



MEETINGS OUTLOOK™



A market that's becoming more balanced will remain stable as increasingly positive business conditions are predicted. This degree of stability is permitting more focus on people and planet.

NORMALIZING SUSTAINABILITY AND DIVERSITY

A healthy, stable landscape with favorable overall business conditions and an increasingly balanced market (still slightly favoring sellers) is permitting a greater focus on sustainability and diversity.



By Elaine Pofeldt

When Alicia Schiro, founder and CEO of Aced It Events in New York City, started working with one client in financial services five years ago, 250 people attended that firm's holiday party. Now attendance is up to 400 people, in part because the company has been hiring over the past few years.

Meanwhile, at other events, Schiro has found that clients are spending more to bring an experiential element to their events.

"Long gone are the days of just hors d'oeuvres and cocktails," she says. "A lot of companies don't want to focus on alcohol. They want the event to be an activity. They are recognizing they need to put more money towards experiential marketing, and they are."

Schiro isn't alone in finding her business thriving. This quarter's *Meetings Outlook* showed a healthy, stable market with fa-

vorable overall business conditions. It was the third quarter in a row that has shown a shift to a more balanced market. Attendance and budget conditions were essentially flat.

An increased focus on sustainability in meetings was another key trend that emerged in the survey. As one anonymous respondent put it, "Sustainability will continue to grow as a trend and as a way of conducting business for the betterment of society. Meeting professionals and particularly business event strategists (planners) need to drive this change in order for key stakeholders within supplier organizations to follow suit and embrace across their business lines."

How meeting professionals are embracing sustainability ranges from extensive zero-waste efforts to taking one or two high-impact steps to move the needle in the right direction. Among survey respondents, 29 percent said they are mini-



“Sustainability will continue to grow as a trend and as a way of conducting business for the betterment of society.”

ALICIA SCHIRO
Aced It Events

mizing waste at meetings and events by using digital materials instead of paper; 22 percent are using recycling bins or back-of-house sorting, 18 percent are reusing or donating onsite materials, 15 percent are not using plastic straws and 12 percent are redistributing extra food.

Julia Spangler (MPI Indiana Chapter), a sustainable events consultant in Indianapolis, has been helping clients orchestrate zero-waste events. Among them was Masquerade, a non-profit fundraiser in Indianapolis for about 600 guests, held in October. Composting was a major element.

“By placing compost bins in the back-of-house catering stations, we diverted more than 750 pounds of organic waste from the trash,” Spangler says. “Combined with our other elements of recycling and donation, we kept 91.3 percent of the event’s waste out of the incinerator and landfill!”

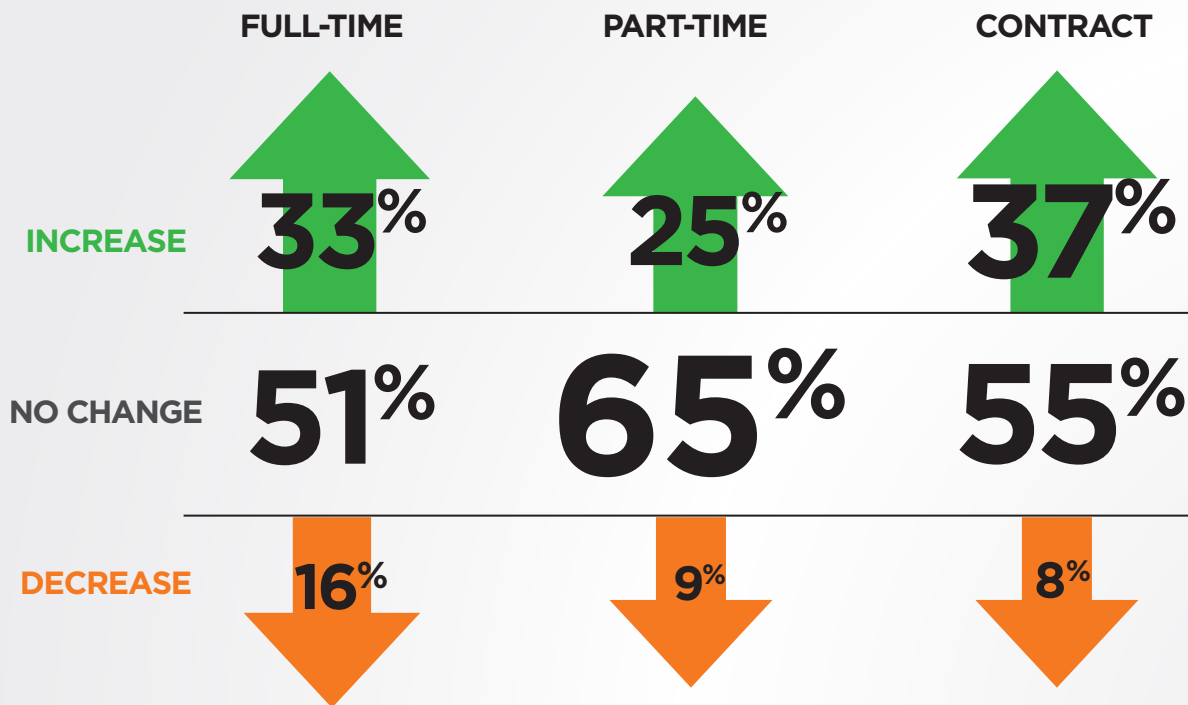
To create a sustainable event with very little waste, Spangler has found it is essential to introduce the zero-waste concept into the planning process as early as possible, “so any effects these strategies may have on staffing or the timing of the event can be taken into account.”

