

REIMAGINING BUSINESS EVENTS THROUGH COVID-19 AND BEYOND



Jointly presented by



In 2020, an unforeseen pandemic altered our lives and businesses forever. COVID-19 disrupted industries and halted travel, resulting in an estimated US\$28 trillion in lost economic output¹ and 114 million job cuts². The pandemic underscored the need for all organisations – especially ones heavily dependent on face-to-face interactions – to better future-proof themselves through innovation.

The business events sector was one of the worst hit. While many companies in the sector enjoyed record numbers in 2019 and projected an even rosier 2020³, the pandemic put paid to that. Although most professionals in the industry agree that face-to-face meetings remain relevant, they also agree on the urgent need to rethink and reengineer business events.

Moving forward, professional event organisers and planners must reimagine business models: from customer experience and content delivery to operational considerations like revenue streams, manpower, and supplier relationships. Business events companies must be more open to leverage useful technologies in order to continue creating impactful experiences. They must be more agile and adopt a growth outlook not only to survive this period but also to prime themselves for recovery.

This white paper provides an overview of the big questions, evolving challenges, and industry insights as business events gradually resume around the world throughout the rest of 2021 and into 2022. It gathers thought leaders and seasoned practitioners, lays out their priorities amidst current conditions and frames their paths through and beyond COVID-19.

¹ According to the International Monetary Fund, as reported by [The Guardian](#) in October 2020.

² Reported by the International Labour Organisation in the January 2021 edition of its [ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work](#).

³ 8 per cent growth projected by CWT Meetings & Events in its [2020 Future Trends Report](#) published in September 2019.



Successful business events require tireless work behind the scenes

A Clarion Call

Business events reflect our purpose to help communities network, collaborate, and innovate together. They invigorate us when we meet and learn from our peers all around the world.

Our sector is at a significant crossroads now. We have long played an important role in enabling trusted dialogue between governments, businesses, and industries, but the pandemic has forced us to rethink our path forward. How can we sustain what we have spent years building while also evolving with the times?

Today, our ability to deliver meaningful events is very

much governed by protocols that constrain live events with dense people-to-people interactions. Amidst these circumstances, we have to ask ourselves: What are the motivators (and detractors) to attending business events in this day and age? How do we design experiences that meet stringent hygiene standards and overcome border control measures? What does 'going hybrid' truly entail? What new business opportunities and revenue streams can we explore even as the world continues to grapple with the pandemic?

Innovation will be key to this progress. We all must approach business events with fresh eyes and perspectives.

Part of the challenge lies in cultivating a growth mindset, which often requires us to modify or even abandon legacy ways of working. Still, many have risen to the challenge, some of whom are featured in this white paper. Their stories give us hope that we can reinvent, recover and remain resilient.

The impact of the pandemic will be felt for many years to come. Science predicts that like the flu, COVID-19 will become endemic around the world. We at the Professional Convention Management Association (PCMA), the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) and Singapore Exhibition & Convention Bureau (SECB), as well as UFI (The Global Association of the Exhibition Industry) hope that the forward-thinking ideas presented here will encourage and inspire you as we navigate these uncertain times together.



The purpose of business events to build networks and communities remains intact

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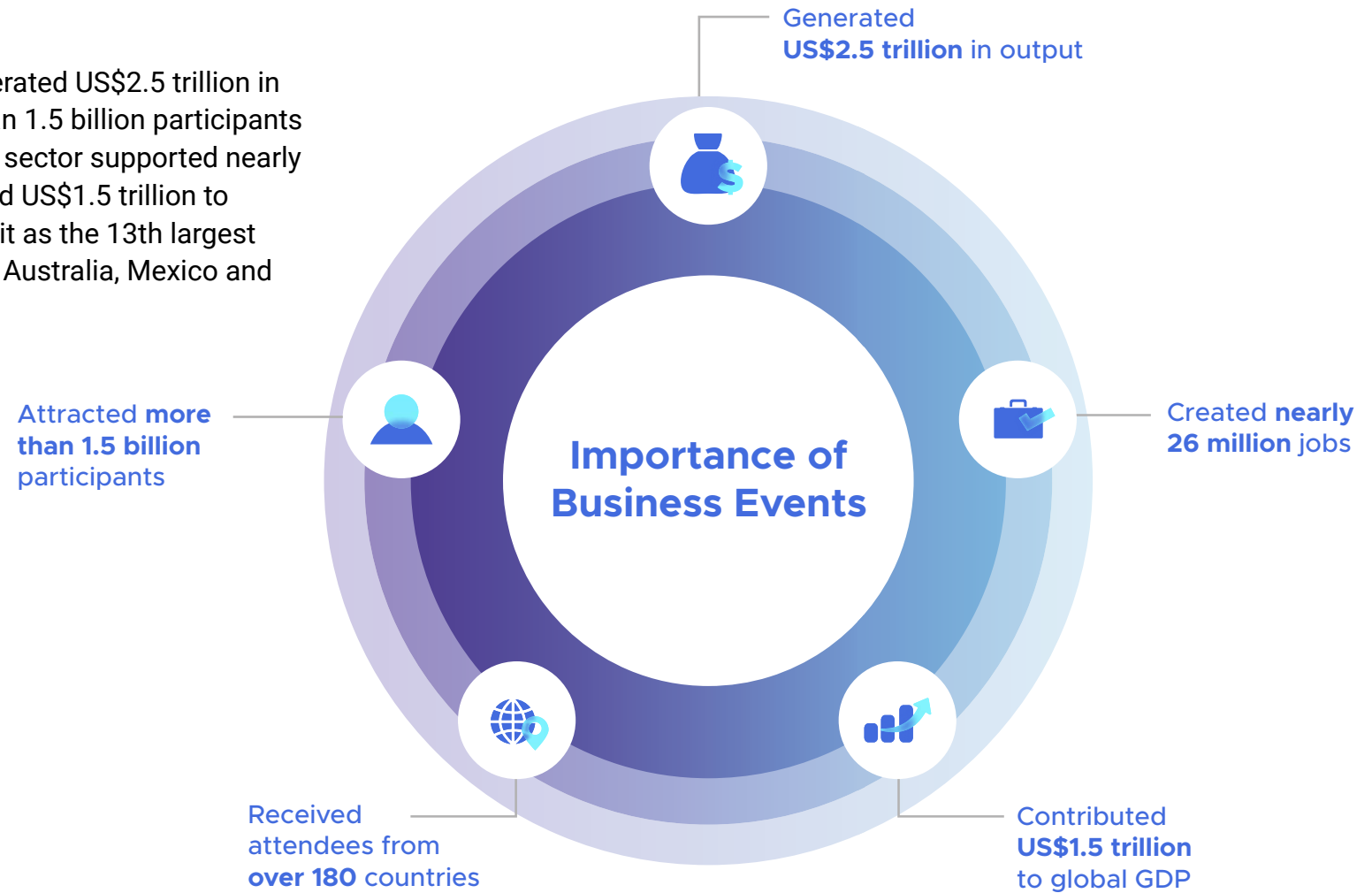
Thoughts and ideas for successful innovation journeys to meet evolving customer demands



The Impetus For Innovation

Facing Facts

In 2017, business events generated US\$2.5 trillion in output and attracted more than 1.5 billion participants from over 180 countries⁴. The sector supported nearly 26 million jobs and contributed US\$1.5 trillion to global GDP, which would rank it as the 13th largest economy globally, surpassing Australia, Mexico and Saudi Arabia.



