



THE IRF 2021 WELLNESS IN MEETINGS AND INCENTIVE TRAVEL STUDY



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Wellness has long been a part of meetings and incentives. With COVID continuing to pose health threats and impact attendee comfort and confidence, meeting and incentives planners are looking at the concept of **wellness** through a different lens. At the fifth annual Meet Well Summit on September 8 - 9, more than 50 meeting and incentives planners and suppliers from across the country gathered in at The Wigwam in Litchfield Park, Arizona, to experience wellness inclusions and discuss the changing definition of wellness.

As masked attendees participated in health screenings upon arrival, it immediately became clear that the concept of wellness has moved far beyond the healthy dining options, spa experiences, and morning yoga discussed in previous years. During facilitated discussions, attendees considered how factors such as health & safety, attendee mental health, physical health, food & beverage, and sustainability impact the overall attendee experience and level of comfort.

Wellness Starts with Addressing COVID Concerns

As a result of the pandemic, the priority for wellness has shifted to addressing attendee concerns about their physical and mental health and safety. Many potential meeting and incentive attendees have not traveled or been in large groups since March 2020. Even for those who have travelled since the pandemic, many have new concerns as the delta variant changes the landscape. Attendees expressed concerns about travelling, being in an environment that they can't control, and the uncertainty of a new location. There's fear of known threats, and perhaps even more apprehension about the unknown.

Corporate leadership is also concerned and cautious about bringing groups together. There's often a hesitancy to convene people for liability reasons, and many companies still have travel restrictions in place. At the same time, they also acknowledge fatigue with virtual meetings. As in-person meetings are planned, more lawyers are involved, and waivers and liability concerns are taking the lead. From the leadership's view, issues resulting from COVID need to be dealt with before other types of wellness can be considered.

Health & Safety the Top Wellness Consideration

Planners agreed that the focus is on how to keep attendees and staff safe. Standard wellness elements (spa, yoga, etc.) have frequently been put on hold while planners deal with COVID. Before other elements of wellness can be addressed, foundational health & safety considerations need to be addressed by planners first.

Hotel and venue cleaning standards: How to make sure the properties maintain their stated cleaning standards and procedures in a shifting environment

Consistency of protocols: Implementation and enforcement of protocols involving masks, vaccines, contact tracing, health questionnaires, and temp stations vary widely

Masks: Considered are a source of comfort by some attendees and a nuisance by others

Social Distancing: How to source enough space and promote safe distancing between attendees

Vaccines: Breakthrough COVID cases and differing opinions on vaccine mandates have made vaccines a source of concern and confusion

There are many factors and shifting concerns when establishing health & safety protocols, and priorities vary from company to company. One planner summed it up by saying, “It’s important to take a *Swiss cheese approach* to COVID. Layer the protocols in such a way that ultimately all the holes are covered. There’s no one approach that will cover it all.”

Mental Health and Well-Being Receiving More Consideration

Wellness in meetings has always been driven by the goal of making attendees feel comfortable and cared for, but the emphasis on emotional wellbeing has increased because of the pandemic. COVID seems to have raised more awareness of mental health concerns. Work-related team meetings are often check-ins with people, and there’s more transparency, vulnerability, and compassion.

The group discussed how attendees are different since the pandemic, and how they are more open about expressing their emotional needs. People have worked from home for so long, and coming back to a meeting is, as one planner put it, like “coming back into the sunshine.” The group also acknowledged that many attendees could have anxiety about being back in a group. Some people are ready to be part of the event, just not *all* of the event *all* day.

Communication is critical to helping attendees feel informed and in control of their experience. One planner explained how “overloading” attendees with information ahead of the event helped to manage expectations and empower attendees to make decisions for themselves. Some attendees find a great deal of comfort and protection in clearly-communicated health & safety protocols, while others prefer to know what types of rules and restrictions they are expected to abide by. One size does not fit all, and a regimented schedule does not work. A big part of achieving attendee comfort and peace of mind is assuring attendees that you are providing flexibility and options regarding the agenda, breaks, and spacing.

Mental health is also being addressed in education sessions and activities at meetings and events. In-person and virtual meetings have had sessions on mental health, dealing with the work from home environment, and professionally-led active stretching breaks. Incentive programs are building in spa time and intentional rest and recreation time.

