

How Millennials Are Changing Meetings

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Planners Redesign Experiences and Content Delivery to Meet New Expectations

By Mark Rowh



The differences among generations are common points of discussion. Whether it's seniors confused by the priorities of grandchildren or supervisors baffled by the habits of their younger employees, there always seems to be some degree of generational divide.

In the current meeting space, this may be most apparent with the impact of millennials. As the influence of this group grows, planners are finding it necessary to meet new expectations.

After all, millennials now make up a sizable portion of the attendees at virtually any meeting. And while there is always danger in oversimplifying the characteristics of any one group, most millennials do share some traits that are causing planners to change old ways of doing things.

Of course this can be a two-way street. While planners may feel compelled to cater to the demands of younger attendees, the result can be meetings that are more rewarding for everyone.

“Millennials have a lot to offer and perspective is refreshing,” says Bob Schuster, national director of conferences and events for CMP Meeting Services in Ponte Vedra, Florida.

At the same time, combining insights from this group with the experience of others, such as baby boomers, can be especially productive.

“When millennials work with boomers, my experience is that it is a grand slam based upon cross pollination,” Schuster points out.

Perhaps nowhere is the influence of millennials being seen more than in the delivery of content and overall communication.

“They were brought up in the age of digital media, and they want content in more innovative ways,” says Nicole Marsh, CMP, DMCP, a partner with Imprint Group, a destination and events management firm with locations in Colorado and Florida. “Video is incredibly important in terms of how they want to digest information.” She notes that invitations and follow-up communication, not to mention program content, are best received and more often viewed in video formats.

“Programs became more educational and career-driven, as the bulk of the millennial generation is career-focused and moves from jobs with more frequency than the generation before them,” Marsh says.

She recalls a recent meeting where a client switched from classroom seating to a U-shape with lounge furniture so that all attendees could see each other and make the meeting more participatory.

Another client changed the goals and purposes of events to be more millennial-focused to increase attendance and engagement by that audience.

Sharable Moments

“We have found that they are looking for more experiential events rather than the same old seated dinners,” Marsh says. “Station-style F&B, destination-specific food and beverage that is interactive and local or has a story behind it are even more well received.” This means that event design should incorporate ways to include unique and “sharable” moments and opportunities for participants to talk about or share online.

“Many planners ask us for hot ideas on how they can continue to engage their millennial attendees,” says Sira Butler, director of 204 Events, a Los Angeles provider of meeting and event rentals. “Like most people, millennials don’t want to sit through long, boring meetings. They want to experience something new and that’s share-worthy on social media.” She has noticed that millennials respond favorably to the addition of engaging items to their meetings and events, whether that is virtual reality, a creative display or seating setup, or simply better lighting and sound systems.

Typically, millennials want to attend meetings and events that provide a share-worthy “wow” factor, Butler says. In support of that goal, her company recently rented sofa seating for 150 guests of Damminger Productions for a special Netflix corporate event. There they hosted a 10-hour binge-watching marathon of “Stranger Things” leading up to the new season’s premiere.

“This is an example of the company going above and beyond the normal theater screening to retain the attendance and attention of their millennial attendees,” Butler notes.

The “look” of an event is becoming an increasingly important factor, according to Butler.

“Because millennials are a part of the ‘visual age,’ meeting planners should definitely consider incorporating experiences that are cool enough to share on social media,” she says. Such experiences could range from providing interactive photo booths to incorporating over-the-top branded displays or visually stunning décor into event design.

Some argue that while the influence of this group is growing, it’s not entirely new.

Meeting Disrupters

“Millennials are disrupters to the way meetings have been planned for the past 10 to 15 years,” says Chuck Moses, director of sales and marketing at the Kimpton Hotel Van Zandt in Austin, Texas. “The goal of a successful meeting is still the same, but how they plan for it and search the venue has completely changed.” This may include crafting an RFP from a smart device. Or instead of a three-page proposal, they may prefer three compelling bullet points to capture their attention within the first 30 seconds.

At the Kimpton Hotel Van Zandt, quirky on-property meeting and boardroom options are offered with millennials in mind. Each of its 11 dedicated meeting spaces is integrated with state-of-the-art technology

and dynamic audio-visual, including top-level Wi-Fi and internet speeds. Guests can add musical elements to any meeting with features including music-themed games and dedicated playlists, curated by a director of music, that can be customized for every occasion.

Catering to millennial preferences and expectations has become the standard, according to Philip Gamon, sales manager for the Hilton Atlanta.

“Millennials have changed the way business is thought of completely,” he says. “If you would have told someone 50 years ago that you can order groceries from a cellphone and have them delivered in an hour, they would have thought you were crazy. Millennials have created an unprecedented demand for convenience and saving time, and the same principal can be applied for corporate meetings.”

Gamon relates recent changes for a group that includes a substantial number of millennials.

“While they continue to book the same amount of rooms year over year, they began hosting general sessions at the Fox Theatre, an offsite historic institution in Atlanta, because they wanted to create an experiential, culturally significant meeting for attendees,” he notes. He says combining a traditional hotel setting with nontraditional venues makes planning meetings more dynamic and flexible.

Similarly, booking alternatives to the big box hotels may be seen favorably.

“They want a ridiculously unique experience for their attendees and business travelers where the standard is non-standard,” Moses says. “From the lobby to the meeting space and the guest room, all of it should have its own unique personality.”

The same goes for local attractions, according to Ally Brown, manager of specialty accounts at Naples Grande Beach Resort in Naples, Florida. “Local nightlife and restaurant options are a big draw,” she says. “Planners should consider independent or boutique hotels with nearby local attractions when picking a meeting location.”

Brown says the best way to spark a millennial’s interest in any conference is to ensure that they will get an experience that they’ve never had before.