Careful planning throughout the event is often necessary to prevent waste, she finds.

“For buffet meals, it’s important to keep food in the back-of-house until it’s truly needed, because food that has been on the event floor cannot be donated or reused,” Spangler says. “I recommend that caterers allow pans to fully diminish before replacing them, use smaller pans to keep the buffet fresh without discarding half-pans and use smaller serving utensils to encourage reasonable portion sizes. For plated meals, I strongly recommend that caterers not pre-set salads or desserts. In my

GLIMPSE AT CURRENT EMPLOYMENT TRENDS

A slight uptick over last quarter, which is good to see since that showed a decrease in hiring growth.



waste audits, I've found that pre-set foods often make up the majority of waste from plated meals—and often they are completely untouched when they are cleared and thrown out."

Other meeting professionals are focusing on strategic steps that can have a big effect on an entire meeting. Karen Shackman, founder of the Manhattan DMC Shackman Associates New York, for instance, finds that choosing the right location can help a great deal.

"Sustainability—the real secret on this is to meet in cities that value sustainable farm to table," she says. "Everyone says they do this. Work with a DMC that helps track it."

Meanwhile, the United Network for Organ Sharing (UNOS), an as-

sociation in Richmond, Va., has been incorporating water stations into meetings, in lieu of plastic bottles. Attendees can fill up cups at the stations in the back of the room.

"We were a little nervous about push-back," says Jeff Schmid (MPI Virginia Chapter), assistant director, meeting partners at UNOS. "People do like to grab a bottle of water, but it was a no-brainer to try it out. It was one of those changes that not only saved us money but was also good for the environment."

Experimenting with the water station came with some bumps, however. Schmid discovered that putting pitchers on tables did not work well.

ON HUMAN BONDAGE...

Even though the rates aren't as significant as they need to be, meeting professionals are increasingly paying attention to and helping to combat human trafficking. 27% of respondents believe that hoteliers and venues are doing enough to fight human trafficking—*up from 13%, year over year*. When it comes to whether or not planners are doing enough, the results are essentially unchanged, with 18% of respondents indicating planners are doing enough.

What steps, if any, is your organization taking to combat human trafficking?

20% Training employees to spot the signs

18% Networking with others to grow awareness

Notably, the percentage of respondents to answer that their organization is doing nothing to combat human trafficking has decreased, year over year. Only 10% say their organization is doing nothing but has plans to do more (down from 22%); 15% say their organization is doing nothing and has no plans to do anything (down from 32%).

“Sustainability—the real secret on this is to meet in cities that value sustainable farm to table. Everyone says they do this. Work with a DMC that helps track it.”

JULIA SPANGLER

MPI Indiana Chapter

“The pitcher is normally between two people, and if they’re not the ones that are thirsty, it’s kind of awkward to maneuver to get to the water pitcher,” he says.

When water stations and cups were set up near the back, the water stations worked much better, he found, as people simply got up and helped themselves.

Schmid’s team did get one complaint that he took under advisement, though—from a guest who fretted that he could no longer grab two or three bottles and bring them back to his room at night.

He’s willing to live with that. UNOS’ largest event is a 600-person, three-day event—meaning that adding the water stations has had a major impact on reducing water-bottle waste.

“If you have a water bottle at every session, that’s a significant amount,” Schmid says.

The experiment worked so well that at the larger meetings UNOS organizes, it has made refillable water bottles a sponsorship opportunity. Schmid says that the experience of adding the water stations prompted him to think more about the role of planners in the sustainability effort.

“It can’t just be the hotels doing it,” he says. “It can’t just be the planners. It has to be the hotel working with the client and the planner being willing to change some things they do on the program level.”

Planners can play a role in sustainability by asking about sustainable practices in the RFP process with questions such as, “Do you recycle now?” and “Are there any notable sustainability efforts your property is making?”

“I can’t tell the hotel what to do but I can make it a priority to ask about it,” Schmid says. “We’re asking the questions now.”

Inclusive Representation

Diversity and inclusion are also top of mind for many meeting professionals in the latest survey. Asked if they are satisfied with the state of diversity and inclusion in the meeting industry, 47 percent of respondents said yes, 29 percent said no and 24 percent were unsure.

That said, not everyone in the industry has observed much progress in conversations about race. Compared to five years ago, 41 percent said discussions about race in the meeting industry were about the same, with 35 percent saying they were somewhat easier and only 8 percent saying they were much easier.

