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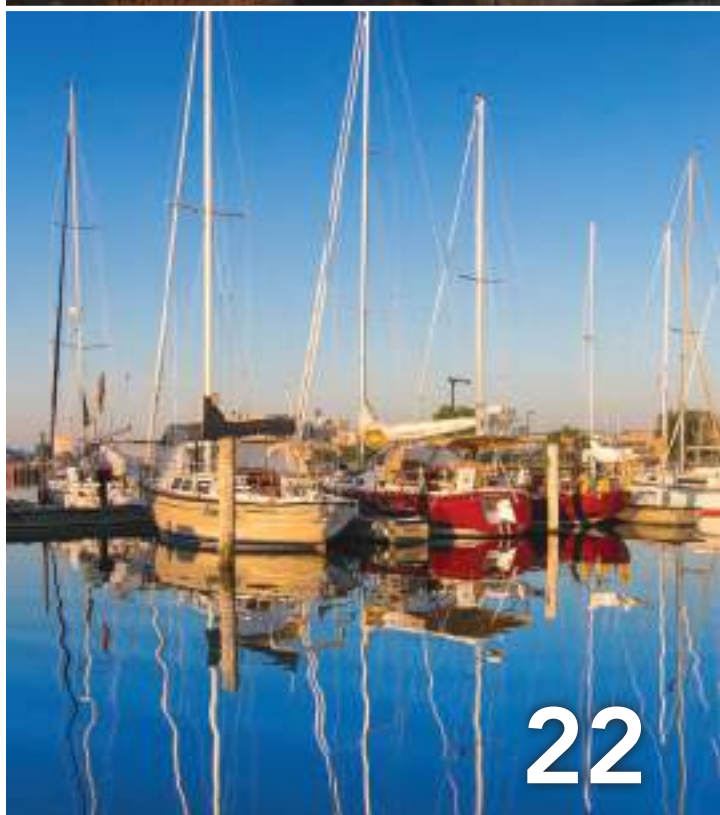
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EDITOR'S LETTER

I recently attended a conference where the attendees, normally a tightknit group that gathers twice a year, were reunited after 24 long months. I watched happy greetings and even observed tearful embraces. It was like witnessing a long-awaited homecoming. It was clear that the group was not intimidated by the pandemic.

Like many of us, meeting- and event-goers are eager to get on the road again. And new data from Freeman, a global event leader, shows that face-to-face events can be safer than some daily activities, like going to the grocery store. The new research, conducted in partnership with Epistemix, a modeling and simulation provider, also reveals the risks of infection at events to be as much as eight times less than the community infection rate where they were being held. This is, in part, attributed to the controllable nature of events.

Think about it. From a planner's perspective, you can control a group's environment with subtle hints to socially distance by spacing tables further apart; control flow by designing a schedule of events that limits bottlenecks in small spaces; and otherwise minimize risks by serving plated meals instead of arranging a buffet, for example. What it comes down to, though, is complying with local and state public health restrictions, and doing what you think will make your audience feel safe.

Communication is key. Spell out your public health policies and requirements ahead of time. Whether it's through snail mail, social media, phone calls, press releases, event signage, email or all of the above, you need to get the message out to promote transparency. That being said, conditions can change in a short span of time, so flexibility is critical in addition to keeping all lines of communication open, at least until we have a better idea of what to expect tomorrow.

No matter how they're doing it, people are continuing to meet and reunite, sometimes in innovative ways, and it feels good.

And as always, thanks for reading Wisconsin Meetings.

Carrie Mantey
Editor
editor@wisconsinmeetings.com

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Although many restrictions have been lifted in the state, please note that some of the facilities highlighted in this issue may still be operating on limited hours or temporarily closed due to COVID-19. Please contact each facility directly to confirm schedules and availability.

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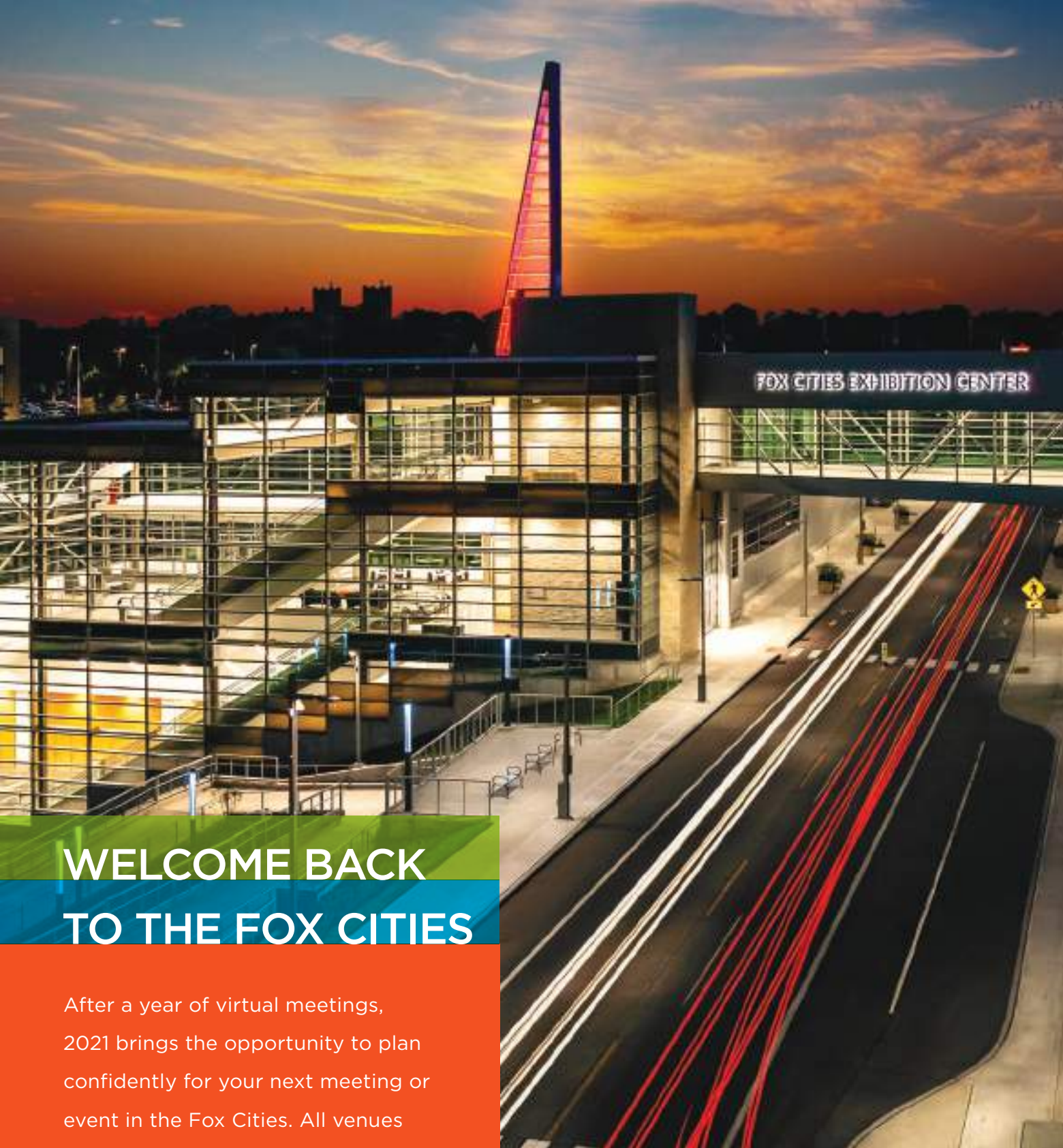
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WELCOME BACK TO THE FOX CITIES

After a year of virtual meetings, 2021 brings the opportunity to plan confidently for your next meeting or event in the Fox Cities. All venues continue to follow appropriate health and hygiene protocols and a wide variety of spaces and places promise the perfect venue for any group to feel safe, comfortable, and ready to reconnect.

