

MARRIOTT BONVOY™
EVENTS

CONNECT WITH
CONFIDENCE

HYBRID MEETING INSIGHTS

Considerations for Meetings and Events
that Prioritize Health and Engage People

Drawing lessons learned from hybrid in-person and virtual experiences, this report offers practical considerations for event professionals as they plan engaging meetings, conferences, conventions, trade shows, and special events in a time of seismic change for the industry.

February 2021

Le Meridien Cyberport, Hong Kong

MARRIOTT
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MEETINGS & EVENTS REIMAGINED FOR THIS MOMENT AND BEYOND

With everchanging restrictions on gatherings and travel globally, the coronavirus pandemic brought business as usual to an abrupt halt – significantly so in the world of events. But disruptions can also be fertile ground for innovation, and the meetings and events industry is ready to meet this challenge.

In this spirit, Marriott International set out to plan, conduct and learn from our first-ever series of hybrid virtual and in-person events. We called our series *Connect with Confidence* and introduced it as an extension of our Marriott Bonvoy™ Events initiative. Our aim for these hybrid events was twofold:

- Bring people together with confidence, incorporating leading-edge health protocols and the option to participate virtually from their home or office
- Provide a fully immersive and engaging experience to spark confidence and encourage a consideration to return to in-person meetings and events

We knew that the challenge was steep: 90% of our participants had not attended an in-person meeting since the COVID-19 pandemic began. We had to ground ourselves in new concerns and mindsets in order to earn people's confidence in our ability to execute a meeting in this environment. At the same time, we had to help our in-person guests understand the role that each of them would need to play in promoting their own wellbeing and that of others while with us. This would involve letting go of some deeply engrained meeting behaviors and embracing new ones.

We also knew that this venture was important: People want to get together – the need to connect is deep in our DNA. That's why business is an inherently social endeavor. In fact, 53% of participants in our second event plan to host their own in-person or hybrid meeting within the next year. We recognized that what we learned together through *Connect with Confidence* could guide not only our own teams and customers, but the meetings and events industry as a whole.

The need to INNOVATE

53% of event participants plan to host an in-person or hybrid event within the year

Fast facts about our EVENTS

The Ritz-Carlton,
Tysons Corner,
McLean, Virginia, USA
November 9, 2020

Participant mix
In-Person: 44
Virtual: 238

Gaylord Rockies Resort
& Convention Center
Aurora, Colorado, USA
January 13, 2021

Participant mix
In-Person: 100
Virtual: 803

Planned future event locations:

- Mexico City
- Dubai
- London

LESSONS FROM THE JOURNEY

The Marriott International planning team collaborated with a creative, committed, expert team of fellow event professionals to bring these events to life and capture observations, lessons and ideas from the experience. In this report, we offer insights to help meeting and event professionals:

1 Define an event **strategy** that is centered on goals but informed by new realities

2 Manage changing expectations with thorough **communications**

3 Consider new ways to **engage** both in-person and virtual participants

4 Create an **environment** that offers direction, choice and control

5 Provide meaningful opportunities for people to **connect**





1

DEFINE AN EVENT STRATEGY THAT IS CENTERED ON GOALS BUT INFORMED BY NEW REALITIES

In many ways, the pandemic accelerated trends already starting to shape meetings and events. For example, digital innovations were transforming much of life and business. And event professionals were challenging themselves to better meet the diverse needs and preferences of individuals, not just groups. With new concerns and requirements imposed by the pandemic, these trends shifted into high gear and certainly had technological and logistical implications for our events. But before we focused there, we stepped back and centered our strategy on our events' goals: *What did we want people to feel and do during their time with us?* This helped free us from conventions so we could plan meaningful events informed, but not defined, by new realities.

FROM OUR EXPERIENCE

Pre-planning research on rules and norms. Before we gathered to collaborate deeply on the details, our planning team studied health regulations and guidelines at the local and national level, as well as industry-specific norms for travel. Having a clear understanding of the policies and culture of the specific organizations and destinations involved was also critical. With insights from this research, the prep team advised our planning process throughout the journey.

