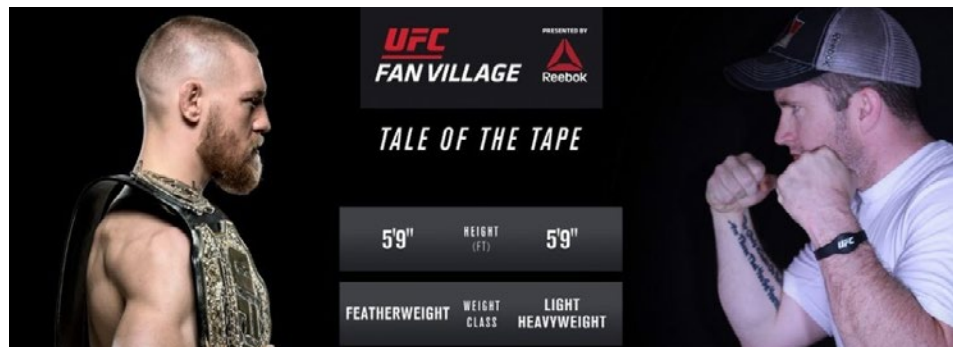
4. Expanding Role of Technology

As virtual and augmented reality technology has become more intense, immersive and creative, offerings have also become more mainstream – and not just for early adopters. Over 12 million virtual reality headsets were sold in 2016^{xii} and according to research firm Tractica, more than 200 million will be sold worldwide by 2020.^{xiii} The '70s pop group ABBA hopes it's even sooner than that! While details are still forthcoming, ABBA is planning a live and virtual experience: "A groundbreaking venture that will utilize the very latest in digital and virtual-reality technology...which will enable a new generation of fans to see, hear, and feel Abba in a way previously unimagined."^{xiv} So what does this mean for your events today?

- **Surprise and delight:** OK, OK, using retinal projection technology to add AR directly onto your field of view, as shown in the school assembly below^{xv}, is still a few years off; but there are still plenty of ways to "wow" participants. Like when Anheuser-Busch created a virtual brewery via Budweiser's immersive tour at SXSW that led participants on a "walk" through the brewery – evens smelling hops along the way.^{xvi} These new realities have created a whole new medium for storytelling, or as we referenced earlier, *storydoing*.



- **Gamify:** Aside from scavenger hunt games and leaderboards, which are still popular on mobile event apps today, RFID-enabled green screen photos have been popping up as interactive displays. An Olympic-themed activation put participants in the shoes of an athlete,^{xvii} while UFC fans compared themselves to their favorite fighters.^{xviii} The finished products were shared all over social media and served as memory merchandise from the event. Looking to foster networking? Try a networking challenge – the first to obtain 50 business cards, or gain a specific number of social media followers.



Creativity and productivity are maximized when traditional challenges are examined by diverse backgrounds, opinions and approaches.

- **Education and Empathy:** Exhibitors can use virtual reality to create product demos, and presenters can ditch their PowerPoint presentations for 3D holographic images, making education more engaging, and more thorough. Not to mention, healthcare meeting organizers can help foster empathy for patients through VR experiences for meeting attendees. A Global Leadership Summit^{xx} used virtual reality headsets to tell the story of a young refugee in Syria to foster understanding and generate donations.

5. Diversity

Recently, CEO of Marriott International Arne Sorenson wrote “Our business depends on the vibrant exchange of ideas, the sharing of customs, the ability to travel and experience new things. We know the many tangible benefits of diversity and inclusion, because we live it every day in every one of our properties.”^{xx} It can't be denied that one of the proven benefits of diversity is innovation. We explained earlier about the personal growth opportunities SXSW affords its participants, which can be attributed to the commitment to diversity by the organizers. Hugh Forrest, Chief Programming Officer of SXSW, writes that creativity and productivity are maximized when traditional challenges are examined by diverse backgrounds, opinions and approaches.^{xxi}

Due to the nature of our business, it's no surprise that many industry leaders have taken a firm stance on their support of diversity practices. From the gender gap to LGBTQ rights and beyond, the meetings industry can serve as a powerful leader with active examples of inclusiveness.