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meetings and conventions in the market that month generating significant hotel demand.

The media spotlight the games generated additionally offered a chance at branding the city on a worldwide stage. In fact, between July 18 and 24, 2021, “Milwaukee” as a Google search term was more popular than it’s been in five years, according to Google Trends.

VISIT Milwaukee took advantage of this spotlight by running a 30-second commercial called Powered by the People in drive-in markets during two rounds of post-season play. And the organization continues to capitalize on the Bucks win as it markets the city as the best place in the country for a meeting or convention. “The world now knows that Milwaukee is a city of champions, and that excitement clearly resonated with thousands of local fans and visitors,” concludes Williams-Smith.

MILWAUKEE BUCKS CHAMPIONSHIP PROVIDES A MUCH-NEEDED ECONOMIC BOOST

VISIT Milwaukee recently released updated estimates of the economic impact that the Milwaukee Bucks’ championship run brought to the city. The total impact of the three rounds of playoff games, as well as the NBA Finals, is estimated to have brought \$57.6 million in direct and indirect spending to the community. “These dollars pumped much-needed life into many of the businesses that struggled the most during the pandemic and they helped support thousands of jobs,” says Peggy Williams-Smith, president and CEO, VISIT Milwaukee.

The total economic impact figures include estimates of spending at lodging, transportation, food and beverage, retail, recreation, venue rental and business services companies. The data also include estimates of indirect impact and induced economic impact — the money spent between businesses to support this activity and the money spent by employees of those companies.

The total estimated direct impact by spending type is:


1. Lodging: \$8,424,845
2. Recreation: \$6,586,263
3. Retail: \$5,819,003
4. Food and Beverage: \$5,219,209
5. Transportation: \$4,258,004
6. Business Services: \$1,210,430
7. Space Rental: \$38,521

Bucks’ fans, sports media, the NBA and a few corporate partners drove downtown hotel demand for the month of July. There were relatively few other

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON IN-PERSON SPEAKERS ARE BACK

With a goal to help spark ideas and conversations on important topics, Badger Talks recently opened an in-person speaker request system. Whether you want to improve communication in your workplace or learn about the latest ground-breaking health care research, Badger Talks provides a roster of 400 University of Wisconsin-Madison experts ready to give talks around the state, in addition to the virtual speaking engagements it’s been offering.



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GATHER AT DEER DISTRICT — FOR ANY EVENT

THIS EVENT SPACE RECENTLY DEBUTED IN ONE OF MILWAUKEE'S HIGHLY SOUGHT-AFTER DOWNTOWN ENTERTAINMENT AREAS.

BY SUE SVEUM

You might think that an event space located in the heart of Milwaukee's Deer District — overlooking Fiserv Forum, home of the 2021 NBA Champion Milwaukee Bucks — would cater primarily to casual sports-related events. But one glance at Gather at Deer District, featuring a modern, elegant setting, delicious food and stunning views, and you realize that it has much more to offer planners of any event.

"We just opened in May 2021 and hosted our first corporate event on May 18," says Mallory Brigman, director of event sales. "Gather is a flexible event space that can accommodate a variety of events — so we're currently seeing a wide range of bookings from corporate meetings to wedding receptions. Basically, anyone looking for a great, unique space."

With 6,000 square feet of flexible space (which can hold groups of roughly up to 300 theater-style), Gather is equipped to host a variety of events. A lower-level entry area, with plenty of room for guests to mill around with a welcome cocktail, is ideal for registration, a place card display and more. According to Starr Butler, vice president of booking and events, the balcony at Gather is another great perk. Overlooking the plaza at Fiserv Forum, it gives guests a one-of-a-kind, VIP visual experience to everything in the Deer District.

Ever since huge crowds were seen gathering outside Fiserv Forum for Bucks home playoff games, the Deer District has quickly become a must-see downtown entertainment area. "Gather benefits meeting and event planners looking at Milwaukee as a destination due to both the location and uniqueness of the space," says Butler. "The design of this space allows planners to truly customize the experience they want their attendees to have." And there's no doubt that Gather's convenient and lively location within the Deer District is a plus.

"The success of the Milwaukee Bucks has been great for the entire city," says Brigman. She explains that, in addition to its location, ESPN using Gather for its nationally broadcast show, "The Jump," during the playoffs has vastly increased interest in the space as well. "We received great visibility during the NBA finals," she says, "and now we're excited to welcome and host many more events!"

According to Butler, Gather's location is very attractive to meeting planners for another reason: It's the only standalone event venue within the Deer District that's dedicated to private events.

In real estate, they say it's all about location, location, location. But when it comes to events and event planning, there's a little more to it. So when you choose Gather to host your event, what can you expect in terms of service? "We're proud to offer a world-class experience," says Brigman, adding that the dedicated event operations team assists clients in preparing for their meeting by providing layouts, load-in and load-out information, audiovisual quotes and the finalization of all logistics prior to the event date. Clients also soon discover that the same dedicated event coordinator who assisted them in preplanning will be on site during the full event.

When it comes to food, Gather's catering partner, Levy, offers a customizable experience that allows you to create a menu that best fits your event. The organization also acts as a dedicated, on-site contact for food and beverage operations during the event.

The 365-day venue service team (which includes Fiserv Forum, Deer District and Gather) is both flexible and persistent. "We know we can host a multitude of premium events at one time with flawless execution," says Butler. "Our clients are at the forefront of our business — and we continue to provide service and one-of-a-kind experiences as one of Milwaukee's premier venue destinations." [WM](#)



Sue Sveum is a freelance writer based in the Madison area.



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PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

WHAT GOOD IS A HOBBY?

HOBBIES ARE AN INVESTMENT IN YOURSELF AND SCIENCE PROVES THEIR WORTH.

BY MOLLY ROSE TEUKE

"A hobby is only fun if you don't have time to do it."
— Leo Beenhakker, Dutch international football coach

If asked to name a half-dozen hobbies people might engage in, you could probably do it easily: gardening, birding, knitting, fishing, photography, painting. Maybe woodworking, sewing, yoga, or learning a musical instrument or a new language. Even beekeeping, scrapbooking, geocaching or playing bridge.

Listing the benefits of having a hobby, however, might be tougher. There are a few obvious benefits. A hobby can help you relax, for example. Or it can give you something to look forward to, inspire a sense of accomplishment or provide a way to socialize around a common interest.

A HEALTHIER YOU

There are also measurable health benefits to having a hobby. In 2010, a team of researchers from several universities cited outcomes from across four studies of 1,394 men and women who had various health issues and also engaged in hobbies: lower body mass index, smaller waist circumference, lower blood pressure, lower stress hormones and better overall health. Participants also reported getting better sleep, and feeling a greater sense of purpose and life satisfaction.

In a 2015 study published in the *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*, researcher Matthew Zawadzki linked "mentally engaging" leisure activities to reduced levels of depression, improved mood and a lower heart rate — even when the

subjects were not participating in the activity in the moment. "We're still talking about the short term, but there was a definite carryover effect later in the day," he says. "If we start thinking about that beneficial carryover effect day after day, year after year, it starts to make sense how leisure can help improve health."

