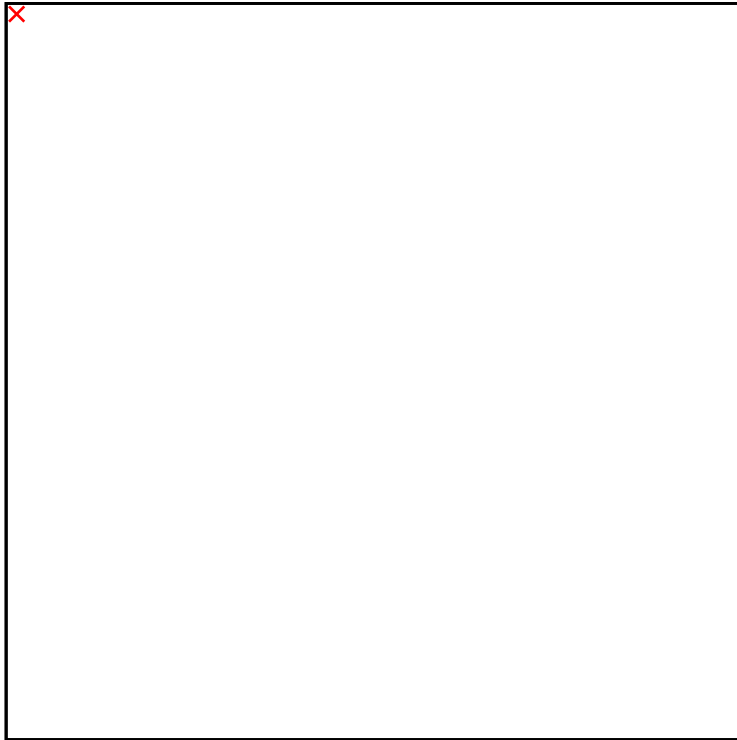


Top 10 Trends Impacting and Transforming Meetings in 2021

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The Woodlands (Houston), Texas, March 1, 2021 ... [BENCHMARK®, a global hospitality company](#), announces the Ten Top Trends that are impacting and transforming meetings in 2021. The trends were observed by Benchmark's portfolio of 80 meeting hotels, resorts and conference centers located coast to coast. Benchmark is the leading U.S.-based independent hospitality management company, operating award-winning properties within its [Benchmark Resorts & Hotels](#), [Gemstone Collection](#) and [Benchmark Conference Centers](#) brands. Benchmark's 2021 meeting trends were announced by Eric Gavin, chief sales officer.

"If there's one thing we learned in 2020, it's the true definition of what it means to pause and pivot," said Mr. Gavin, "and just how resilient and creative the folks in the meetings industry are. With the anticipation of widespread vaccinations in late Spring, we are seeing early signs of pent up demand for meetings and gatherings. In our view, 2021 is a turn-around year that will kick off a substantial recovery for the meetings industry."

Trend 1) Road To Recovery.

The industry is expressing optimism, for the first time since the pandemic began! Vaccines are being administered to increasing segments of the population, raising optimism for a meetings industry comeback during the third and fourth quarters of this year. According to a leading meetings, events and hospitality technology provider, to date in 2021 meeting RFPs have reached the highest levels since March 2020. As destinations begin to safely open back up, so are the size and quantity of group gatherings.

Trend 2) Road Trip Meetings.

Corporate gatherings in 2021 are primarily regional drive-to at this point, though Benchmark is seeing fly-in meetings take hold during the latter part of the year. Hybrid meetings remain a key option for including entire teams within a meeting, with attendees nearby driving in and those further afield attending virtually due to travel apprehensions, or as some may need to remain home for family or health reasons. That said, the demand for hybrid meetings is not as strong as might have been expected. It seems the desire to gather in person far surpasses hybrid meetings, and there may be fatigue setting in with remote connections.

Trend 3) Technology Driver.

Technology can make – or break – a meeting experience, and planners know that better than any other. So, what is the most important technology request and concern among planners for a superb conference experience in 2021? [Bandwidth](#)! Bandwidth is technology priority number 1, 2 and 3! After that are a property's virtual meeting capacity, and a dedicated tech support team available at a moment's notice throughout the meeting.

