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SKIFT MEETINGS MEGATRENDS 2026

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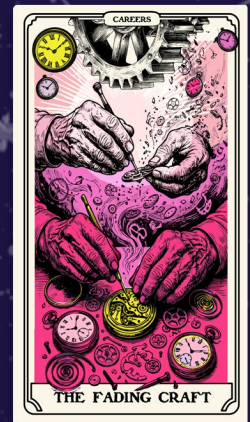
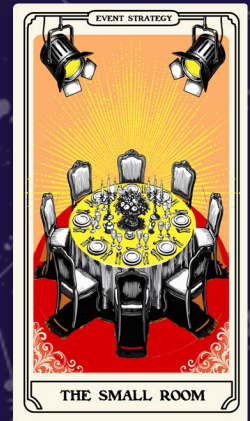
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Introduction

The Skift Meetings Megatrends 2026 report is an essential, forward-looking analysis, charting the most profound and transformative forces currently shaping the future landscape of meetings, events, and incentives globally. It is designed to move beyond anecdotal evidence and surface-level trends, offering deeply researched, strategic insights that are indispensable for every event professional and industry leader.

This comprehensive report was developed with a singular purpose: to equip industry leaders with the critical intelligence necessary to effectively navigate an era of persistent uncertainty, transcend conventional thinking, and move past reactive planning. It is a guide for understanding disruption and turning it into a strategic advantage to drive intentional, profitable, and sustainable growth.

From the rise of live events as a vital counterpoint to AI-generated “slop” and the strategic shift toward smaller, more focused “micro events,” to the detailed examination of the deepening talent gap, managing relentless cost pressures, and operating amid intense political polarization, this report offers actionable, research-driven insights to redefine success in the year ahead.



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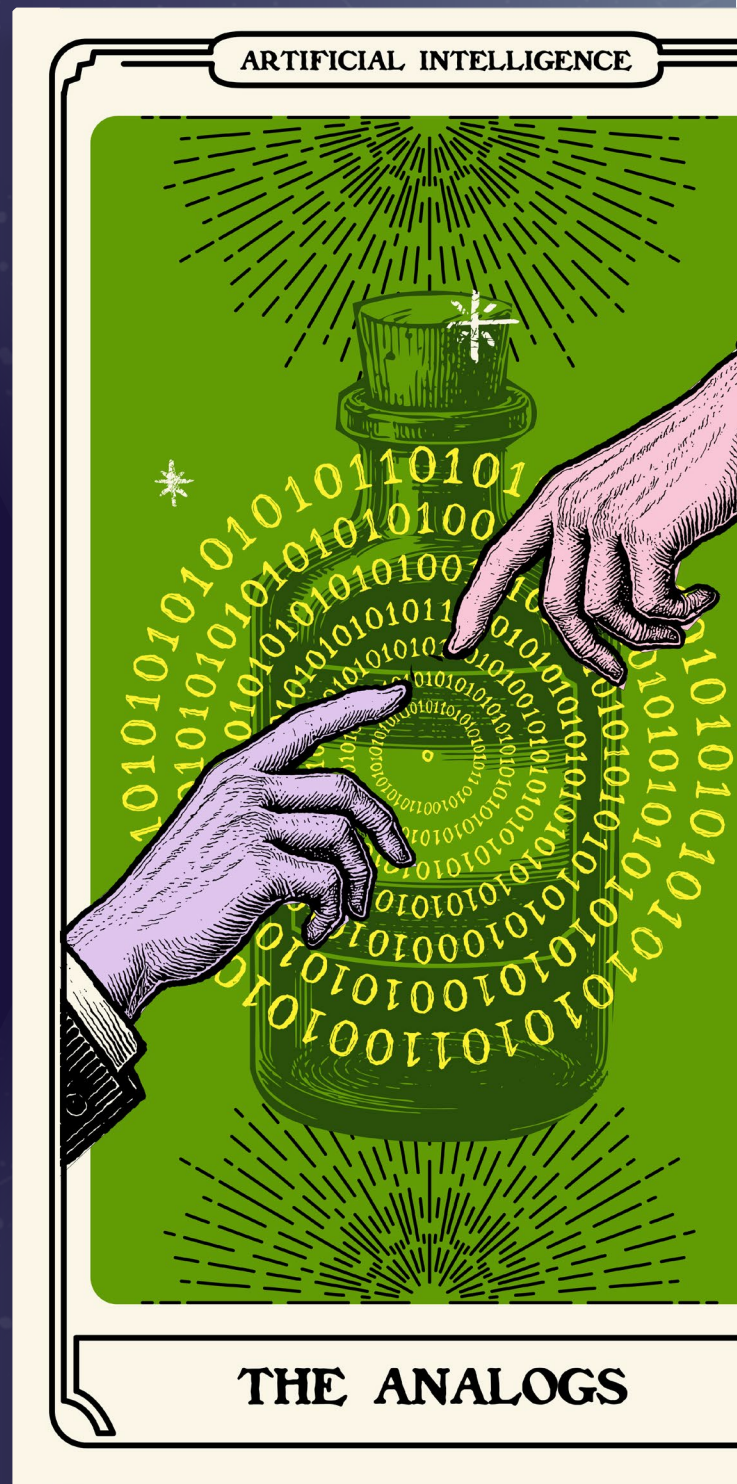
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Live Events Become the Antidote to AI Slop

MIGUEL NEVES



Skift Take

A growing societal fatigue with content generated by artificial intelligence (AI) is creating a new appreciation for authenticity, making live, in-person experiences a refreshing counterpoint to the flood of digital information.

In June, investor Mark Cuban posted on X (formerly Twitter): “Within the next 3 years, there will be so much AI, in particular AI video, people won’t know if what they see or hear is real. Which will lead to an explosion of f2f engagement, events and jobs. Those that were in the office will be in the field. Call it the Milli Vanilli effect.”

Cuban makes the point that when AI can simulate almost everything, being physically present becomes proof of authenticity. Live events are inherently unscripted and imperfect — and that is now a selling point.

GROWING SKEPTICISM TOWARD AI

Reinforcing this opportunity is the mood around AI, which has slowly but steadily shifted from the incredulous reactions to the first uses of ChatGPT in November 2022 to relative indifference to the daily announcement of incremental improvements.

A CEO quoting ChatGPT responses from the stage may have been cutting-edge in 2023. By 2024 this had lost its appeal and in 2025 this is unacceptable and borderline unprofessional. There is an unspoken “acceptable AI” spectrum that is different for each person.

This skepticism or indifference can also be seen in a drop in social media usage. According to a study commissioned by the Financial Times, time spent on social media peaked in 2022 and has declined steadily ever since with teens and young adults curtailing their use the most of any age group. The rise of AI-generated content on social media is one of the drivers of this trend, but overall media saturation and political polarization are other factors.

In events, the use of AI for logistics, administrative tasks and event communications is generally deemed fine, but AI-generated keynote content is not. We are drawing our own ethical lines around how AI is deployed across society and events are no different.

The way event tech companies market themselves follow the same pattern. While many were keen to add “.ai” to brand names 12 months ago, AI is now only selectively used in their marketing.

THE UGLY SIDE OF AI

Fueling the changing mood around AI is a distrust in the technology. Aside from fears of advanced general intelligence (AGI) taking over the world and mass job losses, there is a rise of what some call “AI slop” — low-quality, synthetic content.

While data on how much content is currently generated by AI is difficult to quantify, one report suggests that just over half of the content on the internet is AI-generated. This illustrates the immense scale of synthetic content flooding daily life, and making the pursuit of authentic content a daily challenge.

AI slop mainly takes the form of online content created quickly with little care for accuracy or copyrights to boost SEO or sway political favor. But the business variation is “workslop,” defined by researchers as “AI generated work content that masquerades as good work, but lacks the substance to meaningfully advance a given task.” A striking example of “workslop” is a report prepared by Deloitte for the Australian government that was discovered to contain AI hallucinations. This incident led to a partial refund of the \$285,000 (AU\$440,000) paid and provided a clear example of the consequences of unchecked AI deployment.

THE RISE OF ANTI-AI ACTIONS

While Silicon Valley continues to openly invest in slop-generating startups, creative humans are responding by bringing production value down to bare bones to highlight human creativity and performance. Timothée Chalamet’s satirical promotion video for the film Marty Supreme is an 18-minute-long Zoom call that is too awkward and imperfect to be generated by AI.

In reality, content is often hard to distinguish as AI-generated, particularly when the intention of the content is to deceive or mimic human-generated content. An “anti-AI” sentiment among consumers and creators demands clarity on content provenance. “AI-free” is emerging as a new authenticity credential, drawing parallels to labels like “organic” in food production or “handcrafted” in luxury goods.

