



# MEETINGS OUTLOOK™



*As the landscape remains strong, industry professionals explore the challenges and opportunities presented by controversial social issues and “greening” meetings.*

# OVERCOMING CHALLENGES, LEVERAGING OPPORTUNITIES

There may be a slight slowdown or shift coming as business and live attendance projections reveal some weaknesses, though it's still a healthy market favoring suppliers.



By Elaine Pofeldt

**M**olly C. Marsh, CMP, director of education and engagement design at AMR Management Services in Lexington, Ky., believes the impact of controversies over women's reproductive rights, gay marriage and transgender bathrooms will be felt in the meeting industry for years to come.

Her association management firm mainly represents state governments and healthcare organizations.

"They have issues they take stands on," Marsh says. "Right

now, those organizations are taking those issues into consideration when looking at contracts two, three or four years out."

While Marsh (MPI Kentucky Bluegrass Chapter) has not had any clients cancel a contract because of a state's law on a specific issue, she finds they do give serious thought to how hospitable a given state will be to their members and their views.

If some feel state laws will keep potential attendees from traveling to an event, it's not unusual for state associations to



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**MOLLY C. MARSH, CMP**  
MPI Kentucky Bluegrass Chapter  
AMR Management Services

say, “We can’t afford it if no one is going to show up,” and also to point out that an issue is important to both them and their members.

Marsh is not alone in finding that social issues continue to impact destination selection. It was a key trend that emerged in the most recent *Meetings Outlook* survey.

One respondent, for instance, predicted that locations that restrict the reproductive rights of women could lose business. Although 52 percent said they don’t consider whether a location

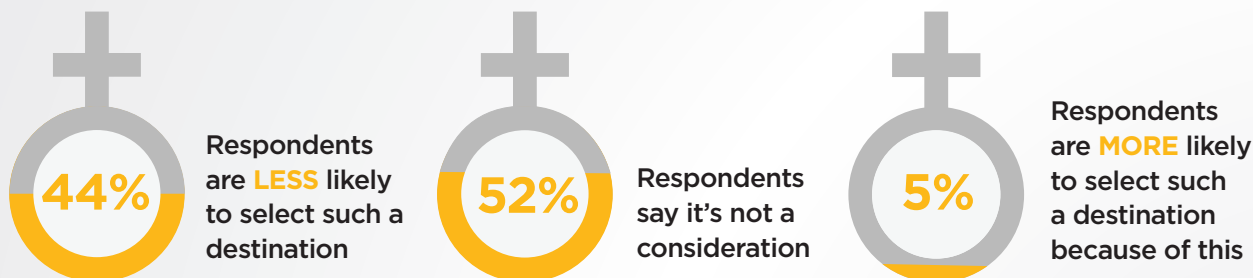
restricts the reproductive rights of women in meeting selection, a significant 44 percent of respondents said they are less likely to select such a destination. Only 5 percent said they were more likely to do so.

“I think women’s rights will be a huge factor, if the bathroom bill was any indicator,” commented one respondent, who chose to remain anonymous and self-identified as “much less likely” to book at a destination that restricts the reproductive rights of women. “Clients will continue to use their buying power...as

# DESTINATION SELECTION

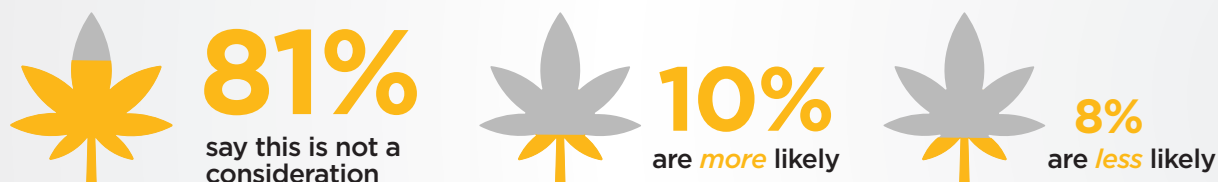
The impact of controversial legislation across various jurisdictions on the meeting and event destination-selection process is interesting. Respondents indicate that meeting/event business in locations that restrict the reproductive rights of women may be harmed due to such laws.

