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Convention South

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Plus:
What Our
Industry Survey
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Winter 2022 Industry Trends Report

ConventionSouth's semiannual survey offers a peek inside the relationship between planners and CVBs

By Martha M. Everett

“It’s a relationship profession.” That’s how one planner describes the meetings and events industry in *ConventionSouth’s* Winter 2022 CVB & Planner Relationships Survey. Our semiannual survey, fielded online during two weeks in January, asked meeting planners and CVBs to anonymously share their perspectives on their evolving relationship.

This is our fourth survey to include questions on the continuing impacts of the pandemic, a subject that first appeared in our October 2020 study. Coupled with our historical data, the results of this survey allow us to track changing attitudes and glean valuable insights.

Much of the data echo earlier findings, demonstrating surprising stability in this anything-but-certain climate. And in a glimmer of hope, these latest results show signs of progress in the recovery of the beleaguered industry.

Rebookings rebound

With COVID-19 cases declining and many areas lifting pandemic restrictions, there is cautious optimism. But the virus remains top of mind. Still, 87 percent of respondents think or are hopeful that virtual events can help sustain the industry until in-person events fully come back. And more than 71 percent of planners who responded say they have no plans to change careers, an increase of 3 percent over October 2021.

Rebookings are rebounding, with 65 percent of planners noting they have rescheduled postponed in-person 2020 and 2021 events for this year or next.

More than 70 percent of planners say they have resumed hosting in-person events, most starting in the third quarter of 2021. That is a

marked improvement over October 2020, when responses showed 89 percent of planners were not planning any live events.

But uncertainty remains. For those who have not returned to hosting in-person events, 35 percent—the highest percentage—say they do not plan to do so until the second quarter of this year.

Live events will look a bit different, with 56 percent of planners saying they are planning events for fewer attendees than normal. That’s an improvement from October 2021, when 64 percent said the same.

Changing relationships

As to whether the relationship between CVBs and planners has changed due to the pandemic, 46 percent of CVB respondents say yes. Planners are visiting destinations less and using third-party services more, say some. “Planners are working around CVBs more than ever. Even planners you have a relationship with are not working through you,” one CVB response says.

Still, reliance on CVBs remains strong, with 74 percent of planners saying they use CVBs when planning most or some live events—up 4 percent from last March. And planners give CVBs high marks for sharing RFPs with appropriate venues, suggesting hotels in line with their budgets, and accurately promoting their destination’s ability to handle meetings.

When it comes to repeat bookings, relationships are becoming more important. Relationships with staff was the No. 1 reason planners say they book events at the same location, with cost a close second. The ranking of those reasons was flipped in both our March and October 2021 surveys.

Cutting costs

The majority of CVBs report they had to implement cost-cutting measures. The most common cost-cutting measure reported for both 2020 and 2021 is reducing advertising spending. But this year’s survey shows a sharp increase in the number of CVBs reporting staff layoffs: 29 percent, up from 19 percent last March.

That figure meshes with some of the negative comments planners had about CVBs. “Most have been missing in action; they have had too much turnover of personnel,” says one planner.

However, most planners express empathy with CVBs for the challenges they face. “I think CVBs have had to adjust the same way planners have,” writes one planner. Another agrees, “They’ve been hard hit, as well.”

The online debate

Nearly all planners (90 percent) say they think virtual or hybrid events will continue post-pandemic, down 5 percent from October 2021. And 53 percent of planners say they will incorporate online elements into in-person events this year, a significant reduction from 68 percent in our October 2020 survey.

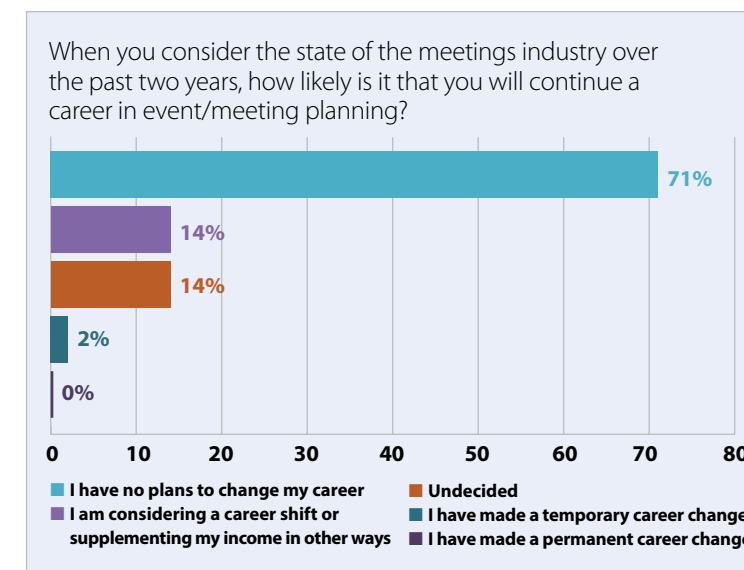
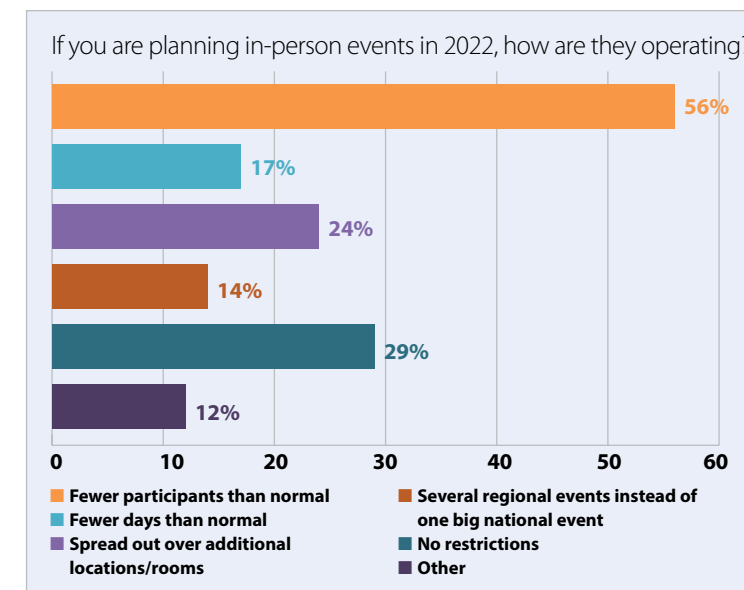
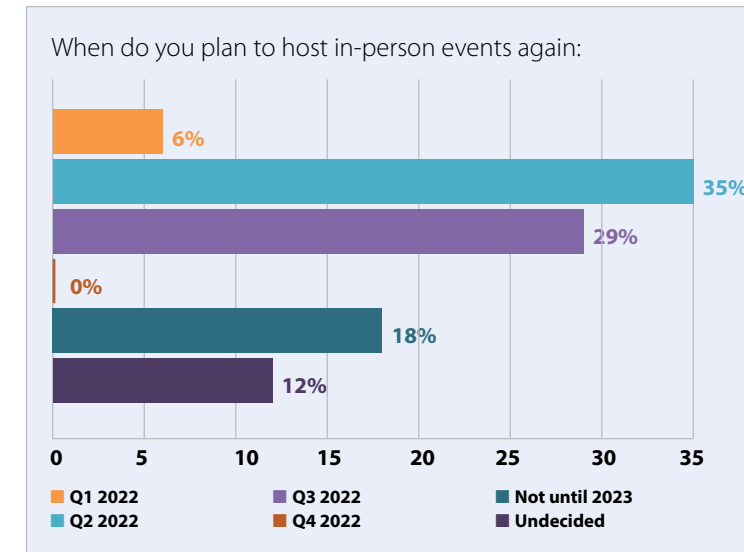
Planners express mixed feelings about online events. Many laud online’s convenience, flexibility, cost and time savings, increased participation, inclusivity, and environmental benefits.

“We now have a comfort level, tools, and resources to fully embrace virtual and hybrid meetings,” says one planner.

