

WHAT'S TRENDING

BY SELENA FRAGASSI



LED lighting has come a long way in recent years and it is now much easier and less expensive, so look for its use across the board in small and large events.

A New Year of NEW TRENDS

It looks like 2016 could be a leap year in more ways than one as giant steps will be made in meeting and event technology, food, décor and organization. Three experts predict our near future.

It's almost January 1, and you know what that means—another new year. But with all the new quarters, budgets and resolutions to be made comes the opportunity to wipe the slate clean, start fresh and advance on all the activity you had those 12 months prior. When it comes to meetings and events, being in the know is always being one step ahead in achieving personal goals and client expectations, so we turned to three experts to look into the future and see what we can expect to trend in 2016 and how to plan for it.

FOOD/DRINK

Local will still be a big buzzword when it comes to planning menus in 2016, says Jodi M. Collen, CSEP, president of the International Special Events Society (ISES) and head of the event department at Minneapolis' Augsburg College,

which arranges 400 events each year.

"It's becoming less of a commodity and more of an expectation," she says of the straight-off-the-farm mentality. "It's becoming less acceptable to not understand where your food comes from or how it was prepared. Guests

are now asking questions." To keep up, chefs and catering companies are finding new ways to impart that idea while keeping it cost effective. "The key way is in developing seasonal menus and products that allow chefs to showcase what is fresh and also keep it interesting and relevant to what is happening in the food market at that moment."

In the same token, caterers are "really taking the lead on specialty menus," says Collen noting that make-your-own stations are also finding a resurgence to appeal to guests' individual dietary requirements. "Because things like gluten-free items are such a prevalent request we are now seeing whole gluten-free menus arranged rather than just a replacement option. Chefs are going above and beyond now to accommodate those needs in tasty ways."

Healthy options will also continue to be popular with all "the trendy vegetables used as side dishes," says Collen, pointing to the rampant use of Brussels sprouts, cauliflower and beets.

Where guests won't skimp out though is bacon. "It's everywhere right now. It's

mimicking how big cheese was years ago,” she says, noting that brunch foods in general are requested more and more as typical menu items. Even for desserts, crepe cakes are becoming a hot ticket, as are pies, macaroons and dessert bars that are starting to overthrow the cupcake trend of years past.

For beverages, mixology and signature cocktails are still ubiquitous, “but what is interesting is now we are moving away from vodka and rum and reverting back to traditional liquors like bourbon, whiskeys and tequilas that are used to replicate old-fashioned cocktails,” says Collen. Food and wine pairings will start to be replaced more often by food and beer or food and alcohol pairings, too. “It lets people learn more about what they are drinking. We’ve overall become more adventurous.”

DÉCOR

An adventurous spirit is starting to apply to décor, too, as planners start putting more thought into out-of-the-box ideas to create a memorable environment. “In 2016 there will be less importance on stuff, or décor for décor’s sake, and more emphasis on the integrated experience of an event. Planners will be thinking about how someone navigates through an entire program rather than what the room looks like,” says Collen. That means tapping into mobile apps and enhanced lighting technology to set the mood.

“Lighting technology has changed so much in recent years; you can do more less expensively and much easier with LED, and it’s becoming prevalent in designs across the board whereas we only used to see it in high-end events,” she says.

For overall aesthetics Collen sees the natural/organic/rustic trend continuing in 2016, coupled with a greater focus on sustainability. “Planners are looking for ways to be able to make use of things more than using one-off designs.” Another experimental tactic has been working with unconventional seating arrangements. “Guests are less interested in sitting at a roundtable and talking with a few people next to them, so now planners are thinking of arrangements that give attendees the best chance to interact,” says Collen. Unique floor plans and a variety of tables are being paired together, and guests “might be asked to move around more and participate.”

ORGANIZATION

Fran Brasseur, CHSE, CHBA, has also been noticing a similar trend in meeting setup. “Everyone is looking for



Clockwise from left: Locally sourced foods and organic displays will continue to be prevalent in 2016; old-fashioned cocktails, including those made with bourbon and whiskey, will find new life next year; one thing that is always in style—bacon.

