



HEALTHCARE ASSOCIATION FOCUS GROUP REPORT

MOVING FORWARD POST COVID-19

OVERVIEW



"We're ready to go!"

Welcome words when talking about an industry that has been so impacted by the global pandemic called COVID-19. Face-to-face convention marketing and live events generate billions in revenue and millions of jobs.

The global pandemic of COVID-19 has changed the healthcare events and exhibitions industry and brought it to its knees. Whether these significant changes continue for the short-term or permanently change our industry is yet to be determined. However, associations continue to explore improvements and changes that will further the value of face-to-face marketing.

With an ever-growing list of events being cancelled or postponed, Poretta & Orr assembled meeting planning staff from six top healthcare associations to gather insights and discuss what **SUCCESSFUL** conferences, tradeshow, meetings, exhibitions and events could look like moving forward.

There is a clear distinction between mass gatherings such as sporting events versus conventions. Not all types of events are equal. Associations are able to implement safety measures and control the flow and design of meetings and conventions helping to further that distinction. Understanding that exhibitions are part of an organized event, and that safety measures can be effectively implemented, is an important concept to communicate moving forward.

So how will the healthcare convention and exhibition industry adapt to changes and successfully continue beyond COVID-19?

Well, our focus group says many exhibitors are ready to go!

Read on for insights from meeting planning staff from six top healthcare associations.



INTRODUCTION

Covid-19 has created a global pandemic and changed overnight the healthcare event and exhibition industry. If inventory is taken, virtually all of the second quarter conferences, tradeshow and exhibitions were cancelled or postponed, leaving us with many questions and uncertainties about how best to move forward with the best interests of all parties involved: the attendees, the exhibitors and the associations. The live events industry was one of the first to be affected and will likely be dealing with the aftermath for the foreseeable future.

Poretta & Orr has continued its leadership role within the healthcare exhibit and event industry by facilitating a focus group that included the meeting planners at top healthcare associations to discuss the value of face-to-face engagement at events, tradeshow and conventions. This important discussion also centered around potential new strategies that embrace the continuation of face-to-face marketing as an imperative piece of tradeshow, conventions and events. The use of alternate platforms such as virtual meetings and their perceived value both short and long-term were discussed and as expected were viewed as enhancements to events, not a replacement.



"What do exhibitors want?"



"We want to hear from exhibitors"

The meeting planning staff participating in the focus group were from the following healthcare associations:

- AACN – American Association of Critical-Care Nurses
- ACP – American College of Physicians
- ACR – American College of Rheumatology
- ASHG – American Society of Human Genetics
- ATS – American Thoracic Society
- CAP – College of American Pathologists

In addition to this focus group, Poretta & Orr also facilitated a similarly formatted focus group with healthcare exhibitors. The findings from both focus groups were shared with one another.

The importance of sharing information amongst peers was noted strongly by the participating meeting planners, especially during a global pandemic with implications that could be far-reaching and long-lasting.

GOALS


As noted, Poretta & Orr invited a small but targeted group of meeting planners from six top healthcare associations to discuss the demonstrated value of face-to-face engagement at events, tradeshow and conventions for healthcare exhibitors, attendees and associations.

This discussion included topics pertaining to the current environment and post COVID-19, and highlighted creative strategies to help exhibitors, attendees and associations reap the benefits of face-to-face marketing.

The participants were chosen in part because they represented different sized organizations, various specialties, and a variety of exhibitors and attendees. In addition, each of the meeting planners has demonstrated:

- Innovative and out-of-the-box ideas for creating engagement opportunities at their prior meetings;
- A willingness to, and interest in, sharing and learning from peers and;
- An interest in receiving insights from the healthcare exhibitor focus group running parallel to this focus group on the same topic.

Three over-arching goals were identified prior to the focus group meeting and were the key discussion drivers:



To develop communication strategies and potential tactics which highlight the continued value of face-to-face engagements while acknowledging and communicating the form and function of the face-to-face interaction may be structured differently.