⁴Reported by the Events Industry Council in its November 2018 [Global Economic Significance of Business Events](#) study.



Health and safety are of the utmost importance at business events

However, with travel at a standstill, global tourism suffered a staggering loss of US\$935 billion in the first 10 months of 2020⁵. Within the business events sector, the global exhibitions category alone contracted by 68 per cent⁶. More than half of the 450 companies in the exhibitions industry polled by UFI as of January 2021 have had to reduce their workforces. 30 per cent saw a drop in profits of more than 50 per cent, while a tenth said they would have to close if they had no business in the next six months⁷.

Even though vaccination efforts have started, the world is still in the midst of a crisis that has impacted every sector, radically changed consumer behaviour and created many fresh challenges. The COVID-19 situation remains very fluid, with many countries and companies attempting to restart business events and restore a semblance of normalcy – to varying degrees of success.

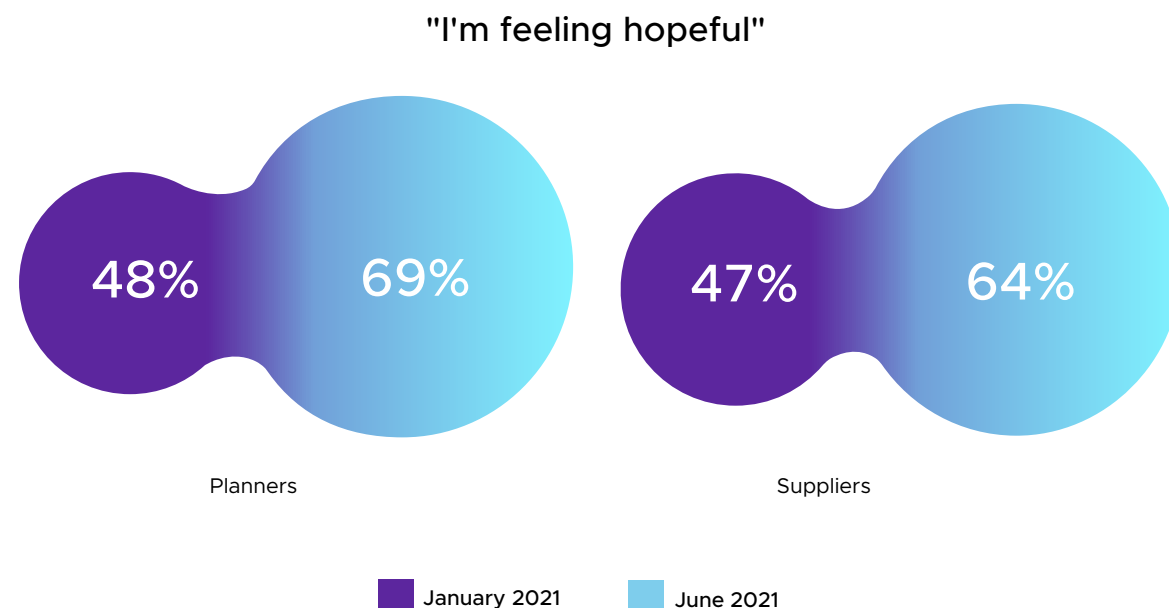
⁵ Estimated by [Forbes](#) contributor Duncan Madden in a January 2021 article.

⁶ Reported by [UFI](#) in a COVID-19 damage assessment for the global exhibition and trade show industry covering the full year of 2020 and published in February 2021.

⁷ Reported in that 26th [UFI Global Exhibition Barometer](#) published in January 2021.

As circumstances around the world change almost daily, sentiments across the sector also remain mixed. In a survey conducted by PCMA⁸, around a third of suppliers and nearly a quarter of event planners said they had participated in a recent in-person event. Some 77 per cent of suppliers said it was worth all the additional precautions and safety measures, while 63 per cent of planners said the same. Yet even with more than half of the respondents for each category giving face-to-face events the thumbs up, 23 per cent of suppliers and 44 per cent of planners were unwilling to travel for events. That said, 31 per cent of suppliers and 25 per cent of planners said they were willing to travel any distance necessary if the programme seemed worth it.

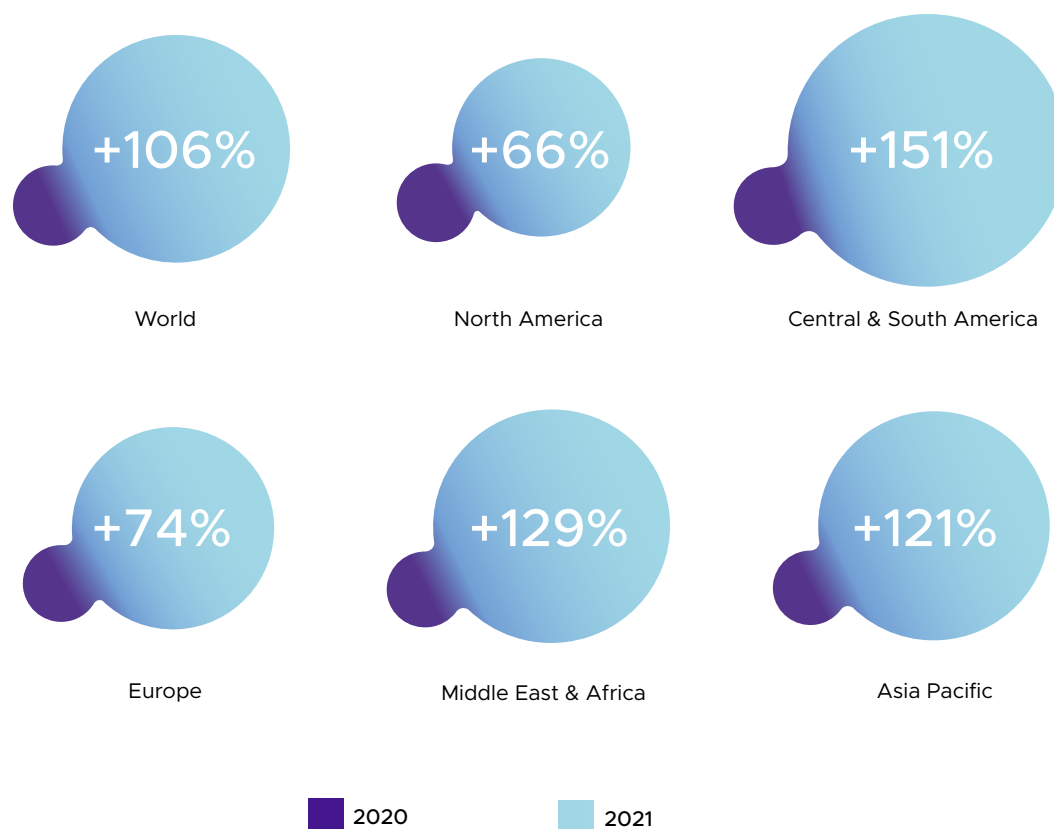
Overall, optimism has continued to grow, with 69 per cent of event planners and 64 per cent of suppliers feeling hopeful in June, compared to less than 50 per cent of both types of respondents in January⁹.



