



THE RISE OF DESIGN THINKING IN MEETINGS AND EVENTS

Presented by

Skift.

+

VENETIAN MEETINGS
— LAS VEGAS —

SKIFT SUMMARY

The world's most engaging and effective conferences don't happen by accident.

Innovative event design today employs a fluid, yet structured creative process based on the well-established theories of design thinking, which prioritize the needs of the individual end-user, interdisciplinary collaboration, and continual prototyping and testing. More than anything, design thinking requires teams of people with different skill sets and different agendas to willingly listen to each other's new ideas with open minds.

Event design, of course, is about much more than "design." It's about developing an entire structure of experiences aligned around a common mission. Design thinking is also not just about design. It's more about codifying how designers think, which can help non-designers learn and leverage the creative process more effectively.

This report explores the convergence of modern event design and design thinking by examining various processes of creation developed by leaders within and outside the meetings and events industry.

Skift examined how design thinking philosophies — first developed by the IDEO design school at Stanford in the early 1990s — are embraced at event organizations including: the Consumer Technology Association, which operates CES; the Freeman event management company; Meeting Professionals International, and the Event Design Collective, among others.

The primary challenge today for event owners, planners, and stakeholders is engaging attendees on a personal level with relevant content to capture their attention amid the cacophony of noise in our online world. At the same time, event planners are continually integrating more digital platforms into their programming, adding new layers of opportunities to connect delegates, exhibitors, and sponsors.

Design thinking brings structure and direction to all of that by deconstructing the event design process to better align business objectives, technology platforms, and evolving attendee demands. Ultimately, the end goal is to create communities of highly committed people around like-minded interests.

"Design thinking may not be at the forefront of everyone's thinking, but it needs to get there," said Patrick Crosson, an event producer at agencyEA in New York City.

"The data we're capturing, whether through attendee mapping, surveys, or something else, helps us empathize with attendees," he explained. "That's how we understand what they want. And that's how we can ideate solutions to questions like, 'How do we get attendees to do this instead of that?'"

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ABOUT SKIFT

Skift is a travel intelligence company that offers news, data, and services to professionals in travel and professional travelers, to help them make smart decisions about travel.

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EXECUTIVE LETTER

AT THE FOREFRONT OF MEETING INNOVATION

We're excited to partner with Skift on this fascinating deep dive into the latest on event design. At The Venetian and Sands Expo, we place great value on innovation, and frequently pilot new meeting designs, concepts, and themes with our group clients.

One of the top trends we're seeing is what we call event "festivalization," which involves leveraging a wide variety of property assets and capabilities for more impactful brand activation and deeper attendee engagement. Our clients are increasingly looking beyond our core exhibit and meeting spaces and asking about how to integrate restaurants, retail, non-traditional spaces, and unique experiences into their events. We're also seeing more inclusion of end users of products and services into the event experience, which adds a different, B2C-like dimension to event design.

Our meeting space is accompanied by thousands of hotel suites, dozens of restaurants, myriad entertainment and nightlife options, hundreds of shops, and a world-class spa. The sheer variety of environments we offer aligns well with the rise in demand for more creative event spaces and experiences that cater to different group segments (e.g. smaller groups), sometimes within the same conference.

In general, meeting clients are recognizing the need to be more innovative. It's not enough to replicate what was done in years past — clients want to leverage new technology and out-of-the-box thinking to get to a new place. In addition, clients are increasing their efforts to design events from the attendee perspective, design programming and content to optimize attendee engagement, and make events more experiential.

No matter what an event is seeking to achieve, we like to brainstorm with meeting planners during the event design phase, aligning our knowledge of meeting trends and our extensive capabilities with our clients' goals to co-create truly memorable events.



Chandra Allison
Senior Vice President, Sales
The Venetian and The Palazzo Las Vegas
Venetianmeetings.com

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Chandra Allison', located at the bottom left of the page.

INTRODUCTION



Photo: CES 2018

The art and science of event design, as it's defined in the meetings industry today, is highly complex. It requires a holistic framework that unifies all of the different elements in an event around an agreed-upon strategy "designed" to achieve specific business outcomes.

Supplementing the live event, the increasing level of digital engagement today is bringing more complexity and opportunities to modern event design. Digital platforms extend an event's reach to a broader audience, and they provide a wealth of new options for kinetic event experiences and sponsor activations. As such, event design requires a much more sophisticated approach than it did even a few years ago.

"The problem is, when you say 'event design,' a lot of planners still think about table centerpieces and drapery, which has been going on for way too long with regard to how we create these group learning experiences," said Julius Solaris, founder of Event Manager Blog — considered the leading voice in event tech worldwide. "Event design should be a conversation about how we structure events at every step, and how we produce them to achieve our stakeholders' objectives."



Photo: IMEX America 2018

CES in Las Vegas provides a good case study to explore how the best event organizers are structuring event experiences to engage a wide variety of attendees on a personal level. CES is the world's largest innovation conference that brings together more than 175,000 attendees, exhibitors, and stakeholders to see the future of connectivity and mobility. Such a massive citywide event, therefore, requires a complex structural framework to control the chaos.