## Are you more or less likely to host a meeting/event in a location that restricts the reproductive rights of women?



Cannabis legalization, on the other hand, appears, overall, to be neither a notable hindrance nor attraction when it comes to meeting/event destination selection.

## Are you more or less likely to host a meeting/event in a location that has legalized cannabis?



social commentary.”

Interestingly, despite controversies over marijuana legalization, the vast majority of respondents (81 percent) said that legalization of cannabis does not affect destination selection one way or another (only 8 percent said they were less likely to choose a destination where cannabis use is legal, while 10 percent said they were more likely).

Within a destination, a venue’s friendliness to attendees’ dietary needs is increasingly important, Marsh has recognized.

“From my perspective and observation, that’s very much tied with diversity and inclusion right now,” she says.

Until recently, “We’ve been used to ‘If you don’t pick up your dietary card, you are not going to get the meal you wanted,’” she says. Now, she finds that if attendees feel excluded because of their meal choices, “It’s going to get posted all over social media and have an impact on your organization.”

### Sustainability Challenges and Solutions

Another key issue to emerge in the latest survey was a focus on sustainable meetings, a long-brewing industry trend. Many espouse the benefits of environmentally friendly meetings—and 62 percent of respondents say their organizations have adopted more sustainable purchasing behavior. Still, 40 percent of respondents say cost is preventing organizations from making

their gatherings more sustainable, 24 percent say the lack of a clear mandate is holding back “greening” and 17 percent say sustainability doesn’t really matter to their stakeholders.

This has left some meeting professionals frustrated. As one respondent put it, “Clients do not care for greening their event. They just want to impress their audience with new, trendy things. It doesn’t matter if it costs the planet a lot.”

However, many do find there are ways to adopt sustainable practices within their existing budgets. Among those who are energetically greening their meetings is Jesse Rittenhouse, a sustainability project manager and consultant at The Spinnaker Group, a consulting firm focused on sustainable building where many of the company’s all-virtual team are based in Florida.

When The Spinnaker Group holds its own events and partners with nonprofits on them, he and his colleagues have found many cost-effective ways to keep them green.

“For each event, we look for meeting spaces in buildings or offices that have achieved a sustainability certification as a first choice,” Rittenhouse says. “We make sure that all plates, cups and utensils provided are reusable, compostable or come from recycled materials and can be recycled, and that the food and drink choices contain locally sourced agriculture.”

The Spinnaker Group also helps clients who need onsite

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## JESSE RITTENHOUSE

The Spinnaker Group

meeting spaces to design and build them according to green and healthy certifications, such as LEED, Living Building Challenge and WELL, he says. Often, making the most of the natural environment—by offering views of the exterior and natural light and using building materials and furniture that have recycled content or responsibly harvested wood—can go a long way toward greening a meeting space, he finds. The cost of sustainable construction materials and furniture “are rapidly approaching the price of standard designs and materials,” Rittenhouse says.

For those seeking to hold corporate meetings off site, Rittenhouse finds that seeking spaces within buildings or offices with sustainability certifications to host a meeting can make it easier to ensure the gathering is sustainable. Another option he recommends is holding the meeting in a green space outdoors.

“You might be surprised how much more awake and productive the participants will be,” Rittenhouse says.

In the food and beverage area, Rittenhouse has found it’s possible to keep costs down at sustainable meetings by sourcing from local restaurants or farmer’s markets.

“Almost all restaurant suppliers now have compostable and recycled plates, cups and utensil offerings that can be bought in bulk for discount pricing,” he adds.