Trend 4) Year of the SMERF.

And not the little blue creatures we grew up watching on public television! One would think that major pharma would dominate in 2021, or the tech industry, or the insurance or financial industry would reign as the most important industry segment delivering the majority of inquiries and meetings. But not this year. In 2021, it's all about S.M.E.R.F. business, with a heavy emphasis on social, educational and religious meetings!

Trend 5) Don't Touch!

Rapidly becoming the new standard in hospitality, contactless technology rallied during the past many months and will outlive the pandemic. It has become the expectation of planners and meeting guests, facilitated by smart phone capabilities at check in and check out. From arrival to entering the guest room to conference registration and meeting agendas to conference services to dining with virtual menus for ordering breakfast, lunch, dinner, drinks or room service, contactless technology is here to stay!

Trend 6) Dinner Reimagined.

QR codes and contactless menus, attended buffets, individually packaged menu selections, the reinvention of the a la carte box meal featuring fresh gourmet salads, grilled shrimp with orzo, and which, in addition to sealed fresh food selections and snacks, may be accompanied by face masks, bottled water and hand sanitizers within the box. Some properties are even elevating the box meal to

grazing boxes in lieu of grazing tables. A strong preference remains, though, for served meals, or modified buffets with individually packaged selections, and culinary staff-served hot and cold choices all behind safety plexiglass. Given the current environment, properties are accommodating meeting guests in any way they can--tailoring to individual customer preferences, which may also include bento box meals and boxed hors d'oeuvres, as well as drop-off catering in guest rooms. Eco sensitive as ever, individually packaged meals are presented in curated eco-friendly containers.

Trend 7) Creative, Local & Sustainable—Some Things Never Change!

In 2021, creativity, taste and eco-appeal are important priorities to planners and guests--the pandemic hasn't changed what makes dinner delicious, memorable, responsibly prepared and talked about six months later. Culinary teams remain exceptionally passionate about providing locally sourced and sustainable food items--not only for freshness but to support local farmers and purveyors during this challenging time. Farm to fork dining experiences are as important today as they ever have been! In all regions outdoor dining reigns, with chefs in Northern regions planning hearty winter menus served in large outdoor spaces surrounded by fire pits and heaters, enabling safe, appealing and socially distanced dining experiences under the stars...often pairing with soul-warming signature drinks like Smoked Bourbon Manhattan's and Old Fashioned cocktails.

Trend 8) Size Matters.

In many destinations, state regulations are restricting the size of events to as little as 10 – 15 people, so understandably average group size in 2021 is smaller. With more destinations lessening their restrictions, however, we are seeing larger group requests of 50 - 100 guests, booking at larger properties that offer extensive space for social distancing, with some break out spaces offered outside for greater accommodation of social distancing with small group sessions, and with select break outs offered virtually so guests can easily transition into the break out of their choice. Meetings being booked in 2021 extend for 2 days on average, which is not too dissimilar to previous years. Meeting package rates are holding, on average, to those negotiated in 2019 to remain competitive and win business. Properties are preparing for many meetings to book very last minute throughout the year.

Trend 9) A Fresh Perspective!

Meeting out of doors has been a fun trend over the past few years. In 2021, it's a necessity. Outdoor spaces are being created where they don't currently exist: ballroom courtyards, resort scenic lawns and sandy beaches are now meeting rooms for larger groups, as are restaurant terraces, pool decks, outdoor pavilions and newly installed tented rooms which reimagine the "traditional" meeting room this year. Adirondack chairs are stand-ins for ergonomic seating, portable heating elements bring warmth to outdoor rooms in northern climates. Where appropriate, plexiglass offers another line of safety. And, the meeting room views have never been better!

Trend 10) Partners in Planning.