According to Kara Dickerson, vice president, strategic partnerships and conferences at the Consumer Technology Association, which produces CES, the primary strategy behind the show revolves around building communities of like-minded people. Almost two dozen "marketplaces" are themed around everything from smart cities to digital marketing, which helps individual attendees navigate their personal journey throughout the four-day event.

"We're always thinking about what types of experiences we can create for attendees to help build communities," said Dickerson. "We do that by showcasing the world's most visionary companies in a tangible way with really compelling content and thought leadership. The marketplaces are just a great way to aggregate those companies around different themes and missions. And then, we're curating the right type of attendee base to come together in communities to connect with those groups of companies."

The CES event design model is an interplay of macro and micro programming. It brings together a broad, interdisciplinary range of organizations and it provides context for the individual attendee. That model has been evolving throughout the meetings and events industry for years, for an increasingly wider spectrum of events. Moving forward, the challenge is to bring more structure to define that design model for more event organizers.

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The idea that we can simply keep doing what we did, even three or four years ago, is just not plausible anymore.

— Bob Priest-Heck, CEO, Freeman

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A greater focus on the tenets of design thinking is helping develop and provide that structure.

But what is design thinking? The concept is not new. Design thinking was first popularized by the IDEO design school and consultancy at Stanford University in the early 1990s, which works with a wide variety of companies ranging from Apple to Lufthansa to help them improve their customer experience.

At its core, design thinking is not about design. It's about how designers think. Simplified, design thinking attempts to codify the creative process, beginning with the needs of the end user, to develop clear solutions to complex problems. Understanding that process can help non-designers create more user-friendly products, services, systems, and experiences.

According to Tim Brown, CEO of IDEO: “Design thinking is a human-centered approach to innovation that draws from the designer's toolkit to integrate the needs of people, the possibilities of technology, and the requirements for business success.”

The actual phrase “design thinking” might not always be employed by the many leading organizations driving the future of event design. However, they all embrace the same philosophies underpinning design thinking.

For example, the Freeman event management company, which produces CES, has fully integrated design thinking into how it works with event owners and organizers.

“Bruce Mau, our chief design officer at Freeman, built a customized design thinking cycle that's particularly adjusted for brand experiences,” said Mo Hussein, senior vice president of design at Freeman. “That's what we internally call the ‘Freeman Learning Cycle,’ which is fundamentally just another way of looking at design thinking.”

Bob Priest-Heck, CEO of Freeman, adds that the events industry is undergoing systemic shifts in how people gather. Therefore, both management companies and organizers need more advanced tools like design thinking frameworks to navigate the constant disruptions.

“The idea that we can simply keep doing what we did, even three or four years ago, is just not plausible anymore,” said Priest-Heck. “We have the incredible opportunity, and the obligation, to innovate. Design thinking is helping us prepare to lead the massive change ahead of our industry.”

IDEO: THE BIRTH OF DESIGN THINKING



Photo: IDEO Lufthansa simulator

IDEO was the first to develop a structural framework that attempts to define how designers think by dissecting the creative process into a series of steps. That framework merely provides a starting point for discussion, inspiration, and collaboration among teams in any organization. It's not meant to be a definitive rule book for how to create something.

According to David Kelley, the founder of IDEO: "Design thinking is not a linear path. It's a big mass of looping back to different places in the process." From another perspective, the Interactive Design Foundation explains it as: "The stages of design thinking often occur in parallel and see repeated use on an iterative basis. Consequently, designers should consider these not a 'recipe,' but different modes that contribute to a project."

The IDEO design thinking process involves five stages: Empathize, Define, Ideate, Prototype, and Test. Following is a brief description of each stage:

- 1. Empathize:** Gain an understanding of the goals you're trying to achieve and the inherent problems you're trying to solve through some form of user research and observation. Empathy is crucial because it allows teams to set aside their own assumptions about the world in order to gain insight into users and their needs.
- 2. Define:** Synthesize the information gathered during the Empathize stage to define the core needs and challenges requiring new solutions.
- 3. Ideate:** This is the "think outside the box" phase relying on insight gathered from the first two stages. It's best accomplished in a collaborative environment with interdisciplinary teams to explore alternative ways of seeing problems and developing solutions.
- 4. Prototype:** Produce scaled-down versions of new ideas that can be quickly and easily iterated upon. "Fast prototyping" and "lean agility" are two common buzzwords today replacing the "think outside the box" phrase.
- 5. Test:** Solicit feedback about the prototypes to gain more nuanced understanding of end users' reactions. The feedback forms the basis for new iterations of what's being designed with a better framing of the challenges involved. Also, craft a human story to inspire others toward action.

In a meetings and events context, Solaris says that a lot of planners are still learning the different facets of modern event design, which also employ IDEO's framework around design thinking. According to Event Manager Blog's surveys, only about 20 percent of professional full-time event planners are using event design and management software. That makes it difficult to follow through on the Empathy and Test steps, particularly, because of the lack of attendee behavior data.

"That means about 80 percent of planners are still using spreadsheets to design their meetings," Solaris said. "So how can we unify the process for learning and experience development, and educate planners about centralized data and centralized everything else, if so many of them are still using spreadsheets?"

For Solaris, there are a few other major gaps in how the meetings and events industry approaches event design today, which a greater understanding of design thinking could fill.