Intensive cross-team collaboration. To align on a shared point of view and consistent results for this radically new experience, we gathered lead professionals from the event stakeholders, including the hotel and vendors involved, as well as those focused on the content of our program, the physical spaces where our guests would meet, food and beverage services, and technology to power the digital aspects of our event. We also involved our hotel's cleanliness champion – a Marriott professional who has received an elevated level of training to ensure the highest cleaning standards are upheld. Together, we established a foundational commitment to the wellbeing of attendees along the entire event journey – from pre-event to onsite and through post-event. All ideas and decisions were vetted through a wellbeing lens, aiming to provide attendees with a sense of comfort, choice and control in an environment conducive to listening and engagement.

Aha MOMENTS

Early collaboration revealed the necessity of a larger-than-typical tech desk.

Additional space drawings were needed for pre-event communications to attendees.

Choices that influence behaviors. In addition to being strategists, negotiators and experts in logistics and engagement, meeting and event professionals must now deeply understand the psychology behind people's mindsets and behaviors – and do our part to help attendees adopt and adapt to new norms. By design, the choices we make as we plan our events can build people's awareness of how their actions impact others. And we can help encourage new behaviors – some at odds with our social human nature – that prioritize the wellbeing of the entire group. For example, we incorporated monitoring systems so that our meeting and event professionals could assess, in real time, the status of room occupancy, physical distancing, and use of face coverings, and remind participants about proper behaviors as needed.

Advanced AV and tech. Technology played a critical role in pulling off virtual and in-person events. And, accordingly, it required more time to plan and test. On board from the beginning, our multi-part tech team had a deep understanding of our meeting goals, content strategy and desired experience, as well as our need to connect and engage both in-person and virtual audiences. This team handled sophisticated hybrid event production, planned and managed multiple camera angles and provided a platform that served as a digital bridge between our event presenters, participants at home and those who would join us at our venues.



Two experiences in one event. We wanted every participant to feel included in our hybrid events. Part of getting to this goal was recognizing that the experiences of virtual and in-person participants would be different – and essentially planning and producing two complete, high-quality experiences.

Understanding that the vast majority of our attendees would be participating with us online, we knew that the virtual audience could not be treated as an afterthought. We planned core event experiences, as well as special touches to help virtual participants feel present with us and truly part of the event, like providing vouchers for lunch delivery at home and having multiple cameras inside the general session so that virtual attendees could change views.

Ideas to EXPLORE

Unify the hybrid event with a single producer, supported by separate managers leading the in-person and virtual experiences.

Planned flexibility. Complex and tech-dependent hybrid events are ripe for surprises. It was important to have a “plan B” in case something didn’t work out – and to stay flexible to adapt in the moment.

Budget aligned with different possibilities. Hybrid events introduce a number of new factors for consideration when budgeting. They present some cost savings, for example, because virtual participants will not need traditional food and beverage service. They offer new revenue opportunities, because the option to attend virtually makes it possible to reach larger audiences, and because this digital dimension opens up attractive new options for sponsorships that can help offset costs. Still, there are added expenses – such as those for advanced technology and production quality – that result in a similar or greater total cost compared to in-person-only events.

Aha MOMENTS

Planning camera angles in advance (and staying responsive in the moment) proved important to ensuring at-home participants saw activity rather than empty spaces at all moments during the event.



“To be successful with our hybrid meeting, we had to delve into the psychology of people to help them change some natural and learned behaviors. As a team of meeting professionals, we recognized our own responsibility to shift away from some of the things that made us successful in the past and do things in entirely new ways to create a great experience. We also had to embrace a mindset of fluidity – adapting and pivoting continuously from pre-planning to our time onsite at the meeting.”

- MICHAEL CLARKE, DIRECTOR, B2B EVENTS & PROGRAMS – U.S. & CANADA, MARRIOTT INTERNATIONAL

2

MANAGE CHANGING EXPECTATIONS WITH THOROUGH COMMUNICATIONS

Good communications have always been essential to the success of meetings and events. But new requirements and points of confusion, as well as new health concerns and expectations, call for a strong communication strategy and a robust set of well-crafted messages. For example, providing vital information, including meeting protocol details, upfront in the event invitation can influence the recipient's decision to attend a hybrid event. In these times of uncertainty, communicating "more" isn't just acceptable, it's needed – although much can be done to make this information highly consumable and accessible through multiple channels.