The CREDO23 movement for film offers an “AI-free” stamp for projects that pledge zero AI use. In publishing, the Authors Guild now offers a “Human Authored” certification that signifies a book was written by a human and not generated by AI. Not by AI provides badges for a small fee that creators can display on their work to explicitly label their work as human-made. These movements and certifications acknowledge that the process of creation — and the guarantee of human effort — holds intrinsic value that consumers are looking for. The hope is that they are also willing to pay more for AI-free creative work, creating cultural economics where scarcity of authenticity creates premium value.

Some corporations are also taking a stance. In September, Spotify announced a crackdown on AI-generated tracks, purging over 75 million spammy tracks and explicitly banning unauthorized AI voice clones to combat content that “degrades the user experience” and “interferes with authentic artists.” This refreshing, long-term approach, may be driven by research that suggests AI-generated content does not perform well.

UNFAKEABLE LIVE EVENTS APPEAL

Consumers are gravitating toward unfakeable live experiences. This is backed by a 2023 Freeman trends report that showed that people rank in-person events as the most trusted information source and prioritize human interactions like product demonstrations.

"You cannot fake events. So events are the only authentic communication channel that is out there. And this is why experiences outplay everything," said VOK DAMS Co-CEO Colja Dams. The agency leader is a power user of AI and event tech. In his view, while everything surrounding an event — the marketing, the design, the logistics — can be augmented by AI, you can't fake the live event itself.

The good news is that companies are responding and increasing event spend. Dams said that the agency's clients are following the desire for real connection. "Marketing budgets are under pressure, but the amount of marketing money going into live events is rising."

The Amex GBT's 2026 Global Meetings and Events Forecast backs up to positive sentiment, stating that 85% of meeting professionals surveyed are "optimistic" about the business outlook for the year ahead, the best result since 2021.

DOUBLING DOWN ON BEAUTIFUL HUMAN IMPERFECTIONS

AI saturation and skepticism, paired with changes in how people seek and consume media, products, and experiences all lead to boosting the appeal of live events. But for events to truly benefit from being seen as an alternative to AI saturation, they need to focus on making the most of human connections, as well as celebrating imperfections.

Two of the most famous tech events, Salesforce's Dreamforce and HubSpot's INBOUND, emerged from the Covid pandemic in a trimmed down format. Dreamforce went from 170,000 in 2019 attendees to 40,000 this year, while INBOUND went from 26,000 in 2019 to capping this year's event at 13,000. Both companies have strategically chosen to stay smaller in size and more focused to provide a better experience for all.

Informa, the world's largest event organizer, has invested significantly in the business festivals format that provide an engaging, high-end atmosphere with a high production value, in contrast to trade shows focused solely on scale.

Event design is also a factor, with events that go deeper on participation and genuine interaction set to win out. Event designers like Adrian Segar and Liz Lathan have long championed participatory formats that turn attendees from passive consumers into active contributors.

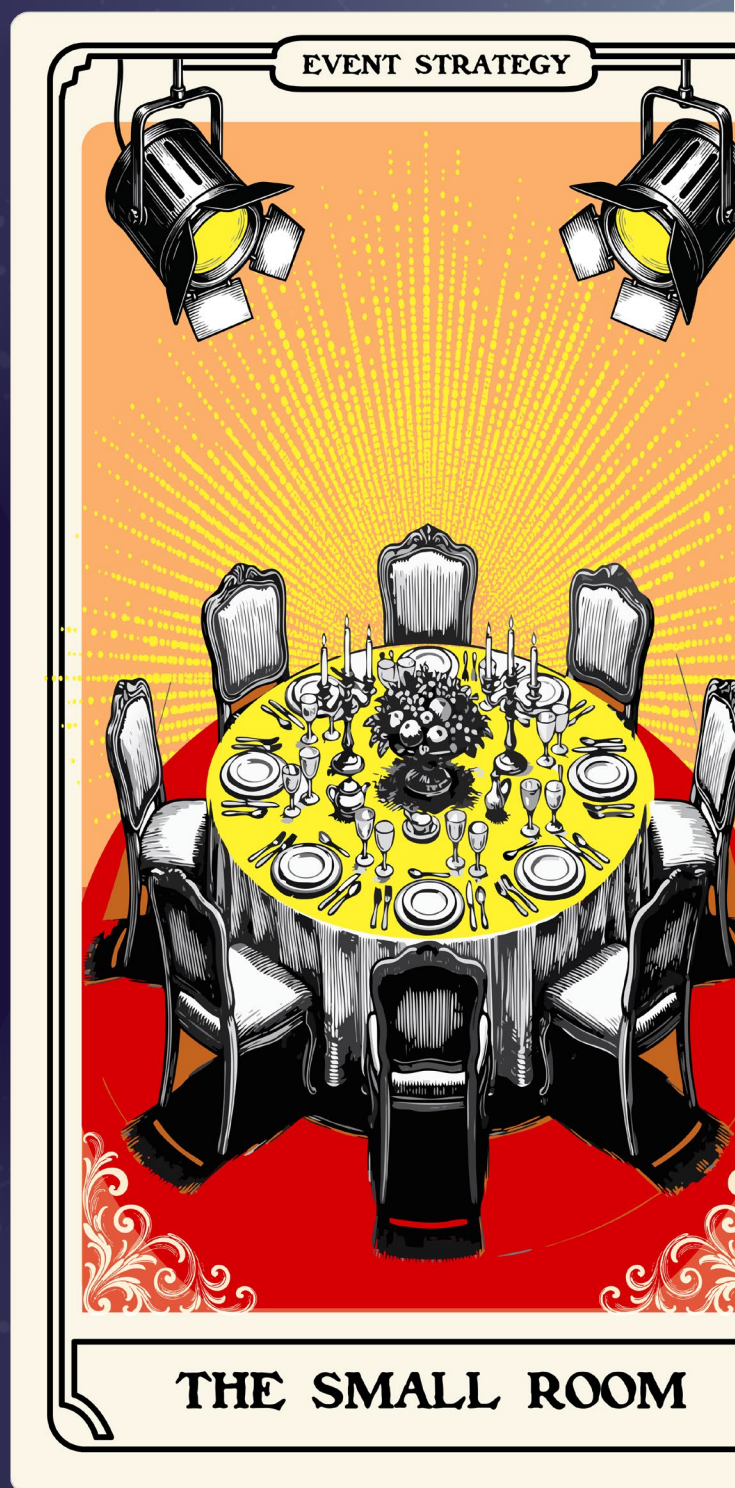
Stage formats are also changing to showcase the unfakeable nature of live events. While the goal for most keynotes and main stage sessions is to create a flawlessly produced stage performance, the rise of live podcasts showcase a different approach. They allow for largely unscripted content that embrace spontaneity and unedited, real-time presence.

Live events offer something technology cannot replicate: the energy, spontaneity, and trust built through human connection and physical presence. In a world filled with AI, the unfakeable nature of a live moment is the new luxury, making the in-person gathering a vibrant and counterbalance to synthetic content and virtual connections. Now it's up to the events industry to ensure it can reap the benefits of this unintended benefit of AI. ◀

2

Bigger Isn't Always Better: Why Micro Events Are the Next Big Thing

ANDREA DOYLE



Skift Take

Planners are rethinking scale. Today's most successful gatherings aren't the largest, they're the most intentional.

Across the events landscape, size is losing its appeal. Planners are trading spectacle for substance, and building experiences that prioritize authentic human connection.

"Micro events" typically ranging from 10 to 100 participants, are designed to foster genuine engagement, create trust, and deliver measurable value. Some are regional gatherings with shorter time commitments; others are invite-only retreats or focused summits. What they all share is intention: a curated environment where conversation flows and relationships deepen.

Liz Lathan, co-founder of Club Ichi, said "there is a greater chance that the organizer has intentionally curated the invitation list so making quality connections feels more guaranteed." She believes attendees prefer micro-events as they involve a shorter time commitment and are usually regional, so less travel is involved. But equally there is a greater chance that any content or conversation will be more aligned with their interests. "Consuming content has become so ubiquitous, it feels unnecessary to commit to a three-day conference to listen to something that could have been a podcast," said Lathan.

A SHRINKING SEGMENT, BUT NOT A SHRINKING INDUSTRY

While some sectors are seeing smaller gatherings, the events industry overall remains steady. According to the Center for Exhibition Industry Research (CEIR), estimates project 2025 ending in the -1% to -4% range, with several segments showing growth.

Healthcare and government meetings, for instance, have slowed due to new federal policies enacted since President Donald Trump returned to office.

A generational shift is also contributing to smaller gatherings. Baby Boomers, who long fueled large-scale conferences, are retiring, while younger professionals are selective about how they spend their time. They won't attend a meeting just because.