A SMARTER YOU

Researchers have long known that regular physical exercise helps improve cognitive function, such as memory recall and problem-solving. They now know that recreational and leisure activity can contribute to a healthy brain, too, so long as it requires mental effort.

If you're like most people, maintaining a healthy brain means you won't grow more forgetful with every passing year. But ongoing practice is key, according to Dr. John N. Morris, director of social and health policy research at the Harvard-affiliated Institute for Aging Research. "Embracing a new activity that forces you to think and learn, and requires ongoing practice can be one of the best ways to keep the brain healthy. It is the constant repetition of working to improve, and not the quest for mastery, that can have the greatest impact," notes Morris. "You can't improve memory if you don't work at it. The more time you devote to engaging your brain, the more it benefits."

"It's important to get out and do something that is unfamiliar and mentally challenging, and that provides broad stimulation mentally and socially," confirms Denise Park, a psychological scientist at the University of Texas at Dallas. The key is to strive for a balance of a little more challenge than skill. Too much challenge results in anxiety. Too little challenge results in boredom.

ALL ABOUT THE FLOW

Flow is that feeling you get when an activity just spills out of you, when you're "in the zone." The concept was pioneered by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in his popular 1990 book, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. Csikszentmihalyi reasoned that happiness is not a fixed state and can be heightened by being in flow — which doesn't include vegging out in front of the TV or even spending a quiet evening with friends.

"The best moments in our lives are not the passive, receptive, relaxing times," he says. "The best moments usually occur if a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile." When you are in flow, you're so involved that you don't notice what's going on around you. Your sense of time is distorted, you don't notice the clock, or whether you're tired or hungry. You turn off your inner critic. Your concentration is so intense that there is no attention left to ruminate on the problems in your work or life. It's a feeling of being completely free in your pursuit of choice.

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a delightful pastime of mine because it requires putting common elements together in order to achieve a lovely something that nobody needs."

"Becoming serious is a grievous fault in hobbyists. It is an axiom that no hobby should either seek or need rational justification. To wish to do it is reason enough. To find reasons why it is useful or beneficial converts it at once from an avocation into an industry — lowers it at once to the ignominious category of an 'exercise' undertaken for health, power or profit."

— Aldo Leopold, American author, philosopher and scientist

WHAT'S IT WORTH TO YOU?

In 2019, Blueprint, a company offering thousands of hours of instructional videos aimed at the hobby market, partnered with global consulting firm Ipsos to conduct a survey of 2,000 randomly selected adults. Results suggest that 75% of Americans have creative hobbies and are reluctant to let them go. Of respondents in the Blueprint survey who have a Netflix subscription, 77% say they would rather give up Netflix than give up their hobby.

Respondents also say that creative activities make them feel better than watching TV or browsing social media. "We heard it from our customers for years," says John Levisay, former Blueprint CEO. "When you talk to a quilter or a cook or a knitter, they all talk about this kind of flow state that they get in when they're making [something]. It's similar to meditation or yoga, where your blood pressure comes down, and you forget about a lot of the mayhem in the world or personal stress."

"Our data shows that people who participate in creative hobbies vs. those who do not are more likely to describe themselves as happy, joyful [and] passionate," adds Maggie King, former director of consumer insights at Blueprint.

CHOOSE WISELY

An important consideration in choosing a hobby is to avoid the need to be productive, lest you lose the joy. "Becoming serious is a grievous fault in hobbyists," wrote the great naturalist Aldo Leopold. "It is an axiom that no hobby should either seek or need rational justification. To wish to do it is reason enough. To find reasons why it is useful or beneficial converts it at once from an avocation into an industry — lowers it at once to the ignominious category of an 'exercise' undertaken for health, power or profit."

Sure, some research suggests that having a hobby makes you more creative, more productive and more satisfied at work, but making that your motivation is a slippery slope. As Jaya Saxena wrote in a 2018 New York Times article titled, "The Case for Having a Hobby," "Many hobbies have morphed into the dreaded side hustle or as paths to career development, turning the things we ostensibly do for fun into ... more work. ('Like embroidery? You should be selling your creations on Etsy!')."

American actress, comedian and writer Amy Sedaris had the right idea when she said, "Crafting, or 'making things,' has always been

Think your job is too demanding to allow time for a hobby? Heed the advice of someone who had plenty of reason to say he was too busy, but had multiple hobbies anyway. "To be really happy and really safe, one ought to have at least two or three hobbies, and they must all be real." That's Winston Churchill, who counted painting, landscaping, fencing and bricklaying among his many hobbies.

"Change is the master key," he believed. "A man can wear out a particular part of his mind by continually using it and tiring it, just in the same way as he can wear out the elbows of his coat. There is, however, this difference between the living cells of the brain and inanimate articles: One cannot mend the frayed elbows of a coat by rubbing the sleeves or shoulders; but the tired parts of the mind can be rested and strengthened, not merely by rest, but by using other parts. It is not enough merely to switch off the lights which play upon the main and ordinary field of interest; a new field of interest must be illuminated."

Thomas Fletcher, chair of the Leisure Studies Association and a senior lecturer at Leeds Beckett University in the U.K., turns the work/time conversation on its head: "In thinking about the relationship between work and leisure, I would argue that, rather than thinking about how leisure can promote greater productivity at work, a more important consideration is about how work inhibits our leisure time." [WM](#)



Molly Rose Teuke has an enduring curiosity about what makes our brains tick. Pre-COVID-19, she offered a program for Nicolet College called *Getting Your Brain on Your Side* and delivered brain-based leadership training for the NeuroLeadership Institute, a global leader in the performance arena.

She also hosts a weekly classical music program on WXPR-FM. You can reach her at mollyrosecoaching.com.

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With an in-person event, the emphasis remains on the experience. Planners must consider the décor, food, stage, entertainment and more. But beautiful flowers, impeccable décor, delectable food and an impressive stage means little to virtual attendees.

Thus, a hybrid event that mixes live and virtual elements must keep both audiences engaged. Doolen recommends incorporating compelling storytelling when livestreaming part of an event, for example. “We work with a video storyteller and Plum Media to tell interesting stories through video,” he says. “That is important because, if your content isn’t engaging and people get bored, your virtual audience will stop watching.”

Asking for feedback in real time, encouraging interaction between attendees, and including online quizzes or surveys encourage participation from both audiences. Also make sure speakers welcome and acknowledge attendees connecting both in person and online. And when in-person attendees break for coffee or networking, introduce elements that allow online participants to network, too.

**“ IF YOUR CONTENT
ISN’T ENGAGING AND
PEOPLE GET BORED,
YOUR VIRTUAL AUDIENCE
WILL STOP WATCHING.”**

**— FORREST DOOLEN,
MAKE-A-WISH WISCONSIN**

Doolen reminds event planners to do more than provide virtual attendees access to a livestream and a platform. These attendees also need ways to message in-person guests and each other. Just like in-person attendees who get to walk the floor, chat with others and gather event swag, he says, your remote attendees also crave a personal touch.

Make-A-Wish Wisconsin welcomed virtual attendees with elaborate party boxes, for example. Anyone who hosted a virtual event in their home or business could purchase party boxes meant to enhance the experience. The organization offered

UPPING ENGAGEMENT IN THE NEW NORMAL

These strategies can help companies make the best of both worlds when hosting hybrid events.

By Ronnie Wendt

Corporate meetings evolved during the pandemic. One innovation was the popularization of the hybrid meeting, which combines the best of in-person and virtual events into a single gathering. Where employees of national and international companies once met in one location for a meeting, they now gather in person by region to participate virtually in a hybrid event.