To further discussions and find new ways to demonstrate the value of face-to-face interactions as an integral part of successful trade shows for all parties involved: exhibitors, attendees and associations. Brainstorm and establish ways to accomplish this safely in the near future and in a post COVID-19 world.

Determine what association tools and resources are currently available or should be created to keep face-to-face marketing now, and going forward, an important part of any exhibitors successful marketing program, including enhancing the face-to-face experience with virtual offerings that include engagement and interaction.

Poretta & Orr felt it was important to facilitate discussion that centered around opportunities and solution-driven conversation. Many of the obstacles associations are facing are out of their control, such as what is happening in both the airline and hotel industries, for example. However, while these challenges were noted, the focus group explored potential solutions to move forward and shared insights on what a successful event could look like in our current environment, paying particular attention to safety protocols.

It was also noted that with the reintroduction of leisure travel, as well as the implementation of successful safety measures and changes in available information regarding the COVID-19 virus, the resumption of travel may be positively affected, which would positively affect the industry.

SOLUTIONS TO CHALLENGES

From the onset of the discussion it was clear that there were no shortages of challenges. The good news is that there were also potential solutions for each challenge that came up.

It was also clear from feedback from the meeting planners that many of the exhibitors, large and small, have indicated they were ready to get back to face-to-face marketing in an exhibit hall setting.

The participants anticipate that virtual components will play a complementary role in meetings and conventions going forward. Decreased attendance was anticipated at meetings in 2020, and smaller more regional meetings could offer an alternative forum to continue engagement with both attendees and exhibitors.

The following are the discussion topics covered and the key points highlighted:

How Has COVID-19 Impacted Convention Planning:

An over-arching theme was the obvious challenge of planning a future conference when there was such uncertainty for when there will be a sense of normalcy. The following four considerations that significantly affected planning were cited:

1

When will cities and states reopen?

2

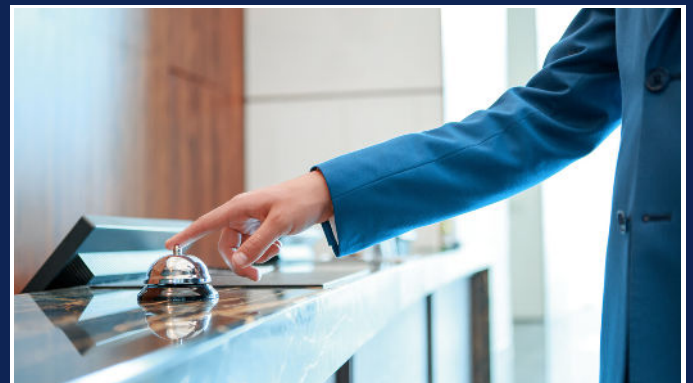
When will corporate travel be allowed?

3

When will airlines fly regularly and what safety protocols will they implement?

4


When will hotels/restaurants reopen and what does that look like?



It was noted that these considerations were out of their control and discussion shifted to proactive solutions demonstrating the value of face-to-face marketing when planning an event in the current environment. Focus was also centered on the safety of the staff, attendees and exhibitors.