Jane Scaletta, DMCP, CIS (MPI Greater Orlando Chapter), president of Dolfin Destinations, has been working to provide guidance on how to create sustainable meetings and events through her work as Sustainability Champion for the SITE Florida & Caribbean Chapter; and as a member of the SITE Global Sustainability Committee. She was part of the group that developed a sustainability roadmap for the organization. It did so with the guidance of the group Positive Impact, a UK-based company with expertise in this area. It looks at how to follow ISO 20121 ([www.iso.org/iso-20121-sustainable-events.html](http://www.iso.org/iso-20121-sustainable-events.html)), a sustainability standard for events. The goal is to share it with SITE to educate all of its members.

“It’s a commitment to action,” Scaletta says.

To aid those who want to create more sustainable meetings, the chapter has included on its website (<https://sitefloridacaribbean.org/sustainability>) case studies of sustainable meetings. One such case study focuses on an International Women’s Day event held March 8, 2019, at the The Vinoy Renaissance St. Petersburg Resort & Golf Club, which followed ISO 20121 standards. It included elements such as donations to Dress for Success, which

## Business Conditions

Projected business conditions overall are down slightly—to a level not seen in more than a year (**2.3% projected growth**). Curiously, suppliers appear more optimistic than planners in their business projections, with 71 percent answering favorably and projecting a 3.3 percent growth. On the other hand, only 45 percent of planners expect favorable business conditions, predicting a 1 percent growth.

**59%**

of respondents predict **FAVORABLE** business conditions

**23%**

of respondents predict **NEUTRAL** business conditions

**18%**

of respondents predict **NEGATIVE** business conditions

## Whose Market?

Respondents indicate a slightly more balanced marketplace than we’ve seen in recent quarters—but the edge clearly still belongs to sellers.

**20%**

Strong Seller’s Market

**28%**

Slight Seller’s Market

**27%**

Balanced Market

**22%**

Slight Buyer’s Market

**4%**

Strong Buyer’s Market

# ATTENDANCE FORECASTS

LIVE AND VIRTUAL ATTENDANCE FIGURES OVER THE NEXT YEAR ARE EXPECTED TO **GROW 1.4 PERCENT AND 3.3 PERCENT, RESPECTIVELY. LIVE ATTENDANCE PREDICTIONS ARE THE WEAKEST SEEN SINCE 2017**; VIRTUAL ATTENDANCE GROWTH PROJECTIONS ARE THE STRONGEST WE'VE SEEN IN FIVE YEARS.



## Projected Live Attendance

**47%**  
POSITIVE

**30%**  
FLAT

**22%**  
NEGATIVE

makes gently used clothing available to working women in need; energy-saving LED lighting; water provided in the meeting on request; locally sourced food; use of a microbe-powered food digester to get rid of food waste; reusable linens; and many other elements.

Meanwhile, at Dolfin Destinations, which represents 10 DMCs, Scaletta has found that many are interested in sustainable events.

"Most of them already have a strong sustainability passion and program," she says.

She has found herself engaged in friendly debates on the topic with industry peers. The gist is: "Is it the supplier who should be sustainable, so the planner has sustainability to work with, or the planner who should force the sustainability and expect the supplier to fulfill it?" Her view is that it should be a collaboration by both parties.

Scaletta has taken inspiration for her efforts to green the industry in Africa.

*"I was amazed at the sustainability in Africa. Everything they do is deeply ingrained in sustainability."*

### JANE SCALETTA, DMCP, CIS

MPI Greater Orlando Chapter  
Dolfin Destinations

"I was amazed at the sustainability in Africa," Scaletta says. "Everything they do is deeply ingrained in sustainability. There is no plastic anywhere, not on the resort, not in the décor, not in the furniture, not in the plates or cups. I'm talking serious sustainability."

Some properties go beyond this. At Victoria Falls Safari Lodge in Zimbabwe, she found the management sources food locally, uses ecofriendly cleaners and promotes low-carbon activities such as canoeing. In collaboration with a local safari operator, the lodge also created the Victoria Falls Anti-Poaching Unit to protect wildlife. This has led to the arrest of 700 poachers. The lodge has also created a "vulture culture" experience, a supplemental feeding program for the birds.

