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MEETINGS OUTLOOK™



The forecast for business conditions and budgets continues to improve at a healthy rate. Audiovisual partners have an increasingly powerful role in the outcome of successful events, while planners are driven to focus more on myriad aspects of contingency planning.

2017 SPRING EDITION

ALL EYES ON AV

The rising importance of audiovisual options and suppliers in influencing the quality of the attendee experience and the overall costs of meetings are key trends in the industry.



By Elaine Pofeldt

The Ronald Reagan Building keeps rising to the top of Mike Smoyer's list when he organizes meetings in Washington, D.C. The meetings, aimed at IT managers, focus on the latest government technology.

One reason Smoyer keeps coming back is the great relationship he has with Projection, the audiovisual company the facility uses.

"To me, it's invaluable to know the team," says Smoyer, president of the Digital Government Institute. "They get to know your event and the culture of your event. We ask them questions: 'What do you think about this?' 'Have you seen this?'"

Smoyer is not alone in

keeping audiovisual top of mind in planning his meetings. AV's rising importance in influencing the quality of the attendee experience and the overall costs of meetings stood out as a key trend in the most recent *Meetings Outlook* survey.

"What we're seeing is the AV providers are integral to the success of most meetings and events of any size," says Bill Voegeli (MPI Georgia Chapter), president of Association Insights, the Atlanta-area research firm that conducts the survey. "The quality of their product has increased dramatically because of the successful integration of AV and IT."



OF RESPONDENTS CITE RISING COSTS AS A KEY TREND

TREND FORECAST

21% of respondents have significantly increased sustainability practices in the past five years; 28% have either decreased or not increased such practices

*“At events, you have to find ways to use the AV to create **something they are not just going to find on Facebook.**”*

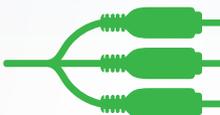
KELLY BERTO, CMP
President, SilverCrate



RESPONDENTS ARE SEEING A MUCH HIGHER INCIDENCE OF INCREASED AV COSTS



AV IS INCREASINGLY VIEWED AS A SIGNIFICANT BUDGET ITEM—AND BUDGETS FOR AV CONTINUE TO GROW

No. 1 
TREND

22% OF RESPONDENTS CITED THE CHALLENGE OF TECHNOLOGY OPPORTUNITIES

As a result of the growing emphasis on gee-whiz AV productions, the amount of spending in this area is growing.

“We’re seeing a much higher incidence of increased AV costs,” Voegeli says. “The budgeting for AV is getting mentioned more and more often as a significant budget item and an increasing budget item.”

Many meeting professionals are willing to make the investment in great AV because it brings a competitive edge to their meetings.

Kelly Bertog, CMP, is among them. As president of SilverCrate, an event planning and production firm in Chicago, Bertog is well aware that he is competing against smartphones for attendees’ attention.

“At events, you have to find ways to use the AV to create something they are not just going to find on Facebook,” he says.

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PREPARATION FOR PROTESTS

When Bishop-McCann planned a medical convention for about 700 people in Washington, D.C., in November, several protests took place. The meetings, incentives and event firm was well prepared.

With clients coming from the U.S. and several other countries, Bishop-McCann’s team discussed the potential for disruption with the organizer and briefed the group on general safety in advance of the event, according to Account Director Amber Heintz, CMP-HC, HMCC (MPI Chicago Area Chapter). Bishop-McCann’s team relied on local partners as well as government, online, news and other sources to keep abreast of what was happening.

“Throughout the week, we continued to monitor and inform,” Heintz says. “While the vast majority of the protests were peaceful, we were aware that anything could turn violent in a moment’s notice. Though a few motor coaches were re-routed, the event went smoothly.”

Bishop-McCann does considerable contingency planning, and protests are routinely taken into account, according to Heintz. Communication with clients is a crucial part of this and involves briefings on current and potential threats, she notes.

“We provide topline and secondary details based on the severity of the topic or possibility of escalation,” Heintz explains. But that isn’t the last step. “We work with our clients to complete a plan for informing our attendees of the protests and provide steps to ensure their safety.”