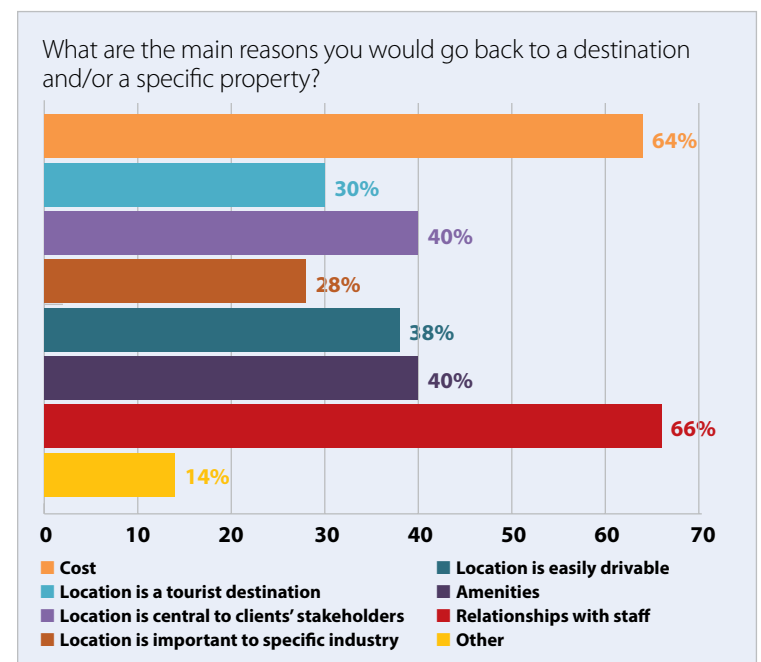
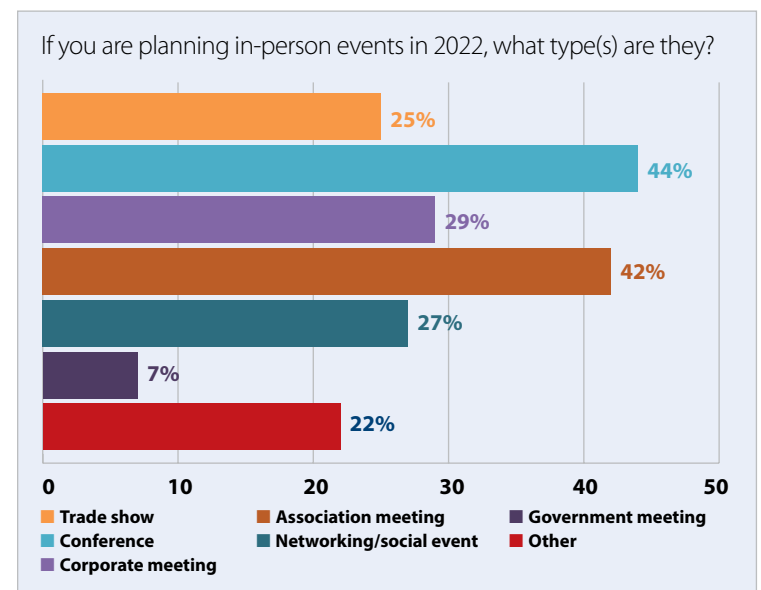
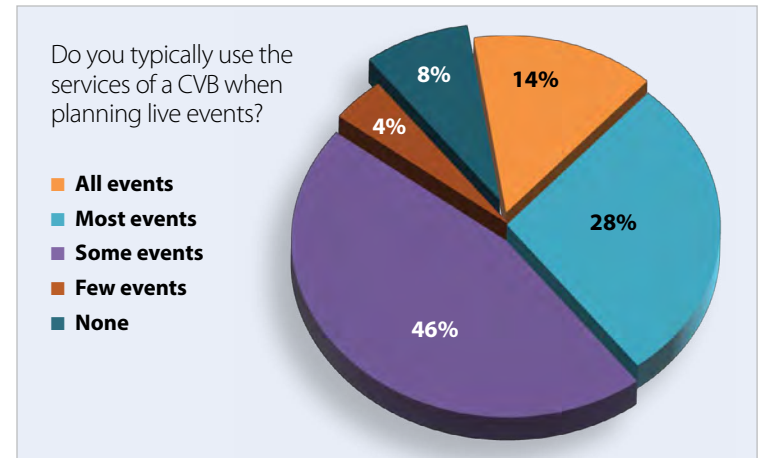
Indeed, 62 percent of planners now say they have the skills or resources to produce a virtual event in-house.

Still, all agree technology will not supplant human interaction. As one planner says, “No amount of technology can replace a handshake.” ■

We Asked Planners



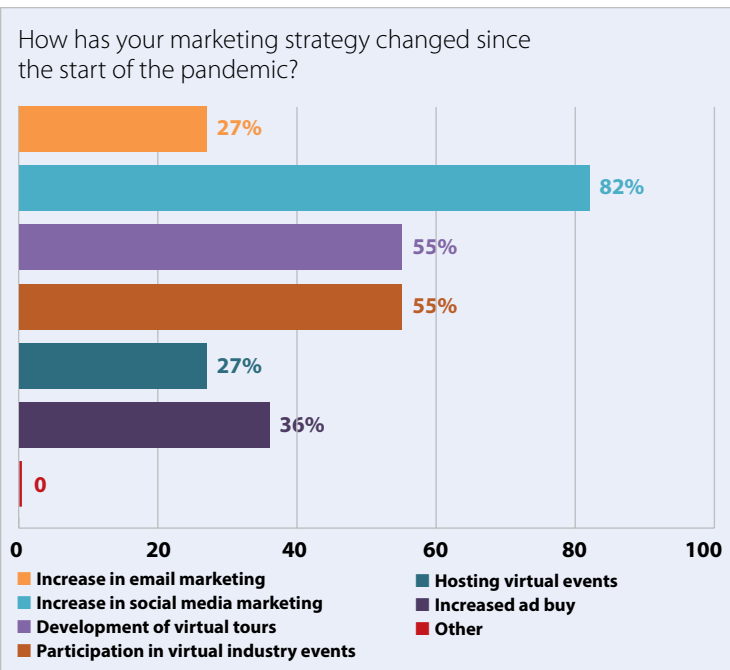
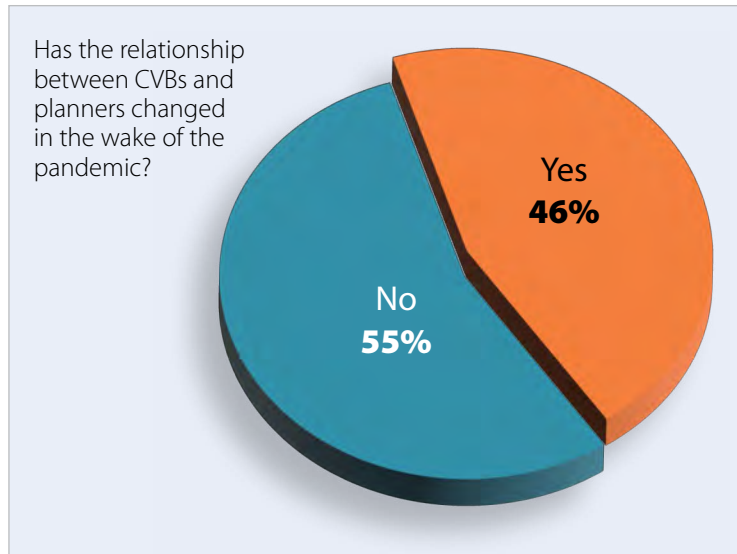
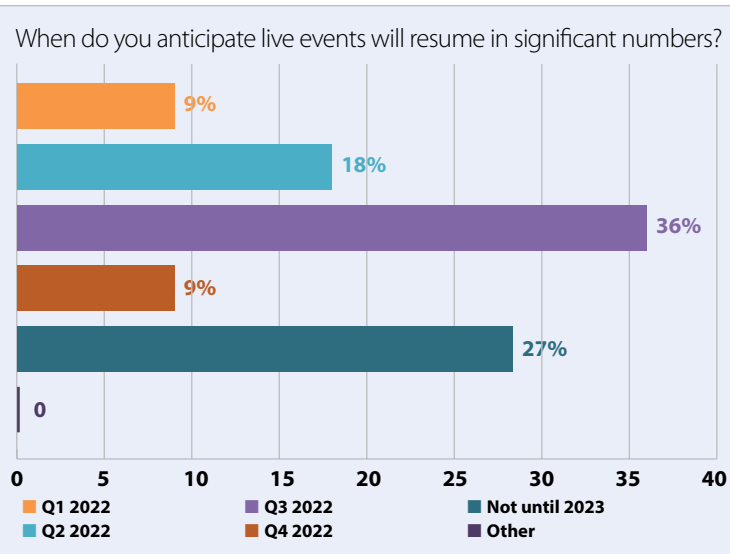
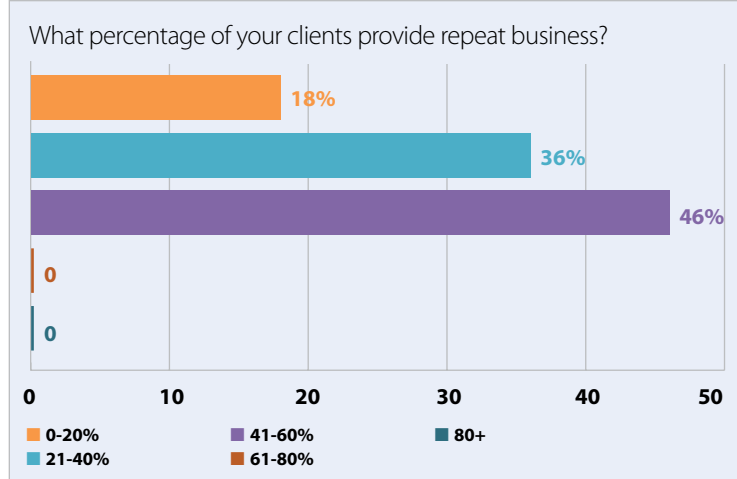
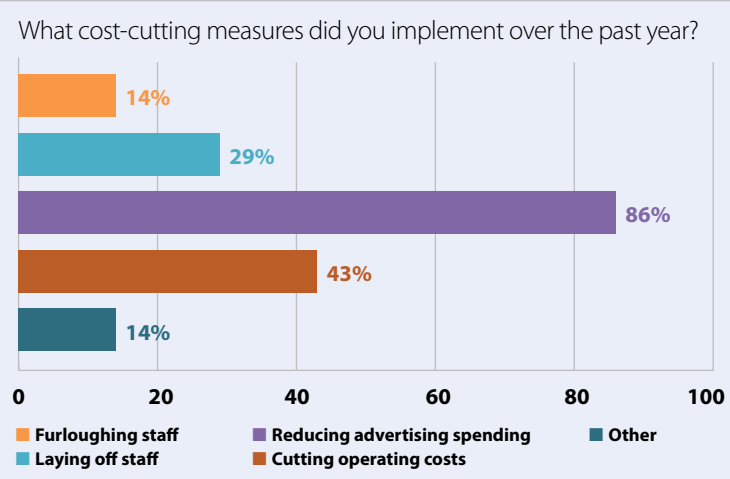
Percentages may add up to greater than 100% due to rounding.



