

Why conferencing in 2019 needs a different approach

Education and skill sharing opportunities, networking and an off-site environment for colleagues to learn more about themselves have become prime conference features despite budgets under an increase of pressure. According to Marc Wachsberger, MD of The Capital Hotels and Apartments, however, the days of multi-day, multi-event international conferences are on the decline in South Africa.



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"Tighter budgets and an increased expectation of value for money and return on investment have seen more and more South African companies looking for conference venues that offer everything that they need in one venue, and at a reasonable price.

"Across our 51 conference venues, we've noticed that multi-day events are less popular than before, while clients are choosing venues that are adaptable to allow for full audience plenaries or small group breakaways, all at one location," says Wachsberger.

Seven trends to shape the industry in 2019:

- Companies are seeking maximum output from delegates at conferences, and a small bowl of chewy mints and a bottle of water to last between breakfast and lunch isn't going to cut it if they're to keep energy levels high.

A range of **healthy and nutritious snacks** that are going to keep energy high and creativity on form, is essential.

- Business professionals at all levels are placing greater emphasis on health, with menus needing to offer options that cater to various eating plans and religious needs.

While many of these requirements can be met with a carefully planned buffet menu, venues that respect diverse dietary needs and integrate them as seamlessly as possible will be conference organisers' first choice. A buffet or finger fork lunch is also a great way to manage high-pressure schedules and diverse dietary needs.

- Even though many conferences have a focus on digital with on-site free Wi-Fi being as essential as comfortable seating, **secretariat rooms** are still in high demand. Offering the space for this at no charge is a great value-add, whether the conference organiser brings in their own copier and printing facilities or not.

- Most conferences still have a fun or **team-building** element in them, and the venues that offer a blank canvas that welcomes any kind of creative activity are the ones that will enjoy more bookings.

Popular events include chocolate making, MasterChef-type competitions or even canvas painting, but there really should be no venue-imposed limit on what event organisers can do to inspire creativity among attendees.

- Venues that have spaces that can be dressed up or down or easily reformatted to accommodate the agenda will also be the most popular. **Being willing to transform** a daytime pool area into a night-time ballroom under a Bedouin tent, for example, will win an event organiser's heart (and business).

- While overnight conferencing has been affected by budget constraints, venues that offer **comfort and value for money** will be the first choice. Conference delegates don't need night time turn downs or toiletries that they'll never use – but they do need free high-speed Wi-Fi, and some may even need free laundry services. Free parking should be a non-negotiable, and free shuttle services within a 5km radius of the venue for overnight guests is a great value-add.

- Excellent **customer service** is top of mind for conference organiser who want the comfort of working closely with an efficient and readily available expert banqueting team. This includes being available on call at any time to discuss event plans, while emails should only be a back-up to face to face meetings and telephonic updates.

"Conferencing is all about creating, curating and sharing conversations, and the venues that offer or create the most appealing environments where organisers' outcomes are effectively achieved, are the ones that will welcome repeat business, even in the current tough economic climate," says Wachsberger.

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