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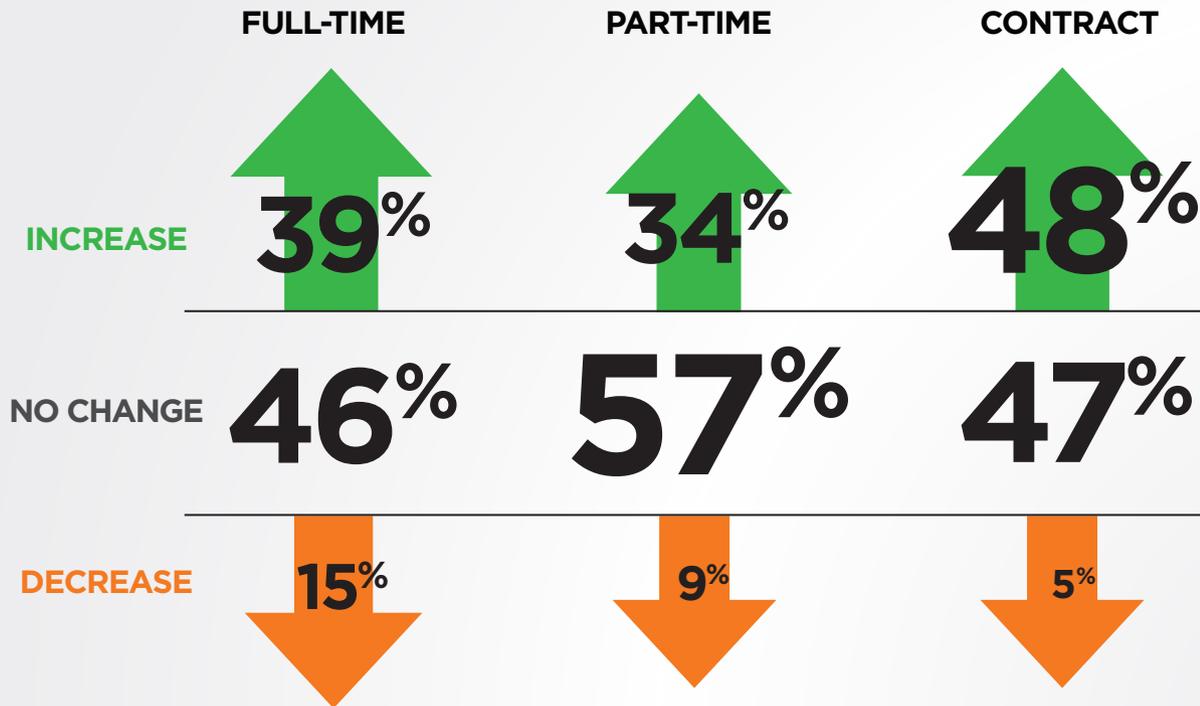
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GLIMPSE AT CURRENT EMPLOYMENT TRENDS



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To that end, Bertog has been experimenting with creating unique environments via LED displays and 360-degree wireless speakers hidden throughout the event. “You feel like you are transported into a different realm,” he says.

At one party in January for a large international retailer of camping and hunting products, SilverCrate adopted a winter wonderland theme to emphasize the idea of connecting with nature—to bring the outdoors inside.

To do that, SilverCrate worked with an animation company to create video displays to show attendees scenes of nature.

“You’d see an elk on the northwest corner wall,” Bertog says. “And it would make its way toward you.”

The display was a hit, he says. “You could tell many of the people in that room had spent time observing elk in the wild and watching videos online,” he says. “They thought it was going to be a typical party. Next thing you know we’re in this realm.”

Other meeting professionals are finding ways to incorporate smartphones into AV productions, making the most of attendees’ focus on their devices.

When the American Farm Bureau held its annual convention and trade show in January at the Phoenix Convention Center, the group’s CEO asked attendees to email a letter to their legislators and take various other actions, such as posting on social media platforms, to support a cause he had discussed. The letter was sent to attendees in a text message via an app called Phone2Action.

Of the 4,000 attendees, 1,681 responded, according to Jeb Ory, CEO of Phone2Action. As the farm bureau’s CEO stood on the podium, a live feed with a map of the U.S. showed pins dropping into people’s states as they took action—a display that Phone2Action coordinated with the venue’s AV team.

Ory says Phone2Action has been seeing an uptick in demand from large trade associations looking to keep members interested.

“It gives them a new way to engage all of their members and everyone attending their event,” he says. “They have an opportunity to take collective action on something—and they can see it happening in real time.”

Christina Devlin, CMP, CMM (MPI Oregon Chapter), events manager with Associated General Contractors, a nonprofit trade association in Wilsonville, Ore., says her group’s members have been receptive to live polling on their smartphones. People respond via texts for an instant response that will show up on the screen where a speaker is showing a PowerPoint presentation, Devlin explains. “It’s been very effective,” she says. “We’ve gotten better engagement with that.”

Given the importance of AV, some meeting professionals have worked hard to cultivate good relationships with their providers.

Smoyer, for his part, greatly appreciates working with a familiar

TREND FORECAST

48% of respondents report good availability of space for 2017 meetings; 61% say the same for booking 2018 meetings

“[Phone2Action] gives them a new way to engage all of their members. They have an opportunity to take collective action on something—and they can see it happening in real time.”

team. “When we do go to a facility that doesn’t have someone in house or we’ve never worked with them, I do think it hurts our meeting,” he says. “It just takes longer. It’s more painful. The quality of equipment might not be the same. I’m a huge advocate of finding a good partner and using them as much as you can if it’s economically feasible.”