⁸ Reported in PCMA's January 2021 [COVID-19 Recovery Dashboard survey](#) with 491 planners and 219 suppliers participating.

⁹ Reported in PCMA's June 2021 [COVID-19 Recovery Dashboard survey](#) with 119 planners and 45 suppliers participating.

Expected Revenue Growth Within the Exhibitions Industry from 2020 to 2021



What is certain is that health and safety have become more urgent – and visible – priorities at business events. Delegates expect measures for health and hygiene to be implemented, on top of their usual requirements for high-value experiences and robust networking opportunities.

To be sure, the business events sector has weathered previous crises. Many will recall the SARS outbreak in 2003 and the Global Financial Crisis of 2008. In both cases, business events overcame major challenges, and learnings from these moments in history have changed the way we operate. But the scale and spread of COVID-19's impact are unprecedented. The prolonged closure of international borders, resurgent waves of cases, uncertainty of lockdowns, as well as differences in regulation across countries all curtail efforts to make long-term projections.

Still, business events are bouncing back. Planning for in-person events in 2021 and 2022 are ongoing¹⁰. Revenues are picking up, with the exhibitions industry expected to register global revenues 106% higher than 2020 figures, with regions also set to see significant growth from last year¹¹.

¹⁰ In an [APAC COVID-19 survey](#) conducted by PCMA in April 2021, 82 per cent of respondents say that they are planning in-person events in 2021, with the proportion increasing to 90 per cent for 2022.

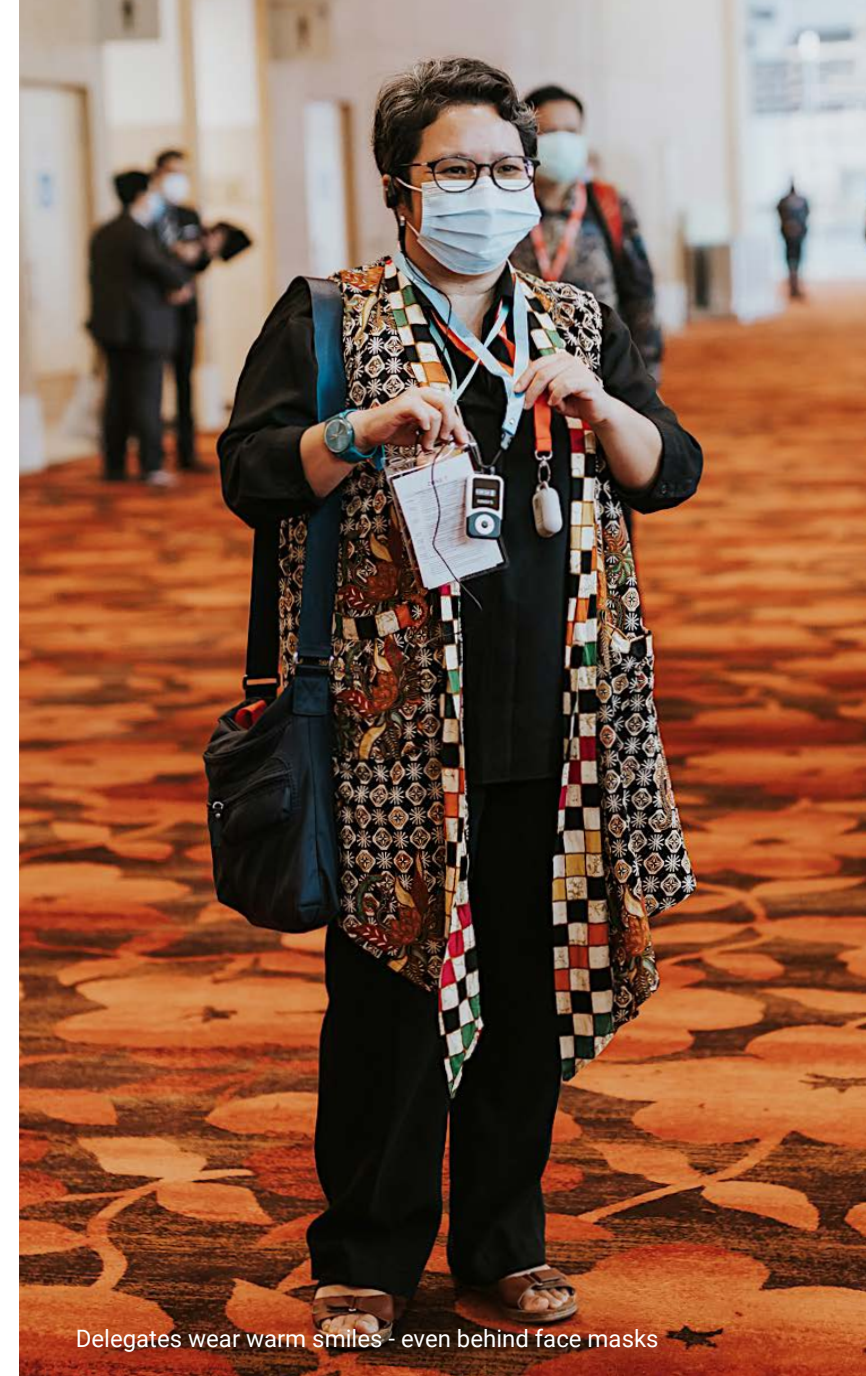
¹¹ Year-on-year revenue growth projections reported in the [26th UFI Global Exhibition Barometer](#), based on data from 457 exhibition industry companies globally.

Within Asia Pacific, there are strong indications of growth and innovation. Based on UFI, Explori and SISO's Global Recovery Insights report¹², exhibitions in Asia are likely to see stronger growth in participation from both visitors and exhibitors, compared to the rest of the world.

Exhibitors in Asia are now much more optimistic about their budgets, and the number of events they are planning to participate in has recovered to pre-pandemic levels, compared to 2019. There is also a stronger appetite for digital or hybrid events in Asia, with respondents more than twice as likely to have participated in such events than respondents from other regions. Visitors from Asia are

significantly more likely to convert from attending a new event digitally to attending in person in the future – 64 per cent compared to 48 per cent of respondents from the rest of the world.

PCMA's APAC Dashboard Survey¹³ reflects similar findings. A greater proportion of planners in Asia Pacific (38 per cent) were planning to simultaneously stream their in-person events to virtual audiences, compared to their North American counterparts (17 per cent). Of the APAC respondents planning a hybrid event in 2021, nearly 80 per cent planned for their in-person and virtual audiences to interact, compared with 27 per cent of North American planners.



Delegates wear warm smiles - even behind face masks

¹² From July 2021 Global Recovery Insights report by UFI and Explori, supported by SISO. Survey of 14,000 trade show visitors and exhibitors conducted in Summer 2020 and Spring 2021.