THE RISE OF INTENTIONAL SUB-COMMUNITIES

Intentional communities play an important role in this trend. Rather than targeting everyone, they're spaces for smaller groups with shared interests or goals.

"Personalization of everything is a major trend that plays into the micro meeting concept," said Nancy Drapeau, VP of research at CEIR - Center for Exhibition Industry Research.

They also promote collaboration, belonging, and loyalty. Event organizers and sponsors report stronger engagement, richer feedback, and higher satisfaction rates.

According to Maritz, there is a growing trend toward personalization in order to make a large event feel smaller and more intimate.

"Particularly for generations entering the workforce, there is a desire for meaningful connection and real voices over flashy production. We are seeing growing interest in 'micro-communities' within larger events as well as curated content and networking opportunities," said Steve O'Malley, Chief Operating Officer of Maritz.

Freeman's [eXperience Trends Report 2025](#) highlights a growing disconnect between what planners showcase and what attendees value most. While organizers often equate success with keynote speakers, grand stages, or high production value, attendees say their most meaningful experiences come from peer learning, intimate networking, and product discovery, all outcomes that smaller formats support.

Micro events deliver on these expectations. They allow planners to design with intention, not scale. Yet, paradoxically, they can be just as challenging to produce.

According to Lathan, micro-events might be even tougher to plan than mega events.

"The venue matters more, and someone has to pay more attention to the actual attendee experience because there is no follow the crowd journey," she said. "Attendees expect a higher level of personalization and concierge-level touches, putting more of a burden on planners."

Still, Lathan said the payoff is worth it. "From a business perspective, the relationship building that comes from personal attention drives better relationships faster than trying to scan badges and nurture conversations when sorting through a sea of attendees," said Lathan.

As micro events multiply, planners are debating how to scale them without losing their essence. "Does the event team set a template and let sales run them, or do the events need the onsite presence of a person from the team?" asks Lathan.

In uncertain economic times, their appeal is also financial. Smaller gatherings require less elaborate production and fewer logistical costs, yet often deliver higher perceived value.

SMALL MOMENTS CONNECTED WITH BIG EVENTS

Event marketing that focuses on the number of attendees, sessions and speakers an event has, replacing that with the people they can meet and connect with. This is where smaller gatherings connected with bigger events help.

Healthtech conference HLTH, held in Las Vegas Oct. 19-22, offered its 12,000 attendees curated attendee journeys, micro-experiences, specialty summits and interactive workshops designed to foster targeted, community-driven interactions for subsets of the broader healthcare audience.

Tech mega-show CES is deploying regional delegate programs in 2026 including the five-day "Road to CES Asia-Pacific" in Beijing in September. Regional efforts act as micro-forum satellites of the main show that are more curated and geographically proximate.

Within the main CES show there are several gatherings targeted at specific audiences. C Space is promoted as a "gathering place for advertisers, marketers, and media executives." New for 2026 is CES Foundry at Fontainebleau Las Vegas as a dedicated event focused on "AI, blockchain, and quantum innovation."

"We continue to find ways to build communities in ways that add value for our attendees, exhibitors, and media," said Kinsey Fabrizio, president, CTA.

Another example is the Tech Basel Miami AI Summit hosted by eMerge Americas on December 3, created to help eMerge evolve beyond its annual flagship event, the eMerge Conference + Expo. "These focused experiences dive deeper into transformative technologies, connect innovators in intimate settings and build momentum that strengthens our tech ecosystem," said Melissa Medina, CEO and co-founder of eMerge Americas.

These formats let major events deliver both scale and intimacy, combining the reach of large expos with the impact of face-to-face conversation.

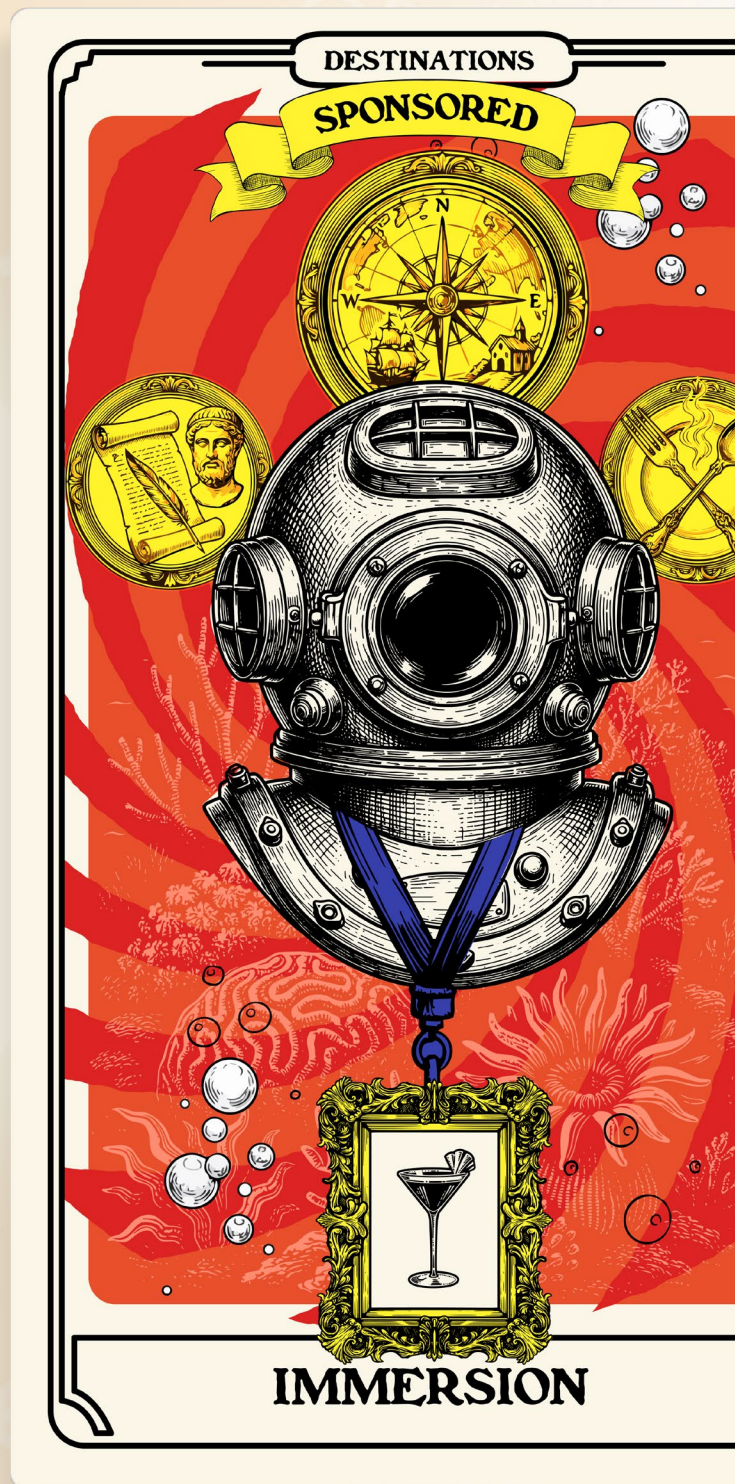


3

Q&A: The Experience-First Mindset Is Redefining Event Design

CREATED IN PARTNERSHIP WITH **VISIT AUSTIN**

ALISON MCCARTHY



Skift Take

In 2026, planners are shifting to an experience-first mindset, designing events that extend beyond traditional venues. By integrating local culture, neighborhoods, and talent, meetings become immersive journeys that transform attendee engagement and set a new standard for authentic, destination-driven event design worldwide.

Attendee expectations have evolved beyond convenience and content. Today, attendees are craving events that feel dynamic, participatory, and connected to a genuine sense of place. To meet this demand, planners are weaving local culture, cuisine, music, and distinctive venues into their programs to spark emotion and create lasting memories.

Whether it's a curated content-driven session in a music venue, a custom workshop in a boutique hotel, or a networking activity in an art gallery, the event itself has become a journey rather than a fixed agenda. As budgets tighten and attention spans shrink, investing in creative, authentic experience design is becoming the ultimate differentiator, transforming "where" a meeting happens into how it's felt.

SkiftX spoke with Steve Genovesi, executive vice president of Visit Austin, about how planners will think less like logistics managers and more like experience designers in 2026, focusing on crafting stories and interactions that feel uniquely tied to the destination.



› Steve Genovesi
Executive Vice President,
Visit Austin

Steve Genovesi serves as Visit Austin's Executive Vice President, overseeing the Sales, Sports, and Destination Service departments. Steve has more than 40 years of sales and marketing experience in the convention and meetings industry, including 14 years with Visit Austin. His career highlights include serving as the VP of Sales and Marketing for the Chattanooga CVB and leadership roles with Marriott International, including Director of Sales at the Atlanta Marriott Marquis during the 1996 Atlanta Summer Olympic Games and opening General Manager for one of the largest urban Residence Inns located in downtown Philadelphia.