"The promise of exposure for sponsors, who are under extreme pressure to show ROI, for example, are often faced with a lack of accountability from event planners," he explained.

"Also, how do we create a strong narrative for our events that explains why we're making the decisions we're making? And how do we choose speakers to deliver that message? These are longstanding issues that not many people in our industry care about."

vehicle, which didn't require any attention from you at all to get to your destination, how would you want to spend your time in the vehicle?"

Members in the SXSW audience were asked to collaborate with each other to come up with compelling ideas that could take advantage of the Wi-Fi connectivity in driverless vehicles. The answers were as varied as the group of people providing the ideas, ranging in themes from destination discovery to personal development to remote workspaces.

Now, imagine that same workshop in an official corporate scenario. IBM and Ford could collate user data and ideas to identify preferences among all different types of customer demographics and psychographics. And with that data, the companies could then prototype and re-prototype products and services designed for different passenger segments.

That process, as structured in the IBM Enterprise Design Thinking framework, involves three design Principles, the 3-step "Loop" action model, and three "Keys" for project management.

The Principles are:

- 1. A focus on user outcomes:** Drive business by helping users achieve their goals
- 2. Restless reinvention:** Stay essential by treating everything as a prototype
- 3. Diverse empowered teams:** Move faster by empowering diverse teams to act

The Loop involves:

- 1. Observe:** Immerse yourself in the real world
- 2. Reflect:** Come together and look within
- 3. Make:** Give concrete form to abstract ideas

The three Keys are:

- 1. Hills:** Align teams around meaningful user outcomes
- 2. Playbacks:** Stay aligned by regularly exchanging feedback
- 3. Sponsor Users:** Invite users into the work to stay true to real world needs

IBM has developed deep context and action steps for each of the above processes. When embraced together as a whole, the framework provides a cohesive road map for teams to continually develop new solutions and address challenges along the route.

"We had a large number of design-led sessions [at the annual IBM THINK 2018 Conference in Las Vegas]," wrote Arin Bhowmick, global vice president of design at IBM, recently on Medium. "Some sessions were focused on showcasing products and getting customer feedback, allowing customers to engage with and have a voice in the product. Other sessions offered mini IBM Design Thinking workshops, so that attendees could see how our design teams operate and how the IBM Design Thinking framework played a role in the products that they use."

Q&A: CHANDRA ALLISON, SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT OF SALES, THE VENETIAN AND THE PALAZZO LAS VEGAS



Photo: Event at McCarran Airport

The Venetian and The Palazzo Las Vegas bookend the Sands Expo convention center, connecting more than 7,000 suites, over 30 restaurants, and 2.25 million square feet of meeting and event space. The variety of business, social, and entertainment environments aligns well with the rise in demand for more creative event spaces catering to different group segments within the same conference.

Looking ahead, the new MSG Sphere will be located behind The Venetian and The Palazzo, and is scheduled to open on New Year's Eve in 2020. The new spherical event venue will have the largest and highest-resolution LED screen in the world, spanning 170,000 square feet of display area wrapping around the inside of the building.

SkiftX spoke at length with Chandra Allison, Senior Vice President of Sales at The Venetian and The Palazzo, about the “festivalization” of meetings trend, and how event organizers are designing programs to speak to a multitude of different audiences.

SkiftX: How has your engagement with meeting planners and conference organizers evolved over the last few years?

Chandra Allison: We're seeing more of our clients ask about how they can use our property almost like a small city, and as a platform for festivalization. We've talked to a variety of clients recently who are now prioritizing the diversity of event environments as one of their main focal points, especially with the announcement of the Sphere. They're asking about how they can use our property for their exhibition and product area, but they also want to integrate more and more of our restaurants, our retail, and other creative spaces around the property into their program.

It used to be that only the large trade shows were using restaurants spaces for brand activations. Now, we're getting more requests from customers with all sizes of groups, who are trying to create a festivalization atmosphere. So that's shifting how events are designed today, and we can easily accommodate this shift.

SkiftX: How is that shifting how planners approach event design?

Chandra Allison: Planners have to think about the end user experience and engagement while balancing the company's objectives. When you begin with the end user experience in the design of an event, a property like ours allows for a breadth of options. Blank canvas spaces such as our expo halls allow for community villages to be built, for things like think tanks and silent discos. Planners also conduct restaurant takeovers to partner with celebrity chefs for a culinary experience, and use a retail outlet as a way to bring a new product to life and sell to a particular person in real time.

SkiftX: What do you think is driving the increasing complexity in event design today?

Chandra Allison: We've found that a lot of companies need to engage their attendees differently than they have in the past. One particular customer said, "We need to think beyond the walls of the meeting space. We need to be interesting. We need to be innovative. We need to think about different ways that attendees can ingest information and share content in compelling and interesting ways. Just having it in a meeting room like we've always done is not working for us anymore."

Customers want to design events that lead with the attendee experience first, and then use the variety of spaces we offer to accomplish that. They still have a great need for meeting and/or exhibition space, but we see much more use of our unique spaces, restaurants, or shops to provide smaller group think tanks or networking opportunities with like-minded communities.

