

Beat: Travel

MEETINGS And EVENTS At MARRIOTT INTERNATIONAL S FIRST MAJOR HYBRID EVENT

INDUSTRY LEADERS UNPACK FUTURE OF TRAVEL

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USPA NEWS - With grounds for optimism over travel rebound, Marriott International together with industry leaders discussed future trends at its first hybrid event in Asia Pacific – "Be There with Marriott International – The Path Forward for Travel and Events". The event, attended in early September by more than 1,100 in-person and virtual travel industry professionals across Asia Pacific, featured a lively panel discussion on the emerging trends and demands in meetings and events, changing business travel policies, luxury travel, and consumer behavior in a post-pandemic era. These key trends emerged:

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- Customer experience is still key

Cleanliness remains the top priority for many consumers, and expectations around safety and hygiene have increased dramatically as part of the customer experience. Social distancing, facemasks and hand sanitizers are expected essentials. Marriott International offers event organizers tips on setting up events in the new normal through the company's 'Connect with Confidence' commitment.

Bart Buring, Chief Sales & Marketing Officer, Marriott International Asia Pacific, says, "As we continuously elevate our guest experiences, we understand how cleanliness is still top of mind for many. We are committed to keeping our guests safe through enhanced cleaning regimen changes that leverages technology. I am optimistic about the bright spots of travel recovery we are seeing, and I look forward to international borders reopening."

- In-person human interaction more powerful than ever

There has been a rapid adoption of technology and digitalization across the MICE industry. Although virtual events were the norm at the peak of the pandemic, 47% of respondents surveyed post-event said that more than half of their events next year will be offline. Hybrid events, which combine live interactions and the convenience of going digital, are expected to become the de facto meeting format.

Planning events in the 'new normal' has taught Industry leaders to keep testing, thinking, assessing and learning, so they can be nimble and change what is not working. MICE industry leaders must recognize the importance and power of face-to-face meetings complemented by hybrid technology in bringing out the human experience and connection.

Ramesh Daryanani, Vice President, Global Sales, Marriott International Asia Pacific says, "We need to strike a balance between technology, reach and engagement. When hosting hybrid events, the platform is not the most important—instead, the desired outcome and the value that human connection brings is. Marriott's hybrid solutions will continue to evolve, but there is no doubt that nothing replaces the power of face-to-face meetings."

As borders reopen, customers will seek events that are more intimate; and the networking that comes with these events will also be prioritized given many lost connections over the pandemic.

- Wellness is the new luxury

The pandemic gave travelers an opportunity to think about rebooting travel for the better. Wellness travel, associated with the pursuit

of enhancing personal well-being, is driving demand for weekend anti-stress getaways, hidden all-inclusive resort stays, spiritual retreats and off-the-beaten-track emerging destinations.

According to a survey conducted by Marriott International, 3 in 4 travelers surveyed indicated the desire to travel to relieve stress. There is a higher demand for slow travel, where people are slowing down and visiting just one place, taking their time to get familiar with the destination and its surroundings and culture, rather than a fleeting visit. Industry leaders should adapt to these rising trends and curate experiences that cater to changing market demands. Marriott Bonvoy's Westin and JW Marriott are two brands that feature programs that allow guests to maintain their wellness practices while on the road. The recently launched pilot of Good Travel with Marriott Bonvoy is another example of a program where guests have the opportunity to connect with local communities to create a lasting positive impact.

In partnership with technology partner, NowEvents, the hybrid event took place in Renaissance Hong Kong Harbour View Hotel, The Ritz-Carlton, Millenia Singapore and JW Marriott Gold Coast Resort & Spa. The in-person events saw the use of technology where panelists appeared to be in the same room even though in different locations. Moderated by Karen Bolinger, Strategic Business Consultant, PCMA Asia Pacific, the panelists included:

- Andy Winchester (HK) - APAC Travel Manager, Bloomberg;
- Anna Patterson (SG) - Vice President & Managing Director, George P Johnson Singapore;
- Bart Buring (HK) - Chief Sales & Marketing Officer, Marriott International;
- Charlotte Harris (HK) - Managing Director, Charlotte Travel Hong Kong;
- Kenji Soh (SG) - Executive Director, Head of Asia Pacific Travel, Goldman Sachs;
- Oscar Cerezales (SG), Chief Strategy Officer, MCI Group

Source: Marriott International Inc.

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