

Meeting And Event Executives Weigh In On Post-COVID Events

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Introduction

Kristi Casey Sanders's 2020 article "Meeting and Event Executives Weigh in on Post-COVID Events" captured the meeting industry during an unusually uncertain stage of the COVID-19 pandemic. Planners, venues, suppliers, speakers, and attendees wanted the economic and social value of live gatherings to return, yet they were operating before vaccines were widely available and while guidance on masks, distancing, testing, ventilation, and contact tracing was still evolving. The article's enduring value lies less in any single 2020 rule than in its recognition that event safety depends on coordinated behavior. A venue can create a careful plan, but implementation can fail when participants ignore requirements, staff lack authority, or organizers and suppliers assume that another party will manage the risk. Sanders's examples of attendees leaving because they observed violations, a participant being removed after repeated mask disputes, and a staff member later testing positive show why risk management cannot promise zero infection. It can instead reduce preventable exposure, clarify responsibility, support rapid response, and protect trust when conditions change (Sanders, 2020).

What Changed After the Emergency Phase

The return of live events demonstrated that in-person meetings still provide forms of value that digital platforms do not reproduce completely. Conferences, exhibitions, celebrations, training sessions, festivals, and business meetings support spontaneous conversation, shared attention, networking, destination economies, and relationship building. At the same time, the pandemic accelerated hybrid and virtual formats that expanded access for people facing health, cost, disability, caregiving, visa, or travel constraints. The World Health Organization ended COVID-19's status as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on May 5, 2023, but that decision marked a transition to longer-term management rather than the disappearance of the virus (WHO, 2023). Event planning should reflect the same distinction. Measures appropriate during an acute emergency do not need to remain permanently unchanged, yet organizations benefit from preserving the ability to scale precautions when respiratory illness or another hazard increases. A resilient event model therefore combines the strengths of in-person participation with remote options, contingency planning, and decision criteria that allow measures to be added or removed proportionately.

Layered Risk Reduction and Indoor Environments

One of the strongest lessons from the pandemic concerns layered risk reduction. Surface cleaning and hand hygiene remain useful general practices, but respiratory illness also requires attention to shared indoor air, crowding, symptom policies, and the ability of people to stay home when they are sick. Venues should understand how ventilation systems operate, how occupancy affects air quality, and whether outdoor space or increased fresh-air exchange is available when conditions justify additional precautions. Capacity limits and distancing can be useful during elevated risk, but a seating plan alone is inadequate if people crowd at registration desks, elevators, transport, restrooms, or receptions. Planners should therefore examine the complete attendee journey. Health messages also need realistic wording. No organizer can guarantee that infection will not occur before, during, or after an event, and overconfident promises may reduce trust when a case is reported. Credible communication explains the measures being used, their purpose, and their limits while allowing people with different risk levels to make informed participation decisions (WHO, 2025).

Coordination, Enforcement, and Response

Operational coordination determines whether a safety plan works under pressure. Contracts and pre-event briefings should specify responsibility for venue systems, crowd management, food service, security, emergency communication, accessibility, and any health requirements that apply. Front-line workers need the same information as senior planners because registration staff, ushers, catering teams, and security personnel often encounter problems first. Enforcement must also be consistent. A policy loses credibility if influential speakers, executives, or sponsors are exempt while ordinary attendees are disciplined. Staff should know who may issue warnings, when a matter should be escalated, and how accommodations will be handled. De-escalation training is valuable because public disputes can create additional safety and reputational problems. A positive case or medical concern requires a defined response process that protects confidentiality, identifies the responsible contact, follows applicable public-health requirements, and avoids unsupported claims about where transmission occurred. Preparedness works best when teams rehearse common scenarios before an event so unclear authority, missing supplies, and contradictory procedures are discovered before attendees are affected.

Privacy, Accessibility, and Participation

Privacy and accessibility are essential parts of event risk management rather than secondary concerns. Registration information may help organizers communicate schedule changes or health notifications, but data collection should be limited to legitimate purposes, protected from unnecessary access, and retained only as long as required. Sensitive health information should not be stored casually in spreadsheets or shared with sponsors simply because it was collected during registration.

Accessibility requires similar foresight. Masks can affect people who rely on lip reading, mobile-only processes may exclude some participants, and physical distancing or queue systems can create barriers for people with mobility or visual impairments. Remote participation can improve access for some disabled attendees while creating problems for others when audio, captions, documents, or interaction tools are poorly designed. Organizers should therefore integrate accessibility expertise into planning rather than treating safety and inclusion as competing goals. Flexible refund, transfer, or remote-participation policies can also reduce pressure on sick attendees to appear in person, aligning financial incentives with the health behavior the event claims to encourage.

Contracts, Economics, and Sustainable Event Design

The pandemic also exposed contractual, economic, and sustainability questions that remain relevant beyond infection control. Force-majeure clauses, cancellation terms, insurance exclusions, minimum-spend commitments, and refund obligations became critical when government restrictions or travel disruption made performance impossible or impractical. Clear agreements cannot eliminate every loss, but they can define responsibility before a crisis. The economic consequences extend beyond venues to hotels, restaurants, transport providers, performers, freelancers, exhibitors, and destination communities, which explains why reopening decisions involved both health and livelihoods. Hybrid formats can provide operational resilience when travel conditions change and can also reduce unnecessary travel for activities that do not require physical presence. This creates an opportunity to consider environmental impacts alongside health and financial performance. A well-designed event strategy asks which objectives genuinely benefit from face-to-face interaction, which can be achieved online, and how food, transport, energy, materials, and waste can be managed responsibly. Post-pandemic improvement should therefore be broader than retaining emergency procedures; it should strengthen contracts, access, continuity, and resource use.

Conclusion

“Meeting and Event Executives Weigh in on Post-COVID Events” remains useful because it documents how professionals tried to restore live gatherings while confronting uncertainty, inconsistent behavior, and shared responsibility. The specific emergency environment of 2020 has changed, and WHO’s May 2023 decision ended COVID-19’s global emergency status, but the deeper operational lessons remain applicable (WHO, 2023). Safe and credible events depend on layered risk reduction, honest communication, ventilation awareness, consistent enforcement, privacy protection, accessibility, flexible participation, and clear coordination among planners, venues, suppliers, staff, speakers, and attendees. Preparedness should also be scalable. Permanent emergency rules can become outdated, while abandoning planning entirely leaves organizations vulnerable to respiratory outbreaks, extreme weather, transport disruption, or other crises. The strongest post-COVID model is therefore not a

return to every pre-pandemic habit. It is a more resilient event system that distinguishes routine operations from elevated-risk conditions, preserves hybrid capability where it adds value, aligns contracts and incentives with desired behavior, and adapts transparently when evidence or circumstances change (Sanders, 2020; WHO, 2025).

References

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