SkiftX: At some point, the complexity of events today and the demand for innovation requires some kind of structured design thinking. Is that a challenge for some organizations to add more complexity, but at the same time, remain true to the core purpose of the event?

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We’re seeing a lot more of our customers asking about how they can use our hotel almost like a small city, and as a platform for festivalization.
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Chandra Allison: Companies have to think about their core purpose and what they need to achieve, but how they go about that has evolved to accommodate various communities that exist within a single event. Each community has different behaviors, and the event always needs to feel as though it is beneficial for the attendees themselves. I don’t think companies can abandon their core purpose, but if they think of the communities they need to reach and the kind of engagement they seek, it should all align. It adds more complexity, but the outcome should be greater. We see tremendous growth from customers that use this approach.

SkiftX: Do smaller groups also want to break up events and segment experiences?

Chandra Allison: Yes, definitely. I don’t think event design has a size restriction, but with smaller events you may not have the variety of different communities. Attendee engagement is personal, and in order to create efficiencies, you have to know your audience and then think about how you can utilize event options like ours to keep them engaged.

SkiftX: Are more event organizers asking for help when it comes to creating more effective and creative sponsor activations?

Chandra Allison: Yes. Customers want to be able to bring their brand to life in interesting ways and we are helping them do that with investments in our digital package throughout our meeting spaces at The Congress Center and Expo. We are promoting use of the non-traditional spaces on property, new cocktail experiences, and new restaurant concepts for group activations and buyouts.

SkiftX: How is your company’s internal culture evolving to always embrace innovation?

Chandra Allison: We’re fortunate because we host so many different types of events at our property. That helps us stay on top of what trends are happening, and continually be ahead of the curve. We also share how the dynamic of our customer base is evolving with everyone in our entire organization, so we’ve always got this repository of information on interesting things coming down the pipeline. Additionally, our team participates in a number of events and various associations across the globe. It’s the collaboration between our team and our customers that creates innovation.

FREEMAN: WICKED TEAMS FOR WICKED PROBLEMS



Photo: Sands Expo Convention Center

In 1973, Horst W. J. Rittel, professor of the design science at University of California, Berkeley, wrote a paper called, “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning.” Part of the thesis labeled complex social challenges as “wicked problems” because such challenges often can’t be easily defined, and solutions can’t always be easily agreed upon.

The wicked problem theme gave rise to the birth of design thinking. During the same time when IDEO popularized design thinking for the masses in the early 1990s, Carnegie Mellon and Case Western University Professor Richard Buchanan published the paper, “Wicked Problems in Design Thinking.” He suggested design thinking was the “new liberal art of technological culture,” because it provided a structured approach to explore, define, and provide solutions to complicated challenges, exacerbated further by the rise of technology.

Buchanan wrote: “Without integrative disciplines of understanding, communication, and action, there is little hope of sensibly extending knowledge beyond the library or laboratory for the purpose of enriching human life.” One could add “meeting space” to that sentence.

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It's all built by teams, so you really need people who are experts at teams.

— Bruce Mau, co-founder, Massive Change Network

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Enter Bruce Mau, co-founder of the Massive Change Network, which “promotes the transformative power of design thinking to generate new ideas and help institutions and businesses innovate.”

Mau joined the Freeman event management company as chief design officer in 2015 to bring design thinking to the meetings and events industry. In 2016, he created the Freeman Design Leadership Council consisting of 10 visionary people outside the events industry, ranging from military leaders to Disney creative directors. His goal was to approach event design with a much broader scope of interdisciplinary perspectives than had ever been attempted before.

“The principle I apply is really to bring wicked teams to wicked problems,” said Mau. “With all the new problems today, you have to think about what’s needed to synthesize all of the content input to produce a new kind of synthetic media output. It’s not a singular practice anymore. It’s all built by teams, so you really need people who are experts at teams.”

Like IDEO and IBM, Freeman has developed a proprietary design thinking framework to inform how it collaborates with clients. The Freeman Learning Circle event design process is a continual feedback loop structured along the following four phases:

- 1. Opportunity:** Gather information and define your project vision. Identify the true opportunity and make sure the right voices are in the room.
- 2. Formulate:** Leverage multiple perspectives to ideate, create, iterate, and evaluate the options. Don’t be afraid to throw half the work away to uncover the big idea.
- 3. Build:** Now build the plan, marshal the resources, align the team, leverage partners, and orchestrate the dance. Continue to look for opportunities to streamline the processes.
- 4. Debrief:** It’s not over yet. Pull the team back together and share project outcomes, lessons learned. Gather the data, run the analysis, and build an even better plan for next time.

“Design thinking is an essential part of how Freeman is reinventing the attendee experience, from the ground up, to keep events at the forefront of marketing in the face of a rapid change,” said Bob Priest-Heck, CEO of Freeman. “Using design thinking when creating brand experiences lets us take advantage of the disruptions and changes in audience behaviors and turn them into opportunities to create deeper and more meaningful connections.”

Q&A: MO HUSSEINI, SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT, DESIGN, FREEMAN

As one of the largest event management companies in the world, Freeman works with high-profile clients such as Google, McDonald's, and the Consumer Technology Association.