SkiftX: How can planners think beyond the convention center when designing events, not just in Austin, but in any destination with rich cultural assets?

Steve Genovesi: The industry's really starting to rethink what "event design" means. It's no longer just about what happens inside the convention center. We're seeing more planners treat the entire destination as the venue. That means getting out of a single box and creating a kind of campus experience, where attendees can explore, connect, and engage with the city itself.

In a city like Austin, for example, that means taking advantage of the places that make the city so distinctive. You might hold a curated, content-driven session at a venue that reflects the ethos of your event, such as ACL Live at the Moody Theater, the Blanton Museum of Art, or a local gallery in East Austin. Networking could take shape in more social, community-minded settings, like a historic dance hall, or over an intimate dinner at one of our legendary barbecue joints or new concept restaurants. Even the journey between venues can become part of the experience — think themed transportation or guided walks with planned moments of surprise and discovery along the way.

There's a growing demand for authenticity and local connection. How can destinations and CVBs help planners meaningfully incorporate those elements into their programs?

The CVB's role is evolving from a sales organization to a true destination connector. Our job is to open doors to an authentic version of the city. At Visit Austin, for example, our Destination Services team helps planners tap into the local fabric, connecting them with speakers, entertainers, venues, and experiences that bring their event vision to life.

That can take many different forms. On the music side, it's not just booking a band, but commissioning a local artist to create a sonic identity for the event or inviting a musician to lead a workshop on creative flow. For innovation-focused events, we can pair a tech keynote with a fireside chat featuring one of Austin's startup founders. And with food, it's about moving beyond the menu, perhaps by offering a private market tour with a local chef, followed by a collaborative cooking experience that celebrates Texas ingredients.

Austin has long been known for its creative energy and collaborative spirit. How has that culture influenced the city's approach to meetings and events?

Austin's creative DNA not only influences meetings but gives planners permission to think bigger. The result is a high-energy, collaborative ecosystem where local talent meets world-class creative design.

Our creative capital is an open resource. We encourage planners to move away from predictable formats and use the entire city as a dynamic venue. That might involve collaborating with local musicians, artists, or small businesses to incorporate authentic Austin experiences directly into the program. Maybe it's transforming a historic music venue for a keynote, or co-creating a session with one of our tech innovators. Whatever the idea, the community is ready to get involved.

As Austin undergoes the Convention Center expansion and redevelopment, what lessons have you learned about flexibility, partnership, and reimagining the attendee journey?

We're approaching this moment more like a product launch than a reactive pivot. It's a chance to completely reimagine how people meet in our city and how attendees experience Austin. With its walkable downtown, distinctive neighborhoods that lend themselves to curated event campuses, and a deep hotel inventory of 15,000 rooms downtown and 50,000 citywide, the city is built for it.

We've also learned that creating these kinds of experiences really comes down to consistency, communication, and collaboration. When everyone's aligned, from service and timing to branding, every touchpoint feels intentional. That kind of coordination around logistics, guest flow, and visual identity helps planners deliver a unified, high-impact experience from start to finish.

What are some examples of events or activations in Austin that have successfully embodied this "experience-first" mindset?

Bringing thousands of attendees to Austin every March, SXSW is one of the world's premier events for music, film, and innovative media. The city's creative energy, independent spirit, and vibrant local businesses give the festival its distinct character, creating an unforgettable experience for attendees.

In 2026, SXSW will continue to reimagine its footprint in the absence of the convention center, uniting music, film & TV, and innovation programming across seven concurrent days in downtown Austin, all while celebrating four decades of creative discovery and connection. The festival will expand throughout the city center, creating themed neighborhoods that give each creative community its own dedicated space, while still fostering the spontaneous encounters that have launched careers and sparked collaborations year after year.



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4

The Talent and Knowledge Gap Threatening the Future of Events

ANDREA DOYLE



Skift Take

A deepening talent and knowledge gap is emerging as one of the events industry's most existential challenges. Intentional investment in talent pipelines, mentorship, and alternative workforce models may help.

The global job market has cooled significantly heading into 2025. Hiring has slowed, companies are taking longer to fill vacancies, and layoffs are again on the rise.

According to outplacement firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas, the number of new hires as of October for 2025 totaled 204,939, a 58% decline from the year-ago period and the lowest level since 2009. In addition, employers cut more than 202,000 workers in the third quarter alone.

"It's very likely job cut plans are going to surpass a million for the first time since 2020," said Andy Challenger, senior VP and labor expert for Challenger, Gray & Christmas.

For the events industry, this cooling market compounds a long-simmering problem: planners are being asked to do more with less, and for less. Furthermore, seasoned professionals are leaving, often replaced by less experienced workers. This trend is widening both the talent and knowledge gaps as decades of institutional experience walk out the door.

"We have seen that it can be a challenge to fill many of the frontline positions across the industry that are key to running an event," said Steve O'Malley, Chief Operating Officer of Maritz. "And then the challenge is not just attracting younger generations, but also showing them the opportunities the industry offers that will make them want to stay and grow in their careers."

Another challenge is the lack of knowledge about the industry among students. "Our research finds that many individuals fell into the industry or did not know it existed before joining, which is my experience as well. However, many who join the industry witness its importance as a global, economic force and become passionate advocates of the channel," said Nancy Drapeau, VP of research at the Center for Exhibition Industry Research. "Despite its role, the extent of academic research in collegiate marketing and sales programs remains scant."

A SHRINKING WORKFORCE, A GROWING DIVIDE

The pandemic accelerated an exodus that the events industry has yet to recover from. In addition, as veteran planners retire, too few new professionals are stepping in to fill the void.

Before the pandemic, Generation X made up the largest segment of the event workforce and attendee base, according to [Freeman](#). Since then, younger professionals and more diverse voices have entered the industry, but often without access to the mentorship or institutional knowledge needed to thrive.

Cvent is seeing the effects of this talent and knowledge gap. “In our Cvent Supplier Network we see that 44% of organizations sourcing through the platform are new to CSN this year — and among repeat organizations, 24% of individual planners are themselves new to their organization. That speaks to a dual challenge: new organizations entering the sourcing channel and significant turnover within event teams. The industry cannot assume institutional knowledge is staying put,” said Jim Abramson, Cvent VP of product management.

GEN Z VALUES EVENTS — BUT NOT THE EVENT INDUSTRY

Ironically, younger generations believe in the power of in-person connection: Freeman research shows 91% of Gen Z professionals say face-to-face networking is critical for career growth. Yet few are pursuing careers in event planning.

The issue isn’t disinterest in events — it’s disinterest in the working conditions. The long hours, low visibility, and limited career paths have made the field less appealing compared to roles in marketing or corporate strategy.

“There are less people in the Gen Z cohort as a result of lower birth rates and they are staying in school for longer, delaying entry into the workforce,” said Drapeau. “This implies there will be fierce competition to win Gen Z talent to join our industry over alternative career paths. It isn’t unique to us, but we must build awareness of our industry.” She is a fierce advocate of workforce development.

SEARCHING FOR SOLUTIONS

Some companies are tackling this head-on. [Emerald’s Associate Rotational Program](#) is one example, offering competitive pay and exposure to multiple disciplines, including marketing, sales, content, and event operations. Senior mentors guide participants, who often transition to full-time roles after completing the program. Structured entry paths like this show that with intention, the industry can attract and retain top talent.

Tracy Judge, founder and CEO of [Soundings](#), believes compensation reform is key to solving the talent shortage. “We can’t find qualified people because the pay model itself is broken,” she said. Judge points to the long-standing practice of paying flat day rates to [1099 contractors](#), regardless of hours worked.

These types of [contractors](#) hold roles including travel directors, planners who are paid a flat rate onsite, logistics or operations staff supporting event days, and production roles including stage managers, show callers, and producer support.

“Not only is it unattractive to today’s workforce, it’s questionably legal under federal and state labor laws. This outdated structure makes it even harder for planners to secure the budgets they need because the industry has normalized undervaluing onsite roles,” said Judge. “Event professionals should be treated like other professional service providers and compensated for their time, expertise, and the value they deliver. If we want to close the talent gap, we need to modernize how we engage and pay onsite staff so that this work is both sustainable and respected.”



KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER AT RISK

Without a robust pipeline of younger professionals entering the field, the knowledge transfer that should happen gradually between generations simply isn't happening.

The industry faces not only a talent shortage but also what some experts call a "process knowledge crisis," a loss of implicit, hard-earned expertise that experienced workers hold about workflows, negotiations, and crisis management.

Mentorship programs can help bridge the gap, but they require time, something short-staffed teams don't have. Industry associations offer external mentorship opportunities, but these can't replace the in-house transfer of institutional knowledge that once happened organically.