Meeting contract language is where the rubber hits the road in 2021. Many planners are adamant about the need for flexibility around attrition clauses, cancellation clauses and fees, rebooking clauses, group rate clauses and commissions. Though moving along at a more rapid pace than previously, vaccinations have only recently become more broadly administered and planners remain cautious about rescheduling meetings in the shorter term. Many find comfort in Benchmark's Meeting Accelerator Program launched early in the pandemic, which offered zero attrition or cancellation fees and zero risk in rebooking through March 31 of this year. Planners are keenly aware of what the industry has been through, and are eager to be a partner--particularly for those hotels that have been gracious with cancellation policies and have remained in active touch.

Bonus Trend - Importance Of A Destination

The destination experience and destination programming are a top priority this year, particularly drive-in destinations offering significant transportation accessibility. In fact, the destination experience has probably never been more important! Deep dives into the local cultural amenities of a destination are being requested by planners, as most destinations offer wide open spaces desirable for social distancing, peaceful, relaxing and safe down time activities/experiences that can be customized to the group's needs. Resorts with wellness programs are offering meeting groups: Experientialism, Wellness & Self-Care, Healing and Immersions in Nature, including resort outfitters activities. And, like outdoor meeting rooms, you just can't beat the views!

Bonus Trend - Spirit Through Team Bonding!

There has very likely never been a greater need than in 2021 for teambuilding programming. After many months of officing out of the home and connecting with colleagues and clients virtually, there is a yearning to come together, to reconnect, to rebuild the team and rekindle the team spirit. It's a basic human need. The need to do so outside, given the times, is ideal for teambuilding and these programs are being actively requested. Orvis Fly Fishing, Land Rover Driving School, falconry, hiking, golf, Lost Shaker of Salt scavenger hunts, margarita mixology courses, Continental Drifter cardboard boat regattas, Flip-flops & Tie-dye Kind of a Day, coconut bowling, ax throwing ... anything that will offer the team a chance unwind, reconnect, share and delve into renewal experiences, gain courage, and maybe blow off some steam.

Meeting The Moment, Together.

Unprecedented, uncharted, unimaginable ... any number of superlatives fit the current environment. The road to recovery for the meeting industry is filled with questions and unknowns. Collaboration across all aspects of meeting and event planning and management will be required to bring people back together. That is why Benchmark is meeting the moment with collaborative initiatives bringing together Benchmark's meeting experts from across all aspects of event planning, design, culinary, and execution to support planning partners with safe meeting and event planning solutions. Forty years ago, this is why Benchmark was founded and why it remains today – as a means to bring people together, to help renew and enrich relationships, to facilitate the basic and essential human need to gather interpersonally, to connect!

About BENCHMARK®, a global hospitality company.

[BENCHMARK®, a global hospitality company](#), is a leader in the development, management, and marketing of independent, soft branded, and experiential hard branded resorts, hotels, and conference centers. In addition to the company's award-winning full service [Benchmark Resorts & Hotels](#), its lifestyle and luxury [Gemstone Collection](#), and its industry-leading [Benchmark Conference Centers](#), BENCHMARK is also an investor in [etc.venues](#), a leading provider of contemporary city centre venues for meetings, signature events, and conferences. Benchmark's combined portfolio features more than 80 unique projects across three continents. The company is passionately committed to delivering personal, inspiring, and memory-making experiences, driving total revenue and profitability, and cultivating an award winning, "Be The Difference" culture for all its employees. Benchmark, is based in The Woodlands (Houston), Texas, with offices in London, England; Miami, Florida; Park City, Utah; Scottsdale, Arizona; New Brunswick, New Jersey; Seattle, Washington; and Tokyo, Japan. www.benchmarkglobalhospitality.com To become a fan on Facebook, visit www.facebook.com/BenchmarkResortsandHotels, www.facebook.com/GemstoneHotelCollection. Follow us on Twitter at www.twitter.com/BenchmarkHotels, www.twitter.com/GemstoneHotels, on Instagram at www.instagram.com/benchmarkresortsandhotels, www.instagram.com/gemstonehotels, and on Pinterest at www.pinterest.com/benchmarkhotels/gemstone-hotels. At LinkedIn, <https://www.linkedin.com/company/benchmark-a-global-hospitality-company/>

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