The Freeman Learning Circle, as explained in the previous section, helps account leaders, strategists, creatives, and production people at Freeman stay focused on their clients' missions, and how those missions evolve year after year. SkiftX spoke with Mo Hussein, senior vice president, design at Freeman, to explore how his teams integrate design thinking into their daily operations.

SkiftX: How do you define design thinking at Freeman?

Mo Hussein: For Freeman specifically, we think of design thinking as a powerful platform that we've adopted to make our work and our business better. The goals and key performance indicators for success are always very different client to client. Therefore, it's critical for us to engage in a process of understanding those goals so that our work is targeted to them. That fundamentally for us is the role of design thinking. It's a systematic approach to give us check-in points for making sure that we understand what it is the client is trying to do every step of the way. The event industry is a very unique space in the sense that we have a lot of clients that we work with year after year after year, which puts us on an iterated cycle. Design thinking, especially as we've adopted it internally, helps us ensure that we're looking at each of those opportunities in the right way.

SkiftX: Sometimes people think of design thinking as more of a niche theory. Why should more event organizers explore what it is and what it does?

Mo Hussein: We live in an attention economy, and human attention is an incredibly scarce commodity and resource. I certainly feel that every time I check my email. There's this constant competition for everybody's attention in the world that we live in. Design thinking helps us understand our clients and focus on their end user — the person that they're trying to influence. The rigor and discipline that we apply around that is really about trying to understand the best, simplest, and most elegant way to capture an audience's attention. For me, design thinking helps us really articulate ideas to distill them down to a pure clarity of purpose. It's about understanding what motivates people and moves them from point A to B.



SkiftX: How is the Freeman Learning Cycle innovative in terms of facilitating collaboration among your teams across the four phases: Opportunity, Formulate, Build, and Debrief?

Mo Hussein: The first phase tends to be a fair amount of work between our account leaders and our strategists. In the second phase, there's a fair amount of work between our strategists and our creatives, and the third phase includes a fair amount of work between our creatives and our production people. And then in the final phase, everything comes together with the strategists leading the process to help us analyze the results and find new insights and ways to iterate the process towards perfect, so to speak, moving forward.

SkiftX: We've heard event organizers question the value of design thinking because they say they've always designed events around the needs of attendees. How would you address that?

Mo Hussein: Designers and creative people tend to be a little underwhelmed by the concept of design thinking, because for them, these processes are what any good designer goes through. But the reason that it's called design thinking is that's how designers think. So when you introduce this as a process to designers, they tend to say, "Yeah, I do this all the time. I'm not sure why this is special."

Whether you look at the Stanford or IBM version, or whoever's version, they're fundamentally similar. Step one is about empathy with the end user; step two is about coming up with a plan; step three is about executing on the plan, and step four is about iteration. We've adjusted it internally for the things that make more sense for our industry, but those four basics are the fundamentals of design thinking.

When you start introducing it to other disciplines within the company, it's a different story. A lot of my work over the past year has been working with our sales leadership to help them leverage design thinking to solve challenges and explore opportunities. And I don't mean opportunities from the sales standpoint. I mean opportunities in terms of organizational and workplace structures, or whatever other issues, and really taking a designer's mindset and applying it to different non-design problems.

SkiftX: What are some of the misperceptions revolving around design thinking?

Mo Hussein: Design thinking really for us is a framework. It's not the answer. It's a set of tools that our people can use to solve different problems. We actually call it our "Toolkit." Some people, though, view it as a checklist. They go, "Okay, I've got 17 tools, number one through 17. I'm going to start at one and make it down to 17, and then I've solved the problem." The reality is somewhat like a real toolkit that has a hammer and screwdriver and whatever else. If you were going to fix a table leg, you wouldn't sit down and pull out your tools and try to use all of them in a specific order. You would sit there and look at the problem and go, "Okay, well, I need a socket wrench to tighten the leg. I'm probably okay leaving the hammer inside the toolkit."

CASE STUDY: COMMUNITY BUILDING AT CES



Photo: CES C Space

The massive CES conference every January in Las Vegas is a showcase for the world's leading technology companies reshaping every industry sector. The event is hosted in three primary venues across the city, including the Las Vegas Convention Center, ARIA Resort Las Vegas, and the Sands Expo convention center at The Venetian and The Palazzo Las Vegas, along with a host of indoor and outdoor satellite locations.

In 2018, CES was segmented into 27 "Marketplaces" focusing on specific industries ranging from autonomous vehicles to baby tech. There was also the C Space exhibitor and stage area dedicated for attendees in the marketing and creative sectors to explore technologies and trends driving the future of media, advertising, and mass communications. This year, the roster of companies participating included Facebook, IBM, Google, and Amazon, along with celebrities ranging from Neil Patrick Harris to Kerry Washington.

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Seeing the bigger picture, I think, is what's driving the success of CES today because we're engaging attendees on a much broader level.

— Kara Dickerson, vice president, strategic partnerships and conferences, CTA

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The Consumer Technology Association (CTA), which produces CES, designed the conference that way to build communities of attendees with aligned industry interests. It also helps people navigate their way through the thousands of sessions and activations taking place across the city. According to Kara Dickerson, vice president, strategic partnerships and conferences at CTA, a lot of resources are invested to empathize with attendee motivations.