Scaletta says we think of sustainability as saving paper, but "it goes much further than that."

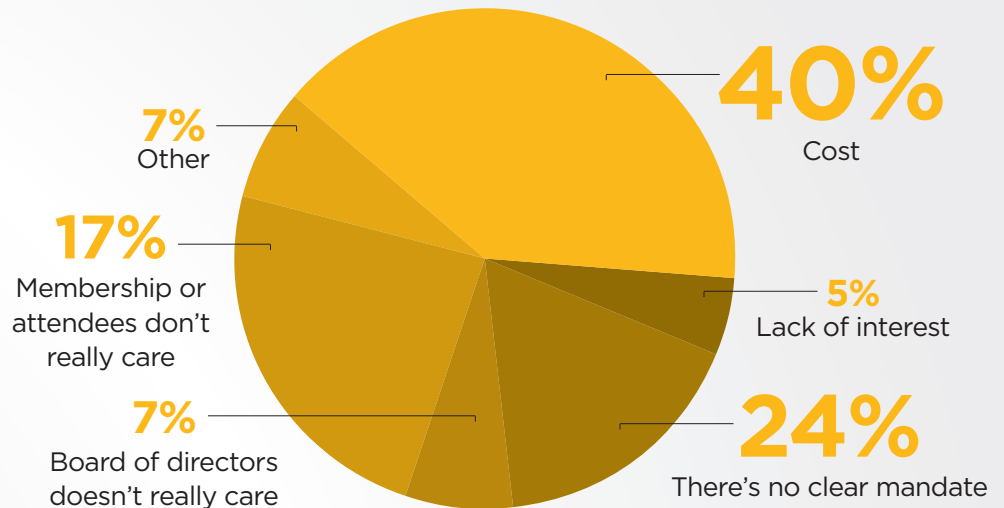
Sometimes, meeting professionals find that implement-



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Watch an MPITV video in our digital edition as we dig deeper into the *Meetings Outlook* data.

# GREENER DECISIONS

**What is the greatest obstacle to making greener event choices?**



**Has your organization changed its purchasing behavior or processes within with the last year to make them more sustainable?**



ing new technologies for purposes such as making a gathering more accessible or inclusive can bring sustainability benefits, too. That's the case for Roberta Dexter, CMM, a senior meeting designer at Strategic Meeting Designs, a firm based in Halifax and Vancouver. She works on events for associations that hold conferences focused on academic learning. Typically, there are 300 to 1,000 delegates.

Dexter finds that her efforts to use technology to make meetings more accessible to people who are blind or deaf have helped her achieve sustainability goals, too. At one recent association event in Canada, for instance, Dexter enlisted a technology partner called Translate Your World to provide captions in both English and French, the languages being spoken at the meeting. The AV team built a soundproof booth on site, where a single interpreter worked. The interpreter's translations appeared on a large screen on the stage or on the delegates' smartphones.

Having planned events where attendees speak a variety of languages and flown in multiple translators, Dexter is looking into using Translate Your World to access remote translators in 78 countries for future meetings. Using remote translators is not only cost effective, but reduces the environmental impact that comes with bringing translators on site, she says: "It was my mission to find a solution, for the benefit of pricing and the

carbon footprint."

Despite the myriad ways sustainable practices are being implemented, many meeting professionals say there's plenty of work to be done. Asked how long it will be before industry practices reflect sustainability nearly all of the time, and the largest group, 41 percent, said four to nine years. Another 39 percent said it will be within three years.

To move things along, 58 percent of respondents said clients should maximize pressure on venues, service providers and contractors to make their venues and operations as sustainable as possible, via specifications in RFPs. Venues and services providers should offer the most sustainable option for stand and banner materials, food and beverage packaging, carpet and other materials—providing no other choice—according to 42 percent of respondents. ■



Meetings Outlook is supported in partnership with IMEX Group.