Hybrid events let companies downscale their gatherings, while connecting people assembled in person with people in other geographies. These events, when done correctly, can broaden your audience and exposure, allow meetings to occur amid COVID-19 fears and provide a rich experience for all involved.

ENGAGE BOTH AUDIENCES

To be successful, hybrid meetings must provide both value and relevant content for all attendees, according to Forrest Doolen, the director of marketing and communications for Make-A-Wish Wisconsin.

Make-A-Wish Wisconsin hosted its first virtual event right after the pandemic began. Normally, the organization held an in-person gala at The Pfister Hotel in Milwaukee. The event included a full dinner, awards ceremony, auction, raffle and wine pull. The virtual format, in comparison, offered none of those things, but still attracted 600 registered attendees; garnered 6,400 views between Facebook, YouTube and Twitter; and raised \$659,000.

As pandemic worries waned, Make-A-Wish Wisconsin wanted to host an in-person event in 2021. The problem was, however, that many people remained hesitant to gather at large events. Instead, the organization opted for a smaller-scale event with a virtual component.

That’s when Doolen learned effective hybrid events treat all attendees equally. But planners cannot use the same tactics to engage both audiences. He says planners must craft one event that offers two unique experiences.



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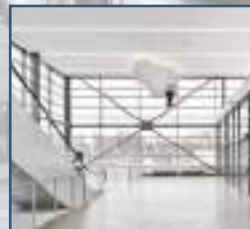
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two types: a dessert box and an appetizer box. "People loved them. They included champagne and beer, Make-A-Wish swag and treats," he says. "It really added to the excitement."

CHOOSE AN ENGAGING VENUE

If planners put too much emphasis on virtual attendees, they may overlook their in-person guests. For hybrid meetings where parts of the audience attend in person, but others watch on a screen, it's important to select an engaging location, Doolen suggests. Make-A-Wish Wisconsin held its 2021 gala at several Marcus theaters. Attendees ate dinner in their seats, then watched the virtual program on theater screens. The novel setting was a hit, according to Doolen.

"We had 150 people watching from movie theaters and 400 people watching from home," he says. "We helped people feel comfortable in person by asking them to wear masks in the theaters, providing hand sanitizer and having theater staff serve meals."



ENGAGE AUDIENCES ON SOCIAL MEDIA

All too often, planners create a social media page for virtual and hybrid events, then forget about it until two weeks before the event. Or they use the page just to capture registrations. Both moves are a mistake, says Josh Klemons, a digital storyteller and strategist at Reverb Communications of Madison. "You don't just use social to promote events. You use it to get people excited about them," he says. "Don't ask people to come — give them a reason to come."

Make-A-Wish Wisconsin used Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn to promote its event. "We also created a Facebook event for people to follow," Doolen says. "People are open to following events on Facebook. This can help you sell your event because, as people follow your event page, it shows up in other people's newsfeeds."

But a Facebook event page must give attendees more than the details. Leading up to the event, you need to share content into the Facebook event intended to excite your audience. Potential attendees need to know a speaker, also a best-selling author, just released a new book. Give them a reason to be excited about the lineup. Talk about special guests that will be in attendance. Promote that the venue just hired an award-winning chef. These are posts they will want to share with friends, which expands your audience, advises Klemons.

He also warns the adage "if you build it, they will come" does not prove true. "Creating a Facebook event will not quadruple donations

or triple attendance," he says. "You still have to promote your event."

And because social media platforms run the gamut from TikTok to Facebook, Instagram to LinkedIn, it's essential to promote your event on the right platform, stresses Klemons. "Ask yourself: Where is my audience?" he says. "If you decide to promote your event on TikTok, but that's not where your audience is, it will not help you — no matter how amazing your content. Promote the event in the places your audience already is. If you don't know

the answer, take a step back and ask: How can I figure that out?"

Once you pinpoint where to share content, use each platform's features to their highest potential, recommends Klemons. For example, using a countdown clock for Stories that you post on Instagram can build excitement. "Though Stories disappear after 24 hours, you can create a countdown and folks can opt in to get reminders," he says. "Instagram will remind people of the event throughout the countdown."

Consider marketing the event on Facebook. Here, it's important to understand the difference between boosted posts and Facebook ads. "If you put up a post, you can boost the post. This makes sense because your posts will never show up to 100% of your followers. Boosting a post ensures more of your followers see your posts, so it expands your reach," says Andrea Strand, owner of Cutwing Marketing Solutions of Lake Geneva.

Facebook ads, however, let you analyze your demographics to dispatch targeted advertising. Another effort worth considering is remarketing. This allows you to put a Facebook pixel onto your website and, whenever anyone visits your website, then visits Facebook, your event ads pop up. "These ads take more time and can be challenging. It just depends on your experience," Strand adds.

Doolen reminds planners not to overlook email, phone calls and even snail mail as well. Make-A-Wish Wisconsin hit the phones to notify potential attendees of its new format. The organization also sent emails to virtual attendees, reminding them how to access the livestream event.

Hybrid meetings can offer the best of both worlds during tough circumstances. With COVID-19, some attendees may not want to gather face to face. But through promotion, venue selection, hidden surprises and tools that keep everyone connected, hybrid events can appeal to all audiences and increase engagement. [WM](#)



Ronnie Wendt is a freelance writer based in Waukesha.



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BALANCING WORK *and Play*

By Kristine Hansen

These family-friendly venues offer meeting- and event-goers a chance to let the family tag along on their business adventures, increasing the likelihood of attendance.

After 18 months of reduced corporate and leisure travel, and endless weeks of virtual schooling and childcare uncertainty during the COVID-19 pandemic, family members tagging along for a work trip no longer seems out of the ordinary. This exception to the rule is especially true when the meeting or event site features amenities like a waterpark, spa, horseback riding and ice skating. When the accommodations include a pool and someone else to do the cooking, what spouse or child wouldn't jump at the chance to go along?

Because the line between professional and personal lives has started to disintegrate during the pandemic, the term "bleisure"—an artful mix of business and leisure travel—is becoming more commonplace. As such, meeting and event planners may want to

consider booking venues that provide family entertainment not only for the event, but for pre- and post-event fun as well.

Kalahari Resorts & Conventions, Wisconsin Dells

Although it's centrally located in the state, the African-themed Kalahari Resort & Convention Center in Wisconsin Dells—home to the state's largest indoor waterpark at 125,000 square feet—feels worlds away from Wisconsin. This is, in part, due to the toucans, flamingos, giraffes and Bengal tigers at Timbavati Wildlife Park, located on site, which is open to all guests. The resort also runs an Adventurers Club for kids' activities, and Tom Foolerys Adventure Park with a ropes course, climbing wall, indoor zipline, bowling, laser tag and arcade.



©GRAND GENEVA RESORT & SPA

Accommodations are well-positioned for families, too, including two-bedroom suites with private balconies. There are six different layouts for these types of rooms, proof that the resort knows how to customize for small groups.

"Planners report a 20% increase in attendance when their events are held at Kalahari, resulting from the desirable location for families," says Nicole Slemin, national sales manager at Kalahari Resorts & Conventions. "We see many multi-generational guests enjoying the resort during conventions, with grandparents and kids at the waterpark, while parents are in session. In the evening, the variety of dining venues and activities offers something that appeals to the entire family."



©KALAHARI RESORTS & CONVENTIONS

renovated villas that range from a studio size up to three bedrooms. "They really give you a calm feel," says Conrad, "with a living area, kitchen, pool [for villa guests only] and deck." Outdoor grills and firepits are right outside each villa's door, and staff can even stock the fridge and cupboards with groceries. These accommodations are also dog-friendly in case the family pet wants to come along.