“When we launched C Space, talked to many companies and executives that were involved in the advertising and marketing space, because we recognized that coming to CES might actually be a pretty intimidating experience for people in that community,” said Dickerson. “They wanted to come together and network with each other at CES, but navigating the main show floor was perhaps not the right fit for this particular group. So we created the C Space Storytellers stage and exhibit area at ARIA that was a bit removed from the main show floor.”

Another example of community building, Turner Network was the main sponsor hosting the inaugural CES Sports Zone Marketplace in 2018 at the Sands Expo convention center. Programming revolved around digital media trends and Turner's push into esports, along with remote broadcasts of Inside the NBA and appearances by Shaquille O'Neal.

“Turner brings a lot of their executives and star talent, including Shaq and other celebrities walking the show floor and interacting with exhibitors,” said Dickerson. “It was a really fun and successful partnership for both CES and for Turner, and I think we gave them a lot of brand exposure to audiences outside of the sports world, and into the technology space. It's all about customizing content to a specific community within the larger show.”

The big shift at CES over the last decade has been the evolution from showcasing gadgets to providing a glimpse into the future about how people will connect as communities. It's a conversation extending beyond technology to one about collaboration and innovation, where technology is critical as a tool to bring people together to help solve the world's challenges. Dickerson says it about telling a bigger story to make a bigger impact.

“We had a panel discussion about 5G and the implications of that, and I think a lot of other shows are talking about it in the sense of infrastructure and technical specs,” she explained. “But we want to help people understand the types of new innovation we can expect for these faster networks, such as on our health and our ability to communicate and work in different ways. Seeing the bigger picture, I think, is what's driving the success of CES today because we're engaging attendees on a much broader level.”

C2 & IMEX: THE FESTIVALIZATION OF MEETINGS



Photo: C2 SkyLab

C2 Montreal and C2 Melbourne are considered two of the world's most creative conferences based on a wild and inventive variety of unique event experiences, such as SkyLab. Delegates sit in a circle of circus-like trapeze chairs that are hoisted up into the ceiling for a one-of-a-kind networking experience that tends to make people open up more and let their guard down. SkyLab has also been very, very good for C2 in terms of social media sharing and global media exposure.

C2 International was co-founded by Cirque du Soleil and the Sid Lee marketing agency, both based in Montreal. "C2" represents the combination of "creativity and commerce," and it was a primary inspiration for Skift's 2017 Megatrend: "The Festivalization of Meetings." The megatrend highlighted the growing number of conferences worldwide that are converging different industry sectors and experiential exhibits to create a festival-like atmosphere.

According to the overview of the Skift Megatrend: “The formula behind these events is generally the same: Pull together the most inspiring minds in business, tech, media, science, education, art, and culture inside a cross-section of colorful venues and collaborative spaces. Then hit ‘blend’ with integrated online and offline catalysts, mixed reality experiences, startup pitch competitions, live music performances and art exhibits, and local offsite experiences to create spontaneous collisions between participants in unprecedented ways.”

“We always start with the question, ‘What do we want our participants to feel?’” said Martin Enault, CEO of C2 International, Asia Pacific. “And then we bring people from different industries together to create brainstorming groups, such as scholars together with Cirque performers, and musicians with people from creative agencies. We’re always trying to come up with ideas to create something that will challenge us like never before.”

In 2018, the IMEX Group partnered with C2 to create a new level of experiential networking environments at IMEX Frankfurt and IMEX America in Las Vegas. Those are the world’s largest trade shows for the meetings industry, bringing buyers and suppliers together for individual meetings. However, the IMEX Group wanted to diversify opportunities for face-to-face networking opportunities beyond the buyer-supplier appointments.

At IMEX Frankfurt in May 2018, for the first time in the show’s history, the organizers created an IMEX Live Zone in a separate hall with a C2 Skylab in the center. Other innovative experiences, such as sensory-deprivation dark rooms and participatory DJ lessons, were surrounded by all of the Living Lab breakout spaces that had previously rimmed the perimeter of the trade show floor.

“Everyone in our industry has been talking about personalization, festivalization, and experiential events in general, and I think that’s really gone from being a talking point to being something that events are really trying to achieve now,” said Carina Bauer, CEO of the IMEX Group. “That said, we still have to achieve the business of the show. If the buyers and suppliers are not achieving that business on the show floor, then we haven’t really created a successful show no matter how funky it is. We have to always have that balance in mind, but I think we’ve proven it’s possible to deliver that core value and create a great experience at the same time.”

Months before each event, the IMEX team puts together various design workshops to explore new ideas, like the Live Zone this year, that embrace the principles of design thinking to prototype new user experiences.

“Design thinking is how tech companies tend to develop new ideas, where they do design sprints, for example” said Bauer. “You take a problem, put together a little mini-design workshop to work through that problem, and then you go away to test solutions, try something different, and come back to share results. The challenge is that’s a really different way of working in a traditional business. It’s not the same as going into a meeting with a 10-point agenda, and one person directs everything. But once you embed it in your work culture, then people start seeing the value.”