KEY TOPICS AND DISCUSSION POINTS

- A top consideration was to monitor local, state and government guidelines or regulations for gatherings and to how to plan within these new parameters.
- Communication was key. All parties should be communicating and working together to explore solutions that work for all stakeholders. Focus group participants encourage exhibitors to reach out to association staff to discuss options available to them.
- Some associations were exploring the potential of offering regional meetings as an adjunct to their larger meeting each year. This might be a solution that Healthcare Professionals (HCPs) are more comfortable with short-term, as it wouldn't require travel by air.
- Determining how to best plan for an event when the number of attendees is such an unknown was discussed. Opening online registration as early as possible was strongly suggested, and anticipated revenue declines will force associations to prioritize essential activities.
- Understanding the needs of both the attendees and exhibitors is vital and will help determine what aspects of the conference have the highest perceived value. Plans can move forward by keeping those benefits with the highest value and eliminating those with a lower value. Feedback, communication and metrics will be key to making these decisions.
- Understanding the needs of HCP attendees is key. This is not only important to the associations but to the exhibitors. If associations implement strategies that enhance the value for HCPs and they attend, the exhibitors will follow. Some associations are conducting attendee surveys to gain important insights, while others are holding meetings with individual exhibitors.
- Meeting planners discussed various items to implement flexibility around certain aspects of the event. For instance, how refunds might be processed for cancelled or postponed events was discussed. There were several options outlined and no matter the solution adopted by the association, communicating the requirements to exhibitors was cited as important.
 - Full or partial refund on attendee registration
 - Complimentary future registrations at an event
 - Complimentary or discounted association product or service
 - Creative sponsorship opportunities
 - Increased visibility amongst attendees
 - Discounted exhibit space
 - Free membership
 - Free 2020 registration to cancelled event that is now a virtual event



"Virtual. It's a complement to a convention, not a replacement."

► Incorporating a Hybrid Component

Participants working for associations with meetings scheduled for the last quarter of the year, at the time of writing, were moving forward with plans for a live event and exploring all options, including considering adding a virtual or hybrid component as an adjunct to the event.

- Some meeting planning staff pointed out that due to many unknown factors, determining whether their convention will be live, virtual or hybrid is difficult and they find themselves having to plan for all options, simultaneously. In some cases this is creating a duplication of efforts that can't be helped.
- For most, incorporating a virtual component to their convention had already been part of their future business plan. The global pandemic just moved the time-frame for this up. Again, not as a replacement but as a complement to the meeting.
- Associations should examine their bylaws to ensure they allow for or permit business to be conducted virtually or electronically. Many bylaws require face-to-face meetings to be how official business of the association is conducted.
- The meeting planners discussed utilizing virtual as an option for delivering conference content to HCPs and this seemed to be a useful medium. However, evaluation of various platforms will determine whether this option is best-suited for their organization.
- The virtual exhibit hall has yet to prove its effectiveness, although in some cases it is being offered as a short-term option if associations move forward with a hybrid approach. In addition, a virtual component could expand the reach of the association. HCP exposure to virtual educational components could foster increased attendance at face-to-face meetings in the future, providing HCPs find them valuable.
- Finding the right virtual platform is an important function of the association. Most participants felt that determining the most appropriate virtual platform was key to improving their virtual event. There are many platforms available and assessing the options for ease-of-use and interactivity was important.

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“Including a virtual component could expand the reach of the association.”

► Implementing Safety Protocols

All participants of the focus group felt strongly that the health, safety and well-being of their attendees and exhibitors was their highest priority. The structure and flow of the meeting was discussed and participants found a number of challenges would need to be addressed. A newly adopted structure that minimized disruption, incorporated necessary safety protocols and accommodated all parties in attendance within the space provided was a priority.

It was noted that finding the necessary space to accommodate new social distancing guidelines could be an issue, but most participants felt that in the current environment attendance would be down in 2020 and therefore space would be sufficient. However, if attendance numbers resume to pre-COVID-19 levels, space would be a critical concern.

Some participants felt that with the discovery of a COVID-19 vaccine or treatment, some of the safety protocols may not be necessary. Time and feedback would dictate the safety measures needed and implemented going forward.