Grand Geneva's 10,000-square-foot fitness center is another draw for guests, with daily classes, a sauna, a whirlpool and state-of-the-art workout machines. Being a full-service resort, three restaurants (the casual Grand Café, the Italian-infused Ristorante Brissago and the upscale Geneva ChopHouse), a coffee shop and two bars round out the fun. Grand Geneva's Experiences team additionally organizes family-friendly programming that's open to all resort guests throughout the year. This might mean a trivia night, pizza and guacamole challenges, scavenger hunts, bike- and sled-building classes, or chili cookoffs.

"We're a short drive away [from most of the state], but definitely a change of scenery, and away from the hustle and bustle," says Conrad.

Grand Geneva Resort & Spa, Lake Geneva

"It's the perfect place to learn to ski," says Todd Conrad, Grand Geneva Resort & Spa's director of group sales, about the sprawling property in Lake Geneva. But even beyond The Mountain Top at Grand Geneva is Timber Ridge Lodge & Waterpark, an indoor waterpark, and an Adventure Center that sits on the resort's 1,300 acres. At the center, guests can rent outdoor gear appropriate for any season (for example, scooters and bicycles in the warmer months, and ice skates, snowboards and skis during the winter). Other activities include archery, volleyball, disc golf and walking trails. A vintage trolley helps guests get around the property with ease.

Coupled with the Adventure Center's adrenaline-filled activities are recently



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Blue Harbor Resort & Conference Center, Sheboygan

"It's easy to make a business trip feel like a vacation," says Susan Engler, general manager of Blue Harbor Resort & Conference Center, which hugs the shoreline of Lake Michigan. "We know how important team bonding is, which is why meetings at Blue Harbor Resort are family-friendly. From the beautiful sunrises, nearby beach, walking trails along the shore or bike rides through the friendly city of Sheboygan, families are sure to find entertainment and relaxation when they tag along for a business retreat."

Back at the 243-room resort, Breaker Bay Waterpark features not only water slides, but also a glow-in-the-dark mini-golf course, arcade and eastern Wisconsin's only double surf simulator, The Riptide. When the weather is warm outdoors, says Engler, the property's expansive lawn consists of giant Jenga games, scavenger hunts and cornhole tournaments, while "paddle surfing, kayaking and charter fishing are all within walking distance." Sheboygan is also home to Above & Beyond Children's Museum and Bookworm Gardens, a botanical garden with vignettes inspired by works of literature written for children.



©BLUE HARBOR RESORT



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Then, "when the sun sets, bonfires and s'mores are on the agenda," says Engler, so groups can capitalize on the resort's beachfront perch.

The Waters of Minocqua, Minocqua

The Waters of Minocqua, built in 2001 with 106 hotel rooms, also offers an ideal location and family-friendly resort amenities. While its new conference center won't be complete until 2023, until then, there's an events center and several meeting rooms for the business traveler. For the leisure traveler, there's an indoor waterpark that's open year-round with two slides, a pool, a hot tub, a kiddie area and arcade. During the warmer months, there's an outdoor pool available to guests, too.

"It's a great area to take your family," says Carly Dubek, sales and events manager at The Waters of Minocqua. "We're a very family-friendly destination. Many of our events in town (like Beef-A-Rama, the Fourth of July, Carnival Nights, the Bearskin State Trail and other fun things) bring people to The Waters. I see families absolutely everywhere."

Dubek adds, "The central location is attractive for meeting planners, particularly state government organizations with employees traveling from around Wisconsin. When they come, they want to have a few days at the conference, then they want to unwind with the 'Up North' Wisconsin experience."

On top of the new conference center, the resort is also prepping to unveil a "floor-to-ceiling" interior renovation by the summer of 2022, says Dubek. Meeting rooms, guest rooms and common areas will all be revived. But don't worry, she says, "It's still going to be an 'Up North,' woody vibe." **WM**



©THE WATERS OF MINOCQUA



Kristine Hansen is a freelance writer based in Milwaukee. She writes about food and drink, design and travel for a mix of regional and national audiences. Her clients include *ArchitecturalDigest.com*, *Fodors.com*, *Vogue.com*, *Midwest Living* magazine and *Milwaukee* magazine. She recently also published "Wisconsin Cheese Cookbook," which is available on *Amazon.com*.

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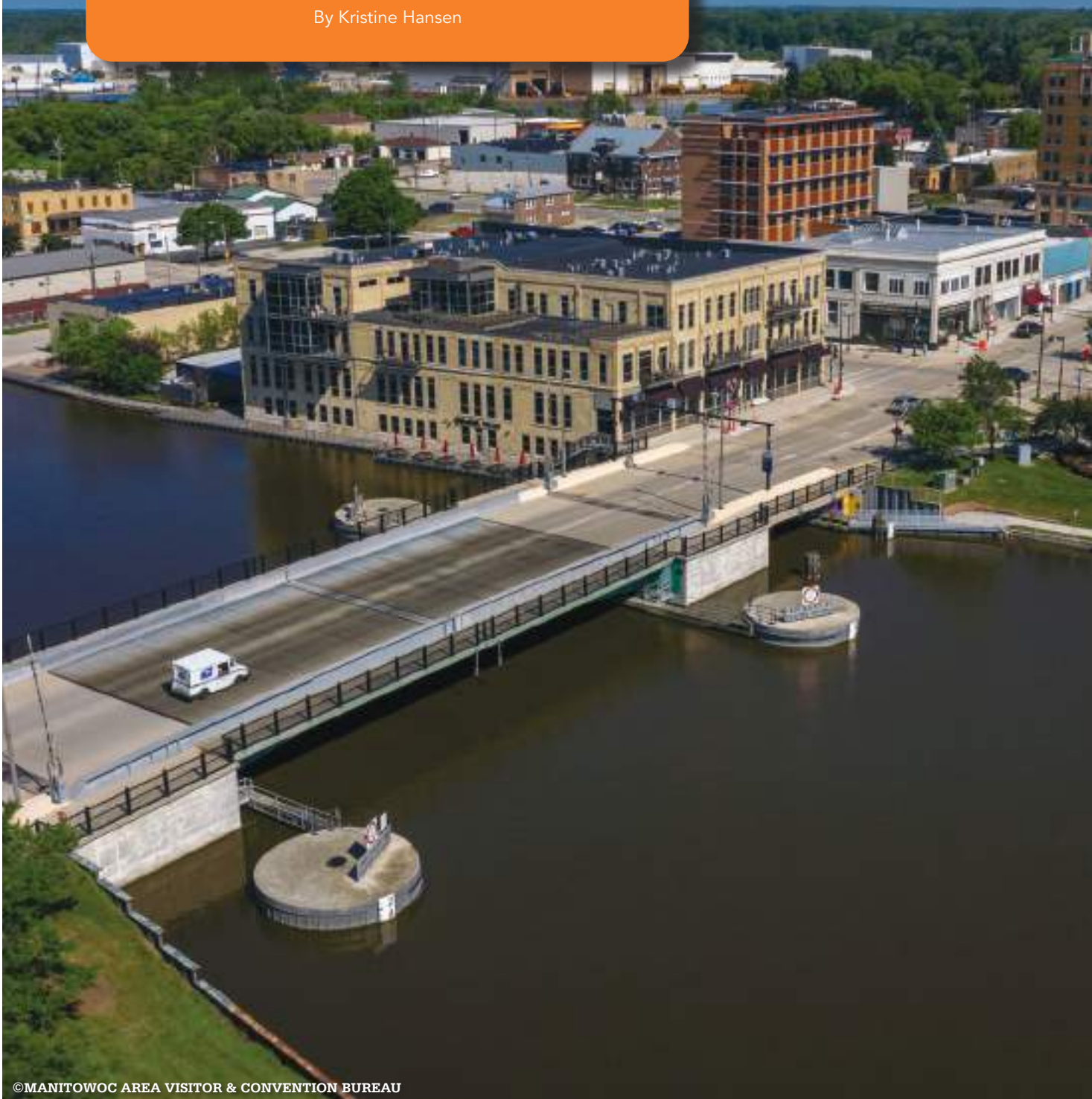
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— DESTINATION —

Manitowoc

THE MANITOWOC AREA MEETING AND
EVENT SCENE THRIVES ON RURAL CULTURE
AND UNIQUE, LOCAL VENUES.