MPI ADOPTS THE EVENT CANVAS

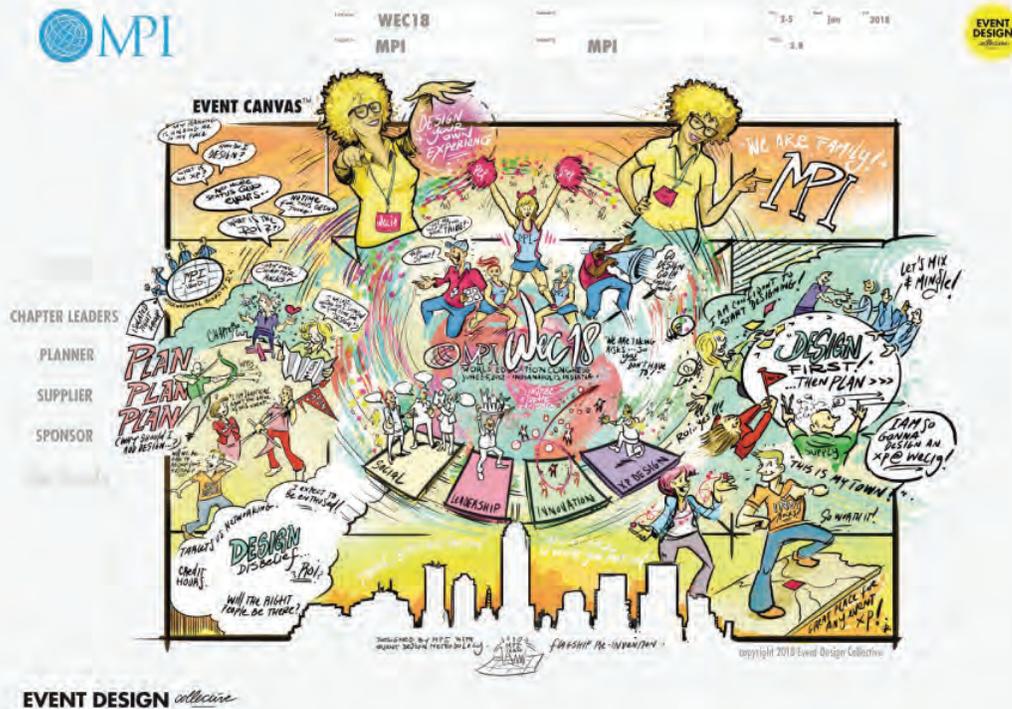


Photo: Event Design Collective

Meeting Professionals International (MPI) revamped its annual World Education Congress (WEC) in Indianapolis in June 2018, based on the Event Canvas framework developed by Ruud Janssen and Roel Frisson, co-founders of the Event Design Collective. The model is considered one of the most sophisticated platforms and comprehensive strategies for designing events today, which any event organizer can adopt. Janssen and Frisson also culled everything down into a one page schematic for teams to use as a roadmap for the overall process.

The Event Canvas is structured to evaluate and define how various stakeholders are transformed during an event. Planners are first asked to identify the behavior and perceptions of key stakeholders leading up to the event in order to establish a benchmark, and then record what those stakeholders are attempting to achieve during the event. To accomplish that, event planners use an “Empathy Map” in the Event Canvas to explore all of the demands that a stakeholder might have. That process is required to frame the design problems associated with any given event to develop the event design narrative.

Janssen explains that planners today should focus on three things when beginning the design process, as outlined in the Event Canvas. They are aligned with the other design thinking frameworks profiled in this report:

1. Consciously think about event design from the user perspective
2. Harness the essence of an event's narrative and articulate that story in 60 seconds
3. Equip people and teams with the ability to systematically crack the complexity of an event's challenges

"We developed a methodology for any team to apply design thinking to event design," said Jannssen. "What we're doing is creating a common language around designing events, because we think that's missing, and we're trying to make it visual with the Event Canvas."

For MPI, the best way to understand their stakeholders' wishes was to involve prospective attendees in the planning of WEC this year. The Dallas-based association recently underwent a design thinking assessment using the Event Canvas that sought the "unique perspectives and ideas" of board members, chapter leaders, and others, and the experience "was very valuable," said Matthew Marcial, vice president of education & events at MPI. "It solidified our data and confirmed what we thought people wanted, such as creating more customized experiences due to shortened attention spans."

This year at WEC 2018, instead of standard classroom-style conference design, educational experiences were presented in an open layout using four "WEC Villages" named: Experiential Design, Innovation, Leadership, and Social. "Suppliers wanted more networking and the open concept allows that," said Marcial. "All the food and beverage will be there," keeping attendees contained, and "we expect there to be more energy and engagement in the area than there would be over three different floors of the convention center."

The association also altered its educational offerings to provide 30, 60 and 90-minute sessions for attendees to choose from, providing more options to network and engage. MPI also rolled its Chapter Business Summit – a separate annual training for chapter leaders – into WEC, giving participants the chance to maximize their time and educational input.

Lastly, the organization has revised its general session drastically. It's done away with long 90-minute presentations preceded by lengthy discussions of association business, and shifted to 45-minute "pep rallies" that will provide "inspiration, ideation, and activation" twice daily.