Because survey participants checked more than one answer for some questions, those responses total more than 100%.

We Asked CVBs

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Because survey participants checked more than one answer for some questions, those responses total more than 100%.

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Building a Bond

How to forge a successful relationship: CVBs and planners share their expertise

By Paige Townley



Successful event planning lies in the details. Filling in those details is a team sport that starts with strong relationships between planners and CVBs. “Circumventing the CVB means the planner is missing out on a lot of opportunities to help them along the way,” says Renee Lalanne-Wuerdeman, vice president of sales for Visit Panama City Beach in Florida. “Getting the CVB involved in the booking process paints a complete picture for the meeting planner.”

Relationships with hotel and venue staff also matter, but starting those first steps in the process—from submitting RFPs to familiarization tours—with a CVB can save time and stress and begin a relationship that lasts throughout the planning process. Among the most valuable of the free CVB services is having an area expert in your corner.

“I will never know a city as well as the individuals who live there and work every day to promote it,” says Heather Herrig, president and chief event strategist of Every Last Detail in Atlanta. “By developing a great relationship with the CVB, I can partner with them early in the planning process to gain that understanding and knowledge about the city through them. Their insight is invaluable.”

Planner Kimberly Bean agrees. When one of Bean’s clients wanted to host an event in an unfamiliar destination, she reached out to the local CVB, and the help was immediate.

“They arranged for me to have a personal site visit and tour the different spaces they thought would work well for my group, as well as meet with chefs and experience activities for myself that my client might like,” says Bean, owner of KBT Creative Support Services in Nashville, Tenn. “They had a well-planned itinerary and met me when I arrived in town. I couldn’t have asked for better help or a better resource. They were like having a team of people working with me—a team incredibly knowledgeable about their city.”

Reaching out to the CVB helped lead to a successful event. “I had so much information to take back to my client, and my client fell in love with the destination,” Bean says. “We booked it and hosted the event there, and it went so well, they are ready to go right back again this year.”

Courtesy Houston First Corporation

Courtesy Houston First Corporation



Green spaces outside convention centers provide a place for people to engage and build relationships between sessions.

Relationships form the foundation of the meetings and events industry, and success stories like Bean's can happen when planners forge a connection with CVBs, VCBs, DMOs, or local chambers of commerce. *ConventionSouth* spoke with planners and CVBs around the South to find out what they need from each other to build that bond.

The planner perspective

Planners overwhelmingly acknowledge CVBs are an extended member of the planning team. Their expertise forms the best source of information on a destination, potential partners, hotels, and activities. But there is room for improvement.

Spread the news

One of the top asks of CVBs by many planners: newsletters. Providing up-to-date information on a regular basis covering what's going on in the destination can be invaluable.

"A quarterly newsletter with updates on things like hotel openings and construction, upcoming events, and anything unique to that destination is incredibly helpful," says Lauren Andrews, vice president of Meeting Expectations in Atlanta. "Other great things

for CVBs to share through a newsletter would be highlights of local businesses or properties and maybe even promotional videos."

Success stories from recent events in the destination also top Andrews' list of helpful information. "Hearing how an in-person event went and getting details on how large the event was, anything that had to be changed due to COVID-19, and general execution success is always something planners are looking to hear," Andrews says. "Testimonials from planners would be big, too."

Proactive visits

Meeting face to face with anyone in the last two years has not been an easy task, but having CVBs make the effort to present to planners, whether in person or virtually, goes a long way in building a relationship, Andrews adds.

"We recently had CVB reps physically come to our office and sit down and talk to two of our team members, and I could see the lightbulb go off," Andrews says. "Within three weeks, we had events for that city go to contract, and that's because the CVB reps came to our office to showcase their city to our planners. The city wasn't even on the radar, and they got business from investing that time."

Don't hold back

In today's environment, planners often are doing more with less. Limited time and resources make planners appreciate when CVBs jump in and share ideas, including offsite activities and dining.

"Sometimes, I feel CVBs can be timid about sharing too much, trying not to overstep or insinuate themselves too much in the process, but I welcome that," Herrig says. "I want to hear from the CVB what's fun to do or a unique off-the-beaten-path experience my group may enjoy or even sharing details about how another group used a space and how it worked out well. Speaking up and offering ideas like that is great to me."

André Wells, founder and CEO of Events by André Wells in Washington, believes today's meeting and event planning world has changed so much that the more information CVBs share, the better. "So many companies have downsized or gone out of business or partnered with different people," Wells says. "A planner isn't necessarily able to keep up with that in different cities. It's good to have all the information and know what you're getting into before making promises to your clients."

Courtesy Meeting Expectations



When planners and CVBs put their best foot forward, the whole team scores.

Attend industry shows

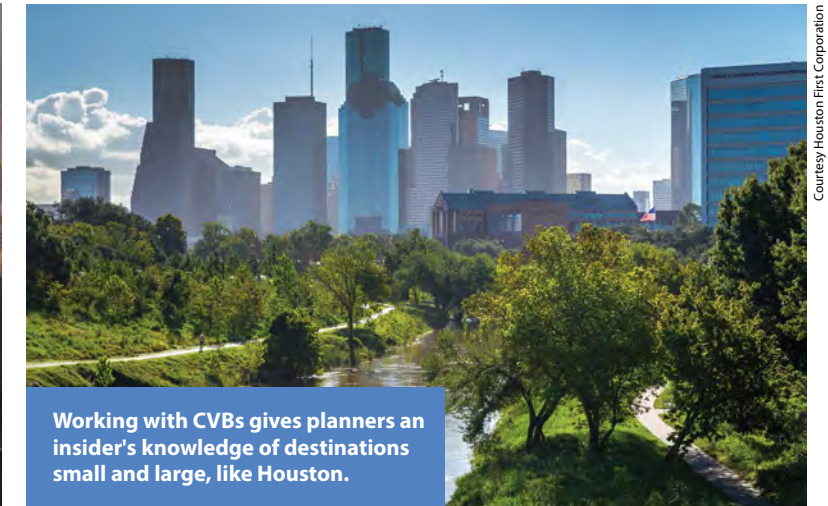
Networking is critical, especially for independent planners. Travel-industry shows provide great networking opportunities, and given the time, effort, and cost of attending, it's critical for planners to meet as many CVB representatives at those events as possible.

"As a small business owner, that has been the biggest help for me and one of the best tools I have," Bean says. "By attending, I have met so many in the industry. If I didn't have those relationships, it would be difficult, if not impossible."

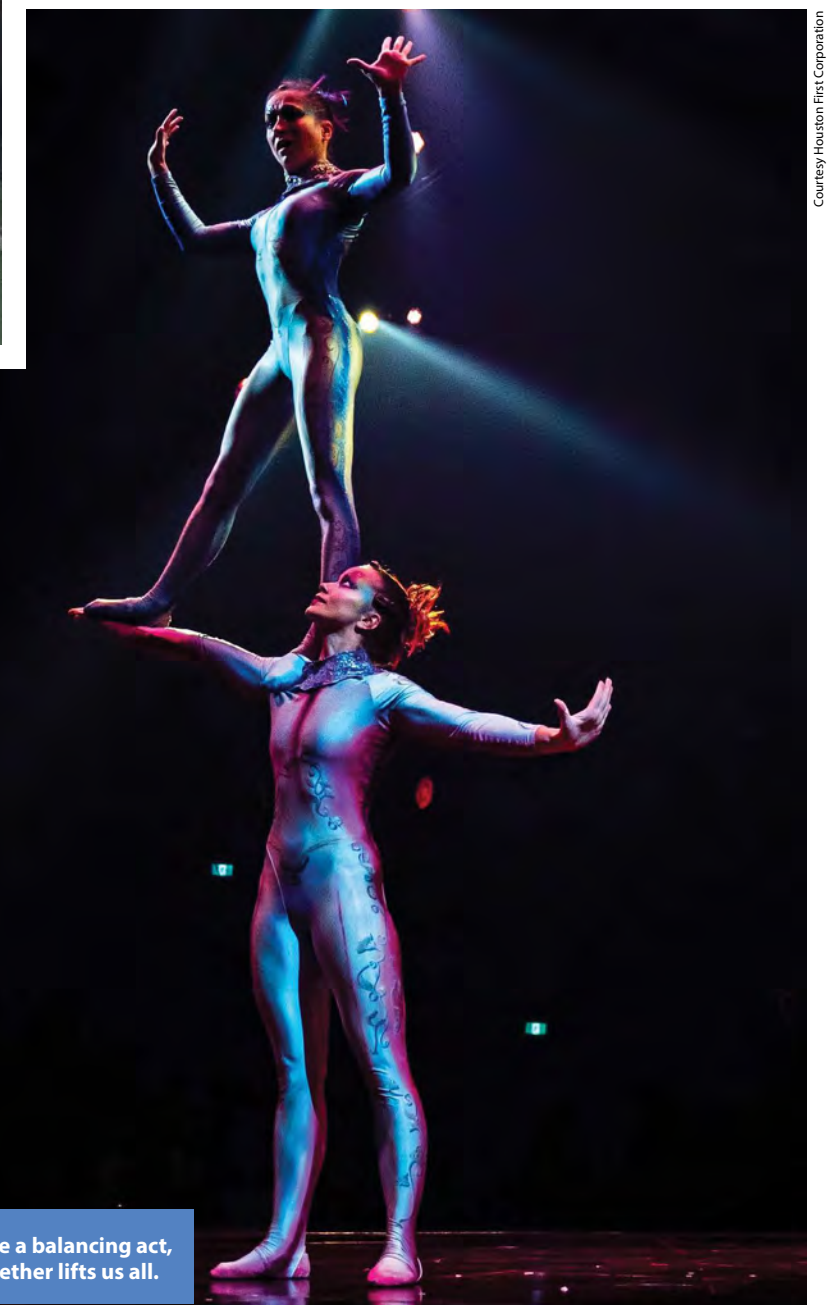
Herrig echoes that sentiment. Broadening knowledge of what destinations are out there can come in handy in the future. "You may think you'd never have a group for a particular city, but that can quickly change," Herrig says. "Making that initial contact with a CVB provides some sort of a foundation for a relationship you may need one day."