FROM OUR EXPERIENCE

Diffusing stress of the unknown. From the moment participants received an event invitation and visited our RSVP website, they knew what to expect. We thoroughly described our environment, health protocols, and expected behaviors – as a matter of responsibility and to build confidence in our commitment to wellbeing. In order to do this, it was critical that we finalize each protocol before extending the first invitation.

To anticipate guests' needs and enhance their sense of control over their experience, in advance of the event, we invited participants to view the floorplan and select and reserve their seat, which was very well received.

Instruction and expectation setting. Leading up to the events, we provided detailed instructions tailored to each experience. Instructions for virtual participants emphasized how to connect to and navigate our digital platform, while instructions for in-person participants conveyed detailed guidance on health protocols like mask-wearing and physical distance, and how to move through lunch and breaks. The event app played a critical role in housing all event information in one place for both the virtual and in-person participants, and reinforced instructions and expectations.

Expectations must be managed all around: In addition to clarifying new procedures for our guests, we thoroughly prepared every member of our team and all collaborating vendors to ensure we had mindshare on upholding health protocols.

Aha MOMENTS

People arrived much earlier for the in-person event than usual. It's important to prepare for this new behavior.

While new protocol instructions are vital, the volume of information can be overwhelming – simplify and increase relevance by tailoring messages to each type of experience.





Program navigation and choices. Prior to the event, we provided a detailed agenda to clarify the meeting’s content, as well as any choices our participants would have for session breakouts and breaks. Allowing participants to plan their day in advance reduced the potential for confusion, which can lead people to roam around the event space.

Extending and affirming the experience. Sharing a post-event recap enriched by photos and videos has long been recognized as an effective way to extend the value of an event. We did so with new purpose, understanding that our participants were also ambassadors and could use what we shared to help others understand what is possible and what to expect from well-planned hybrid event experiences.

Transparency and learning. After the event, we also sent out surveys with separate sections for in-person and virtual participants. With the newness of hybrid events, participant feedback is more important than ever. It is also important to develop a plan ahead of time for clear processes and communications with attendees if there is reason to share any post-event health-related information (for example, if a participant were to report a positive COVID-19 test result after the event).

Ideas to EXPLORE

- Develop video tours of the venue and meeting spaces to create excitement and ease anxiety.
- Provide a “code of conduct” that guests agree to uphold in advance of attendance.

<h1>5W's</h1>	 <p>WEAR A MASK <i>Wear over your nose, mouth & chin.</i></p>	 <p>WASH YOUR HANDS <i>Wash hands for at least 20 seconds.</i></p>
	 <p>WELLBEING CHECK <i>No known exposure to or symptoms of Covid-19 in the past 14-days.</i></p>	 <p>WATCH YOUR DISTANCE <i>Please stay 6 feet apart.</i></p>

These and other health and wellness protocols were shared in advance in greater detail and featured prominently at our events in tandem with our Commitment to Clean initiative. Our pre-event and onsite communication strategy continually prompted attendees to adopt these behaviors for the wellbeing of themselves and others. Learn more at marriottbonvoyevents.com.



3

CONSIDER NEW WAYS TO ENGAGE BOTH IN-PERSON AND VIRTUAL PARTICIPANTS

While a hybrid event may bring people together around a shared theme and content, the experiences that in-person and virtual participants have are inherently different and mostly separate. Event presenters and moderators must take extra care to address two audiences in meaningful ways. And while it's all too easy to concentrate on people who are physically present, successful events will thoughtfully engage the often-larger virtual audience.

FROM OUR EXPERIENCE

Warm welcome and orientation. People used to enter events with a friendly welcome and opportunity to network while picking up their badges during registration, but now badges are often delivered prior to the event to avoid unnecessary contacts. For in-person attendees, the meeting begins with a wellness check and overview of protocols. Conscious that the welcome sets the tone for the whole meeting, we provided a deliberate, well-rehearsed start, including live greeters and an opening video to prepare people for an inviting and informed experience.

For our second *Connect with Confidence* event at the Gaylord Rockies Resort & Convention Center, in-person attendees had the option for onsite rapid COVID-19 testing in addition to the temperature screening that was required to enter the event space. In pre-event communications, in-person attendees were made aware of these health protocols, how to prepare using digital apps, and the procedures we would follow if an attendee did not satisfy these protocols.

