

Convention industry leaders say central Ohio business rebounding

By [ELISSA COLLOPY - The Daily Reporter](#) | Thursday, September 23, 2021

More than a year after COVID-19-related government restrictions shuttered large gatherings, events and conventions in central Ohio are returning to in-person meetings and industry leaders expect the number of meetings to increase even more by the end of the year.

“Despite the Delta variant, we are seeing a bright future in the third and fourth quarters of 2021,” said John Page, general manager of the Greater Columbus Convention Center.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, nearly 200 events scheduled for the convention center have been cancelled or rescheduled for future years. The cancelations resulted in the facility reducing its workforce of more than 200 by more than half.

But business has been improving quickly and is expected to only get better, Page says.

“We have event bookings through 2029, with the Professional Convention Management Association— with 4,000 expected attendees and \$6.2 million direct visitor spending— scheduled for 2023,” said Page.

Back in April, the convention center began hosting larger events when government-mandated capacity restrictions were relaxed, including a USA Volleyball event with 5,000 attendees and athletes, and several large citywide conferences and events over the summer, including AmericanHort’s Cultivate21 tradeshow, which brought in about 8,500 attendees.

The convention center has hosted more than 230 events since the start of the pandemic.

“We’re even more positive today about where this industry stands, the future of meetings, conferences and events and Columbus as a national destination,” said Page.

Jarrold Clabaugh, president and CEO of the Ohio Society of Association Professionals, also says he’s optimistic about the meeting industry’s future.

“Pessimism only creates more fear and negativity at a time when our members and most Americans already are overloaded with the day-to-day concerns impacting their families, businesses and communities,” he said.

But for industries like hospitality, tourism and leisure, challenges are still significant, Clabaugh acknowledged.

“Many industry reports are saying things won’t return to pre-pandemic levels until 2024,” he said.

During the pandemic, OSAP team members have worked to develop virtual options to assist members, help them assist their own association members and coordinate associations’ services with government officials.

“Our face-to-face events were moved online, revenue fell sharply and membership declined as many within our membership categories found themselves unemployed or furloughed for extensive periods of time,” said Clabaugh.

“With each new case of COVID-19, we worry because our organizations and our members are yearning to return to traditional face-to-face meetings.”

In July, OSAP held its annual conference in-person. Though the meeting was limited to 120 people based on the venue's requirements, OSAP met that limit and even had to turn people away.

"Yes, this was before the Delta variant was the leading story every day, but everyone spoke of how thankful they were to not be appearing via their laptop cameras," said Clabaugh.

"We were lucky to have held our annual conference in mid-July in Athens this year before new case numbers once again rose," he said.

Being an organization for association professionals, he said OSAP understands that face-to-face meetings hold greater value than virtual interactions.

However, Clabaugh says moving forward, he sees most meetings being required to have a hybrid setup— in-person options along with virtual for those looking to rein in travel costs.

Though there's a push for in-person events, OSAP and its members' organizations want to ensure they are putting members' health before their organizations' wealth.

"This has been a mantra for our organization since March 2020, and we've seen it with many other organizations, too," said Clabaugh. "Everyone in our association community is being cautious, but optimistically so."

In other parts of the country, convention and meeting business is also rebounding.

In late August, 30,000 masked attendees gathered in Las Vegas for ASD Market Week, a retail trade show. In Chicago, the Black Women's Expo recently held the largest event in its history, with 432 vendors and thousands of masked attendees.

"People are cautious, but they're glad to be able to get out and network with other people," said Dr. Barbara Hall, whose company, JBlendz Communications, was among the exhibitors at the expo.

Still, it could be several years — if ever — before conferences attract the crowds they did before the pandemic.

Experts say one of the big lessons of 2020 is that much of what happens at conferences and trade shows can happen virtually, lessening the need for big in-person events.

Jaiprit Viridi, an assistant professor at the University of Delaware, said moving events online made them more accessible to the disabled and those who can't afford to travel.

Viridi, who is deaf, said she's relieved that in-person conferences are requiring masks for safety. But masks create serious barriers for her, since she relies on lip-reading.

"We don't need to go back to the way things were pre-COVID, but rather embrace the lessons from the past year-and-a-half to improve how we conduct these spaces for everyone," Viridi said in an email.

Paddy Cosgrave, the CEO of the Web Summit, a tech conference aimed at startups, said last year's virtual-only event was less expensive — people paid just \$100 to attend, versus \$700 previously — and drew in more participants from developing countries. But attendees also felt something was lacking.

"In-person meetings provide a quality of interaction that no amount of technology as of yet can replicate," Cosgrave said.

A lot is riding on the revival of in-person meetings. Prior to the pandemic, conferences and trade shows generated more than \$1 trillion in direct spending and attracted 1.5 billion attendees annually around the world, according to the Events Industry Council, a trade group.

The group hasn't yet calculated the impact of the virus globally, but the Center for Exhibition Industry Research, which studies the economic impact of U.S. business-to-business trade shows, said those events alone were expected to generate \$105 billion in direct and indirect spending in 2020. Instead, that plunged to \$24 billion. CEIR doesn't expect a return to growth for the industry until 2023.

Chicago's McCormick Place, the largest convention center in the U.S., laid off 90 percent of its 2,800 workers last year after 234 events were canceled, said Larita Clark, the CEO of the Metropolitan Pier and Exposition Authority.

One of the complex's two hotels, the Marriott Marquis Chicago, was temporarily closed; the other, the Hyatt Regency Chicago, saw occupancy drop as low as 10 percent.

The economic losses extend far beyond exhibition complexes. Fern, a 112-year-old Cincinnati company, builds exhibits and other infrastructure for 1,400 events in a normal year. But for most of last year and the beginning of this year, its revenue dropped well over 90 percent, said Aaron Bludworth, Fern's president and CEO.

"This was much more brutal than anything I have experienced in my career," Bludworth said.

Bludworth doesn't expect his business to fully recover until 2023. But he has been surprised by the demand he's seeing for fall, when his company will be mounting several hundred shows.

He's had some requests for help with virtual presentations, he said, but demand for in-person events is stronger.

"Maybe you can do education virtually, but when a buyer and seller connect and go out and have dinner, that cannot happen virtually," he said. "Our community realizes we've got to get together and sell products and make this commerce happen."

Steve Hill, CEO and president of the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority, said 2022 is shaping up to be a good year for the industry. But he acknowledges a lot will depend on the situation around COVID-19 and whether international travel restrictions are lifted. Foreigners can account for 20 percent to 30 percent of attendees at the city's major events, he said.

Hill thinks virtual convention elements are here to stay. They give shows another revenue stream and help them develop followers, he said. But Hill thinks enough people will continue to visit in person that hybrid events won't hurt hotels and restaurants in convention cities.

"The shows will get back to 100 percent attendance. People need the in-person aspect of a show," he said.

But Sherrif Karamat, the president and CEO of the Professional Convention Management Association, is not so sure, particularly as more convention attendees question the environmental impact of travel. Karamat is excited about the prospect of virtual conferencing bringing the world closer.

"Learning should not be limited to any one channel. Business networking should not be limited to any one channel," he said.

Karamat says the pandemic is already reshaping the convention industry. Organizers are thinking more deeply about why their conferences matter and the outcomes they want to achieve, he said, which will lead to more meaningful gatherings.

"I'm very bullish," he said. "I feel we're going to take this much more seriously."

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