



What do meetings look like in 2021 and 2022?

By Dan Dolan, Abbey Resort Director of Sales and Marketing

Try to recall there was a time, although it may seem oh so long ago, when meeting in person was the norm. "Oh, I am heading to another meeting, hope it's not boring," you may have mused.

We just might jump at the chance to join a "boring" meeting these days if it meant travelling and seeing colleagues or mixing with industry folks. Of course, it would be better if, when in person meetings return, they are actually *better* than before we lost them.

Today I look forward to that day, not with rose-tinted glasses or gloomy stats, rather with an eye on what meetings might look like.

When in person meetings came to a screeching halt in March of last year, businesses around the country did not stop. In fact, businesses needed meetings more than ever due to the profound economic impacts beginning to unfold. Organizations needed to form new strategies post haste. As an example, our resort's business leadership moved to daily meetings to discuss strategy and our company's home office began laying out schedules for regular meetings to present their guidance on a regular basis. Many companies needed to ramp up the frequency of critical business path meetings while simultaneously finding new ways to meet with a majority of workers now dispersed to home offices. Off-the-shelf virtual meeting solutions including Zoom, Teams, Blue Jeans and others quickly filled the gap. We were all moving so fast, we might not have even realized what we were losing or for how long.

Way before the convenience of lightning-fast internet connections and devices allowing us to meet with someone halfway around the globe from anywhere, people made the choice to meet in person even when it was terribly inconvenient. In ancient times, an invitation to a meeting likely meant an arduous journey, one that required great resources and risk. Why did they do it instead of sending a messenger from the safety of their home or castle? The answers are informative to us today. In person meetings give us critical human connectivity not possible any other way. When not being forced into using poorly lit, low resolution digitized video we can, when face to face, see all the body language, facial expressions and hear clear tones of speech that inform our brains the complete communication coming from a person. Recently I participated in a virtual conference with breakout "rooms." I have never played the virtual life simulation called The Sims, but it looked like a version of the popular game with pixilated humans and thought bubbles of text. It was, at best, clunky and I didn't see serious business getting done. I am sure the organizers had messages they hoped to deliver in those sessions and feedback they wanted in return that did not materialize. Sure, advancements are coming in the virtual meeting realm but most people we've talked to are so uninspired by attending one virtual meeting after another they would rather chew on a shoe than sit through another online session.

That's distraction enough, but add to that today's overloaded work-from-home schedules. Remember when we had relief and inspiration before and after offsite meeting sessions? It might have been a morning run near the hotel or resort before the opening session, enjoying all the freshly prepared meals and breaks by an actual chef and inevitably there were post session receptions to mingle. These things have purpose. The brain, like muscles, need to warm up, be given breaks and cool down. Optimal absorption of information and engagement occurs in a real life event like those we all used to go to because we DO design in the scheduled meals, breaks

and time to unwind or socialize. As each organization determines that it is time to return to in person meetings these lost elements will take on a renewed and amplified importance.

So how should meetings look in 2021 and 2022? In a word, better.

If we realize what we lost and how important the act of gathering and the elements of a meeting are, we should lean in and champion experiential meetings. There are some creative planning companies helping develop and deliver great experiences for their clients, but predictably there may also be a new wave of employees that are told one day, "So you'll be planning our next super important meeting." These will be people who have never planned a meeting before. One thing about those folks, besides the challenge they will have to learn how to plan a meeting in the first place, is they will have fresh thinking and ask new questions.

It seems that meetings occurring this year will have a varying degree of precursors related to safety and guest comfort to meet in hotels. Most companies are prepared, and some are already experienced in the social distancing, cleaning and protocols. What then? We recommend those first in person meetings later this year NOT be jam packed with hours and hours of unending content. Remember, for most of us face-to-face social interactions have been reduced to the occasional visits with a small, very familiar group. There will be a natural shock to the system being in a larger social or business setting for many. Consider reducing the size and ambition of these first meetings. This might be a natural change due to safety guidance or reduced ability for attendees to travel, but this suggestion is more about having engaged and attentive attendees. Focus on a smaller set of hyper-important goals giving ample time for people to receive and digest the content. If in the past, a jam packed one hour session had participants fading after 30 minutes, expect that will occur sooner in these first few meetings.

In our hotel world we desperately want to envision 2022 as close to back to "normal" as possible. If we have learned anything from the cycles of the past 30 years it is that *when* and *how* business returns to pre-crisis levels is unpredictable. One possible scenario is the return to some larger events. This means bigger expenditures and larger expectations. If in 2021 a company only invited a select hierarchy of employees, then presumably a broader group of team members or whole divisions will be attending their first off site meeting in 2022. We believe indications point to many of these meetings and events combining elements of traditional meetings with recognition & reward. Incentive trips and other types of recognition was just not possible in 2020 and most of 2021. This will change what was the norm for, say, a sales meeting, that mostly was about driving next year's sales with a small nod to top performers. Actually, it may be necessary to change that mix quite a bit. Engaged and thoughtful personalization in large meetings show each person matters to the success of a company – a sentiment hard to convey with dispersed team members today. Clever and purposeful team building activities will ease people back into esprit de corps. Not to mention, at this stage, people want to socialize and there could be pushback if not accommodated in the meeting plan. In large meetings it is also important to giving consideration to narrowing the content delivery to the most important priorities and giving more time to those key messages.

Today, our sales team talks about asking very different questions, preparing for a wave of first time meeting planners and building experiences while still fulfilling required meeting needs.