¹³ April 2021 survey was conducted with 184 event planners and suppliers in Asia Pacific.

Great Expectations

The global business events sector cannot – and likely never will – operate in the exact same way that it had done before 2020. Among the major shifts that have occurred in the last 18 months is the accelerated digitalisation of the sector. Webinars have become more mainstream, and many events originally planned to be held in-person took place as digital-only events.

However, questions remain about the financial viability of digital events, especially in the long term. Exhibitors prefer live to digital events in terms of the value and quality of interactions, as well as return on investment¹⁴. Visitors and exhibitors also agree that existing digital capabilities are unable to replicate the dynamic engagement that is a hallmark of physical events.

¹⁴ Indicated in the [Global Recovery Insights 2020](#) report published by UFI and Explori in October 2020.

The conundrum of digitalisation is less about whether digital events will supplant live events. Rather, it is about how we must reconceptualise both physical and digital elements to address evolving customer needs and capture a larger addressable market. Business events historically built around live elements have to be reconfigured for all types of engagement. They must evolve with available technology to deliver superior experiences across multiple platforms. This is an essential paradigm shift that must guide any recovery roadmap.

The digital space opens a wealth of opportunities for the sector. For instance, digital platforms have become indispensable for brands seeking to deliver compelling content to those unwilling or unable to travel to live events. Doing so allows event organisers

to build brand recognition and affinity and expand reach even with lockdowns and border closures still imposed in many places. Digital experiences also prime audiences for live events, as the quality of such events are increasingly seen as an indicator of an organiser's ability to host physical ones. For event owners, digital platforms also provide critical visitor data that can be used for retargeting and optimisation of future experiences.

Ultimately, the onus is on business event organisers and planners to bridge the gap between digital experiences and real-world impact, through delegate engagement and content combining traditional event set-ups with emerging technologies. The proliferation of new technologies, coupled with new delegate psychology, means that event organisers and planners must think outside the box to meet expectations now and well after the pandemic.



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Business events historically built around live elements have to be reconfigured for all types of engagement.

Undertaking Innovation Amidst A Pandemic



Business events provide new opportunities for companies to showcase their latest developments

In many ways, COVID-19 has levelled the playing field. It has highlighted the vulnerabilities of traditional business event formats and cast the importance of innovation into sharper focus. It has forced the sector to experiment and proactively embark on business transformation, addressing market requirements as leadership roles shift between innovators and incumbents.

There are three major areas that business events players need to reimagine as they prepare for recovery:

- **Business Models**
- **Delegate Experience**
- **Talent and Capabilities**

In this section, sector leaders from all around the world share thoughts on how to undertake such transformation.

Reimagine Business Models



Think and behave like a start-up



Find your core



Improvise and diversify

Reimagine the Delegate Experience



Dream big, but start small



Go multi-channel

Reimagine Talent and Capabilities



Engage proactively and transparently with employees

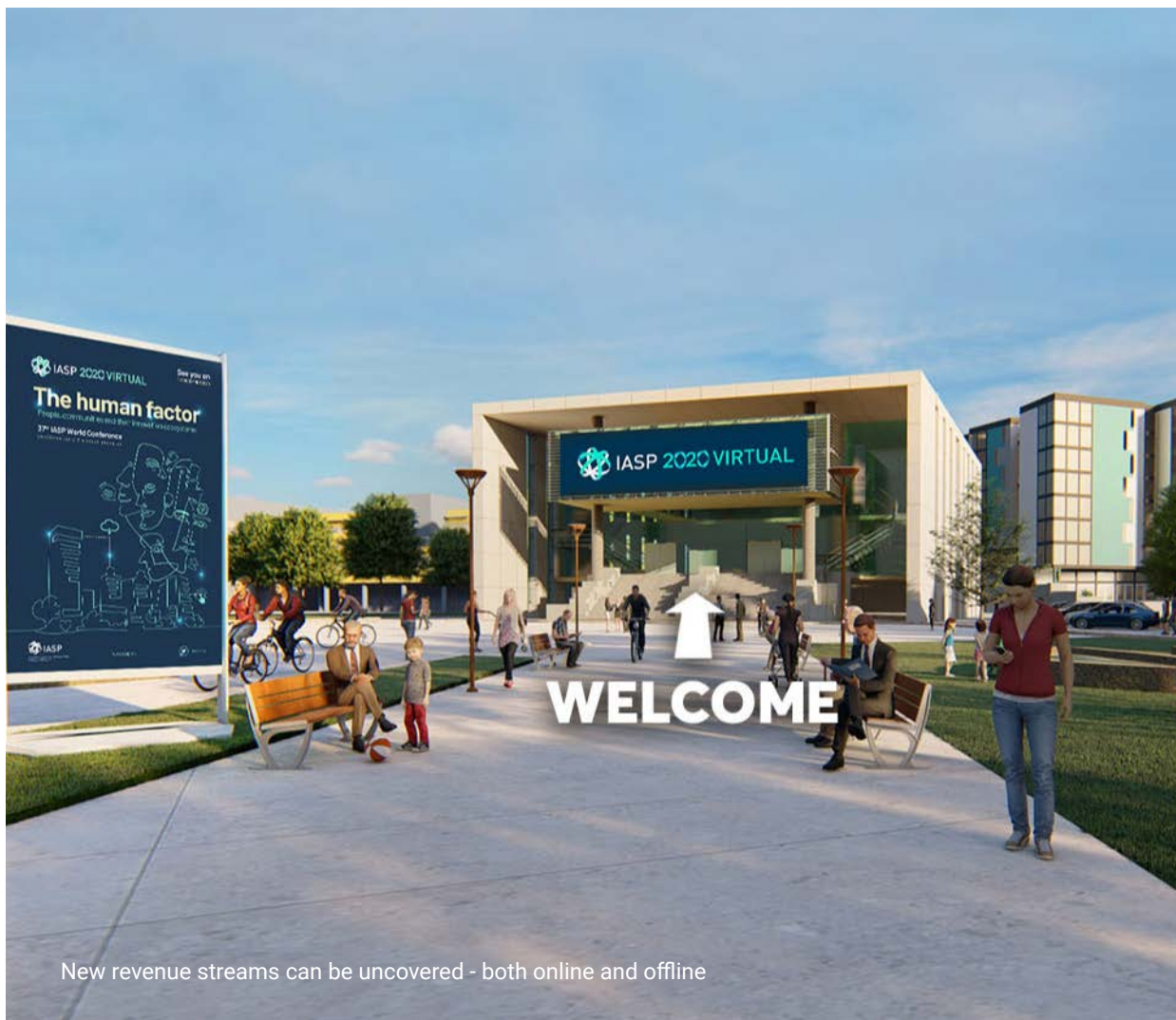


Cultivate stronger digital literacy and skills



Source ideas and talent from different places

Reimagine Business Models



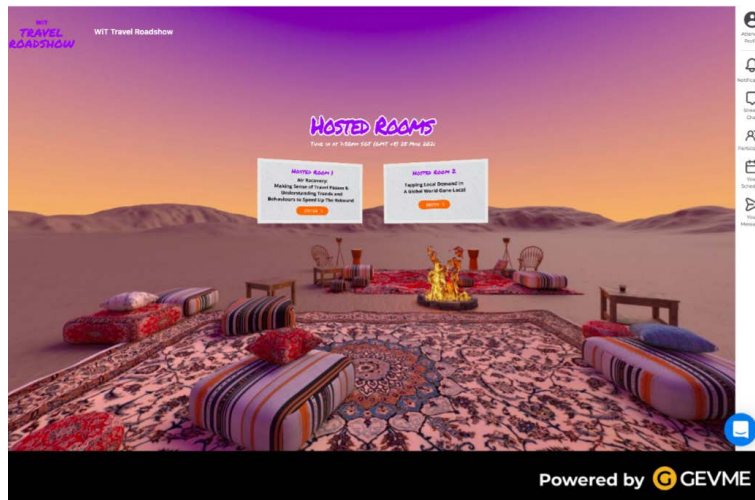
How do we reimagine and revitalise legacy business events companies? The pandemic accelerated and compressed what would have been years of incremental change into an intense period in 2020.