Safety and peace of mind extend beyond the event to travel and return home. Planners noted attendee concerns about bringing back virus to people in their care, such as children and vulnerable populations. The post-event experience should include follow-up communications that provide updates on any reported COVID cases... or hopefully an update two weeks later that the event was COVID-free.

Event Design and Physical Health – Attendees Need Space and Breaks

For safety and comfort, planners reported a trend toward smaller meetings and a strong desire for outdoor space for meetings and receptions. A lot of groups want small, local, boutique hotels, because they have fewer people in general and fewer leisure travelers. There's a lot of interest in hotel buy-outs and, takeovers, and having a private space at a resort that is exclusively for their group.

Since attendees need more flexibility to feel comfortable in the current environment, agendas need plenty of space. Attendees may need more breaks, moments of solitude, opportunities to go for a walk or spend time alone in their room, and the option to take meals away from the group. Plan to provide attendees with extra physical space, such as time outside of the meeting room, space for social distancing in larger rooms, or wave planning to rotate people through rooms and transportation.

One planner reminded the group that providing space and careful room set up does not always keep attendees safe. Their team went ahead of time to a five-star restaurant to rearrange tables to make sure they were spaced properly for a medical industry dinner. Upon arrival, the dinner attendees moved all the tables close together for dinner. Others chimed in about dealing with "furniture movers" at meetings and events.

Planners noted that the need for more space has logistical and cost implications. Private space comes at a premium, large rooms are often hard to acquire, and outside space may need awning or heaters depending on the season. It's important to educate the client or leadership about the cost of extra space.

The classic wellness retreat at a spa has also been impacted by health & safety protocols. Spas require a lot of closeness and touching, which can be inconsistent with protocols. One planner said that a spa retreat she planned to work with was too restrictive and even required masks in the pool. Another planner reported that her incentive program was successful because the high-end spa allowed attendees to feel pampered, safe, and comfortable.

Food & Beverage: Healthy Options Continue to be in Demand

Healthy food and beverage options continue to be a mainstay of wellness inclusions. Personal and lifestyle choices and differences are more important than ever as people adapted to new eating habits while in lockdown. People are more mindful of the food they eat, but still expect food and beverage to elevate their experience. Planners are avoiding processed foods and offering more healthy options, including more fish entrees and innovative vegetable preparation. Careful

attention to dietary restrictions is the shared responsibility of the planner and F&B team. Wellness and inclusivity can also mean fewer alcohol-centered activities and more thoughtful non-alcoholic beverage options, like locally-source fruit juices or signature mocktails.

New health & safety procedures have changed the dining experience at events and meetings. Served buffets are cost-effective, and they allow attendees to see their food being served according to health standards (servers are masked, gloved, behind plexiglass barrier). Planners noted that they need to build in longer wait times for serving buffets. Many noted that clients are requesting more plated meals again.

The costs associated with healthy food selections as well as maintaining health & safety standards can pose a challenge. Planners noted that prices are up and budgets are down. Supplier issues are driving prices up, and food and beverage options may be limited. At the same time, clients and companies are expecting to come back from the pandemic to find great deals. Actual pricing does not often align the “impossible budgets” described by some planners.

Impacts on Sustainability

Planners reported that sustainability is important to them and helps contribute to the attendee wellness experience. They acknowledged that in many ways, the response to COVID often feels counter to sustainability. In an effort to reduce contact, there’s a significant increase in packaged, single serving food and beverage. Planners noted there’s a lot of concern about so much packaging and waste, and recycling is more important than ever.

However, planners were happy to point out ways in which sustainability has improved over the past 18 months. Concern over travel has resulted in more meetings held locally. The desire to reduce contact has boosted adoption of conference apps that replace printed materials. Hotel health & safety protocols, as well as the labor shortage, has resulted in less frequent changing and washing on linens.

Locally sourced food is very popular and contributes to the authenticity of an event at a special location. Attendees enjoy a unique experience at Farm to Fork and Farm to Table events, with thoughtful enhancements such as custom menus and talks by local farmers, artisans, and the chef. Serving locally sourced food is also a great way to support the local economy.

Conclusion

While traditional wellness inclusions such as yoga, healthy food, and use of the spa remain popular, the focus for wellness has shifted to self-care and safety in the wake of COVID. Given that attendee readiness varies widely, planners are factoring in health & safety protocols, attendee peace of mind, and physical health as they strive to make all attendees comfortable. Clear attendee communications, space and breaks, and strong partnerships with the venue are critical components of accomplishing the new goals of wellness in meetings and incentives.