Ideas to EXPLORE

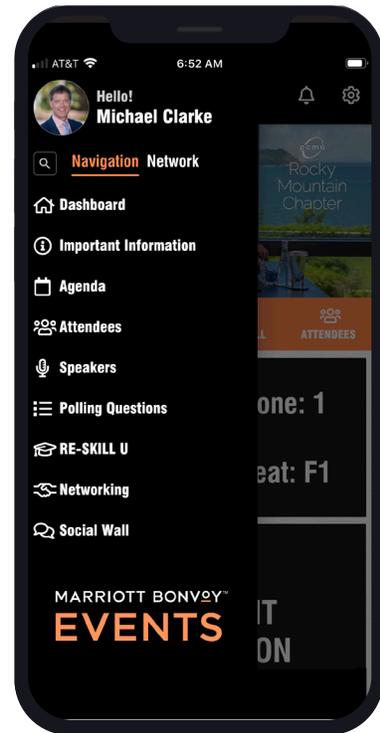
Provide packaged welcome gifts as in-person attendees arrive and mail them in advance to participants at home.

Aha MOMENTS

We used multiple cameras to offer at-home participants more than one view of the stage – but participants of both types expressed the desire to see each other as well. It was especially important to have cameras on the audience during Q&A sessions.

Digital bridge. Our event brought people together through a shared digital platform. Whether they were connecting on their computer at home or from the ballroom using our app on their personal device, participants joined in live chat, polling and gamification of content. Prior to “going live,” virtual attendees were given a comprehensive video tour of the event space, so they could share in the experience of in-person attendees. As digital options increase, it will be important to find a healthy balance between under- and overstimulation.

Responsive facilitation. Onsite staff played a pivotal role in keeping the two types of participants engaged in a shared dialogue. Our dedicated virtual moderator was situated near the stage to make sure that ideas expressed online were voiced in the room, while facilitators helped connect the conversations. Similarly, our virtual event producer kept camera and sound crews attuned to the needs of the at-home audience.



“I thought the way the Marriott program was structured was beneficial in that it focused not only on the hotel’s strategy for getting back to in-person meetings, it was designed to engage the attendees, draw out their perspectives, and facilitate new ideas of how meeting planners and Marriott can work together as we all want to hold meetings again – safely.”

- IN-PERSON ATTENDEE, CONNECT WITH CONFIDENCE MEETING





Brevity and flexibility. Attention spans for virtual audiences are often limited – especially for participants viewing a screen amid potential distractions at home. We shortened the length of the virtual programming compared to in-person to help keep attendees’ attention. We also offered a mix of live and pre-recorded content to add interesting texture and dimension, as well as flexibility for participants to choose their own breaktimes and consume content at their convenience.

For a longer event, the length of individual sessions might become shorter still to incorporate additional breaks and hold the attention of screen-wary participants. Experts suggest that 20 minutes may be the maximum amount of time that a person can be fully engaged in a topic.

“I absolutely love it – this is exactly what I am hoping to accomplish with our annual meeting, and the in-person side seems to be following exactly what I learned in the Pandemic Meeting & Event Design certification!”

- VIRTUAL PARTICIPANT, CONNECT WITH CONFIDENCE MEETING

Aha MOMENTS

Virtual participants let us know they wanted to hear questions from the in-person audience in real time (not just speaker recaps of questions and responses) so we added a microphone to the floor during the first break.

Pre-recorded content can enhance the experience but requires time and attention for quality staging, scripting and production.

Ideas to EXPLORE

Feature remote presenters – but have a backup plan in case of technical issues.

Consider virtual breakout sessions or specific programming to support further interactions and connections.

4

CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT THAT OFFERS DIRECTION, CHOICE AND CONTROL

Hybrid events are new to everyone. And after months of pandemic restrictions, so is returning to a place away from home, surrounded by others. Confusion and apprehension are only natural. Here the physical environment – from the hotel entrance to the meeting room and ancillary spaces – has a role to play in reinforcing safe behaviors while setting minds at ease.

FROM OUR EXPERIENCE

Success in the atmosphere. Our first event featured residential-inspired items like lamps, rugs, live plants and other interior accents to create vibrance and emotional comfort. Having these accessories in the space helped encourage physical distance between participants without leaving an empty, clinical feel that might elevate anxiety. Even virtual participants expressed their interest and appreciation for the sense of presence they felt viewing this appealing physical environment.