EXPANDING WORKFORCE OPPORTUNITIES THROUGH POLICY

Policy advocacy is becoming a vital part of rebuilding the talent pipeline.

The Exhibitions & Conferences Alliance ([ECA](#)) has worked to expand the [Pell Grant program](#) as a solution to the industry's talent shortage. Soon, lower-income students and adult learners can access federal aid for high-quality, short-term skills-focused training that can help get them jobs within the events industry.

ECA also helped get the [Freedom to Invest in Tomorrow's Workforce Act](#) into law. The legislation expands qualified expenses under 529 savings plans to include postsecondary certifications, effectively evolving 529 plans from "college savings plans" into "career savings plans."

"ECA's members recognize that our collective future depends on creating new talent pathways and attracting the next generation into this great industry," said Tommy Goodwin, EVP of ECA.

AI RESHAPING WORK

Soundings' AI Workforce Study found that by Q3 of this year, attitudes had shifted from fear to readiness. "Only 2% of organizations said they were reducing headcount because of AI, while nearly half, 49%, reported that upskilling and reskilling had become their top workforce priority," said Judge.

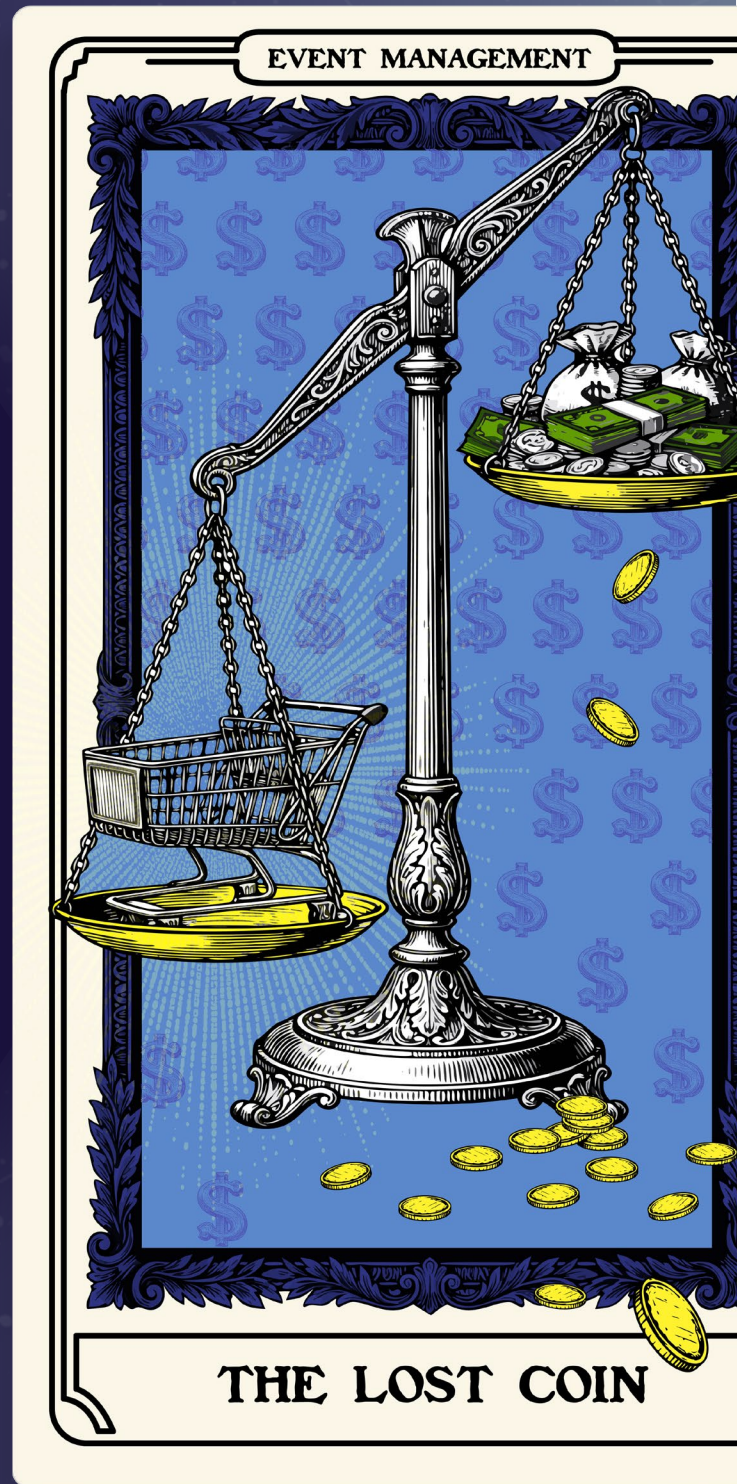
"The conversation is evolving from 'Will AI replace me?' to 'How can AI help me do my best work?'" she added. "To build the workforce of the future, we must first understand what work is being done now, by whom, and how. Only then can we leverage technology and AI to achieve those same outcomes faster, smarter, and more sustainably."

The events industry is standing at a crossroads. The sector can't simply hope for talent to return, it must rebuild the foundation that brings people in and keeps them growing. That means modernizing compensation, investing in structured entry points, and protecting institutional knowledge. If the industry can rethink how it attracts, develops, and values its people, it can secure not just its talent pipeline, but its long-term future. ◀

5

Planners Dangling at the Edge of the Cost Cliff

BARBARA SCOFIDIO



Skift Take

The real challenge for 2026 is affordability. Rising costs are forcing tough trade-offs across meetings and incentives.

Cost is top of mind for planners. More than a third (38%) of the 601 meeting professionals from eight countries responding to [Amex GBT's 2026 Global Meetings & Events Forecast](#) identified increasing costs as their top challenge for the year ahead. In fact, three out of their five top concerns had to do with the bottom line: 32% cited economic uncertainty and 30% said budget cuts.

When it comes to site selection, 38% of respondents said cost was the top factor in choosing a destination, and 30% ranked it at the top when choosing a venue. When asked what their top priority was for 2026, cutting costs was number one for 30% of respondents.

It's the same in the U.K., where a [Meetings Industry Association](#) survey of 109 event venues, suppliers, agents, and destinations found that 89% of organizations have experienced cost increases averaging 12% in 2025.

Nearly half (46%) reported being behind on their 2025 revenue forecasts, with only 66% confident in meeting their targets. Additionally, 40% indicated that their clients' budgets had decreased. To manage all this, 26% had reduced their workforce.

PLANNERS SEEK OUT SOLUTIONS

The pressure on planners is enormous, and flexibility is key. "The demand for resilience and flexibility has never been greater," said Jennifer Murphy, director, MICE Meetings, Incentives, Conventions & Events at [Atlas Meetings & Incentives](#) and a 20+-year industry veteran. "By strengthening contracts, making thoughtful destination choices, and approaching budgets with creativity, planners are proving that uncertainty doesn't stop great events — it simply requires us to be more adaptable.

Switching to virtual meetings has been one solution. More than a third of respondents to the AMEX survey (39%) said they would hold more virtual meetings in 2025. That's mirrored by the [latest poll from the Global Business Travel Association \(GBTA\)](#), which found that from April to July of 2025, 24% of global travel buyers shifted meetings or events online, up from 19% in the same period the previous year.

Those moving ahead with their events are rethinking destinations, staying closer to home, forgoing international trips, and looking to second-tier cities such as Nashville, Houston, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Richmond, or Long Beach. To save budget, Barbara Rohloff, global sourcing and procurement lead category manager at Prudential Financial, swapped Hawaii for San Diego.

Rohloff's 2025 budgets were flat, and 2026 will bring more of the same. With prices surging, she has been forced to seek out a variety of solutions, including cutting either a breakfast, lunch, or breaks; doing away with decor; and scaling back on speakers and entertainment. "We still have them, but we're just not bringing in the best of the best."

Branded activations and partner-supported experiences are becoming more common as companies look to maximize every dollar, said Simone Seiler, global general manager of FCM Meetings & Events. "As budgets are stretched, planners are looking for elements that can be sponsored."

Jeanine Kelly, senior director, event operations, ICSC, is rethinking formats altogether. "Things that were seven-day events, maybe they're three now," she said.

CHALLENGES FOR INCENTIVE TRAVEL

On the incentive side of the business, it's more of the same. "Rising costs/inflation" was the top concern for both the short term (38%) and long term (40%) of the more than 2,700 incentive travel industry professionals surveyed for the 2025 Incentive Travel Index (ITI).

Rising costs are having an impact on overall activity. The report found that only 37% of buyers anticipate activity above or significantly above 2025 levels over the next two years. Suppliers were more optimistic: The majority of DMOs (56%) anticipate greater incentive travel activity levels in 2027 than in 2025, followed by DMCs (49%).

