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Meeting Expectations: 5 things Australian planners should consider as meetings & events resume

Between the devastating bushfires and the coronavirus pandemic, it has been a difficult year for meetings and events in Australia so far. Companies have had to adapt by moving some meetings online – but virtual interactions aren't a perfect substitute for face-to-face meetings. It's harder to sustain people's attention and form meaningful connections in a virtual setting or make employees feel valued and motivated in a way that can be achieved through an incentive trip.

Even as Australia and the rest of the world continues to grapple with the effects of the virus, our industry is slowly beginning the long and challenging road to recovery. In Australia, both indoor and outdoor events have been allowed to restart since July, albeit with various restrictions around capacity and safe distancing. Just this past week, all of the country's states and territories, with the exception of Western Australia (WA), agreed to develop a roadmap to reopen domestic borders by Christmas. Of course, the situation remains quite fluid and restrictions are changing daily – as we have recently seen in parts of Victoria and NSW – and so there remains a sense of caution.

At [CWT Meetings & Events](#), we are seeing positivity amongst our clients in Australia and New Zealand, with corporates starting to make domestic event inquiries and arrangements for Q4 2020 as restrictions ease. Companies are rethinking their meeting strategies for the last quarter of this year and for next year, to ensure they're able to secure the venues and accommodation of their choice.

Naturally, a lot will be different for meetings and events post-COVID-19 – at least in the near- to mid-term. Safety is the top priority, so we will likely have more local and domestic events, with health screenings and stricter hygiene protocols at venues. Group sizes are likely to be smaller, with digital channels being used to reach wider audiences.

Here are some of the important considerations that companies should think about as they look to resume their meetings and events:

1. Destinations – While international destinations had previously been favoured over remote regions in Australia, given the similar overall costs, this is changing due to the prevailing uncertainty around international travel. Corporates are now looking at taking their events to some of those bucket-list Australian destinations like Broome, the Northern Territory, and the Whitsundays. They are keen on exploring domestic options both to support in the recovery of the local economy, as well as to provide a safe avenue for delegates to reconvene.

Earlier this year, Tourism Australia kicked off its “Holiday Here This Year” campaign, encouraging Australians to get out and see their own backyard. As part of this initiative, Tourism Australia and various state tourism boards are offering incentives for organizing domestic meetings and events, and this is something we're actively looking into on behalf of our clients.

2. Getting there– Picking a unique and exciting destination is well and good, but you also need to get your attendees there in a way that’s comfortable, cost-effective and most importantly, safe.

One of the options we’ve been looking into with our clients is to have staggered itineraries that limit the amount of people on one aircraft. We have also been working closely with our airline partners to discuss the possibility of safe-distancing on flights for group travel bookings, as well as chartering flights where appropriate.

For incentive trips, planners can consider unique modes of transportation, such as luxury rail journeys, that become part of the experience. A one-night stop somewhere interesting en route, or multi-destination itineraries, may be more prevalent to drive incentive engagement.

For all events, pre-event communications with safety reminders for attendees should become a must-have.

3. Venues– There’s no shortage of spectacular venues in Australia, offering world-class facilities and dining options with the most breathtaking scenery. We’re having regular conversations with our accommodation and venue partners to understand what measures they are putting in place to address concerns around attendee safety.

These include: the exclusive use of properties or wings/sections of hotels; pre-booked elevator times, controlled by hotel staff for event guests; and the appropriate personal protective equipment and sanitization where necessary.

4. Format– Even as meetings and events start up again, not all attendees may be able to be physically present at the venue due to safe-distancing requirement and travel restrictions. We will likely see more hybrid events that combine both virtual concepts and live events to reach a wider audience.

People often think that the “virtual” element of a hybrid meeting simply means using Zoom or Webex to broadcast the discussions taking place at the venue to the remote attendees. If you really want to engage your virtual event audience and promote connectivity, there’s a lot more to consider. For instance, in live events there is often some buffer time between sessions and attendees can chat to the person next to them. With hybrid events, you can’t have dead-air in the virtual portion – the online audience needs to be engaged from start to finish, and so greater time restraints apply.

Time management will get trickier. Breaks may need to be longer to allow for social distancing and other safety measures, so planners should consider building extra buffer time in their sessions to account for this. Breakfasts could be moved into the meeting room to ensure the event starts on time,

whilst still fulfilling all necessary safety precautions.

With fewer flight options available, clients might look to add some extra activities to fill time.

And with incentives, planners will be forced to create bespoke experiences more than ever before. This could mean engaging with producers from regional areas to come up with event concepts that may not have been done in the past.

5. F&B – Buffets, while an efficient way to feed large amounts of people quickly, will likely disappear due to hygiene and safe-distancing concerns. Instead, individual lunch boxes for meeting breaks may get a facelift with the right attention.

I've also found that event attendees love live stations and I believe these will stay, albeit with greater attention to safety – for example, without self-service.

Without a doubt, the return to live meetings and events will be challenging as we are forced to contend with questions and unknowns that we would never even have considered a few months ago. But if all stakeholders work together – including agencies, planners, airlines, airports, hotels, and governments – I'm confident that there is no obstacle we can't overcome as we work to create safe and memorable experiences for attendees. We are so fortunate to have some of the world's most beautiful destinations on our doorstep and we are ready to showcase what Australia can offer more than ever before.

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