Understanding that many people have grown accustomed to working from home rather than sitting at a desk, a mix of seating was available to encourage different postures and movement, which is known to improve comfort and engagement.

Our second event was designed using exclusively hotel-provided furniture, enhanced with covers and other decorative touches. Either approach to furnishings – customized or conventional – can be a viable option depending on event goals.

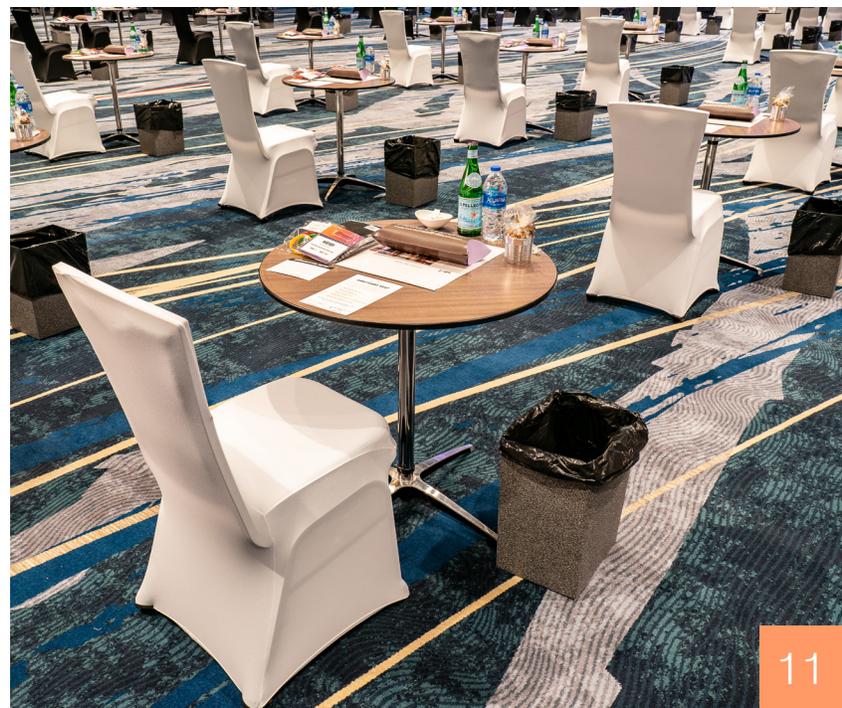
At both events, all furniture was carefully sanitized before and between sessions and a sticker placed on cleaned surfaces to provide reassurance to our guests.

Aha MOMENTS

Side tables placed near the wellness screening area can provide a place for belongings while sanitizing hands.

Ideas to EXPLORE

Outfit someone onsite with a wearable camera to livestream dynamic firsthand views to participants at home.