Industry players now seek to create fresh value for partners and delegates, and they must start by thinking about their core offerings and ability to pivot operations. In the most fundamental sense, innovation is about adapting to customer needs and recognising what aspects of the business are relevant to current requirements – and what are not.

New revenue streams can be uncovered - both online and offline

Think and behave like a start-up

GEVME, a Singapore-based global technology provider for business events, invested in accelerated product ideation – even abandoning what seemed to be promising ideas once prototypes proved untenable.



GEVME rolled out its Hosted Rooms offering – developed using lessons from the previous Serendipity Rooms concept – at the WIT Travel Roadshow in March 2021.

In just one week in 2020, GEVME saw all its planned physical events cancelled or postponed. When such things happen, the key is agility: the company had to dust itself off and kept forging on with new ideas. “Business events companies need to start behaving more like start-ups,” argued Veemal Gungadin, Founder & Chief Executive Officer, GEVME. “This means being ready to prototype, iterate and even abandon ideas that do not turn out to be viable.” Costs for such innovation can go up to two to three times in the short-term,

but these ‘write-offs’ can be cast as learnings and investments towards business resilience.

When it comes to experimentation, GEVME walks the talk. Case in point: Gungadin himself claims to have been very enthusiastic about the idea of Serendipity Rooms, which was in development in 2020. The vision was to engineer serendipity, which was a natural part of live events, by having a small group of delegates interact with like-minded people in a space akin to a digital salon. However, upon rolling this out,

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We are quick to try new ideas, but also quick to move on from them when they don't work. What's important is that we learn from each experience.

Veemal Gungadin
Founder & Chief Executive Officer, GEVME

many users preferred to stay silent and wait for others to kickstart discussions.

The team discovered that the urge to fill silence in physical meetings was just not as present in digital ones, where people had the option to walk away from their devices even as they are logged on. This observation prompted GEVME to change course and add a facilitator to spark conversations. The pivot was successful and was deployed at the WIT Travel Roadshow held earlier this year.

The company continues to get better at knowing what does not work and then figuring out what works. “We are quick to try new ideas, but also quick to move on from them when they don't work. What's important is that we learn from each experience,” Gungadin reflected.

Unexpected Atlanta, which was ranked number 1 by TripAdvisor for its Southern-inspired dining and cultural trails, shifted its business model given fallen demand for its original offering of walking tours – but stayed true to its central mission.



the US government clamped down on alcohol consumption, Budweiser and Coors pivoted to sell ice cream and ceramics respectively. Much like that period in American history, the COVID-19 pandemic prompted us to diversify our business,” McConnell recalled.

Unexpected Atlanta started offering virtual tours complemented by immersive gift boxes based on the tour theme and delivered to participants' homes.

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By mixing the virtual tours with hands-on experiences through the gift boxes, we were able to create a 360-degree remote experience for our customers.

Akila McConnell
Founder, Unexpected Atlanta

“By mixing the virtual tours with hands-on experiences through the gift boxes, we were able to create a 360-degree remote experience for our customers,” McConnell shared. Unexpected Virtual Tours managed to tide the business over amidst COVID-19 and has since become the largest part of Unexpected Atlanta’s revenue, recovering 80 per cent of 2019 performance.

Demand has only grown, with the virtual tour offering expanding to remote team building experiences. Additionally, with the logistics for gift boxes already set up, McConnell opened a new division, Unexpected Gifts, focused on selling carefully curated gift boxes from minority-owned businesses, thus enabling her team to continue sharing unique histories and heritage with their customers.

Improvise and diversify

Harry the hirer, Australia's largest event and exhibition hire company supplying marquees, furniture, custom builds, lighting, and audio-visual equipment for business events and private parties, redesigned existing assets to meet emerging customer needs.



The Studio – which was Harry the hirer's Melbourne warehouse repurposed – has been used for livestreams of fashion shows, digital townhalls, and virtual forums such as "Main Stage" held for the Australian music industry in April 2021.

While the pandemic spurred all businesses to uncover new ways to serve customers, Harry the hirer started by focusing on how they could utilise their prevailing stock holdings to address shifts in customer requirements. "With COVID-19, we had to diversify our product and service offerings. However, in many cases, there was no need to start completely from scratch," said Gab Robinson, Chief Executive Officer, Harry the hirer.

They used existing intellectual property, spaces and inventory to create The Studio, outfitting their Melbourne showroom

with high-tech equipment for clients to host and broadcast exhibitions and seminars.

It has since been used to support digital events as well as hybrid ones, including a live runway show as part of the Melbourne Fashion Festival. The Studio transformed to a film set hosting an ultra-high-end catwalk surrounded by an immersive floral set, allowing video to be streamed as part of the hybrid event.