There’s been more improvement in gender discussions, with 41 percent saying those discussions were somewhat easier, 27 percent saying they were about the same and 15 percent saying they were much easier.

Business Conditions

Compared to last quarter, there’s an **overall increase in “favorable” conditions (+7%) and “neutral” (+3%) and a drop in “negative” (-10%), among all respondents.** That uptick is driven by planners, who reported a 9% increase in “favorable” conditions; for suppliers, “favorable” dropped 2%, but “negative” dropped 9%, mostly moving to “neutral” (which increased 12%).

52%

of respondents predict
FAVORABLE
business conditions

25%

of respondents predict
NEUTRAL
business conditions

23%

of respondents predict
NEGATIVE
business conditions

Whose Market?

This is the third consecutive quarter that’s shown a slight shift to a more balanced market; sellers still have a slight edge.

16%

Strong Seller’s Market

30%

Slight Seller’s Market

21%

Balanced Market

26%

Slight Buyer’s Market

7%

Strong Buyer’s Market

ATTENDANCE FORECASTS

OVERALL ATTENDANCE PREDICTIONS ARE ALMOST THE SAME AS LAST QUARTER, HOWEVER, A SMALL PERCENTAGE OF “FAVORABLE” AND “NEGATIVE” RESPONDENTS HAVE SHIFTED TO “FLAT” GROWTH.



Projected Live Attendance

46%
POSITIVE

30%
FLAT

24%
NEGATIVE

One piece that emerged was a hunger for more information about how to address diversity and inclusion. The related topics that respondents would most like to see covered industry media were company culture (22 percent), hard data (21 percent) and success stories (18 percent).

Among the topics that respondents suggested in write-in comments were age discrimination, LGBTQ stories, invisible disabilities, working mothers' struggles, Millennials in the workplace, workplace flexibility and working from home, the underrepresentation of female meeting planners in positions of leadership and having more people of color on stage.

Some organizations have found that creating a diverse events team can go a long way toward bringing diversity and a sense of inclusion to their meetings. That has been the case at My People's Market, a biennial community event that takes place in the winter and summer months in Portland, Ore. My People's Market is a free gathering of more than 80 multicultural businesses who are entrepreneurs, artists and culinary innovators.

The event was founded by four people of color: Michelle Comer, senior destination manager of equity and community affairs at Travel Portland; Tamara Kennedy-Hill, an equity integration consultant in Portland; Troy Campbell, director of economic development at Prosper Portland; and Amanda Park, project manager of entrepreneurship and community eco-

*“If a conference doesn't have anyone who is **black, Hispanic or Asian teaching, they are losing dollars.**”*

CHRISTINE MICHEL CARTER

Minority Women Marketing LLC

nomics development at Prosper Portland—a factor that Comer believes “naturally changed the dynamics of the event.”

“Making sure everyone's voice is being heard is very important and everyone on the team puts their ego aside and always uses the collective goal to make sure we are making the right decisions,” Comer says.

The diversity among the organizers contributed to their decisions about what to include when it came to food and music, and on other aspects of the event, she notes.

The organizers also sought input from the community, meeting with leaders from all the multicultural chambers in Portland to ensure they all supported the market, Comer says.

The organizers went beyond that and sourced all vendors through Mercatus, an online directory of entrepreneurs of col-

Compared to five years ago, how you would categorize discussions about race and gender in the meeting/event industry today?

RACE GENDER

8%	15%	Much easier
35%	41%	Somewhat easier
41%	27%	About the same
13%	14%	Somewhat more difficult
2%	3%	Much more difficult



Are you satisfied with the state of diversity and inclusion in the meeting and event industry?



47%



29%



24%

or. The arts and entertainment was all curated through Y.G.B. (Young Gifted and Black/Brown), who only works with people of color.

“We try to use as many event contractors as possible who are people of color,” Comer says.

For many meeting professionals, a key step in diversifying events is making sure that speakers aren’t homogenous—and avoiding the infamous “manel,” panels dominated by men. One recent study by Bizzabo, an event software platform, found that among more than 60,000 event speakers in 58 countries over a seven-year period (2013-2019), 66 percent of all speakers were male. The gender gap was particularly stark at summits, where speakers were 85 percent male.

Christine Michel Carter, a speaker and owner of Minority Women Marketing LLC in Baltimore, says the meeting industry needs to add more content and speakers to attract multicultural Millennial women.

“They are very loyal to thought leaders within their cohort,” Carter says. “If a conference doesn’t have anyone who is black, Hispanic or Asian teaching, they are losing dollars.”

As a speaker, Carter has gotten feedback that her participation has helped organizers achieve better diversity.

“I’ve found that whenever I’m added to a conference, some of the feedback I get post-conference is they did see their diversity numbers improve,” she says. ■

Watch an MPITV video in our digital edition as we dig deeper into the *Meetings Outlook* data at themeetingprofessionaldigital.org.



Meetings Outlook is supported in partnership with IMEX Group.