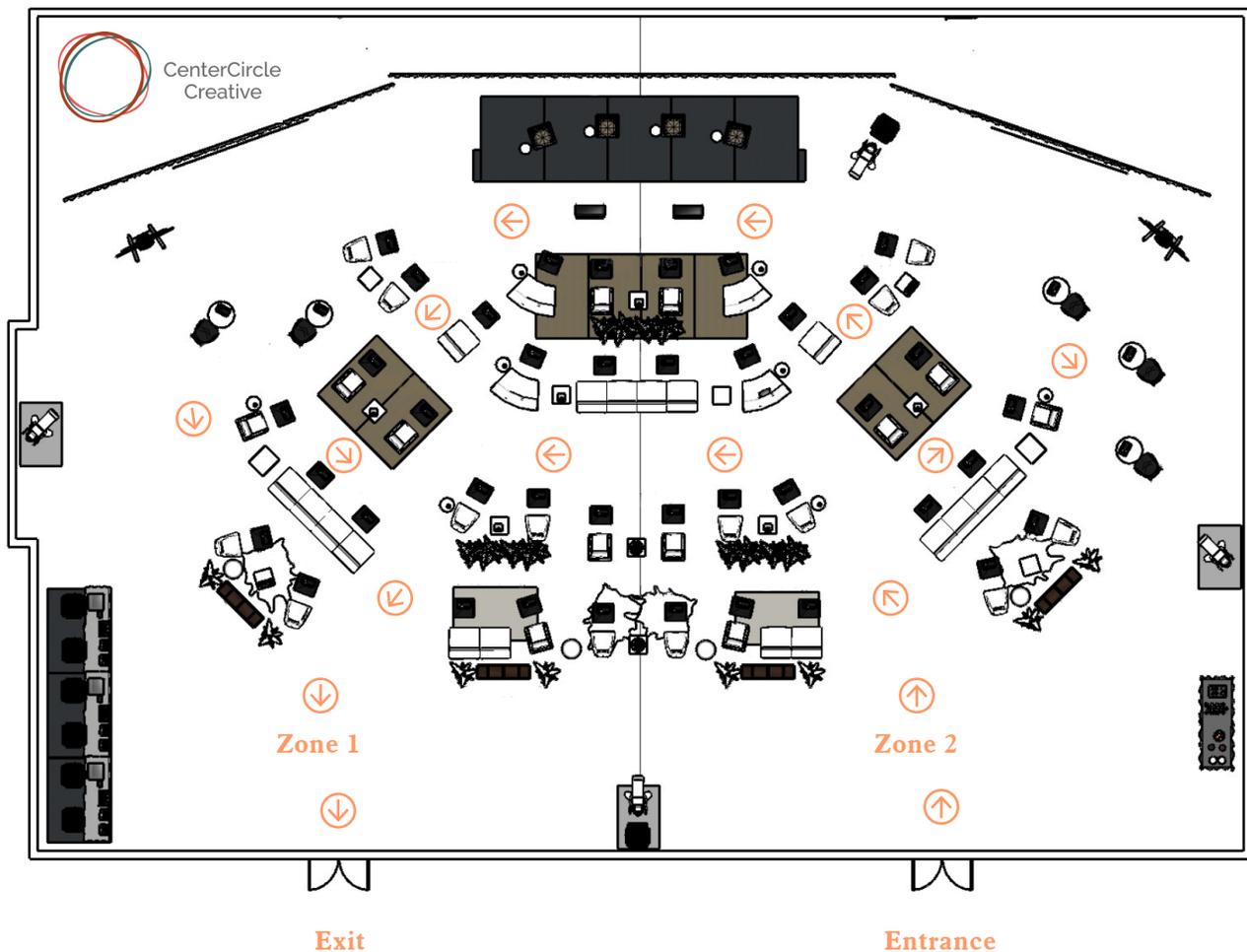




More than signage. For both meetings, all event spaces were designed according to a zone concept, with a specific color assigned to each zone and corresponding wayfinding signage to direct traffic flow. Once people became comfortable at each meeting, they tended to forget about directional floor stickers intended to promote physical distancing and prevent crowding. But we also carefully staged the environment and furnishings to serve the same purpose. We defined well-spaced seating, conversation zones and generous aiseways to eliminate pinch points. And we used physical objects as cues to guide circulation – for example, tables prompted people to step back. To test our plans and rehearse the meeting flow, we conducted a walk-through of the ballroom, foyer and dining areas in advance.

Aha MOMENTS

Traffic flow is important for speakers as well. The room setup should provide paths for speakers to get on and off stage with minimal contact with others.





Sanctuary for one. A significant innovation for these events were *sanctuary seats*, which attendees reserved in advance and maintained for the duration of the event. Guests arrived at their seats to find a name badge, extra mask, face shield and sanitizing products, as well as a dedicated table and waste receptacle, personal supplies and individually packaged refreshments. Sanctuary seats supported a contactless check-in process and provided in-person participants with a zone of control they could own and return to throughout the event. Research indicated that knowing they had an assigned space helped influence attendees’ decision to join in person and created a greater sense of wellbeing.

Aha MOMENTS

Having well-informed staff onsite is necessary to respond to a higher volume of questions and reinforce behaviors that promote wellbeing.

People brought more belongings with them than before the pandemic, and they kept these things nearby – consider ways to further accommodate this behavior to keep the space tidy.

“Design trends are constantly changing. I look at the challenge of designing a space in a pandemic like a new trend and how I can make it interesting, original and safety focused.”