However, at SITE's C-suite Agency Summit, all of the agencies attending conveyed optimism about business over the next two to five years, said Annette Gregg, SITE CEO. "Their clients are continuing or increasing incentive investment and even booking further into the future."

"INVISIBLE" CHANGES TO PROGRAMS

In response, planners are finding creative ways to maintain or even increase the perceived value of the incentive experience without increasing hard costs. The three areas where incentive planners typically make the first cuts when budgets tighten are likely to see shrinkage: 28% of ITI respondents expect to cut the amount they spend on gifting and 25% will cut entertainment and decor. These cuts could help offset expected price increases on hotel, air, and travel anticipated by many respondents: 49% expect hotel prices to rise, 46% air, and 45% food and beverage.

"If you have the same budget in 2025 that you had in 2019, your costs are 23% higher for travel," said Melissa Van Dyke, senior vice president, integrated marketing and innovation, Creative Group, at a session at the Incentive Research Foundation's Annual Invitational.

But a 23% degradation in the experience is not an option. "How do we start to look at these programs and make the best decisions with rising costs and inelastic budgets?" she said.

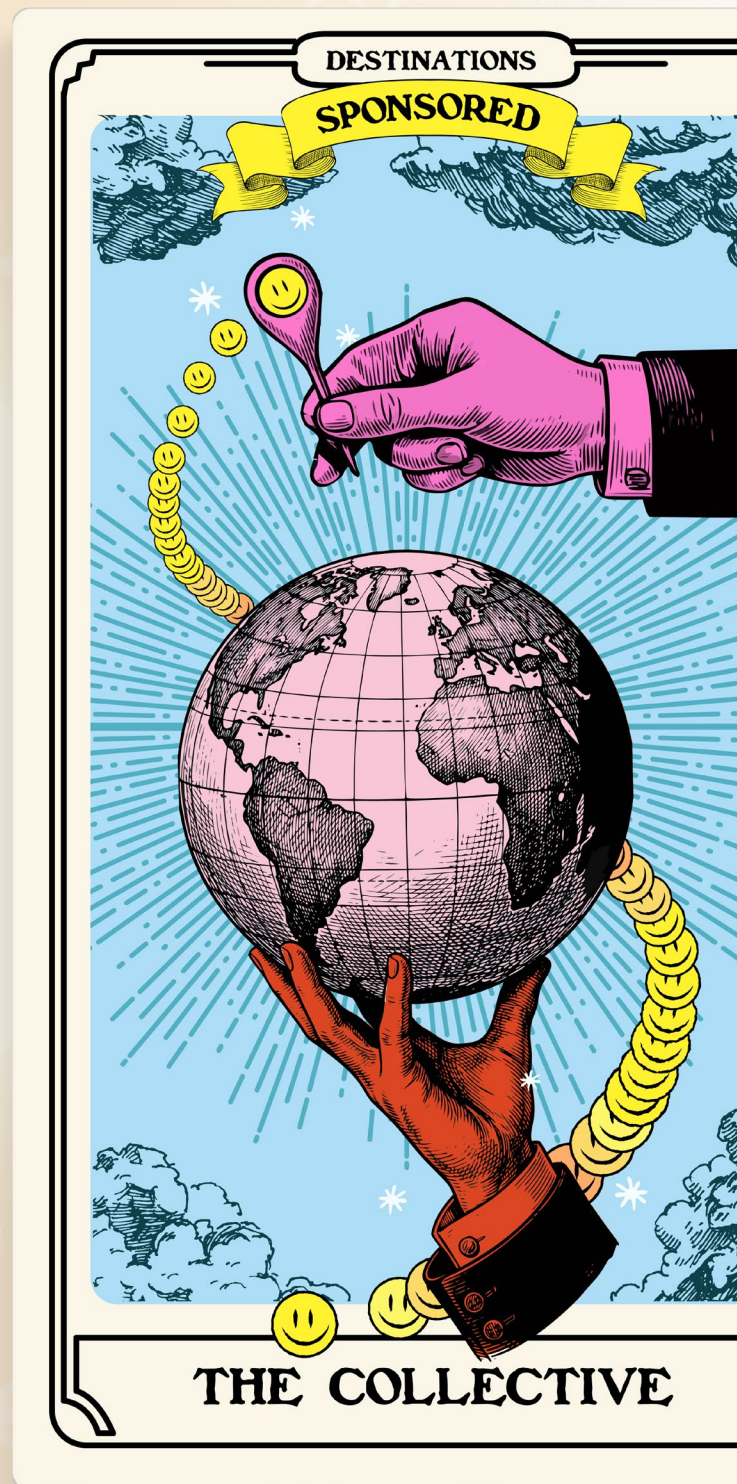
Focusing on things like access and status can actually upgrade the attendee experience at no extra cost. ◀

6

Q&A: Planner-Destination Partnerships Become Key to Successful Events

CREATED IN PARTNERSHIP WITH **CHOOSE CHICAGO**

ALISON McCARTHY



Skift Take

Overtasked and underresourced planners are being pressured to do more with less. Destinations can help them succeed in 2026 by adopting the one-team model, where local stakeholders and partners collaborate behind the scenes to enhance efficiency and create connected, authentic, and memorable events.

As event costs rise and attendee expectations climb, planners are seeking destinations that act as extensions of their own teams. The future of meetings and events lies in “one-team cities,” where collaboration and shared purpose across local partners transform logistical ease into meaningful, long-term impact.

In 2026, the meetings industry is redefining success through collaboration. Faced with tighter resources and growing complexity, planners are turning to destinations that act as strategic partners, where convention bureaus, hotels, venues, and suppliers operate as one coordinated cohort. This alignment reduces planning friction, provides local expertise, and creates a single point of contact that helps events run smoothly from sourcing to execution.

The one-team approach also helps events tap into a city’s wider community, connecting with local businesses, diverse suppliers, and civic partners that enrich the attendee experience and build a sense of local legacy. For planners, the value lies in striking a balance between efficiency and connection.

SkiftX spoke with Dustin Arnheim, senior vice president of sales and services at Choose Chicago, about how the city’s one-team model streamlines logistics while opening doors to authentic, community-rooted experiences that set the new standard for meeting success.



› Dustin Arnheim
Senior Vice President of Sales & Services,
Choose Chicago

Dustin is a respected executive in the destination marketing industry, bringing over two decades of sales leadership experience and a strong record of building high-performing teams, developing innovative strategies, and delivering measurable results. As a key member of Choose Chicago’s executive leadership team, reporting directly to the President & CEO, he leads a dynamic team of 30+ sales and services professionals responsible for securing major conventions and meetings citywide.

SkiftX: What are the biggest challenges planners face today in coordinating across multiple local partners, and how can destinations help streamline that process?

Dustin Arnheim: The biggest challenge event professionals face is time. Every city operates differently, and it can feel overwhelming for planners to navigate an individual city. Destination marketing organizations (DMOs) can make that dramatically easier by serving as the first, most trusted point of contact on the ground. We don't want to get between planners and local stakeholders, but we want to bring speed and efficiency to their interactions. Our job is to provide clarity, remove friction, and make sure event professionals never feel alone in navigating the complexities of a city.

True partnership is about transparency, trust, and a shared understanding that success is mutual. In today's landscape, partnership isn't transactional — it's relational. It means being proactive, not reactive. It means slowing down to communicate organizational priorities and the reasons behind needs and preferences to our partners. It means staying accessible, communicating clearly, and delivering on what we promise. And above all, it means treating every event, regardless of its size, with the same level of care and urgency.

How can collaboration among local stakeholders, including venues, hotels, and suppliers, create a smoother planning process for event organizers?

Planners are looking to do more with less, so they need a destination that is ready to assist with every aspect of the planning process, from the first exploratory call through the last attendee departure. Destinations need to anticipate planners' needs, connect the dots, and solve problems in real time. When local partners work collaboratively, planners benefit from immediate answers and real solutions. Things will always come up, but a unified local network means those surprises are handled quickly and effectively.

In Chicago, our venues, hotels, and suppliers work together behind the scenes to ensure planners feel supported, not bounced around. Through these partnerships, we hyper-focus on the planner and provide the tools they need to achieve their goals. We also share information regularly across local stakeholders, which elevates our ability to understand planners' needs and provide critical services. It's all about creating a seamless experience from the very first site visit to move-out.

Planners shouldn't have to worry about navigating a maze of different organizations and responsibilities. They want answers, not handoffs. Chicago's one-team model brings all of our partners—venues, hotels, civic agencies, suppliers—into a single ecosystem that works together. We all understand the importance of meetings and delivering a unified message to event professionals. That means fewer barriers, faster decisions, and a team that rallies around an event's success. It ensures they're never told "that's not my job," because in Chicago, it's all of our jobs.