- **Panels:** Many conferences have started to require diverse members on speaker panels. Don't be afraid to stir the pot. The purpose of diversity is to hear differing viewpoints. Provocative conversations are sure to keep the attention of the audience.
- **Destination:** Other companies have selected their meeting destinations based on inclusive views and values. The American Society of Association Executives even instituted a contract clause stating they would cancel their meetings if legislature resulting in discrimination were to pass in the destination.
- **Participants:** Hand-picking participants is one way to ensure a diverse group, but if that's not a possibility, try adding an optional field to the registration for “ethnicity.” You'll be able to see if the registrants represent as many ethnicities as possible or where you can do more work.
- **Venue:** Meeting space can also be evaluated to determine if the environment is suitable for the meeting purpose. Sometimes, a unique or unusual venue can serve up just the right dose of inspiration.

6. Successful Outcomes

Terms like “Return on Event,” “Investment” and “Opportunity” are nothing new for our industry, but this trend is proving more important than ever. The World Economic Forum^{xxii} has reported that we are in an outcome economy, made possible by the digital age. With vast amounts of data available, advance analytics can afford insights into effective ways to optimize business outcomes.

Not only should businesses strive to deliver these successful outcomes, but clients are expecting it. The investments made into event technology for many companies have already reshaped our future, according to Brian Casey, President and CEO of Center for Exhibition Industry Research.

We've put together helpful ideas on how to measure return on face-to-face experiences to make sure they deliver on their purpose. Risk mitigation and proper negotiations on the front-end will also help set your program up for success. We've included tips to ensure mutually beneficial outcomes and contract clauses to think about, too. It's currently a seller's market when it comes to hotel and venue space; but that doesn't mean you can't negotiate so both sides have their needs met and will share the risks fairly, should a situation arise.

How to Measure Event Outcomes:

Objective	Measurable
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre- and post-assessment • 3-6 months post survey – was the learning applied?
Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visual cues, energy levels • Social media interaction • Booth dwell time
Networking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contacts made • Attendance
Sales	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualified leads • Attendance fees • Sponsorships • Sales/Contracts signed after event

How to Prepare for Negotiations:

- Be flexible with dates, rates and clauses.
- Be informed that most costs rise year-over-year, just like any other industry. The rates you paid five years ago will be different today.
- Be strategic by knowing your room-to-space ratio and understanding what is considered reasonable to hotels.
- Be savvy with time and money by preparing a firm agenda well in advance. This will drive your event space needs and prevent re-work.
- Be clear on your needs. Prioritize them by must-haves and nice-to-haves.
- Be aware that venues might not offer holds, and options go quickly.
- Be specific when contracting to avoid ambiguity and future misunderstanding.
- Be proactive in strengthening relationships with a simple phone call.

Contract Clauses to Think About: ^{xxiii}

Management-Change Clause or Rebook Clause: Things happen. Mergers, acquisitions and management changes can throw a wrench into a sales meeting booked a year in advance, so having the option to re-schedule can save thousands in cancellation fees.

Renovation or Construction Clause: The hotel should notify your group immediately upon any knowledge of construction or renovation projects on hotel property. Projects around the hotel that could affect the group should also be reported. Sometimes, hotels know when they are planning construction projects, and if they happen to be in progress or pop up over your dates, it's good to be covered.

Cancellation-by-Hotel Clause: Remember that seller's market we mentioned earlier? A hotel might decide a different piece of business is more profitable than yours, so requiring that they find a comparable location and reimburse the group for any additional costs involved in the change of location, will spare you (some) of the headache.

Meeting-Room-Change Clause: Sometimes you book a specific meeting room for a specific feature or because of your logistical limitations. Avoid surprises by requesting to approve any room change in writing; hopefully you're using a mobile event app, so it's easy to inform participants on the fly.

Attrition Clause: Some hotels might completely strike an attrition clause which could lead to the group being responsible for 100% of the rooms in their block, even if they aren't booked. Regardless of how confident you are that you'll fill your entire block, it's still smart to include this clause.

Site Inspection Clause: Everything looks pretty on paper. If you visit the property before your event and it doesn't fit the needs you've agreed upon for your group this clause will save you the embarrassment of an un-fit venue.

Summary

Armed with these trends and supporting action items, you should feel amped-up and informed to take on the next meeting or event that comes your way.

Get Started Today

Let Creative Group implement some of these trends and best practices with you.

We'll help you maximize the effectiveness of your message and create unforgettable meetings and events. You'll be on your way to developing creative ways to network, educate, launch, celebrate, influence, collaborate, reward, sell, and inspire your audience to thrive.

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