Follow up

After a meeting or event is over, some destination officials might move on to the next piece of business. But for planners, a follow-up to find out how the meeting or event went is welcome.

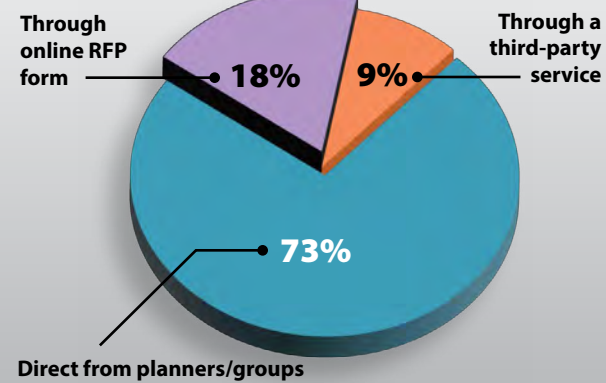


Working with CVBs gives planners an insider's knowledge of destinations small and large, like Houston.



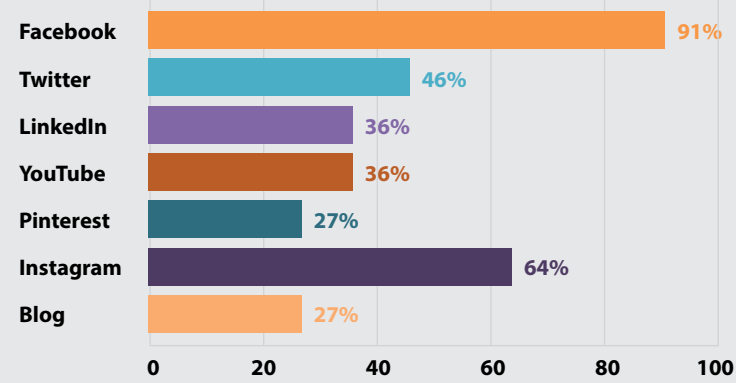
Relationships are a balancing act, but working together lifts us all.

What is your preferred method to receive meeting/event RFPs?



Because survey participants checked more than one answer, responses total more than 100%.

What social media platforms do you use to communicate with meeting planners and group organizations?



Results from *ConventionSouth's* Winter 2022 CVB & Planner Relationships Survey

Will Venue-selection Technology Replace CVBs?

Technology has altered the way we do just about everything. That includes venue selection. The emergence of venue-selection technology has some questioning whether it will reduce the relevance of CVBs.

An overwhelming majority of planners say no. *ConventionSouth's* 2022 CVB & Planner Relationships Survey results show 86 percent of planners say venue-selection technology will not reduce the relevance of CVBs in the foreseeable future. That number is up slightly from sentiments expressed by planners in our 2021 survey.

"Everything can look great online until you experience it," says Kimberly Bean of KBT Creative Support Services. "I know you can do the tours virtually now, and it's fun and great, but I still feel it's important as a planner to really be on site and experience it."

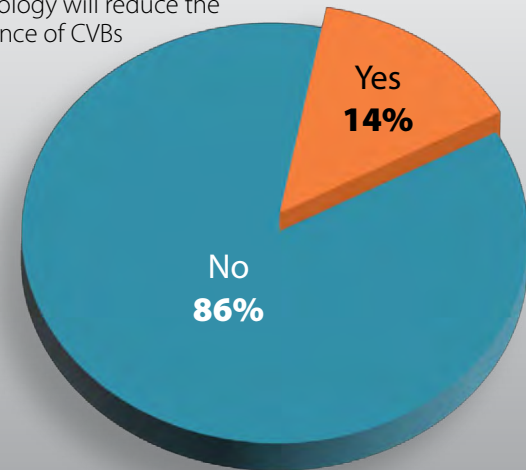
Heather Herrig of Every Last Detail agrees. "I prefer to do my sourcing by reaching out to those I have relationships with," she says. "I understand some planners can't do it manually because they have so many meetings to source for and need the help of a sourcing site, but for someone like me, technology doesn't change my approach."

Michael Heckman of Houston First Corporation says the technology could change the relationship, but it shouldn't replace it. While Houston First and other CVBs are putting more resources into creating virtual tours and pumping up their video libraries, Heckman says those shouldn't be the deciding factor.

"I hope it doesn't move in the direction where it's solely what planners will rely on," Heckman says. "It's really just another tool in the toolbox. Tech shouldn't be in place of strong relationship-building between planners and account reps."

For Janet Roach of Visit Tallahassee, venue-selection technology is an added benefit, not a substitute for planner and CVB relationships. "This technology is exciting, and it really does help planners, but it also helps us better show our destination," Roach says. "I can share a video with someone in another location, and they can see we are exactly what they need. So, I think it goes both ways, it's not just taking away from a planner actually visiting the destination. Many times, people may decide not to do the initial site visit like they did years ago, but now they can focus on getting the right venue and contracting the event via technology, then coming to the destination for the final details."

Do you believe that venue-selection technology will reduce the relevance of CVBs



Lauren Andrews, vice president of Meeting Expectations, sees great time-saving potential in venue-selection technology, but many other aspects still require a CVB.

"The technology may help me quickly filter down the number of potential hotels and then I can handpick myself. But the technology won't tell me there's a great hotel that recently underwent a renovation and should be considered or a hotel I'm considering is hosting a major event during my dates and I should look for other dates," Andrews says. "The CVB knows all of those important details—not to mention they are still needed for things like site inspections, offsite venues, and transportation. So, does the technology alter the relationship? Yes, but it makes the CVB no less valuable to me."

Bottom line: Venue-selection technology is another tool in the planner's belt, but it does not eliminate the need for a personal relationship.

"I don't think anything changes human interaction," says André Wells of Events by André Wells. "The tools are very helpful, so I think it will be an added bonus, but I don't think it will replace the relationships."

Michael Heckman, president and CEO of Houston First Corporation, does that. He suggests: "Ask if there were any issues or anything unresolved. The effort to ask and make sure every need was met and if not, how it could be fulfilled, is very much appreciated."

The CVB perspective

Relationships are a two-way street. And while the benefits of having a strong relationship extend to CVBs, they need planners to help them.

Details, details, details

Among the most important things CVBs say they want from planners: details. "It's important to us that planners know we are here to help," says Bryan Kunz, director of group sales for Visit Galveston in Texas. "We want to know exactly what the planners' goals are and how we can best help them. We consider ourselves an extension of their team when they are here and beforehand as well, so we want to know as much as possible about their event and what they are hoping to achieve."

In addition, CVBs want planners to share what they want to avoid. "In making sure we know what's important to the planner or group, that includes potential negatives," says Janet Roach, meetings and conventions director for Visit Tallahassee in Florida. "Many planners are good about sharing what they need in a destination, but we want to also know their hot buttons. What is a definite no? Where can we be flexible? What concessions are required, and which can be negotiated?"

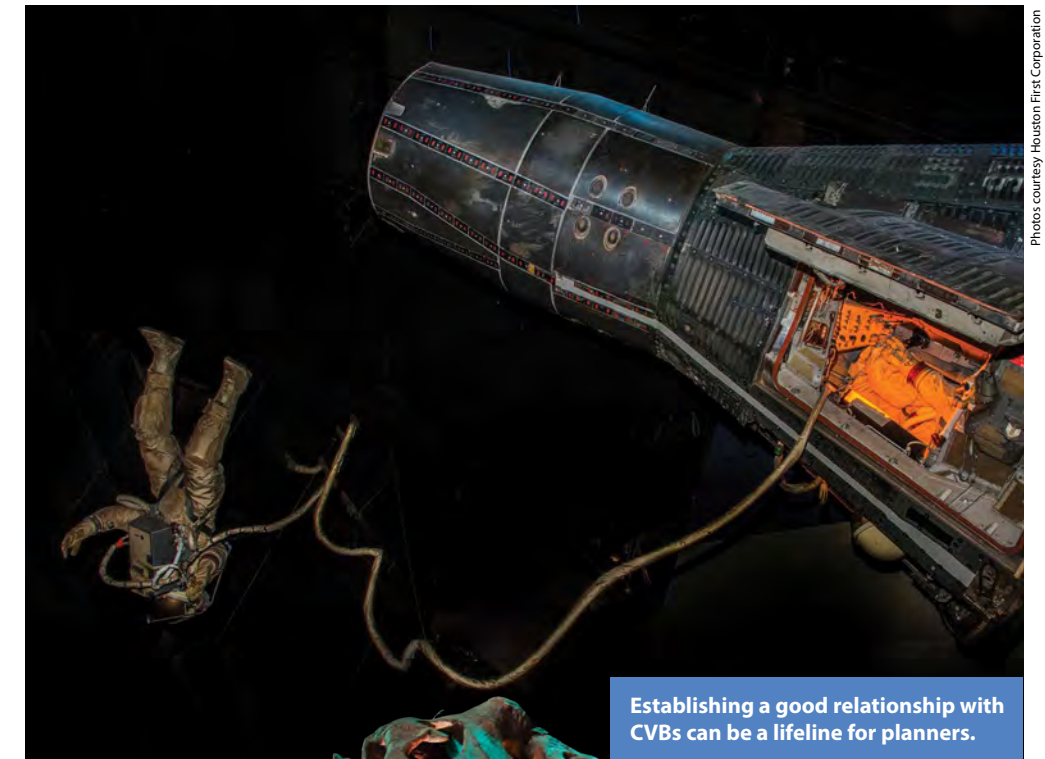
Don't reinvent the wheel

As experts on their destination and its promotion, CVBs have promotional materials that can save planners time, effort, and money.