Can you share an example of how the one-team approach has worked in practice?

We host an annual youth sporting event whose dates shift each year due to the governing body's calendar. Because the client can't commit within standard booking windows, our entire community aligns around a flexible path forward. Venues, hotels, and partners collectively agree to delay contracting, reduce customer risk in agreements, and stay coordinated so the event can remain in Chicago despite unpredictable timelines.

We also see this approach in practice with large corporate groups, which often have short-term timelines. Our DMO team, building management, labor partners, and service providers work together to review date availability, remove barriers, and create solutions. We then bring hotels into the conversation to align citywide, accelerate bids, free up needed space, and support shared communication plans—allowing Chicago to compete for business that requires quick, coordinated action.

When the unexpected happens, it is that one-team mindset that carries us through. Chicago's partners have a long track record of working together to solve issues and protect the customer experience.

How can destination teams strike a balance between operational efficiency and the growing expectation to help events authentically engage with the local community?

The key is buy-in from the local community from the start. Planners want efficiency, but they also want depth, authenticity, and impact. When communities understand the value of meetings and feel connected to the event's purpose, everything works more smoothly—from permitting to programming to legacy projects. We help facilitate those conversations early so that events not only run well, but also resonate with Chicago's neighborhoods and cultural voices.

At that, inclusivity has to be woven into events from the very beginning—not added on at the end. That's why we launched our Department of Inclusive Tourism and Community Engagement, which helps clients design events that truly reflect Chicago's diversity. We start by listening to what planners want, then connect them with neighborhood leaders, cultural partners, diverse suppliers, and community voices. The goal is to create events where every attendee feels welcomed and every community feels seen. ◀





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7

Time Crunch for Sourcing

BARBARA SCOFIDIO

EVENT MANAGEMENT



THE HOUR GLASS

Skift Take

Last-minute decisions, funding challenges, and budgetary uncertainty are turning hotel and venue sourcing into a scheduling puzzle with real impacts for both planners and suppliers.

Rising prices and Trump administration policies have come together to create the perfect storm. The resulting atmosphere of uncertainty has caused many companies to wait until the last minute to approve budgets, which includes spending for meetings and incentive travel — and it looks like more of the same for the year ahead.

Every segment of the industry, from DMCs and DMOs to agencies and in-house meeting planners, is voicing concern about condensed planning windows.

The [2025 Incentive Travel Index](#) (ITI) found “uncertainty and short-term planning” to be the third most pressing short-term challenge facing incentive travel professionals, cited by 27% of respondents after rising costs (38%) and international stability (30%).

“Everything is ultimately moving very fast,” said Catherine Chaulet, president and CEO of [Global DMC Partners](#). Respondents to [Global DMC Partners’ Q3 2025 Meetings & Events Pulse Survey](#) of 151 event professionals found that planners most frequently reach out to DMCs seven to nine months out (27%). However, some lead times are even shorter than that: 13% contact them four to six months out and 4% less than three months out.

They’re also losing people: 16% of respondents blamed a shorter registration window as a reason for lower attendance.

What she finds most surprising is the size of the programs is not a factor. “Even large six-figure programs have short lead times.”

GOVERNMENT MEETINGS IMPACTED

Funding cuts across federal agencies have forced the delay and cancellation of meetings, forcing planners into wait-and-see mode.

Marilyn Atchue Zuill, global account director at [HPN Global](#), said she has multiple groups that are holding off on signing their contracts because of concerns about possible losses in research dollars. “One is medical research and works off of funding from the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Others are government-related associations. They’re currently waiting it out and will re-address the meetings if they feel confident that the funding will be there.”

Scientific and pharmaceutical meeting lead times have been feeling the lead-time crunch since the beginning of the year, says [Moore Style Events](#) CEO David Moore. His core business focuses on biotech and pharmaceutical clients, who are struggling with longer delays from staff cuts at the U.S. Food & Drug Administration (FDA).

"We've encountered growing concerns from them regarding project timelines. Delays at the FDA have become a significant challenge — what previously took 30, 60, or 90 days is now extending up to six months."

EVENT VENUES SHUTTERED DURING GOVERNMENT SHUTDOWN

The moment the government shut down, [Financial & Insurance Conference Professionals'](#) Director of Membership & Operations Katie Karmowski sensed she was going to have to move the opening night gala of her association's November conference in Washington, D.C. The evening event at the Smithsonian Museum was expected to be a highlight of the week.

She decided to monitor the situation closely before making any decisions, keeping an eye on the news and the museum's web site. About a week later — roughly three and a half weeks before the conference — it became clear that the shutdown wasn't going to be short-lived and she began exploring alternate options.

It was the shortest lead time she had ever experienced for an event of that size, around 500 people.

Her DMC, [Hello! Destination Management](#), reached out to the International Spy Museum, which had been under consideration earlier in the planning process, to check availability. "Because deposits, cancellation terms, and force majeure clauses were all in play, we didn't make the official decision to move until October 21 — less than two weeks before the event," she said.

She also tapped [Destination DC](#), which was a sponsor of the event, for their knowledge of what's going on in the city and to leverage their relationships with local venues.

"The biggest challenge was the uncertainty — not knowing if the shutdown would ultimately impact us or not. We had a solid plan in place, but as the situation evolved, we had to be ready to change everything at the last minute."

Other organizations were forced to postpone or cancel their pinnacle events across the country because of venue shutdowns. In Boston, the nonprofit organization Advancing Latino American Prosperity had booked the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library as the venue for its gala for 650 influential Latino leaders. They moved the date to November, then announced to attendees that they had again decided to postpone the event until Spring 2026, hoping to nail down a new date "once there is more certainty."

INCENTIVE TRAVEL LESS IMPACTED

Of the various industry segments, the incentive side of the business is in a different category because companies rely on these programs to drive sales, and require a long timeline to promote them to potential qualifiers.

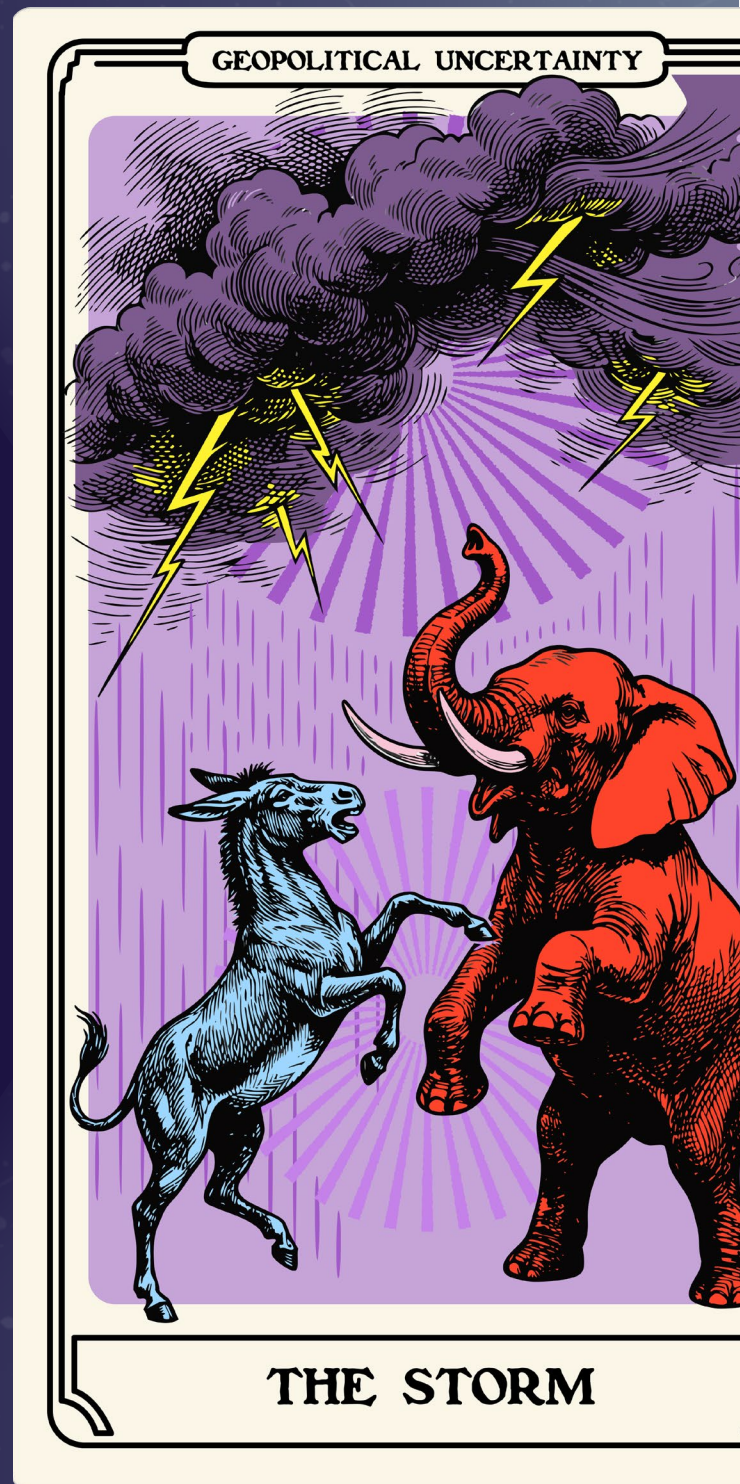
Respondents to the [Global DMC Partners' Q3 2025 Meetings & Events Pulse Survey](#) revealed that, for incentives, the largest share of respondents (41%) started planning 10–12 months out, with another 25% beginning 13–24 months ahead. Meetings and conferences, by contrast, have a shorter window: Just 28% begin 10–12 months out, while nearly half fall into the seven- to nine-month (23%) or four- to six-month (22%) windows.