Good relationships with AV suppliers can also result in more attractive pricing—something a handful of forward-looking meeting professionals are recognizing.

“[Respondents] have described agreements with both local and national AV providers they say have been negotiated and worked on for years,” Voegeli says. “But those are really more seasoned professionals. It seems that the idea of creating a long-term negotiated relationship with AV service providers on a broader scale is something that hasn’t been widely adopted.”

But not everyone has the freedom to cultivate their vendors of choice. Karen Shackman, president of Shackman Associates, a destination management company based in New York City, notes that many venues have exclusive arrangements with specific AV companies. “This discourages any outside vendors from being part of a bidding process,” she says.

CONTINGENCY PLANNING TAKES CENTER STAGE

With headlines about terrorism and protests showing no signs of abating, contingency planning—a trend that didn’t appear in survey responses until the fall of 2016—is also top of mind.

For some organizers, contingency planning affects their choice of venue. One reason Smoyer has gravitated to the Reagan Building is that he doesn’t have to spend as much time preparing for worst-case scenarios. “The Reagan Building has very strict protocols,” he says.

That’s an important benefit, given that the nation’s capital is often subject to major disruptions. “There are constantly protests and events in Washington, D.C., [with] big delegations,” Smoyer says. “You always have to look at the political calendar and see what might shut down the streets.”

When Smoyer does hold events—such as 930gov, a one-day mini trade show with about 1,000 attendees—at the Washington Convention Center, he asks the facility for a rundown on what it will do to keep his team and attendees safe, during both setup and the live event. For past events, he has hired off-duty police as extra security. “We felt that was the right thing to do,” he says.

Devlin finds that, generally, her contingency planning focuses on possibilities such as illness or injury at an event. But when high-profile speakers are on the program, she puts more extensive action plans in place. In 2012, for instance, when former White House Deputy Chief of Staff Karl Rove spoke to the group, Devlin planned for the possibility of protests, though they did not materialize.

Business Conditions

OVERALL FIGURES INDICATE INCREASINGLY STABLE BUSINESS CONDITIONS. Since last quarter, 11% more respondents are citing “favorable” conditions and 7% fewer respondents are citing “negative” conditions.

69%

of respondents predict **FAVORABLE** business conditions

17%

of respondents predict **NEUTRAL** business conditions

14%

of respondents predict **NEGATIVE** business conditions

Projected Budget/ Spend Over the Next Year

BUDGET OUTLOOKS ARE MORE POSITIVE THAN LAST QUARTER, with 7% more respondents citing a “favorable” budget forecast and 8% fewer citing a “negative” budget forecast.

52%

of respondents predict **FAVORABLE** budget/spend

28%

of respondents predict **FLAT** budget/spend

20%

of respondents predict **NEGATIVE** budget/spend

ATTENDANCE FORECASTS

LIVE AND VIRTUAL ATTENDANCE FIGURES ARE EXPECTED TO GROW 1.8% AND 2.7%, UP FROM 1.3% AND 2.4%, RESPECTIVELY.

PROJECTED LIVE ATTENDANCE

55%

POSITIVE

27%

FLAT

17%

NEGATIVE

PROJECTED VIRTUAL ATTENDANCE

57%

POSITIVE

36%

FLAT

8%

NEGATIVE

"We had the resort police circling the area where he was at all times," Devlin recalls. "We [also] had out-of-uniform police in the crowd."

Mary Denson, CMP, Dallas-based senior sales and marketing manager for Corporate Events & Occasions, says planning for the unexpected has become so important that she has made it a habit to inquire about a venue's security plan. "I would include that in the site inspection," she advises.

At Arizona State University, Marla Harr encourages her meeting and convention management students to research incidents that have happened in the last two years in a locale where they are planning a meeting so that they can prepare for contingencies, including regional weather patterns like a wildfire or a hurricane.

Given the emphasis on IT, some contingency planning is focusing on potential technology failures. That's the case for Gary Schirmacher, CMP (MPI Rocky Mountain Chapter), senior vice president, industry presence and strategic development at Experient, a Maritz Global Events company.

"Planning and practicing internet outages is something

"Planning and practicing internet outages is something that is becoming more routine in the planning process."