By Kristine Hansen



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SABBATICAL BREWING CO. ©LAKECOAST LOCAL



WISCONSIN COASTAL FOOD TRAIL
©MANITOWOC AREA VISITOR & CONVENTION BUREAU

In picking a locale for a meeting or event, convenience often wins out. That is what Jason Ring realized early on when promoting the lakefront town of Manitowoc and the surrounding county.

“We’re an easy community to get to,” explains Ring, president of the Manitowoc Area Visitor & Convention Bureau. “The whole eastern part of the state accesses us pretty easily.” That’s thanks to Interstate 43, which snakes north from Milwaukee to Green Bay. Manitowoc has a population of

32,702 and is about 90 minutes from Milwaukee, 45 minutes from Green Bay and an hour from the Fox Cities.

But beyond accessibility, the beautiful setting hugging Lake Michigan boasts uncrowded beaches unlike other parts of the state. According to Ring, outdoor activities and cocktail hours are often folded into event itineraries to capitalize on the view.

Rural Culture

One new attraction in Manitowoc that’s perfect for groups to explore —

either together or on their own — is the Wisconsin Coastal Food Trail. This trail links creameries, wineries, a maple syrup farm, restaurants, pubs, butchers, breweries and fisheries that rely on locally sourced ingredients (or make those products) in one easy-to-follow route. “It’s a neat way for people to get a taste of our community,” says Ring.

In addition to its lovely outdoor surroundings, Manitowoc’s museums and cultural centers — showcasing art, the history of farming and the maritime heritage



WISCONSIN MARITIME MUSEUM
©MANITOWOC AREA VISITOR & CONVENTION BUREAU

of the Great Lakes — offer ample space for hosting meetings. “We have a lot of museums that engage you in the exhibits,” says Ring, “and add to your group’s ability to use the space.” For instance, a meeting at the Wisconsin Maritime Museum could tack on a private, hour-long presentation by the museum’s submarine curator. And at Rahr-West Art Museum, a docent-led tour dives deeper into the Victorian mansion’s history.

Ring notes that agricultural groups love to book meetings and events at Farm Wisconsin Discovery Center, a 10,000-square-foot educational center with an adjacent store and café visible from I-43 and open since 2018. With several event spaces to choose from, the center can host anything from intimate receptions for 30 up to epic events with 350 guests. A cow-birthing barn brings the realities of the farm to the meeting. And a 15-foot-tall garage allows for showcasing farm machinery, if that’s a focus of the meeting, along with a separate entrance to the facility.

“This is a great facility to bring groups in with [agricultural] ties,” suggests Ring.

Similarly, the Wisconsin Maritime Museum (located downtown on the Manitowoc River, which flows into the adjacent Manitowoc Harbor and Lake Michigan) tends to attract “groups focused on the health of the lakes,” says Cathy Green, the museum’s executive director. Plus, the stunning backdrop of Lake Michigan provides around-the-clock inspiration with “the best view in town.”

“A lot of corporations use the museum as a place to do planning retreats,” she continues. And within the last two years, two national museum groups also hosted conferences here.

In 2019, the museum completely renovated its meeting spaces, including a rooftop deck that’s proven to be popular, according to Green. It even comes with the advantage of live music five nights each week from The Wharf, a nearby venue on the waterfront. “Not only have we gained this great venue on the roof, but we have music provided,” says Green.



FARM WISCONSIN DISCOVERY CENTER
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WISCONSIN MARITIME MUSEUM
©MANITOWOC AREA VISITOR & CONVENTION BUREAU

Wisconsin Maritime Museum facilities include the Roof Deck with 3,100 square feet of outdoor space, the Riverview Room with 1,800 square feet that can be divided into up to three separate rooms, the Board Room with 400 square feet or the USS Cobia Theater for groups up to 35 people.

Both the Wisconsin Maritime Museum and Farm Wisconsin Discovery Center use large, flat-screen monitors to help accommodate remote speakers, which has become more common since the COVID-19 pandemic.

For a more refined vibe, the Rahr-West Art Museum can cater to groups who would rather meet in a space surrounded by paintings and other artistic works, such as in the museum's John West Gallery, or in one of three other dedicated spaces for meetings. All in all, the museum can host between 25 and 150 guests, depending on the meeting or event's size and needs.

Another venue with an educational angle is the Manitowoc County Historical Society, which offers five different rental sites at the historic village. All of them are ideal for a group that wants to feel seeded in history, whether it's post-meeting cocktails at the Pinecrest Saloon or gathering outdoors on the village green near Niles Church.

Speaking of groups that want to be steeped in history, when Green moved to the Manitowoc area four years ago, she says that she was immediately inspired by the historic downtown. "It's a beautiful place to be and very walkable," she says. "The history's still intact here, which you don't have in a lot of places. We're building on the historic pieces that were here before. I love how this town has grasped onto those."

Local Venues

Despite its size, Manitowoc continually adds new restaurants and breweries — which also open their doors to small groups for meetings. This includes Sabbatical Brewing Co., a brewery and taproom opened in 2019 by a homebrewing couple in a former Manitowoc flour and grain mill that's been thoughtfully repurposed while still honoring its historic roots. There



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are plans to debut an event space on its upstairs level later this year.

PetSkull Brewing Company is another newcomer to Manitowoc, opening a taproom four years ago. This past summer, the brewery relocated to Buffalo Street in downtown Manitowoc — settling into the 100-year-old, two-story, former Manitowoc Iron and Metal Company building with exposed Cream City brick. The space includes a Cajun and Creole eatery, and an outdoor patio with room for 100 guests. “We’ve seen a lot of restaurants add outdoor dining in the last year” in response to patrons’ increased desire for social distancing due to the COVID-19 pandemic, according to Ring.

Several local wineries are also unique meeting spots for small groups. Parallel 44 Vineyard & Winery, Silarian Vineyards and Duck Creek Vineyard & Winery all pour their wines in a tasting room that includes vineyard views as well as access to outdoor space. Some, like Duck Creek, can even take guests into the vineyard on a guided tour. Event and meeting organizers might also like to consult a winery’s calendar to incorporate activities like live music or yoga into a group’s visit.



The Manitowoc area’s two largest meeting venues — which double as hotels — offer a different experience at each. Near I-43, the 204-room Holiday Inn Manitowoc Hotel & Conference Center flaunts 20,000 square feet of meeting space and the on-site 4601 Bar & Bistro, which is open for all-day dining. Closer to the water — and literally above the beach — the Lighthouse Inn on Lake Michigan is in the nearby town of Two Rivers. Just like the name suggests, the Lighthouse’s Water’s Edge Restaurant (open for breakfast, lunch and dinner) overlooks the lake through panoramic windows. Or you can reserve the Seymour Althen Banquet Hall, which also offers lake views.