Beyond turning their furniture warehouse into a livestreaming

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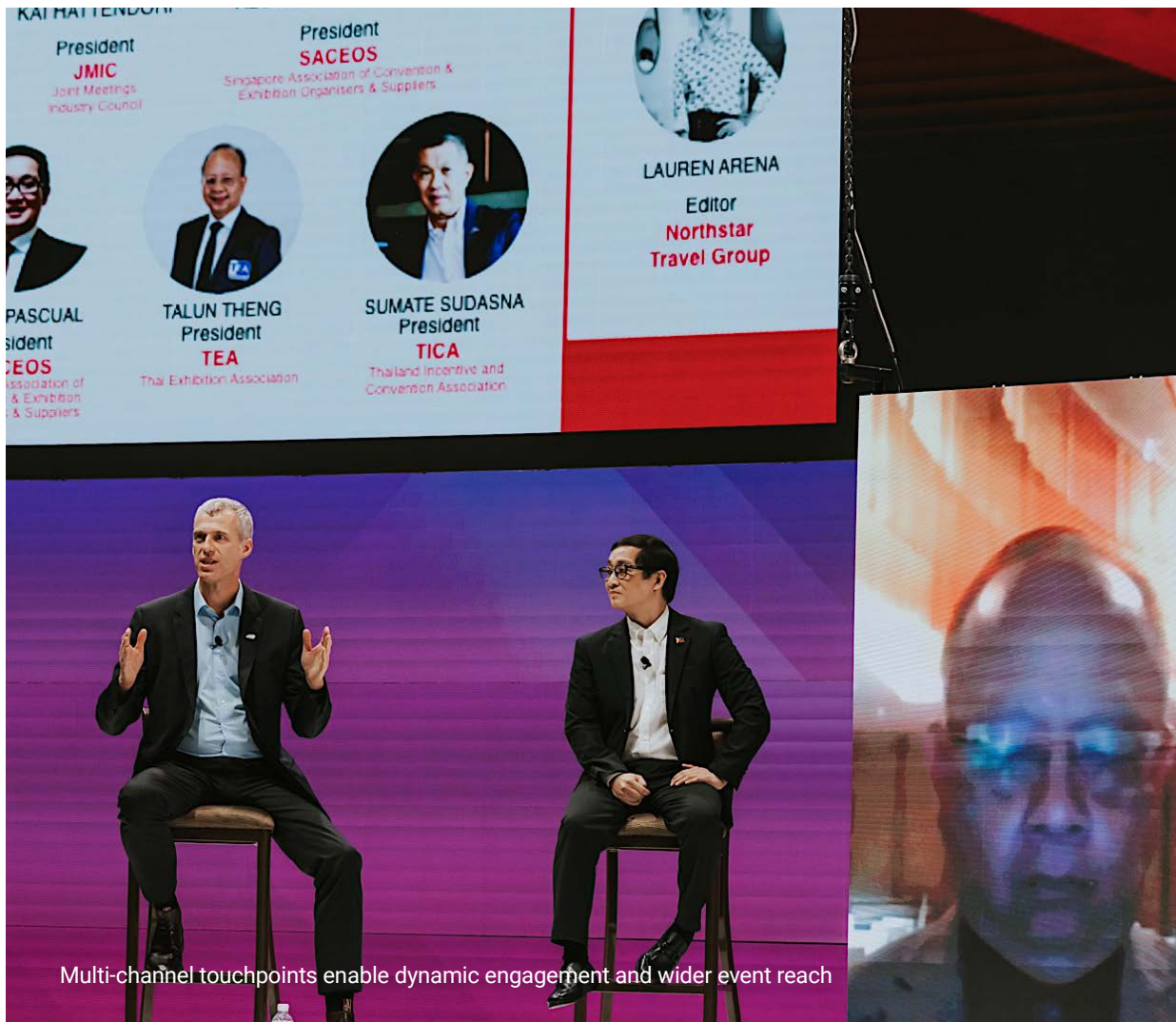
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Gab Robinson
Chief Executive Officer, Harry the hirer

studio, Harry the hirer also turned event marquees into medical testing stations and temporary hospitals – a prudent move as demand for such infrastructure grew across Australia in the following months. Their in-house programmers even pivoted from maintaining internal software for sales and HR to developing wearable technology called Smart Badge, which has been successfully implemented by the Canberra Convention Centre for live contract tracing and provision of social distancing alerts.

At the end of the day, Robinson is clear as to who should get credit for all the innovation: “Our outstanding people demonstrated such creativity and initiative that we were able to develop and commercialise all of these unique ideas.”

Reimagine the Delegate Experience



Multi-channel touchpoints enable dynamic engagement and wider event reach

As safety measures evolve, so will the experience in board rooms, convention centres and tradeshow floors.

Channels, platforms and event formats should change with the times, whether developing content for both online and offline use or enabling on-site networking opportunities. Technology has opened the door for digital tools and techniques to expand and enhance audience engagement, but nimbleness has become the key to delivering value to delegates.

Dream big, but start small

Swinging into action almost immediately after the onset of the pandemic, Singapore's **Emerging Stronger Taskforce**¹⁵ convened an **Alliance for Action (AfA)** comprising leaders from the public and private sectors to pilot new ways to deliver safe and innovative visitor experiences, in order to sustain economic growth in a COVID-19 environment.



Among the visitor experience prototypes trialled by the AfA on Enabling Safe and Innovative Visitor Experiences were meeting pods with plexiglass separating participants, and microphones on both sides for a better auditory experience.

“Vital to generating solutions in a COVID-19 environment is to be unafraid to test them in the field,” asserted Andrew Phua, Executive Director, Exhibitions & Conferences, Singapore Tourism Board. Phua co-led one of the AfA taskforces that trialled various business event prototypes. For instance, protocols were created for on-site testing of delegates, in lieu of quarantine. Meeting pods and exhibition booths were custom designed after conducting droplet transmission and simulation studies with

Singapore's Agency for Science, Technology and Research¹⁶, to enable event delegates to have prolonged meetings in a safe manner. Safe controlled itineraries were curated to ensure foreign delegates were able to enjoy Singapore outside the business event hours with safe management measures in place.

The AfA also rolled out various technology solutions for business events. TravelRevive, the first international travel tradeshow to take place physically in Asia Pacific

¹⁵ Taskforce created at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic by the Singapore Future Economy Council, under the auspices of the Ministry of Trade and Industry.

¹⁶ Airflow and droplet spread study conducted by the Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A*STAR)'s Institute of High Performance Computing and Institute of Materials Research and Engineering.

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As the COVID-19 situation remains highly dynamic, an agile approach with safety at its core will enable business events to continue even amidst uncertain times.

Andrew Phua
Executive Director, Exhibitions & Conferences,
Singapore Tourism Board

during COVID-19, featured an integrated AI solution comprising temperature scanning, mask detection, social distance monitoring, cough/flu detection and crowd density flow control. PCMA Convening Leaders 2021, held for the first time outside North America in 64 years, was another strong demonstration of innovative event technology. Through digital capabilities such as holographic technology, Singapore's event connected in-person and virtual audiences across continents, such as having Toronto-based PCMA President Sherrif Karamat beam into the event 'live' to participate in a real-time panel discussion.

Results from all the trials were used to continuously finetune technology solutions and safe management measures for subsequent pilot events. "As the COVID-19 situation remains highly dynamic, an agile approach with safety at its core will enable business events to continue even amidst uncertain times," Phua said.

Go multi-channel

The Italian Society of Anesthesia, Analgesia, Resuscitation, and Intensive Care (SIAARTI), which supports training and standard setting for key pillars of the healthcare industry, worked with **AIM Group International** to reach their members even amidst heightened restrictions across Italy.



Using a roving studio built within a truck, SIAARTI was able to meet its members despite the pandemic, foster discussion about important topics and capture content for continued engagement online.

Every fall, SIAARTI would hold its annual iCare congress, but COVID-19 prevented a large physical event from happening. Nevertheless, the society wanted to meet its association members in person, especially the anesthesiologists and resuscitators who were in the frontlines of combatting the pandemic. The solution, co-created with event organiser AIM Group International, was a roadshow using a truck that housed a studio from which content was broadcasted on big screens.

“The restrictions for mass gatherings encouraged us to be more creative and define a totally new format for this important annual congress,” said Gaia Santoro, Project Manager and Head of Sponsorship Unit, AIM Group International. With this arrangement, SIAARTI and AIM Group International brought Travelling with iCare to eight cities¹⁷, covering over 1,800 km. In all, more than 800 people were involved in creating the tour, including doctors, speakers, and individuals at participating institutions.