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innovation in the meeting space,” says the executive vice president of Hospitality Sales and Marketing Association International (HSMAI) and executive director of the HSMAI Foundation, “especially in setting the room differently.” Though it can be expensive to rent couches, leather chairs and coffee tables in place of round tables, her tip is to speak with the venue and see if they have furniture on hand to save on the cost of hiring a decorator or supplier. Many times the more non-traditional venues do, especially the quantities for more boutique groups, which Brasseux is starting to see as a major growth potential within the industry in 2016.

“For years we’ve been hearing about growth of the small meeting market and now we’re starting to see it,” she affirms. It comes along with shorter booking windows, sometimes even 7-10 days out. “For a planner that means greater opportunity to try and get into a space they weren’t able to in the recent past if the venue was perhaps holding out for a larger group.”

The planners who plan ahead will be best served in this arena, Brasseux says. “Getting serious about and understanding the market you want to be in is important,” she says, and recommends avoiding the idea to cast the net wide to 10 or more destinations and perhaps honing in on just a couple and researching the potential. One idea is to look at CVB calendars and see when the larger meetings and conventions are coming to town and bookend your events at venues around those dates, she says.

In her own research through HSMAI, Brasseux also finds that personal relationships with sales contacts will continue to be important in 2016. “About 90% are still connecting with sales professionals to book business,” she admits, noting that while there will be a higher



Top: Venues like Canada's Waterview offer a variety of seating options for collaboration opportunities. Bottom: The Sli.do app will be popular for connecting conference attendees.

PHOTO COURTESY OF: JOHN WATSON, SLI.DO.

MEET THE EXPERTS



JODI M. COLLEN, CSEP
President of the International
Special Events Society (ISES)



FRAN BRASSEUX, CHSE, CHBA
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MARK COOPER
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Centres (IACC)

premium on electronic RFP systems and third party intermediaries, human contact is still the most preferred option.

TECHNOLOGY

Face-to-face interaction will also be the “most popular way to meet” even as virtual elements continue to have an impact in meetings in 2016. “Virtual technology will absolutely expand but we won’t lose face-to-face meetings. In fact I think the opposite will happen,” forecasts Mark Cooper, CEO of the International Association of Conference Centres (IACC).

It’s an interesting time for meetings technology, he says, as it’s now easier than ever to facilitate high-tech arrangements with venues carrying more substantial bandwidth and hardware and more planners accepting the challenge of coordinating logistics. “The involvement and use of technology in the meetings industry is definitely in the embryonic stage at the moment, and I think we are only starting to find our feet in terms of how technology can assist us,” says Cooper. “I see 2016-17 and beyond as when we really embrace it.”

Two ways in which it will have the greatest impact in 2016 is site inspection and bookings. “In the same ways we now have street views available for hotels and apartment hunting online, we will start to see similar sophisticated technology offering virtual site

inspections and giving a feel for a venue without even being there,” says Cooper, noting that when planners are ready to book they will start to do so more online. “In general people are more comfortable buying big-ticket items online these days, and that will extend to meetings and conferences. It has only just started to really affect the marketplace and we expect to see a lot more happening in this area.” Cooper equates the phenomenon to the influx of “Generation Y” planners who make decisions without having to be comfortable seeing a location first. They are social media savvy and always linked in, which extends to their need for free Wi-Fi too, which will continue being an expectation in 2016.

On-site interaction is still extremely important and Cooper points to audience participation apps like Sli.do that will continue to take off. “We have audiences now who want to add to the conference or have questions to ask but are not as willing to stand up and speak with a microphone. So this modified two-way interaction between the facilitator and delegates solves that with the ability to do polls, Q&A sessions and voting on questions to make sure the most relevant make it to the panel,” he says. “We’ve seen it used in larger meetings but now it’s having an effect in smaller functions as well.”

As is the name of the game with technology, trends are always shifting and Cooper recommends staying in the loop by subscribing to association newsletters like those of IACC, MPI, ISES and HSMAI. “They have many posts constantly talking about trends and ‘the next big thing,’ he says offering one more piece of advice. “Keep in touch not just with the national newsletters but also the global ones since important ideas often come from all parts of the world.” 

GET CONNECTED

HSMAI
hsmai.org

IACC
iacconline.org

ISES
ises.com