"Last year in Las Vegas, the general session took place in the evening, right before our big party, and it was late for people from the East Coast," Marcial shared. "Our data showed that attendees were not as interested in long, traditional general sessions as they were in previous years, and the pep rallies will provide a high-energy environment to bring all attendees together at the start and end of each day. We are also keeping keynote speakers in 18-minute, TED Talk-style presentation formats, and we're experimenting with various communication channels, such as video for executive communications, instead of a longer on-stage speeches."

The reinvention of WEC has been "empowering," according to Marcial. "Design thinking allowed the MPI team to take down our walls and throw out notions of, 'We've always done it this way,' and brainstorm more openly. We were truly starting with a blank sheet. We all felt it was time to truly re-design the event, and through experimentation, show what's possible."

DESIGN THINKING TO ENGAGE GEN Z



Photo: Sands Expo Convention Center

The science of design thinking will become even more important for meeting and event planners to attract and keep the attention of Generation Z attendees. Born beginning around the late 1990s, and now entering young adulthood, Gen Z is comprised of digital natives who don't want or need information they can find on their own. Instead, they're looking for experiences, and ideally, those moments will be unique, genuine, and shareable. If an event isn't worthy of Instagram, they reason, it's not worth their time.

"If it's not interactive, they're not going to stay at the meeting," said Cindy Lo, president of Red Velvet Events in Austin. "They need to be entertained and they're looking for Instagrammable moments. At the same time, Gen Z can sniff out fake so fast."



Photo: Girlboss Rally

Other event organizers agree that authentic versus staged experiences are vital for that age group. “Often sick of the classroom and being spoken to, Gen Z would rather learn about a brand through an immersive experience than reading or hearing a speaker,” said Cole Griswold, vice president of BMF Media, an experiential marketing agency in New York City. “These events and interactive moments trigger emotions and memories better than any packet or slideshow could.”

When BMF created Hearst’s 2017 Digital NewFronts — an event where media firms showcase online programming to advertisers — the agency created sets where guests could view 15-second food videos from Hearst’s Delish brand. After each one, visitors were prompted to open drawers below the screens where the demonstrated items were served.

“It was the most photographed and Instagrammed moment of the evening, the most crowded area, and it’s what everyone remembers,” explained Griswold. “It was the most colorful, interactive and engaging area, which is why people loved it.”

Nicky Balestrieri is co-founder of The Gathery, a Brooklyn-based brand marketing agency that produces Girlboss Rally conferences geared toward young women. He emphasizes that Gen Z gravitates toward genuine connection above all else. “As things become more digital, we seek human connection more,” he explained. “Experiences provide moments of beauty and joy where people can learn something or meet someone or be challenged. That’s real.”

Creating the experiential element also can be low-tech. For last year’s Girlboss Rally in New York, The Gathery arranged seating in a spot for startup companies to evoke the feeling of a cafe, and had beanbag seating in a general area. “Levels of intimacy with the content can create strong bonds with an audience,” stated Balestrieri. “The more attendees feel at home, the more apt they are to interact and create a more rewarding experience for all.”

“

Levels of intimacy with the content can create strong bonds with an audience.

— Nicky Balestrieri, co-founder, The Gathery

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The stages of design thinking lend themselves well to the creation of authentic event experiences, by first walking in the shoes of the individual attendee, declares Patrick Crosson, an event producer at agencyEA, which is a brand experience agency in New York City.

“All of the stages are necessary. Design thinking may not be at the forefront of everyone’s thinking but it needs to get there,” he said. “Data to track attendee movement has become more available to planners through technologies such as RFID. That’s how we can ideate solutions to questions like, ‘How do we get attendees to do this instead of that?’ Also, the data we’re capturing, whether through attendee mapping, surveys or something else, helps to empathize with attendees. That’s how we understand what they want.”

Phelps Hope, senior vice president of Meetings & Expositions at Kellen, an association management firm in Atlanta, worked with Gen Z girls to re-tool the Girl Scouts of the USA triennial convention in 2017. The tradeshow floor included a pool where girls could try scuba diving under close supervision. The installation was created to support risk taking and discourage girls from sitting on the sidelines. Also, NASA brought in a gyroscope simulator for attendees to experience astronaut training.

“We learned that career advice presented by a 45-year-old woman wasn’t relatable to teenagers, so we had speakers in their late teens, 20s, and early 30s,” said Hope. “And the content doesn’t even have to be relevant to the event. Look outside your industry, such as science, architecture or business, and see what others are interested in.”

Events with a lot of different choices also lure Gen Z, according to Sarah Shewey, CEO and founder of Happily, a national network of freelance event producers based in San Francisco.

“There are way more vegan and vegetarian options at events for this audience, because Gen Z grew up thinking about climate change and sustainability, so its members are eating much more cleanly,” she said. “Five years ago, a luxury event equaled steak. Now, it’s a luxurious event if there’s a great vegetarian appetizer.”

Overall, says Shewey, event design can be an enticement or a distraction for the next generation of attendees. “Gen Z likes intimate events, like small concerts in people’s homes, rather than large festivals,” Shewey stated. “They’re always online so they’re looking for new ways to engage and make friends, versus just following what everyone is doing on social media. They feel smaller, more intimate environments deliver a more chill space to meet.”

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