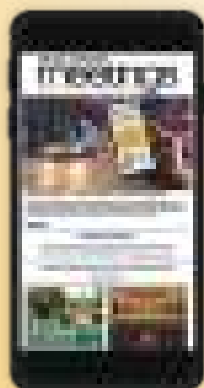
Booking a meeting at either property means guests don’t need to leave, or can at least enjoy leisurely coffee meetings in the morning or cocktail receptions at night — all in the same place, all within the same convenient region of Manitowoc. [WM](#)



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Good Things Come in SMALL(ER) PACKAGES

Although holiday parties may look a bit different this year, organizations are still celebrating, albeit on a smaller scale.



By Ronnie Wendt

Your holiday party plans are in full motion by now. Although they may look a bit different this year, organizations are still finding ways celebrating, albeit on a smaller scale.

"Many people are taking a wait-and-see approach," admits Cheri Davis, event planner and owner of Cheri Denise Events of Mequon. "Other people are doing different things like providing gift boxes for employees, staff and friends, or sending out gift cards. If they do gather, it's in a smaller, more intimate setting."

SCALING BACK THE HOLIDAY SPIRIT?

Todd Conrad, director of group sales at Grand Geneva Resort & Spa of Lake

Geneva, agrees that the pandemic has changed the size of some events, but it hasn't tempered the holiday spirit. "While holiday parties are still of interest, we've seen many organizations scale back to smaller, more private, intimate dinners, luncheons and cocktail receptions," he says. "Companies also are making their holiday parties into winter celebrations that are held in January or February."

But in Eau Claire, the holiday party is alive and well, according to Shari Radford, director of sales at The Florian Gardens Conference Center. She says the venue has a holiday party scheduled every weekend in December, not to mention some midweek events. "So far, things are looking good.

For instance, Radford notes a large national company anticipates bringing in more than 400 people for a holiday celebration among the venue's elaborately decorated Christmas trees and twinkling lights.

EXTRA PRECAUTIONS

When companies throw a holiday party now, what tops their wish list is not festive lights and glittery trees, but a venue well-stocked with hand sanitizer and masks, and plenty of options for social distancing. People are not throwing caution to the wind, Conrad points out. He says groups want to put their best effort forward to keep everyone healthy, and that includes "anti-bacterial wipes, hand sanitizer and masks throughout the event."

As such, social distancing remains a key part of every holiday party. Most planners are seating fewer people at each table round and choosing plated meals over buffets, specifies Conrad. Radford echoes his sentiments, mentioning that The Florian Gardens plans to seat the holiday party of 400 in a ballroom with a capacity of over 525. The venue is also seating six people at tables meant for eight.

Grand Geneva — featuring over 2 million lights, animated scenes, a hallway full of gingerbread houses, and special, holiday-themed seasonal menus — is a magical place during the holiday season. But what's getting people excited this season is its more than 60,000 square feet of function space for larger groups and an outdoor igloo experience for small groups.



©THE FLORIAN GARDENS CONFERENCE CENTER

"We offer ample function space for large and small groups to host their holiday parties," Conrad says. "We limit the number of people at each table to allow for social distancing. Outside accommodations are also a common request."

The Florian Gardens has more outdoor requests, too, even during a season known for healthy snowfalls and frigid temperatures. "We have a group of 250 that plans to host its event outside in December," Radford confirms. Still, most groups prefer the indoors, she says, with "garland and Christmas trees in every corner."

Festive foods make most holiday party highlight reels as well. That's still a focus, both Conrad and Radford say. The buffet is not dead, as some predicted when

the pandemic began. But it has changed. "Though most guests choose plated options, groups that opt for buffets have our waitstaff do the serving," Radford explains. "Every member of our waitstaff must wash their hands and apply hand sanitizer before entering the buffet or touching anything."

Planners and venues are implementing safety checks and new practices to minimize risks and allow guests to celebrate the spirit of the season as it has always been intended. While the events may look slightly different this year, the same holiday cheer will prevail. **WM**



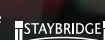
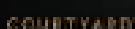
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The New Face of **INCENTIVE TRAVEL**

Incentive travel is making a comeback, with companies choosing regional destinations over faraway places.

By Ronnie Wendt



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Travel remains an enticing incentive for employees. And employers remain committed to including travel as part of their incentive programs for staff. According to a white paper titled "The Changing Face of Incentive Travel," when the Society for Incentive Travel Excellence (SITE) Foundation asked the leaders of 50 companies how committed they were to incentive travel for employee reward and recognition, 94% noted they still support these programs.

After more than a year of beached travel plans, companies are ready to revive their employee incentive travel initiatives.

However, corporate leaders have shifted how far away they are willing to travel. Before the pandemic, North American businesses ventured to faraway places in the Caribbean, Japan and even Croatia. Post-pandemic, they are sticking closer to home.

"We have seen a trend to stay closer," confirms Crystal Zawilinski, sales director of meetings and incentives at Fox World Travel. "Pre-COVID, we saw a lot of incentive travel go to more remote destinations like Europe. We are not seeing as many of those requests now. But we have seen a huge uptick in domestic travel, including Wisconsin-based programs."

Zawilinski believes health concerns factor into this shift. "If anyone gets sick, they are still in the country and often in their own state," she says. "Many people also remain nervous about air travel and prefer to stay within driving distance."

As incentive travel moves closer to home, more employees are bringing the entire family along, too. Mark Wallskog, owner of Heartwood Resort & Conference Center, suggests, "Family members can enjoy the amenities, while also attending



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school or working remotely," mentioning Heartwood even upgraded its internet speed to accommodate this trend.

WHY WISCONSIN?

Wisconsin's reputation for beer, cheese and frigid weather often colors people's perceptions of the Dairy State. But it offers so much more. Zawilinski works to alter this black-and-white mindset, noting, "Incentive travel doesn't always have to involve a beach and a margarita. It can include other experiences as well."

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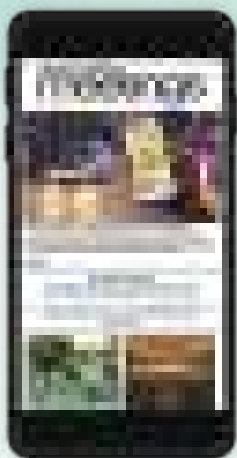
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She adds, "Since the pandemic, clients are more focused on visiting resorts vs. cities and remote places with more room to spread out. I've had clients request things like outdoor entrances to rooms, boutique properties with fewer people and resorts offering a variety of on-site activities."

Here, Wisconsin stands positioned to deliver. Resorts and lodges offering novel experiences dot the landscape. "Wisconsin offers many fabulous resorts. Often, we find people are unaware of our offerings," Zawilinski says.

Heartwood Resort & Conference Center provides an example of what visitors can expect at the state's premium resorts. Located on 700 private acres in the northern Wisconsin wilderness, the Trego resort draws in visitors with cozy accommodations, a tranquil atmosphere and vast recreational opportunities from skiing to water sports. Wallskog believes the state's serene setting provides a perfect backdrop for incentive trips. "Even the highways are calming and quiet and surrounded by pine trees," he observes. And if the start of a trip is peaceful, he says it can "set the tone for the entire trip."

Danielle Léon, an account executive at Red Shoes Inc., a national marketing agency, agrees. The company's team traveled to Heartwood Resort from Wisconsin, Minnesota, California and Florida for a recent gathering. "We heard from everyone, even those who live in Miami and San Diego, that they loved how calming it is here. They appreciated that they couldn't hear traffic, loud music and commotion," she says. "They got to enjoy nature and disconnect from the workday hustle. It was such a connecting experience."