"CVBs have things like photo libraries and sizzle reels that can be used for attendance-building, websites, and other ways to really help sell the destination and help with attendance," Roach says. "CVBs want to share that to showcase the destination and help visitors know what to expect and what they can do when there."

It's never too late

For planners who have never used the services of a CVB—or haven't in a long time—tourism experts advise reaching out to see how the bureau can help. "The planner can go directly to hotels to book and plan their meetings, but if they do, they



Establishing a good relationship with CVBs can be a lifeline for planners.



Collaboration allows us to create things larger than ourselves, an age-old concept that is key to survival.

are missing out on so many great amenities offered through the CVB," Lalanne-Wuerdeman says. "CVBs help with so many things: transportation to offsite events, amenities which may perk up registration, and all sorts of other things that can enhance the meeting. Oftentimes, planners don't know that unless they stop to think about the CVB."

And even if planners don't include a CVB in initial planning, they can ask for assistance later. "If the planner gets stuck somewhere along the way or something isn't working like it should, contact the CVB and ask if there is anything we can do to help," Lalanne-Wuerdeman advises. "We want to be valuable to a planner. We're here to help them look like superstars." ■

Technophobes Take Heart

Even in this digital age, there are ways to develop a better relationship with technology

By Charles M. Cornell

Staying up on the latest tech can feel like learning a whole new language. Many event strategists find it daunting to keep pace with the rapidly changing world of hardware, software, apps, and platforms. Everyone has a different comfort level with technology, so while some face the challenge with excitement, others find themselves reluctant—even fearful.

The best way to develop a better relationship with hi-tech is to embrace it. And one way to do that is to recognize technology's value to the meetings and events industry. After all, hybrid and virtual events have kept the industry afloat during the pandemic. Another way to breach that mental barrier is to accept that technology is not going away and just dive in.

Best friends with technology

Chris Dyer, president and CEO of Conference Catalysts in Gainesville, Fla., has a healthy relationship with technology. "I would consider us very close, almost best friends," Dyer says. He credits that, in part, to his experience in the meetings industry and having the flexibility it takes to be a successful planner.

"There is no question that my time in the event industry has helped us adapt to the current COVID crisis. Every conference and event has something, and sometimes many things, that doesn't go as originally planned," he says. "It is an industry that requires contingency planning for many different facets and requires extreme adaptability under normal circumstances. The adaptability muscle is one that I think has been training more than any other and ultimately helps me look at challenges through an optimistic, creative lens."

Those characteristics run deep in planners, and that gives them a leg up. "Planners across the board are rising to the challenge of developing a better relationship with tech," Dyer adds. "It has become a prerequisite of the job, so if you do not have any technical proficiency, it makes it very difficult to be successful in this industry today."

Having confidence in his technical knowledge also has helped Dyer, whose company created CONFlux, a virtual meeting platform, early on in the pandemic. But Dyer doesn't have a specialized technical background. He made it a priority to educate himself and keep up with event tech.

"This ranges from event website design to complex onsite AV setup and execution," he says. "This has allowed me to think and communicate strategically."

A new way

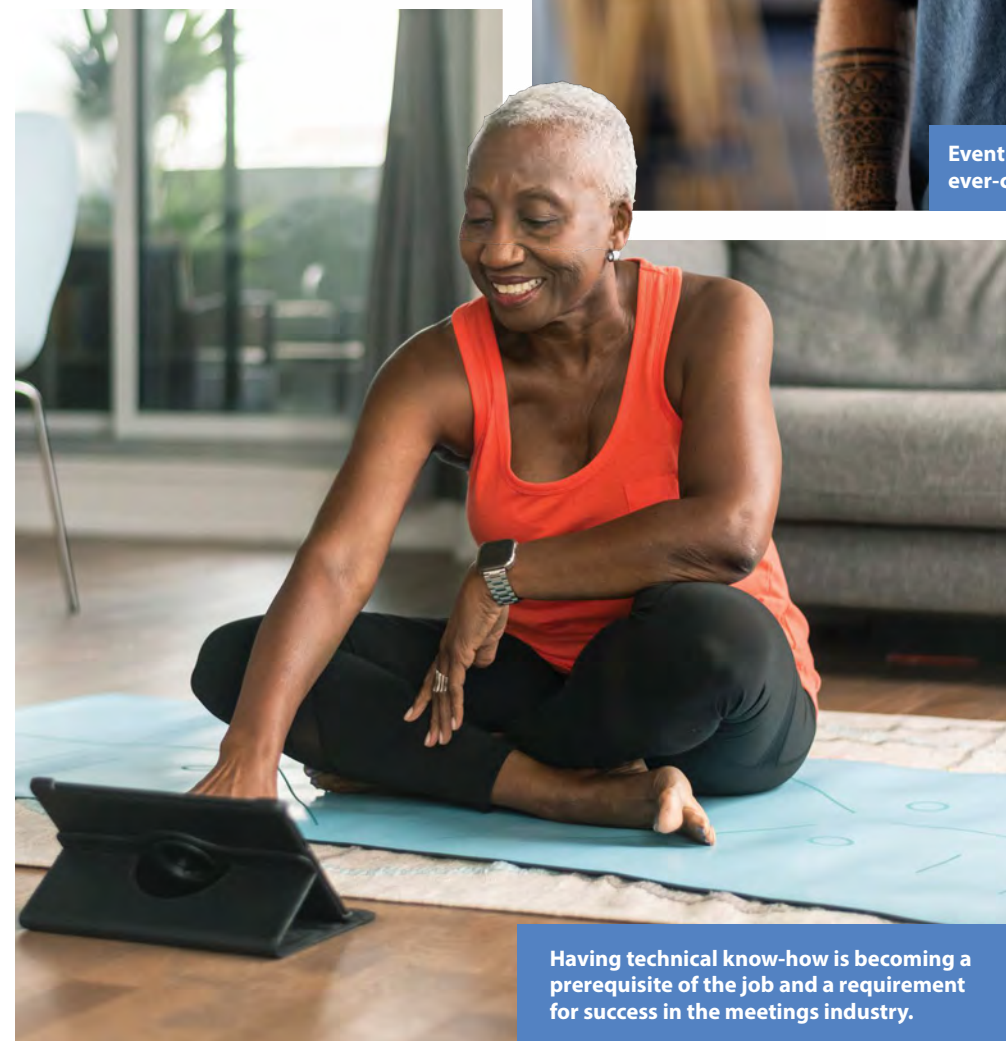
Michael Gunn, senior vice president of the Greater Birmingham CVB in Alabama, agrees planners are adapting to the rise of technology.

"Technology is here to stay, and I think planners are starting to embrace it," Gunn says. "They're trying to develop and learn as much about it as they can and find out what works for them and what doesn't. Tech will definitely be part of their planning moving forward."



Getty Images

Event planners are having to quickly adapt to the ever-changing technological landscape in the industry.

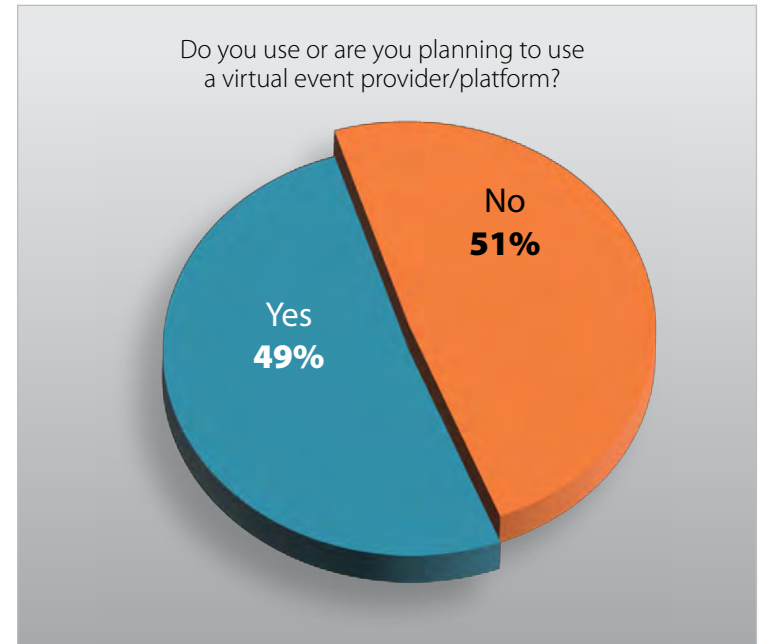
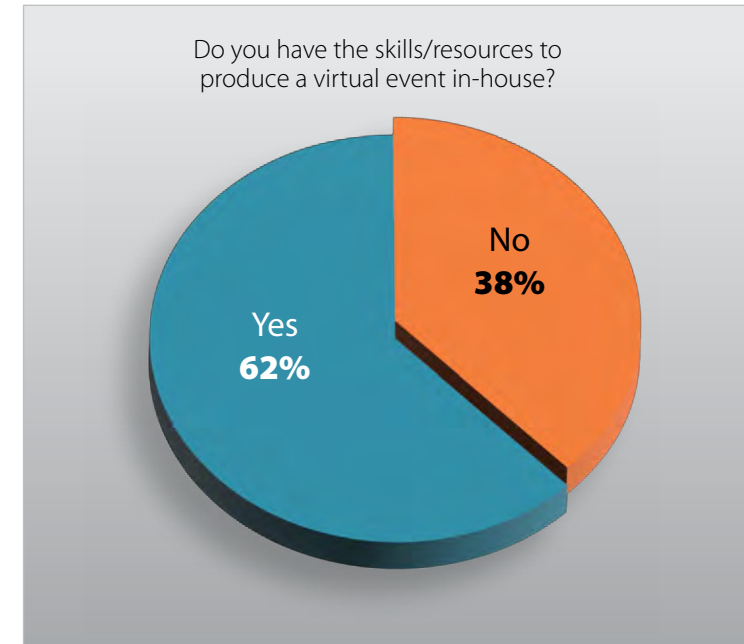


Having technical know-how is becoming a prerequisite of the job and a requirement for success in the meetings industry.