While the fallout from U.S. government policies have forced conversations with her incentive clients about keeping budgets flat, shrinking audience size, and tightening up cancellation clauses, Janet Traphagen, president of Creative Group reported "no notable changes" as far as incentive lead times heading into 2026. ◀

8

The Business of Events Thrives in Times of Political Polarization

MIGUEL NEVES



Skift Take

The events industry is navigating a strong business outlook set against a backdrop of political instability. While the industry is growing, it's also increasingly entangled in the polarization, policy shifts, and security threats defining the current global landscape.

The sector's resilience was on full display in October at IMEX America, the industry's largest marketplace. The event packed 17,633 participants, including 6,145 buyers into Mandalay Bay in Las Vegas, facilitating 92,000 pre-scheduled meetings. The 2025 figures represent a 12% jump in participants and a 7% increase in buyers. What makes these numbers more impressive is the uncertainty leading up to the show, with tariffs, government meeting cancellations and visa challenges hogging the headlines.

The positive dealmaking mood doesn't stop a trend of events in the U.S. facing funding cuts driven by political decisions surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives and sustainability mandates. Planners are increasingly factoring in the potential loss of government grants and policy-driven cancellations as core risks to their events. The recent government shutdown added yet another layer of uncertainty, and more event cancellations.

Political friction is having tangible impacts on international attendance. The International Society on Thrombosis and Haemostasis (ISTH) reported the damaging impacts on its 2025 congress in Washington, D.C., with international attendance dropping from a typical 75% to just 55%. Executive Director Thomas Reiser noted that the organization had never seen such a precipitous decline, attributing the shortfall to visa difficulties and apprehension among foreign delegates regarding the U.S. political climate.

THE ROOTS OF DIVISION

These shifts are occurring as the world becomes increasingly politically polarized. According to the Willis Towers Watson Political Risk Index, polarization is rising globally, creating a business environment prone to whiplash policy shifts.

While some argue that the inner workings of social media platforms fuel divisiveness, a recent research published in Science suggests this polarization may be rooted in human social behavior rather than ad-dollar driving algorithms. In the same sense, events are often touted as platforms for open dialogue, but they may actually function as comfortable bubbles where like-minded professionals avoid genuine disagreement.

The U.S. political landscape heavily influences these dynamics. Historically, corporate America has been shaped by a prevalence of Republican business leaders, with CEOs directing the majority of their political donations to conservative causes. Case in point, President Trump's courting of tech CEOs in Washington. This alignment complicates how the events industry navigates the balance of political views and a neutral business approach as event organizers seek to appease sponsors and exhibiting companies.

Live events have long been utilized as political tools. One of the starkest examples is how Nazi Germany used the 1934 Leipzig Spring Fair to project industrial power and legitimize the regime, rather than promote international trade.

THE BUSINESS OF POLITICAL EVENTS

Modern political events remain a massive industry. The 2024 U.S. federal election cycle cost an estimated \$15.9 billion, with significant expenditures funneling into venues, AV, and security. The centrality of events to political persuasion is epitomized by the construction of the new \$300 million, 90,000-square-foot ballroom at the White House, a project designed to institutionalize larger-scale state gatherings.

A wide range of event professionals profit from political gatherings, whether they agree with what is being said or not. However, this neutrality can backfire, particularly for events on the political fringes. In 2021, Hyatt Hotels faced backlash when the stage design at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) resembled an Narsel rune, a hate symbol used by Nazi units. While Hyatt denounced the symbol as abhorrent, the incident highlighted the reputational risks inherent in hosting polarizing groups.

SECURITY RISKS AND LEGALITIES

Beyond reputational damage, by their very nature events create physical security risks that can be exploited by bad actors. The assassination of conservative activist Charlie Kirk at a speaking engagement and the killing of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson outside an investor meeting are stark reminders for organizers to treat security as a strategic concern rather than a line item.

Events can also become stages for other types of legal battles. OpenAI CEO Sam Altman was served a subpoena on stage during a public event, raising complex questions for organizers. The obligation to keep speakers safe is undeniable, but shielding speakers from legal processes presents organizers with a much more complex dilemma.

GEOPOLITICAL FRAGMENTATION

On the global stage, geopolitical conflicts are complicating business decisions. Many societies take a neutral stance to insulate scientific exchange from national politics. For example the International Society for Computational Biology issued a statement of neutrality.

For trade associations, this is not really an option. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA) barred Russian members from attending its events and cancelled all planned activities in the country. Similarly, UFI, the Global Association of the Exhibition Industry, suspended members based in Russia. However not all UFI members agreed with this approach. Notably Anbu Varathan, the former CEO of the Bangalore International Exhibition Centre and director general of the Indian Machine Tool Manufacturers' Association (IMTMA), who served as UFI President in 2021, opposed the decision. In a LinkedIn post he described the suspension as a "decision to punish Russian companies by suspending access would harm mutual 'trust' among global exhibition industry players – which is of most crucial value to the exhibition industry." As a result, Varathan resigned from his role on the UFI Executive Committee.

India is not the only country where Russian companies are welcome. Large economies like China, UAE, Saudi Arabia and Turkey all maintain strong business ties with Russia. While this stance is controversial to Western nations, it has clear business benefits for events where Russian participation is essential.

More recently, tariffs have dominated the geopolitical conversation. While the direct impact of tariffs on events has been felt, it is limited. The same cannot be said about their impact on global business and supply-chains, which is in turn reshaping trade show economics, sometimes boosting events in unaffected regions while suppressing those with higher tariffs.

NAVIGATING VALUES AND PUBLIC PERCEPTION

Some associations shape event destination choices to reflect their values, avoiding locations with laws that clash with their stances. When avoiding a destination is impossible or impractical, some organizations opt for solutions like Social Offset to balance the impact, donating to local nonprofits that align with their values.

Amidst this fragmentation, the defense sector is booming, and so are defense events. Clarion boasted record attendance at its Defence and Security Equipment International (DSEI) in London in September, despite London Mayor Sadiq Khan opposing the event. The show once again attracted protesters targeting 51 exhibiting Israeli arms makers.

Yet the view on the entire defense sector has visibly shifted considerably in the last few years from warmongers to peacekeepers. The Hague, the capital of the Netherlands is known as the international city of peace & justice. In June it hosted the NATO Summit with 45 heads of state agreeing to increase defense spending to 5% of GDP. Securing the event required 27,000 police, 5,000 military personnel, and extreme cybersecurity measures. While the event may not have generated significant income for the city, it is now open to hosting other defense-related events.

EVENTS SUPPORTING DIFFICULT DIALOGUE

While event companies can profit from polarization, they can also benefit from supporting dialogue. In November World Travel Market managed to bring Israeli and Palestinian tourism companies together under one roof despite the ongoing conflict. At its Palestinian and Israeli peace activists spoke at a Geo-Economics Summit on the power of tourism to bring communities together and build understanding. Elsewhere at the same event, images of a trade show floor exchange between Pakistani and Israeli officials made the headlines for the wrong reasons in Pakistan.

Attempts to foster constructive dialogue within this polarized environment remain fraught with difficulty. The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) faced intense backlash for booking conservative influencer Robby Starbuck for its BLUEPRINT conference. While the session was ultimately well received in its goal to challenge opposing viewpoints, it also highlighted the challenge of remaining a neutral platform in a world that increasingly demands sides be chosen.

The global events industry has demonstrated its ability to thrive financially amid a politically polarized world. Yet, commercial success gained from supporting polarization comes with a clear moral cost. For an industry that can profit from everything from partisan rallies and a boom in defense shows, every business decision is now undeniably a moral one. More than ever, event companies must carefully consider the repercussions of their business choices and determine whether they choose to benefit from division or forgo profits to proactively contain it. ◀



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