► Meeting Room and Exhibit Hall Set-Up

- Due to the uncertainty regarding attendance or the number of exhibitors, one participant noted that they were saving the perimeter space of the exhibit hall in case it was needed to accommodate any unforeseen impacts of social distancing guidelines.
- Planning for acceptable distances between tables, chairs and utilizing 12 foot, one-way aisles was discussed.
- Considerations for marking areas with tape on carpet to indicate how far apart attendees need to be, was mentioned.
- To comply with limiting the number of people in an exhibit hall all persons could have an odd or even number printed on their badge, determining when they are allowed in the hall.
- An increase in how much space is required to implement social distancing guidelines could prove challenging for configuring meeting rooms, product theaters and various other types of areas.
- Meeting planners were leaning on their vendors to brainstorm room and event configurations that were best suited for their convention.
- Consideration will be given to implementing assigned seating and to have the speakers move from room to room and not the attendees, whenever possible.
- Potentially expanding exhibit hall hours, perhaps 8 AM – 8 PM, to accommodate for the impact that limiting the number of attendees in a booth may have. Utilizing an appointment setting schedule could be a workable option.

► Safety Measures

The participants recognized that the health and safety of attendees, exhibitors, members, and staff was of the utmost importance. Conventions that are held must consider additional safety and sanitization measures. Many of the measures discussed and outlined in this paper would be familiar to most, if not all citizens, by the time they attend events and conventions. This presumably could make the implementation and learning curve of safety measures easier to manage. Safety measures discussed, are highlighted below.

- The exhibit hall will require regular sanitization during and between exhibit hall hours. Vendor partners can help identify the best options available.
- Hard walls could be utilized for delineation between exhibitors. Each association would undoubtedly have to address prior established sight lines, as they could be disrupted.
- Floor decals and safety and directional signs should be incorporated liberally throughout the venue.
- Touch-free registration is an option to consider. Sending badges and information in advance to attendees and exhibitors or have them print badges from home was mentioned.
- The potential need for thermal cameras at entry points was mentioned.
- Wearing masks during the convention and requiring it as mandatory was also discussed. Having a supply of masks on hand will be critical.
- Hand sanitizers should be placed strategically and liberally throughout the entire exhibit hall and meeting space.
- Staggered arrival times for entering the exhibit hall to control attendee flow could be used.
- Stationing bathroom monitors to ensure protocols are followed, was an additional consideration.
- All new changes and updates would need to be consistently reflected in meeting materials, the meeting app, signage at the meeting, email communications, website and in the prospectus.
- The focus group discussed an inevitable learning curve for attendees and exhibitors regarding all the measures implemented. The consensus was that HCPs may have a shorter learning curve than attendees in other industries, presumably because they are so immersed in safety protocols daily.



► Food and Beverage

Hotels and convention centers will provide many of the protocols that should be implemented. Likely, when considering your F&B needs for events, self-service buffets may not be a viable option for a while.

- Buffets were not the preferred option for serving meals in the current environment. Pre-packed meals, boxed lunch or dinner options seemed more appropriate.
- One option discussed was to have attendees pick up lunches from refrigerators strategically placed in the venue or have boxed meals already preset at seats.
- Seated dining was an alternative option, and educating staff members so they have an understanding of proper sanitation and food-handling measures is important. Utilizing vendors that can demonstrate their knowledge of safe food handling was also a key consideration.
- Staggering food stations and serving food in individually wrapped units, offering individual water bottles, were attractive solutions.
- Avoid serving items where multiple hands could touch the food, like bowls of chips.
- Provide serving utensils if needed, or arrange for food to be served by staff who are trained in safe food handling.
- Follow all protocols required by local, state and federal entities. These could differ depending on the event location, so educate yourself.

► Clear and Informative Communication is Necessary

Communication was deemed very critical during this time. It was essential to the focus group participants to convey the right messaging to Board members, membership, attendees, exhibitors, sponsors and even the public. Developing messaging that aligns with the needs, challenges and expectations of each group was important to moving forward successfully.