¹⁷ The cities were Turin, Milan, Brescia, Padua, Bologna, Rome, Naples and Bari.

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Gaia Santoro

Project Manager and Head of Sponsorship Unit,
AIM Group International

Apart from the physical roadshow, digital elements also needed to be up to par. Some of the content recorded in the truck, such as interviews, speaking panels, and roundtable discussions with the doctors, were shared on the congress website. The scientific programming of the virtual congress followed a vastly different structure from the physical one, and the full programme was eventually run like a television schedule with short pieces of content, interviews and numerous spots.

To be sure, the experience was not without complications. Production was particularly demanding, as complex technical set-up was required in all eight stops of the tour. For example, the logistics and parking of the truck had to be coordinated with the hospitals, and the transfers of all staff involved had to comply with prevailing regulations. But the format was effective: “We were happy to help engage with these heroic frontliners, and SIAARTI is even keen to maintain some of the digital components even when we are able to host the event in-person again,” Santoro said.

Reimagine Talent and Capabilities



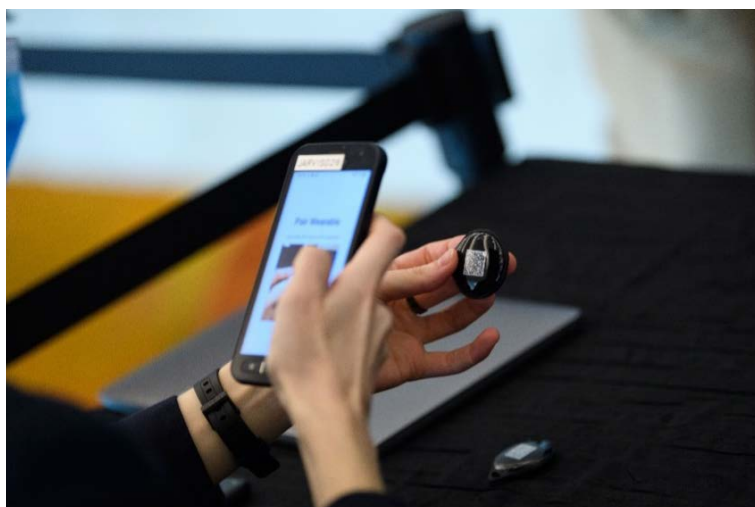
The business events sector is ultimately about people, both on the tradeshow floor and behind the scenes. Very few technologies can run fully autonomously, so business events personnel must also evolve.

Organisations must create opportunities for their employees to hone skills and knowledge around digital infrastructure, hygiene maintenance, and multi-channel content delivery. At the same time, business events operators should consider strategic outsourcing even as they build key capabilities, so that they can scale and meet new digital and operational demands in a timely and cost-effective manner.

The next generation of business events demands new skills for success

Engage proactively and transparently with employees

Montgomery Asia, a subsidiary of UK-based Montgomery Group which has been organising events and conferences for more than a century, found that the pandemic opened new opportunities for team members to have a seat in the decision-making table – and more skin in the game.



The Safe Event platform, co-developed with Singapore start-ups and piloted at Geo Connect Asia (which was organised by Montgomery Asia), utilises Bluetooth technology to track the locations and interactions of conference attendees.

Change management was a big part of many business agendas in 2020, and being positive to that change is critical to survival.

When the pandemic struck, Montgomery Asia Managing Director Christopher McCuin knew that among the things they needed to do most immediately was to reassure and empower their staff. They brought teams from across the world together (virtually) to discuss how to make dynamic changes to diversify the business during this challenging period.

“We listened and followed through with the best ideas which came from all levels within the organisation,” recalled McCuin. “By removing hierarchy, the leadership team ensured that everyone’s voices had been heard and that various perspectives had been considered in setting the direction of our business, our events, as well as the communities and industries we serve.”

There was then a need to ascertain that all relevant parties were on the same page with these changes.

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The leadership team ensured that everyone's voices had been heard and that various perspectives had been considered in setting the direction of our business.

Christopher McCuin
Managing Director, Montgomery Asia

To this end, Montgomery Asia hosted training sessions for their exhibitors, running them through the innovative offline and online aspects of events to prepare them for what to expect in the new operating environment. These trainings, which served to ensure that quality, health and safety standards were not only met but exceeded, were extended to other staff and Montgomery Asia's network of stakeholders, including physical contractors and online vendors.

Still, external partners remain critical for all events. A number of these have very niche applications, such as the Safe Event platform that Singapore technology companies Viatick and Trakomatic helped develop and adapt for Geo Connect Asia, which Montgomery Asia organised this March in Singapore. “To bring critical capabilities to customers, great partnerships with deep technical specialists and proactive upskilling of internal staff are both needed. What business events companies need is a framework to balance these investments in manpower with commercial viability of their events,” McCuin said.

Cultivate stronger digital literacy and skills

The **Singapore Association for Conventions & Exhibitions Organisers and Suppliers (SACEOS)** became the first MICE industry association worldwide to launch a set of technical references for the exhibition industry and partnered with local institutions to develop formal avenues to training and upskilling.



The need to tell a compelling brand story in the digital space has become more acute amidst COVID-19, so SACEOS organised masterclasses providing business events professionals a blueprint to curate and create engaging content for various platforms.

COVID-19 has heightened the expectation for enhanced delegate and attendance experiences both online and offline. To help Singapore's business events professionals manage this shift, SACEOS collaborated with the Singapore University of Social Sciences to develop training courses, such as the BSc Events Management programme, to equip students with practical knowledge on real challenges emerging from the pandemic. These programmes teach skills including risk impact measurement and systems thinking capabilities to solve complex problems.

"Training business events professionals for a COVID-19 environment needs to go beyond technology," said Richard Ireland, Vice President, Professional Development, SACEOS. "Business events staff also need to cultivate skills in broadcasting, strategic narrative building, content production, data management, and cyber security." To further prepare the industry for the demands of the future economy, SACEOS partnered with the National Trades Union Congress to establish the MICE and Events Capability Building Network, bringing together educational institutions across Singapore

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Learning is an ongoing journey, and we are committed to developing well-rounded talent that the industry needs.

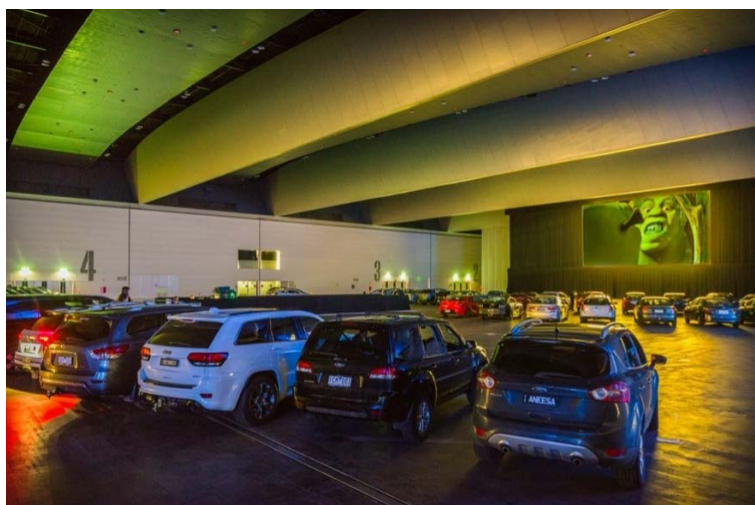
Richard Ireland
Vice President, Professional Development,
SACEOS

to develop blueprints of new and refreshed career paths, and curate new training programmes. The aim is to create a platform that will facilitate cross-sharing of experiences and best practices across industries and ultimately support industry recovery by tapping on expertise from both public and private sectors.