The Greater Birmingham CVB has a seasoned staff with an average tenure of 17 years, Gunn says, but they've adapted to new technologies. "It has been a challenge, but no one has said, 'I can't do this' or 'I don't understand this,'" he says. "Tech is something different, and people like a challenge. It's a new way to embrace doing business."

As for his own relationship with technology, Gunn says he's somewhere in the middle. "I've gotten accustomed to Zooming and needing more broadband space, but tech keeps changing almost weekly. I get emails every day from someone else with a new kind of technology that they want to introduce to make it easier on meeting planning. It's hard to keep up."

Gunn doesn't think technology will replace human interaction, but many of the changes brought on by COVID-19 are permanent. Like it or not, planners aren't going to be able to hit restart and return to pre-pandemic meeting styles. So, even the most tech-averse planner has to learn to incorporate online elements into events.



Results from *ConventionSouth's Winter 2022 CVB & Planner Relationships Survey*

The Tech Whisperer

The suddenness with which the move to hybrid and virtual was forced on the industry didn't exactly start the technology relationship on a positive note. Then there is the money. Investing in technology can require significant budgets, while planners already are dealing with supply problems and staffing shortages.

But meeting planners who are leaders in the technology field say it is possible to stay up on changing trends regardless of budget. And it might be as simple as asking the right questions.

Tess Vismale calls herself a tech whisperer. The independent planner has long been a proponent of incorporating tech into events to take them to the next level. For those who might be on the technology fence, she has a bit of advice.

"The first thing I would say is breathe and relax. It's okay," says Vismale, founder and CEO of iSocialX in Atlanta. "Most people have been in your place before, so don't think that everyone who's encountered technology knew it all or knows it all now."

"You always want to start with yourself and take a good litmus test of what skill sets you have," she continues. "Oftentimes, people will go out and feel overwhelmed. And it's because they don't know what they know currently."

Vismale says the things that make people successful planners are the same things that will make them successful at using technology:

- Understand yourself and what you're planning
- Take an inventory of what you currently have
- Look at what you gravitate toward and what works well for you
- Visualize the end result and plan backward
- Consider the attendees' viewpoint

Online resources to help you get started are a click away, Vismale says. YouTube is filled with free video tutorials that offer a quick way to learn what options are available. LinkedIn serves as a resource for finding experts in the field. And a search of event tech companies can help planners find a tech-savvy team.

"It's okay to hire someone outside of yourself to help. This is why there is a rise in the role of the event technologist," Vismale says. "That's someone who can look at what technologies you have in place and what you have been doing and what you'd like to do and help those things marry."

Event tech and information technology work hand in hand, but they are different, Vismale says. The best person to help planners, she says, is "someone who understands the event world, who knows technology well enough to put the pieces in place."

'Where the magic happens'

Preciate, an online meeting and events platform company headquartered in Dallas, has had more requests than ever for virtual meeting help since the pandemic started, says

Jody Dubuque, the firm's director of channel sales. Among Preciate's offerings is hourly live event support, with a goal of building customer confidence in the technology.

"Event techs are definitely becoming a more prevalent part of the industry," Dubuque says.

"They are key to innovating and delivering new ways to hold meetings both virtual and onsite. If planners don't have the expertise internally, they are turning to virtual-solutions partners to deliver delightful experiences. Every customer Preciate has is evolving post-COVID and looking at new ways to meet, even if technology is new to them and the learning curve is high."

Relationships are complicated. They require trust and give and take. For technology novices, partnering with an event technologist can become their secret weapon. But it requires acknowledging what you don't know, admitting you need help, and relinquishing a bit of control.

"A meeting planner, at their core, is an A Type personality who can see how to plan every detail of a meeting to the T and how they want it to flow," Vismale says. "If they would just allow themselves to step back from that plan for a moment, see that the plan doesn't have to be manual, then turn to the event technologist to say, 'How can I make this tech-enabled?' A real dream team would be the marketer, the event planner or strategist, and an event technologist—those three working together. Each of them has their expertise, and they should let it flourish. That's where the magic happens." ■



Courtesy Eau Palm Beach Resort & Spa

A serene atmosphere aids relaxation at Florida's Eau Palm Beach Resort & Spa, where visitors can make a wish at the candlelit Wishing Well.

A healthy dose of Wellness

The most important relationship is with yourself

By Tanya Manus

It's a little bit like the airplane instruction to put on your own oxygen mask before helping others. Professional planners are caretakers who thrive on catering to client needs, meticulously organizing and anticipating. But focusing every ounce of energy on others can leave planners depleted of the attention they need to give their own minds, bodies, and emotions. The first step in guaranteeing a successful event is being at the top of your game—and that means prioritizing self-care.

"Whole professionals have to be whole people first," says Nancy Snowden, manager of educational experiences for MPI. "We have people on the brink of literal breakdowns because they are compressed emotionally. We have to change in the way we treat ourselves. Empty people cannot create fulfilling experiences for others."

Too often, professionals in high-stress fields treat exhaustion and burnout as badges of honor. Planners already have stressful jobs complicated by cancellations, rescheduled events, health and safety protocols, staffing shortages, rising prices, and ongoing instability. The anxiety and uncertainty take a toll. To re-energize and recharge, do what you do best: Make a plan.

Develop daily 'anchors'

Don't wait for a vacation or even the weekend to focus on your well-being. Incorporate self-care

into your morning routine every day, advises Amy Englemark, a life coach and speaker specializing in teaching business leaders how to be healthy, wealthy, and happy. Intentionally nurturing yourself can change your thought patterns and proactively alleviate stress.

"Ask yourself, 'What do you need before you start every day?'" Englemark says. "It can feel like you don't have time for that, but that's such a trap. Considering your own needs is the most generous thing you can do for people you serve, because they get someone with energy and happiness who is serving them."

Be patient with yourself. In working with her clients, Englemark sees the chronic instability during the pandemic fueling doubt, anxiety, and overwhelm.

"It's taking way more time for people to do what they've always done and way more time for them to serve their clientele," she says. "So much more of people's time is being taken up with daily COVID-19 protocols now, which adds more to your plate and can be frustrating because you feel like you're not able to attend to the needs of your team or serve your clients the way you want."

Many people are feeling stretched, and sensing a loss of control over life can be overwhelming. Nurturing emotional and mental wellness can help you bounce back.

Englemark recommends developing daily "anchors" that nourish the mind, body, and spirit. Those anchors could be some type

of spiritual connection such as prayer or meditation, spending time outdoors, or making time for people who make you feel encouraged and refreshed.

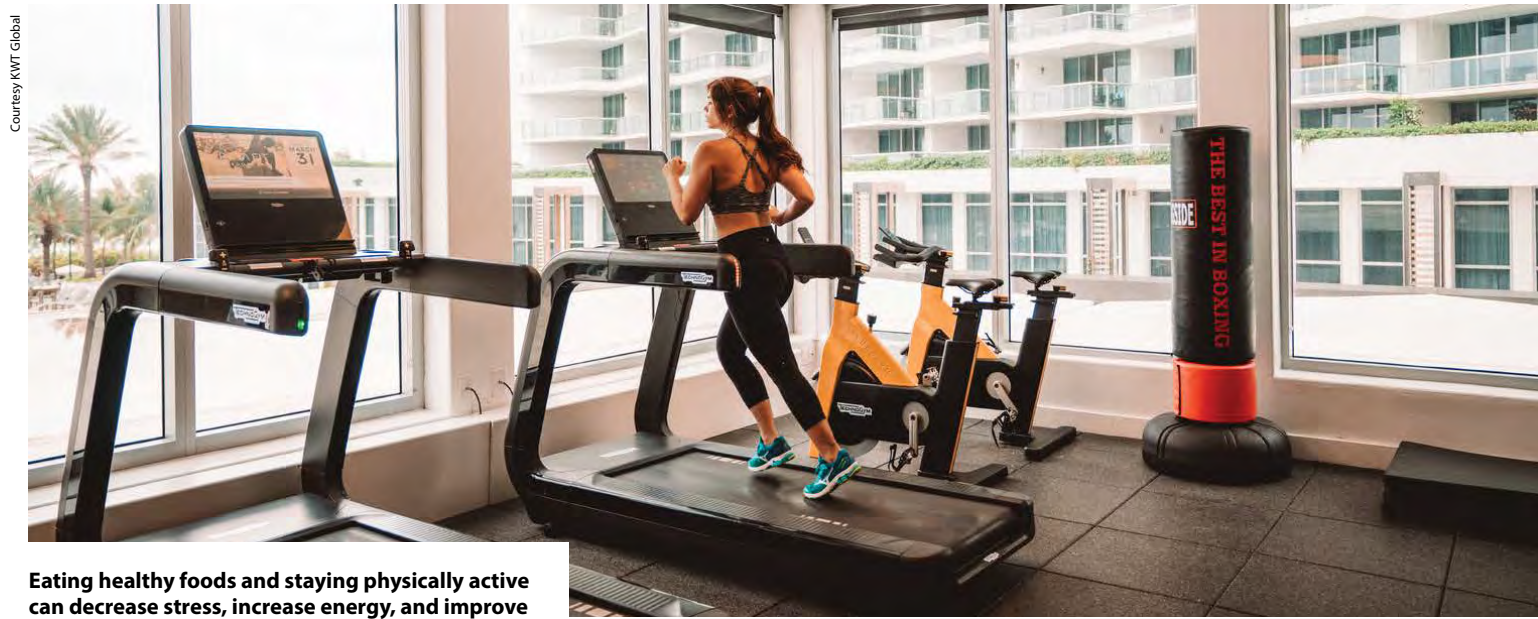
During daily self-care activities, take time to pay attention to your thoughts.