- All communications should reflect that the association has implemented safety measures and has the safety and health of attendees, exhibitors and staff, as its number one objective.
- Focus group participants felt that educating the public about the continued importance for HCPs to attend conventions to further education, science, research and their specialties could play an important role in the successful rescheduling of conventions and that sharing this messaging with the media was important.
- Communication with exhibitors and sponsors should reflect a spirit of partnership and flexibility.
- Attendee communications should include specific details that will assist attendees in understanding what to expect during the event, and a thorough explanation of safety measures implemented should be outlined.
- All communications, when appropriate, should highlight and convey the value of attending their convention. For each group this message will be different, but no less important.

► What Do Exhibitors Need to Succeed?

All of the focus group participants agreed that exhibitors are key to holding a successful convention. A reoccurring theme was proactive communication.

- Provide options to make it easier to work with the associations.
- Be proactive by providing information and reaching out to exhibitors was deemed critical.
- Help exhibitors by being as flexible as possible.
- Acknowledge that there is not a one size fits all solution(s) and create options, when possible.
- Different associations will offer a variety of solutions for many reasons. Ensuring exhibitors feel listened to was important to the participants.
- Meeting planning staff conveyed they want to have a clear understanding of what exhibitors need to demonstrate the value of their participation.
- Associations should consider providing useful metrics and information exhibitors can share with their companies demonstrating the value of the exhibit hall.
- Participants discussed whether there was a way to communicate that the exhibit hall with less attendees could be just as valuable.

"What do exhibitors want?"



CONCLUSION

Why do associations play such an important part in moving past COVID-19? Associations have always played a key role in our society. They are unsung heroes inspiring change through a collaborative spirit in industries all across the nation. Associations bring communities together, face-to-face, inspiring us all to work together for the good of our industry. Associations reach millions of people and have a major impact on policy, education, the economy, and much of that occurs through face-to-face engagement. We need associations to be successful. We need face-to-face engagement.

In keeping with our role as a leader within the healthcare exhibit and event marketing industry, Poretta & Orr recognized the importance of initiating discussions with key industry stakeholders focused on strategies to successfully move forward with face-to-face events post COVID-19. There appeared to be an important need for collaborative discussion amongst stakeholders to identify the key components needed to produce a successful convention in the current environment and how to address the challenges.

Acknowledging there are many unknowns and challenges to moving forward, this focus group shared insights that addressed the short-term impact of disruption, focusing on how to pivot and adapt in areas of safety measures, communication and structure. The insights shared in this paper not only demonstrate the importance of convention marketing but that stakeholders are excited to move forward safely as it relates to planning future conventions.

The meeting planners in this focus group were cautiously optimistic and looking to the future. All participants were ready to implement new solutions to ensure that their convention met the needs of all parties. There was not a one-size-fits-all solution and all acknowledged that conventions will look very different going forward. However, it is important to note that this challenging time was viewed as an opportunity to evolve, with an opportunity to improve engagement opportunities.

Participants also acknowledged that the current environment in healthcare convention marketing was very dynamic. Data and research can be outdated within the time span of a day. So, as has been cited numerous times throughout this paper, flexibility will be key when re-imagining a convention. It was also noted that the type of attendees and the specialties they represent will play a role in how they move forward. Are their attendees on the front-line combating COVID-19? If so, in the short-term, that could affect how their meeting is structured.

And lastly, understanding your clients' needs is key to success moving forward. Short-term they may be different, so it will be important for associations to communicate and do it often to understand what attendees and exhibitors need from them. Conventions may look different going forward but it was stated numerous times that there is no effective replacement for the value that face-to-face marketing provides.

Since the 1800's when one of the first medical associations was established, society has looked to associations for leadership, especially in challenging times. We continue that expectation today and are pleased that the associations that participated in this focus group take that mission seriously. Each are proactively seeking solutions that will continue to keep convention marketing the most effective manner in which to engage with HCPs.

And while our industry may be trying very hard to pivot using alternate platforms for the short-term, there is no shortage of data to support that there is a more effective marketing channel than face-to-face convention marketing with HCPs.

CONTACT US

Please feel free to reach out to us with any questions, comments, or to discuss.

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