In parallel, SACEOS also introduced the Strategic Narratives & Digital Content Marketing Masterclass to help business events practitioners meet customer needs for dynamic, multi-channel content delivery. Ultimately, the objective is to give business events professionals as much opportunity to expand their arsenal of knowledge and skills. “Learning is an ongoing journey, and we are committed to developing well-rounded talent that the industry needs,” Ireland said.

Source ideas and talent from different places

Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre (MCEC), the largest of its kind in Australia, looked beyond its internal team to come up with creative ways to use the venue and chart its path forward through the pandemic.



As part of its Business Relaunch activities, MCEC reached out to partners and cultivated new ways to make use and generate revenue from the space – from hosting movie shoots and guide dog training to running Australia's first indoor drive-in cinema.

When large-scale events started getting postponed and cancelled in Australia, MCEC went into offence mode. It established a Business Relaunch team to spur the creation and delivery of new business concepts – but did not limit the ideation to internal staff. “We welcomed all ideas: big and small, business-as-usual and totally new, from within and outside the organisation. We assessed them on their merits and prioritised accordingly,” said Peter King, Chief Executive, MCEC. In this spirit, MCEC organised Unconventional Ideas, an online hackathon held over two and half days in August 2020. The event

presented an opportunity for the more than 100 participants – innovators and thought leaders across the industry – to pitch and workshop ideas for MCEC to shift into new markets and design new revenue streams.

One idea from the hackathon that has gone through to full execution is Sound Studios, which was submitted by one of MCEC's operations managers. With this concept, MCEC partnered with Film Victoria to host the production of the Liam Neeson film *Blacklight* within the convention centre. Requirements for film production were different

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We welcomed all ideas: big and small, business-as-usual and totally new, from within and outside the organisation. We assessed them on their merits and prioritised accordingly.

Peter King
Chief Executive,
Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre

from the typical ones for exhibitions and conferences. For example, front-of-house spaces were used as locations for the film, and the servery was even transformed into a prison set. With this first foray of Sound Studios, MCEC generated a higher margin of 32 per cent compared to traditional events. The positive uplift also extended to Melbourne's film sector, creating more than 500 jobs for local cast and crew.

Beyond the crowdsourcing at Unconventional Ideas, MCEC continues to find alternative uses for the venue. They have worked with Guide Dogs Victoria to utilise the space for guide dog training. They have also launched a new virtual event product and operated the MCEC Drive In(Door) Cinema, the first indoor drive-in cinema in Australia.

“What we did in six or so months would have taken two years or even longer pre-COVID. We now have a healthy slate of ideas that we are developing and are excited about the future,” King said.

A man and a woman are standing in a modern, high-rise building, looking out a large window at a city skyline. The woman is wearing a light green dress and a face mask, and the man is wearing a blue denim jacket, grey pants, and a face mask. The window has a decorative, patterned glass panel at the top. The floor is made of light-colored wood. The sky is blue with some clouds.

Looking Ahead

The future is full of hope and opportunities to reimagine our industry



The counsel and aspirations of these industry leaders indicate that business events will continue to thrive, albeit with new and different approaches. Innovation amidst a pandemic is not a sprint for the sector to resume to pre-COVID levels, but a marathon to transform. Event organisers and planners must explore new ways to execute events, accommodate multi-channel approaches and encourage remote participation while leveraging technology.

The key to success for any business event has always been attracting quality customers in the short term and then converting them into repeat customers who consistently commit time and money to the event. Building a loyal community that will pay attention has become much more important than pulling off a successful two-day conference at a top convention centre.

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Innovation amidst a pandemic is not a sprint for the sector to resume to pre-COVID levels, but a marathon to transform.

Despite the challenges of COVID-19, business events are experiencing a resurgence. **More and more organisations are combining the best bits of the adaptable technology world with the community building and networking that remain the core of business events.**

While it is hard to predict what the sector will look like in a few years, it is abundantly clear that organisations must apply hybrid solutions in the short and medium term, and continue to adapt and respond to the changing needs of customers to the best of their ability. They then need to design their business and revenue models and equip their staff with capabilities and skillsets to create fresh and empowering experiences. Mistakes will be made, but they must continuously glean learnings from their efforts to finetune the next event.

Whoever meets customers' needs in the most effective and economical way will recover fastest and serve as a beacon for the rest of the sector.



We continue to navigate new business events norms and experiences

About PCMA – Professional Convention Management Association

PCMA believes that business events can economically and socially transform communities, enterprises and individuals. As the world's largest platform for business events strategists and their business partners, PCMA's success is driven by a commitment to providing provocative executive-level education, face-to-face networking and business intelligence to its membership of 8,400 professionals and students and global audience of over 100,000 business event stakeholders.

Through its Ascent leadership initiative to promote inclusion and diversity across the business events industry and beyond, PCMA seeks to empower those challenged by gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity or disabilities to find success.

Headquartered in Chicago, PCMA has 17 chapters throughout the United States, Canada and Mexico with members in more than 40 countries and regional offices in Northern Ireland, Australia and Singapore.

Visit us at pcma.org or on LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.

About Singapore Exhibition & Convention Bureau™

SECB is a group of the Singapore Tourism Board that champions the business events industry in Singapore. As the lead government agency for this industry, SECB aims to establish Singapore as a dynamic business events destination where an ecosystem of ideas, people, and technology draws on vibrant knowledge and an extensive network.

About the Singapore Tourism Board

The Singapore Tourism Board (STB) is the lead development agency for tourism, one of Singapore's key economic sectors. Together with industry partners and the community, we shape a dynamic Singapore tourism landscape. We bring the Passion Made Possible brand to life by differentiating Singapore as a vibrant destination that inspires people to share and deepen their passions.

For more information, visit: www.stb.gov.sg or www.visitsingapore.com

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About UFI - The Global Association of the Exhibition Industry

UFI is the global trade association of the world's tradeshow organisers and exhibition centre operators, as well as the major national and international exhibition associations, and selected partners of the exhibition industry. UFI's main goal is to represent, promote and support the business interests of its members and the exhibition industry. UFI directly represents more than 50,000 exhibition industry employees globally, and also works closely with its 60 national and regional association members. More than 800 member organisations in 83 countries around the world are presently signed up as members. Around 1,000 international trade fairs proudly bear the UFI approved label, a quality guarantee for visitors and exhibitors alike. UFI members continue to provide the international business community with a unique marketing media aimed at developing outstanding face-to-face business opportunities.

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Networking and sharing of expertise continue at business events - through COVID-19 and beyond

Jointly presented by



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