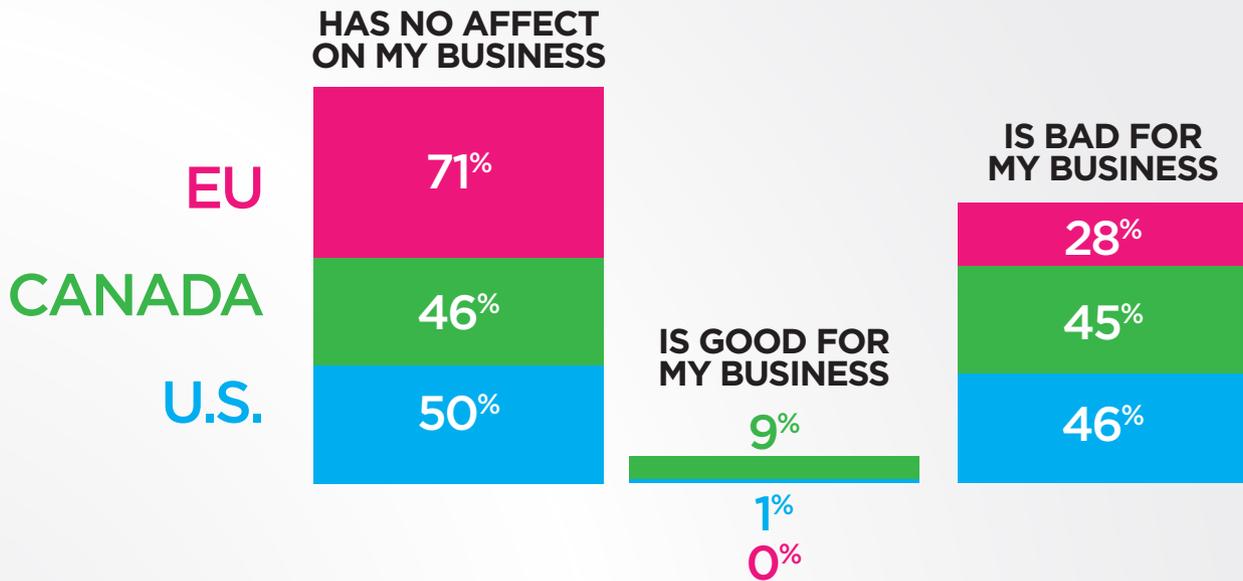
GARY SCHIRMACHER, CMP

MPI Rocky Mountain Chapter
Senior Vice President, Industry Presence
and Strategic Development, Experient

that is becoming more routine in the planning process," he says. "Finding ways to share services or equipment with other groups in the city or venue in and around the same time can pay dividends to groups. Booking business three or more years out, where no one really knows what changes will be made to equipment, internet or service, makes it particularly important to ask lots of questions of the venue during the booking process."

With the increased emphasis on contingency planning, more

IMPACT OF U.S. IMMIGRATION POLICIES ON MEETINGS AND EVENTS



meeting professionals are feeling the onus of being more transparent about what they would do if an unfortunate incident occurs.

“We have been seeing in the last two years more requests than ever to provide copies of our preparedness plan,” says Lauran Dangler (MPI Virginia Chapter), director of group sales at the Omni Richmond Hotel. “A lot of times it is actually on the customer’s rider that it’s required.” She adds that the hotel, looking to respond, has been working on a document to provide to meeting planners.

Travel hitches for attendees are one potential contingency for which more meeting professionals are planning, given the on-again, off-again U.S. travel bans. Two federal judges recently blocked the most recent version of the ban, issued on March 6, which affects travelers from six Muslim-majority countries.

Although most meeting and event professionals believe current immigration policy in the U.S. does not have a negative influence on their business, 42 percent of respondents believe it is either bad for business in some ways or bad for business in every way, given the uncertainty it has caused.

“This federal regime is so different from anything we’ve had before—no one is quite sure what is going to happen next,” says Tyra Hilliard, CMP, Ph.D., JD (MPI North Florida Chapter), an attorney who serves the meeting industry, as well as a professor who teaches courses in hospitality, meetings and events and business for the College of Coastal Georgia.

Jhoanna Belfer (MPI Orange County Chapter), director of sales at Ayres Hotels, says she has seen some cancellations by groups and vendors from Mexico bound for Disneyland since the travel ban who are “not sure the U.S. is open for people from other countries to come and visit.”

“We’re working with them to adjust room blocks in advance if we can be more flexible with their cancellations,” Belfer says.

Giselle Carson, an immigration attorney with Marks Gray

PA in Jacksonville, Fla., says clients in all industries have sought her advice on how to cope with the travel ban.

“What I have suggested is [for] some of those clients to use Skype or teleconference,” Carson says. However, that approach has economic repercussions, she notes. “Those are flights that are not booked, hotels that are not booked.”

She has also urged clients who are planning meetings to make sure attendees budget time for delays during travel.

“Allowing more time for questioning and secondary inspections is something people need to do more when they’re traveling,” she says. “We all need to be more conscientious about travel documents and identification documents, to keep them up to date.”

Given the new realities of U.S. immigration policy, Carson has been hearing from meeting organizers who are looking elsewhere for meetings.

“Canada has been [getting] higher consideration for meetings,” she says. “Western European countries are another preference. It is that fear, that uncertainty. Sometimes things settle down. We hope they will.” ■

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