PACK TRIPS WITH NOVEL EXPERIENCES

As the pandemic persists, Fox World Travel sees requests for things like golf, shopping, hiking and other outdoor activities that people can explore at their leisure. "People are still very interested in food and are comfortable in restaurant environments in smaller groups," Zawilinski says. "It's about providing unique experiences through entertainment, activities and more."

Often those activities reside on site, as at Heartwood Resort, where guests can take a canoe or kayak trip down the Namekagon River, hike or cross-country ski through miles of trails, or fish and swim at Hoinville Lake, one of the resort's private lakes. Guests can even bring their ATVs to explore neighboring trails that connect to the resort.

Within and beyond the walls of the resort, "We arrange on-site and off-site activities, and even put together campfires with s'mores or a special meal, and we include these activities in the group package. There are fishing guides and high-end golf courses nearby. We work with groups to customize their packages to deliver the experiences they seek," explains Wallskog.

On-site activities are a definite plus. According to Zawilinski, "We collaborate with groups to customize packages," too. Fox World Travel considers attendees and their guests, the goals for the experience, and everyone's comfort levels, then provides suggestions. "We don't recreate the same program over and over," she says. "You cannot provide the same cookie-cutter activities to every group. When you understand their needs, you can deliver the experiences they desire."

Fox World Travel also helps planners get creative. For instance, winter travel can be special. "You can create great ice bars or skating events, provide opportunities to ski, and come together later to sip a custom cocktail by the fire," she says. "Then add in art and music to create a very warm environment enjoyed by everyone."

MAKE IT ALL-INCLUSIVE

Clients seek all-inclusive packages for domestic incentive travel. Destination resorts outside the country always offer these packages. Stateside, they are the exception rather than the norm. Heartwood recently added all-inclusive packages to respond to this need. "We put together packages for corporate groups, offering an all-inclusive, per-person rate," confirms Wallskog. "We've found that really helps with planning for groups."

Zawilinski agrees that it's critical for resorts to offer all-inclusive packages.



"Our incentive clients were using all-inclusive resort properties in Mexico or the Caribbean," she says. "Even though they are staying domestic, they want the same level of service and experience here."

Clients also seek out incentive programs that include off-site activities. "We might help companies navigate destinations where restaurants still have capacity restrictions, for example, and even set up reservations in advance," she adds.

MODIFY PROGRAMS FOR HEALTH AND SAFETY

Since the pandemic, groups request more modifications to their travel plans, namely in dining and hospitality, reports Zawilinski. Buffets are passé, for instance, with most groups opting for plated dinners or boxed lunches. "There are very few buffets anymore," she says. "And if they have a buffet, servers dish out the food."

On the hospitality level, many venues had to reduce housekeeping frequency to address staffing shortages, but Zawilinski says, because of COVID, most guests prefer it that way. She's also seeing a shift toward more organic networking activities compared to the structured activities of the past. "This way, people can opt in and out of activities based on their comfort levels," she says. "Some



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groups use ribbon systems to show other attendees how comfortable they are in social settings.”

Furthermore, clients are asking Fox World Travel to connect them to resorts with safety precautions in place, such as hand-sanitizing stations, extra masks and the ability to social distance.

PLAN FOR THE UNEXPECTED

When planning incentive-based travel during a pandemic, expect the unexpected. “That’s the name of the game right now,” admits Zawilinski. “We’ve always had a Plan B. But now there is a Plan C and D because things are constantly changing. We’ve had to be incredibly flexible.”

Before the pandemic, Fox World Travel planned food and beverage for incentive travel six months in advance. That window has tightened. Now groups delay these decisions as long as they can and venues are open to it, according to Zawilinski. So for your incentive travel plans, “be nimble,” she emphasizes.

Last-minute cancellations are becoming the rule rather than the exception, warns Zawilinski. Venues are remaining flexible with these concerns. She says, “We make sure our contracts cover these situations. Our vendors are fantastic partners who work through these challenges with us.”

As long as travelers pack bags that hold masks and hand sanitizer, along with swimsuits and formal wear, incentive travel will require flexibility. The good news is Wisconsin stands ready to serve companies that want to keep trips closer to home, while delivering experiences that create memories for a lifetime. **WM**

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PLANNER PROFILE

COMMITTED TO COMING BACK

WITH A MEETINGS HISTORY DOTTED WITH HARD-WON TRIUMPHS, CHERYL OSWALD REMAINS POSITIVE AND COMMITTED TO A COVID-19 COMEBACK.

BY CARRIE MANTHEY

With more than 12 years at Kohl's under her belt, Cheryl Oswald is a project manager of store operations, experience and events in Menomonee Falls, a suburb of Milwaukee. It's a title she's crafted and earned after gaining status as a Certified Meeting Professional (CMP), and attaining Meeting Professionals International's (MPI's) Certification in Meeting Management (CMM) and a Master of Business Administration (MBA) over her tenure. Beyond continuing education, Oswald credits attending industry events, including those associated with MPI, connecting with peers and reading industry publications for helping grow her career.

She says, "My background has always been in retail, so it was only natural that I found my way to Kohl's corporate. After spending the first year and a half with Kohl's in another role, I found an opportunity on the events team. Nine years later, I am still on the events team and elevated the role into the events project manager position I hold today. Kohl's has given me the foundation and support to build my event career. They have supported me in my efforts to pursue all my certifications and continuing education (CMP, CMM and MBA), as well as giving me the freedom to plan events."

Along with that freedom to plan events comes a busy meetings and events schedule. In an average year, Kohl's holds between 10 and 15 meetings, many of them at its corporate office in Menomonee Falls, but a couple

out-of-state meetings, too. This year, however, Oswald reports, "Most in-person meetings are currently on hold. But we were able to hold our first in-person event in September!"

That's a large coup for Oswald, who's essentially a meeting-planning team of one for such a large organization. But that's just one coup in a long line of accomplishments. According to her, one of her crowning achievements involved organizing an event to benefit Kohl's associates directly affected by Hurricane Harvey. "In a matter of weeks after Hurricane Harvey, we were able to gather donation items from associates across 1,157 stores. These items were then shipped to Houston, where I planned an event for 750 associates and their families affected by the hurricane. Associates were able to come to the event, pick up necessary items and have the support of over 200 Kohl's volunteers," she says.

Unfortunately, that's not the only natural catastrophe-related incident with which Oswald has had to contend. When Hurricane Irma landed, for the first time in its history, Kohl's had to cancel a 750-person program in Orlando. "In a matter of days, I worked with vendors to cancel the program with little to no financial impact; canceled and

"I have a serious case of the event blues. I miss planning meetings. I can't wait to get back to whatever our normal cadence will be."

— Cheryl Oswald, Kohl's

rebooked travel for our attendees; and set up livestreaming for those not traveling to our corporate office for the newly rescheduled event," Oswald remembers. It's this kind of quick thinking and pivoting that makes a successful planner.

Oswald continues to work toward normalcy in the face of the coronavirus: "I think we are all striving to get back to whatever normal is, but I definitely just want to get back to in-person events and planning again. I have a serious case of the event blues. I miss planning meetings. I can't wait to get back to whatever our normal cadence will be."

Despite struggling with the slowdown in current in-person planning, Oswald remains positive and busy planning for future in-person meetings, saying, "We will be back, and I look forward to the day when we are in full swing again!" **WM**



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