- DREW CONDON, STUDIO DIRECTOR, SENIOR ASSOCIATE, CENTERCIRCLE CREATIVE



5

PROVIDE MEANINGFUL OPPORTUNITIES FOR PEOPLE TO CONNECT

Making social connections has always been one of the primary reasons people attend events. Ideas and people thrive on high-quality interactions. To meet this demand with new requirements like physical distancing and mask-wearing, we need to reimagine the ways people meet and mingle. One particular challenge is our traditional, natural urge to make social connections during refreshment breaks – when masks must come down as people eat and drink.

FROM OUR EXPERIENCE

Clear signals. At the start of our events and through friendly reminders, including mobile app notifications, we articulated the steps people could take to maintain wellbeing behaviors while socializing. Our aim was not simply to see compliance, but also to encourage people to feel comfortable asserting their own boundaries and respecting those of others.

We provided red, yellow and green wristbands for all in-person guests to wear to express their own desired levels of physical distance. These color-coded bands were easy to wear and switch – which some participants did – as their comfort levels changed during the event.



Aha MOMENTS

Color-coded wristbands were sometimes hidden by sleeves. For the future, we are considering badge lanyards, as well as symbols to increase accessibility for colorblind guests.

People were more likely to maintain safety protocols during our more structured lunch than our less formalized break time.



Structured choices. Breaks, like the timing of event entrance and exit, were scheduled in waves to reduce crowding. We also offered the option to break in multiple locations.

During lunch, we provided tables with seats to accommodate one, two, three or four guests. Tables for more than one person were staged with six feet between each seat, and separated by wider aisles. Our intent here was to provide people the option to eat alone or with others if they felt comfortable doing so.

Redesigned food & beverage. While it's no longer prudent to have people line up, side by side, to self-serve an assortment of dishes, it's still possible to offer options. We presented guests with prepackaged items and batched non-alcoholic cocktails to make refreshments easy to handle and take away to a large or private space. Meals were prepared and displayed by chefs protected by transparent dividers. Our redesigned plated lunch was delivered in closed, tiered bento-style containers – a three-courses-in-one concept.

Ideas to EXPLORE

Host a pre-event live chat where virtual participants can find common interests and make plans to meet.

Limit length of breaks intended for eating and drinking. If people are socializing less, breaks can be shorter. Alternatively, make food and drinks available continuously so people partake at different times, and getting a meal or snack becomes more personal than social.



Inviting open spaces. We encouraged guests to socialize in large open spaces where they'd have room to spread out while chatting and where we had placed graphic floor reminders for physical distancing. We furnished the back area of the ballroom with tall bookcases, plants and accessories to create an attractive destination for such small gatherings.

Aha MOMENTS

Provide multiple options for break and meal locations – *and* make sure people are aware of their options. People need encouragement and a sense of permission to use alternate spaces for these purposes.



Ideas to EXPLORE

Weather permitting, outdoor areas are ideal for refreshment and social times.

If your event includes overnight accommodations, consider takeaway food options for those that may prefer to eat in their rooms.

Offer alternative social activities, such as art projects or games that can be done while wearing a mask.

MEETING NEW CHALLENGES TOGETHER

Although much is changing in our world, our very human need to connect is not. Together people exchange ideas, we build relationships with one another, and we create real value. And together we meet new challenges – like entirely new social norms and requirements – with creativity and determination.

Now is not a time to wait and see what happens. It's a time to explore and innovate, to share and learn from one another and to build a better future, where the question is not if people can meet but how – and how the new choices we create can welcome even more participants to the table.

Marriott International invites you to explore possibilities and find resources for engaging meetings and events that prioritize health and wellbeing at [marriottbonvoyevents.com](https://www.marriott.com/bonvoyevents).

CROSS-FUNCTIONAL PLANNING TEAM

Connect with Confidence events were planned and conducted by a collaborative, cross-functional team of Marriott International professionals in partnership with trusted industry experts.

MARRIOTT INTERNATIONAL		
CORPORATE Global Sales Meetings & Event Operations Brand Marketing Communications and Public Relations	THE RITZ-CARLTON, TYSONS CORNER	GAYLORD ROCKIES RESORT & CONVENTION CENTER
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		FREEMAN Event Signage and Assets Rob Venus, rob.venus@freemanco.com

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