“Instead of promoting a meeting space with a traditional classroom setting, capture their interest with unique outdoor or modern in-suite meeting space options,” she says. One-of-a-kind offerings are the ideal, with efforts to customize programs and presenting them as an exceptional, unparalleled experience most likely to appeal to this audience.

A recent group Brown worked with wanted a Las Vegas theme for their main gala event. Rather than suggest a layout in a typical ballroom setting, she and her staff turned the entire lobby of their hotel into a Las Vegas-style casino, complete with slot machines, a craps table and poker. And when another group wanted to execute a cruise ship theme, plans included turning a ballroom into a 3-D cruise ship, complete with projections, sounds and visual stimulation to give the overall effect of moving on the sea.

Focus on Technology

As important as any consideration is attention to technology.

“Millennials revolve around technology and social media,” Brown says. “They enjoy interacting in a group and value personal connections, typically preferring less formal networking opportunities.” She suggests including plenty of casual happy hour events that allow them to document their experience with photos and share them on social media.

She also advises using email marketing to attendees and social media advertising along with direct mailing.

“Millennials are always attached to their devices so it’s best to make sure that the conference website and registration is mobile friendly,” she says. “And speakers should fully engage with the audience versus simply presenting a topic.”

She tells of a recent conference where as the presenter spoke and went through slides, questions were posed to the audience who then responded using an app on their phone. The results were displayed instantaneously on the screen for all to see.

“This was by far the most engaging presentation that I have seen or been a part of in a while,” Brown says.

Technology planning also should include Wi-Fi accessibility.

“It’s a given that meeting attendees expect to quickly and easily connect to Wi-Fi,” says Lisé Puckorius, CEO at the OLC Education and Conference Center in Rosemont, Illinois. “Millennials have grown up with connectivity so a venue that doesn’t have it built in or has dead zones creates a negative perception.” Planning also should include checking connectivity strength outside the venue.

“Millennials don’t want to use up their data plan if they simply step outside for a breath of fresh air on a break,” she adds.

Even something as simple as power supplies can make a difference.

“No one, including millennials, wants to fight over outlets to power up,” Puckorius says. “Ask your venue how many and where power outlets are located so attendees have multiple options to keep their devices charged.”

Networking and Noshing

Factors from networking opportunities to food also merit careful thought.

“Millennials are all about networking,” Brown says. “Meeting new people definitely piques their interest.” To this end, unique breakout locations and small distinctive meeting areas should be considered as well as how food service is delivered.

“Millennials are accustomed to instant gratification at their fingertips,” she notes. “Believe it or not, this affects how they expect to be served at events as well.” She says planners may want to consider steering clear of passed hors d’ oeuvres and go for action stations so attendees can grab food as they please.

“Healthier food items and creative presentation of food and beverage is expected,” Puckorius says. “Cater to millennials’ diverse tastes, by offering vegan, gluten-free and allergy-free options that are clearly labeled.” She also notes it’s important not to forget to accommodate other dietary restrictions or preferences.

Meetings Redesigned

“Many meeting agendas prioritize delivery of messages and attendee learning,” says Brent Turner, S.V.P., solutions at Cramer, a Norwood, Massachusetts, agency whose services include meeting and event planning. “This means the resulting agenda ends up with attendees sitting passively in ballrooms for six-plus hours a day.” He advocates instead keeping in mind that millennials want to move, be self-directed and learn from peers.

“So we look at breaking up these traditional agendas,” Turner says. “We take a page from TED Talks and make presentations shorter. We repeat sessions multiple times so attendees can break and choose when they want to learn specific topics, and we create activities that drive peer-to-peer conversation.” The overall goal is to keep things moving while giving the attendees more ways to participate in the meeting experience.

Other measures might focus on changing the traditional scheduling of long sessions in a single ballroom with a single stage. For example, morning seating could be configured in traditional rows, with team discussions assigned in late morning with teams leaving the ballroom and finding space anywhere else in the venue. Then for post-lunch sessions, all seating could be removed so attendees can only stand at high-tops. Toward the end of the day, seating could be brought back and set up in fireside or round-table formats to drive peer-to-peer conversations.

“Just changing the variety of seating — while prioritizing more spaces for group and peer engagement — will embrace many of the expectations of millennial attendees,” Turner says.

Keeping participants active seems to be a key. “Millennials want to contribute and be an active part in their learning at meetings,” Puckorius says. “No more talking heads and listening to lectures for them.” She notes that since millennials crave interaction, it pays to design meeting formats to include plenty of opportunities for interaction among attendees and speakers. Likewise, options for content delivery should take emerging preferences into account.

“With dwindling attention spans, embrace and respect different learning preferences and styles,” she says. “Quick, bite-sized content keeps learning retention and interest high.” Also desirable: a mix of in-person speakers, interactive discussions or live videostreams.

In fact, anything that promotes convenience is likely to be a winner.

“With car service, food delivery and just about anything else available with a few swipes or clicks, millennials are used to convenience,” Puckorius says. “And meeting location matters. Find a venue that is easily accessible from a major airport or transportation hub to make their travel to your meeting easier.”

Discussing such matters in advance is always a good approach, according to Moses. “I think having a shoulder-to-shoulder approach with millennials works best,” he says. “Whether you are a planner or a venue, it’s better to have a fully authentic, non ‘salesy’ delivery come across with complete alignment.”

Gamon focuses on the advantages offered by distinctive offerings. He advises when planning a meeting to ask yourself, would you rather have an experience or would you rather have a meeting?

“Experiences integrated with traditional meetings make millennials feel invested in the company and create a bond through memorable experiences,” he says. “When you make an experience out of your meeting, people remember what they did.” □ **C&IT**

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