"If you're not catching thoughts like, 'Today's going to be a slog, and I don't have energy and I'm not going to get the support I need,' you're setting yourself up for surviving instead of thriving," Englemark warns. "Catch your thoughts. Instead of letting them rule over you, recognize the 'I can't's' or areas where you're making up a negative story about the future and decide intentionally what thoughts you will let take up precious mental real estate."

Emotions can teach people what needs attention in their life. "Slowing down is a key to noticing how you're feeling," Englemark says. "Maybe make time to journal about the feeling."

Consider what you would need to feel better about challenging situations and your ability to handle them. Focus on positive achievements to build an inner sense of capability, creativity, and resourcefulness.

"You can ask yourself, 'What mountains have I already climbed that I'm not giving myself credit for?'" Englemark says. "We're at such a different stage in history, and a question planners can ask themselves is, 'What's the pain my convention attendees or speakers are experiencing right now, and how am I perfectly suited and capable of solving that problem?'"



Eating healthy foods and staying physically active can decrease stress, increase energy, and improve overall well-being. Even if you're on the road, many hotels offer access to high-end wellness facilities, including Eden Roc Miami Beach (above).



Ease social anxiety

If you're feeling more anxious about your job and working with groups of people, that's not unusual, according to Monica Parkin, author of *Overcoming Awkward: The Introvert's Guide to Networking, Marketing, and Sales* and host of the podcast "Juggling Without Balls."

Parkin says even people who considered themselves extroverts pre-pandemic tell her they're experiencing social anxiety now.

"You're not alone if you're having some anxiety about returning to real life," Parkin says. "If people can remember they're not the only ones feeling this way and even the extroverts are freaking out ... everyone else in the room is probably feeling the same way."

Parkin echoes Englemark's advice about intentionally making time for self-care to ease your stress level.

"Turning off social media is helpful when I'm trying to work on a big project," Parkin says. "Then take time for mindfulness. Go for a walk and feel the breeze on your skin. Build in breaks. For planners, control the things you can and let go of the things you can't control."

Remember, you can control your decisions supporting well-being: what to eat, how much sleep to get, taking time to exercise, and reactions to people and situations every time you walk into an event or log onto a virtual meeting.

Choose wellness at work

Treating yourself well physically enhances emotional wellness, too. For example, wear comfortable shoes to work and pack a favorite smoothie mix to have a treat ready when you need it on a hectic day, Snowden recommends.

While looking for ways to increase self-care, do the same for coworkers and attendees.

"Taking active steps to relieve emotional and physical stress during a conference or event can be easier said than done for meetings professionals who are always on the go," says Gladi Colon, complex director of event management and catering for Caribe Royale Orlando in Florida. "Work in small increments of time into your itinerary that are dedicated to relieving the stress your mind and body may be feeling, and make sure to encourage colleagues to do the same. If time permits, lead a five- to 10-minute group meditation session before your event starts so the entire team feels centered and calm before attendees arrive."

Parkin recommends creating warm-up events or pairing attendees with a "buddy" at conferences to help people ease back into large-group social situations.

Incorporate time for breaks and mindfulness activities in event schedules, Snowden suggests. For example, offer attendees a lunch they can take outside to eat, or set up designated tables for people who want to network during breaks.

By offering choices and a less-hecktic schedule, Snowden says, "you can change the way people not only anticipate showing up to your event, but the experience they have while they're there."

Build partnerships

Delegate some responsibilities. The bonus is twofold: Handing off tasks reduces your workload and stress while creating opportunities for others.

"Develop the ability to hand things off to other people, to say: 'I can't do everything. This particular thing isn't in my skill set.' Is there someone else who would love to do this? Maybe they would love a chance to take this over," Parkin advises. "You're going to give yourself the gift of extra time, and you're building a relationship with the other person. You're saying, 'I trust you with this,' and you're taking care of yourself in the process."

The uncertainty of the pandemic has emphasized the need for communication, collaboration, and stronger professional relationships.

"We have to work with each other a lot more," Snowden says. "Supply chain issues and staffing issues are causing complications that can cause a ton of stress."

When tensions are running high, emotional intelligence is particularly vital to building and maintaining relationships. Self-management takes practice, Snowden explains. In emotionally charged situations, stop, calm down, and restart.

"Self-management and relationship management are critical," Snowden says.

Take a fresh approach

Professional planners strive for excellence, even perfection, to give their clients the best possible experiences. But pre-pandemic strategies for planning, teambuilding, and activities might require a fresh approach this year—and that could be beneficial for planners and attendees.

"Be curious about embracing what new opportunities could look like instead of living in the land of comfort or how it was done before," Englemark says.

The people who find the most joy and success in their lives and careers are those who take problems and turn them into challenges. People who grow through challenges tend to love their careers, have lower stress levels, and experience more happiness, Parkin says. When problems arise, approach them as puzzles to be solved.

"If the venue is not available, instead of panic, ask: 'What is the silver lining? Is there a better venue?'" Parkin suggests. "When things go sideways, can you turn it into something positive rather than sit and stew in the negative?"

Practice the 80-20 rule

Shifting expectations can help, too. When feeling overwhelmed, remember that everything does not depend on you. Parkin says adjusting her perspective with humility and humor is a strategy she uses when faced with a demanding schedule and long to-do list.

"The world won't fall apart if you don't do this one thing. Let go of that need to be perfect," Parkin says. "Remember the 80-20 rule: If you can get something 80 percent done, that's almost done. ... Is it worth me staying up until 2 a.m. to work on it when, honestly, 80 percent is good enough for most people and I'm the only one who will notice?"

When the feeling of being overwhelmed threatens to sap your energy and creativity, stay focused in the present, Englemark recommends. Channel that energy into the challenges you're finding solutions for right now.

"A lot of overwhelm in people who are dealing with a lot of changes in their careers is caused by thinking too far ahead and putting a lot of pressure on yourself," Englemark says. "Your solution is often right in front of you if you'll just look for the next step." ■

From Salt Therapy to Puppy Therapy, Wellness Programs Are Easy to Find

Wellness of mind, body, and spirit is a concept hotels are embracing. Many offer guests experiences that refresh and recharge, and some provide amenities specifically for event planners.

"It's important that you build that relationship and offer those things to help," says Tom Faust, vice president of sales and marketing at Margaritaville Lake Resort Lake Conroe-Houston.

Professional planners increasingly ask for outdoor recreation and teambuilding activities that encourage people to connect, Faust says, and Margaritaville obliges with fun and humor. "We have coconut bowling," he says. "You actually bowl with a coconut on the beach and you knock down pineapples."

There's also a boat-building contest that challenges teams to construct boats from cardboard, duct tape, and plastic wrap—then try to float them across the lake. At day's end, Margaritaville's spa and aromatherapy salon offer a blissful retreat.

The resort provides a dedicated office for planners to use. The space is filled with natural light and equipped with ergonomic chairs; massages are available upon request, Faust says. Yoga and meditation for planners and event attendees also are options.

The Omni Dallas Hotel invites planners to "Zen out" in a meditation room with low light, pillows, mats, and soft sounds. For a warm, fuzzy feeling, take a "puppy break." The hotel collaborates with local animal adoption agencies for a puppy playtime that guarantees wags and smiles.

Through a program designed to encourage interaction and intermingling, the InterContinental Miami presents art pop-ups, culinary demonstrations, salsa lessons, yoga, and Zumba classes free of charge for planners and guests.

At PGA National Resort in Palm Beach Gardens, Fla., planners and event attendees can relax with 15-minute breathing and stretching breakout sessions led by instructors indoors or outdoors for maximum stress release.

The lead therapist at The Spa at Hotel Bennett in Charleston, S.C., teaches stress-relieving breathing exercises, and the hotel provides sound-bath meditative experiences that "bathe" participants in sound waves to promote relaxation and inner peace.

The Boca Raton in Florida invites planners to escape to Spa Palmera, their 50,000-square-foot "wellness sanctuary" and its tranquility pool, Halotherapy Himalayan Salt Room, and ritual baths.

Beyond the hotels, MPI has created an event wellness design course focused on holistic wellness for meeting attendees and event professionals. And in July, the industry association plans to launch a series called Destination You, says instructor Nancy Snowden.

"We travel a lot, but the one we spend the least amount of time examining is ourselves," Snowden says. "How can we invest in ourselves as human beings and make that our destination in 2022?"



Green It Up

Developing a relationship with the environment can save money and help communities

By D. Fran Morley

Meetings and conventions can be rough on the environment: paper materials, food waste, plastic use, travel emissions. Fortunately, opportunities to be lean and green are everywhere.

ConventionSouth reached out to experts in sustainable meetings, as well as venues and CVBs across the South, to learn how planners can be good stewards of nature.

Ahead of the curve

MeetGreen, founded in 1994, was one of the first event management and consulting agencies with a focus on sustainable meetings and events.

"I'm from Oregon where these ideas have been practiced for quite some time, but as I traveled for events with my hi-tech clients, I saw that some areas of the country were very different," says Nancy Zavada, the firm's founder and president. "Many cities had no regular recycling programs, there was a lot of Styrofoam, and so much of the paper handouts and plastic giveaways that were so popular were just getting trashed.

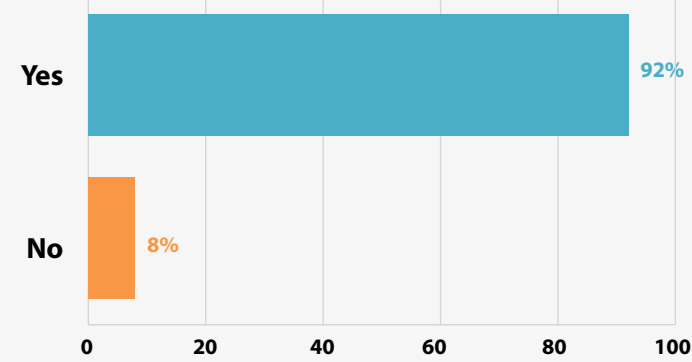
"I realized that event planners could have a huge impact because we order for so many people, whether it's coffee cups, swag items, or food for events," Zavada continues. "Much of what I started with has become more mainstream now and is being integrated into meetings and events of all kinds."

The journey toward environmentally friendly meetings and events does not have to be overwhelming. "No one can do everything all at once," she says. "I advise people to pick one thing, something that's important to your employees or members, and start with that. It might be onsite recycling, refillable water bottles, or reducing paper and plastics. Start with one thing, do it well, measure the results, report on it, and then do more next time."

Popular first steps

Many planners already have embraced sustainable options. Bryan Kunz, director of group sales for Visit Galveston in Texas, says they encourage planners to use digital communication rather than printed materials. "We have seen groups utilize technology toward this goal by implementing digital name badges, touch-free digital conference registration, and virtual welcome bags," Kunz says. The CVB also opted for a digital kiosk at the local convention center rather than information tables with printed

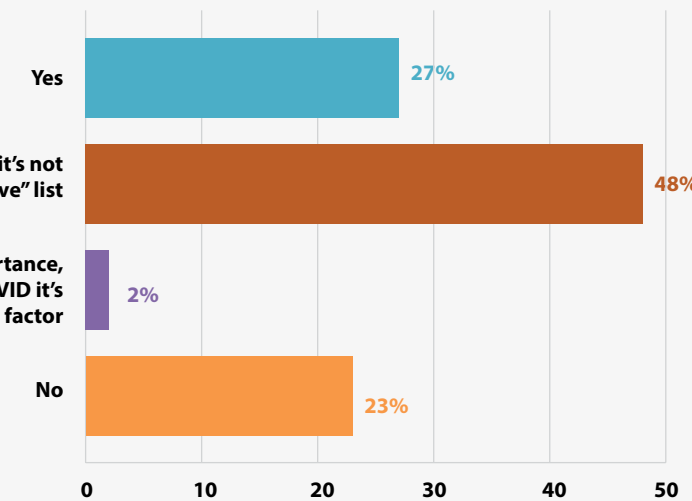
Do you feel it is possible to run an event that is both environmentally friendly and meets health and safety requirements?



Is environmental friendliness an important goal when you plan live events?

It's a consideration, but it's not at the top of the "must-have" list

It used to be of top importance, but in the wake of COVID it's no longer a deciding factor



Results from *ConventionSouth's Winter 2022 CVB & Planner Relationships Survey*

materials, along with creating an app and new website to encourage using digital information.

Kaya Man, destination sales manager for Visit Pensacola in Florida, says they work closely with planners to find sustainable options for events, such as recyclable swag bags or using a limited number of visitors guides.

"We encourage attendees to download our app when looking for things to do and utilize our website," Man says. "The most common practice we are seeing currently is reducing paper distribution. Most have gone to a QR code for information or downloaded an app, giving all the required information in one place without the extra paper."

Similarly, Gulf Shores & Orange Beach Tourism helps planners find green solutions. "We implemented branded reusable convention bags and moved away from plastic bags in 2020," says Michelle Russ, vice president of sales, sports and events. "We offer a meeting planner marketing toolkit with many free digital promotional opportunities for planners, such as banner ads, save-the-dates, visual assets, and a one-sheet of popular dining and activity options."

CVB officials say hotels and venues also are becoming more proactive. "Our Northern Kentucky Convention Center and many hotels encourage groups to use the water-refill stations as opposed to bottled water," says Stefanie Wyckoff, convention sales director

for meetNKY. "Some hotels also encourage clients to use linen-less tables, reusable swag bags and bottles, and compostable boxed lunches and containers."

While many planners seek sustainable options, sometimes, it's their employer or client who wants to go green. "Often, we find planners are seeking opportunities that align with the organization's corporate social-responsibility goals," notes Matt Robinette, vice president of visitor experience for Richmond Region Tourism in Virginia.

Taking it up a notch

The pandemic-era expansion of virtual and hybrid meetings meant fewer people traveling and reduced carbon emissions. But for in-person meetings, holding events in drive-in markets or cities accessible by direct flights goes a long way toward reducing the carbon footprint left by gatherings, Zavada says. During an event, using alternate forms of transportation, including walking, biking, or riding scooters, helps, too.

Beyond that, consider physical surroundings, such as exhibit booths.

"There's a tremendous number of things that can be done on the exhibit floor to save materials from landfills," Zavada says. "Displays can be designed to be reused. Booth carpet doesn't have to be brand new; it could be reused, it could be recycled."

The New Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center has a director of sustainability and corporate social responsibility on staff. Linda Baynham fills that role, and she says that reflects how committed their team is to reducing environmental impacts and helping customers meet sustainability goals.

"We create sustainability efforts around all our conferences and events to minimize the footprint of guests," Baynham says. "Sustainability initiatives are one of the most important ways to stay competitive in the conference market."

Baynham calls the venue's sustainability practice one of its pillars of success. "It is a priority in everything we do here," she says.

Last year, Richmond Region Tourism launched a program called the Net Zero Emission Certified Conference in partnership with the Virginia Green Travel Alliance and Terrapass, a company that uses carbon offsets to fund projects that remove harmful carbon dioxide emissions from the environment.



Sustainability Success

In 2019, more than 250,000 pounds of material was diverted from landfills through recycling programs at the New Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center. The center also conducted a waste audit after a recent event. Employees and volunteers—dubbed The Trash Team—rooted through 400 pounds of trash to determine what was thrown away that could be recycled, composted, sold, donated, or reduced in use. The findings helped inform the venue's growing recycling and waste-diversion efforts.

"The Virginia Library Association's 2021 fall conference utilized the program and provided a net-zero emissions conference to 390 attendees," Robinette says. "The carbon offsets helped neutralize the car, train, and plane rides utilized by attendees, as well as the environmental impact of meals and the hotel and meeting space."

Change for the better

With CVBs, hotels, and venues focusing on sustainability, there's a lot of help out there for professionals looking to plan environmentally friendly meetings.

"Planners might think it's more expensive and more trouble, but that's not true," Zavada says. "Does it take more effort? Yes, but not that much."

A good place to start is adding local vendors with sustainable practices and eco-friendly items to your regular orders for supplies, food, and swag.

"It's more about change," Zavada says. "But consider all the changes that we have gone through in the past two years. We can change. Let's just change for the better." ■

Create Community Relationships Through Good Deeds

The pandemic may have put a crimp in connecting event attendees with local communities, but human kindness is alive and well.

"Planners frequently request suggestions for local charities or non-profits that they can either raise money for or to offer a CSR [corporate social responsibility] component during their event," says Stefanie Wyckoff of meetNKY in northern Kentucky. Wyckoff also has noticed an increase in questions about how venues conserve energy and water, reduce waste, and dispose of food from events.

Many venues encourage planners to donate leftover food to local food banks and other charities. And rather than lug trade show products back to the office—or throw them out—those items can be donated locally.

Voluntourism, such as helping local non-profit groups with maintenance work or community gardening, lets planners and attendees give back to their destination.

"We create volunteer opportunities for visitors through various beach cleanup and conservation programs," says Bryan Kunz of Visit Galveston in Texas.

Supporting local areas can be as simple as seeking authentic community experiences, outings to arts and cultural events, supporting independent retail shops for swag items, hiring local talent, and using area suppliers and food providers.

Connecting with the local community gives attendees the satisfaction that comes from helping others and contributing to the common good. And if the event is also environmentally friendly, everybody goes home guilt-free.



Voluntourism lets meeting attendees give back and help the environment through outings like local beach cleanups.



Gulf Shores & Orange Beach Tourism introduced branded reusable convention bags and moved away from plastic bags in 2020.