

NETWORKING IN THE NEXT NORMAL



Do you remember what it feels like to shake someone's hand?

To jostle among a crowd as you move from one new conversation to the next, getting up close and fairly personal with strangers? Certainly not standing two metres apart as you introduce yourself and see if there's a spark of rapport in the air.

After nearly a year, the world of networking and conferences seems a world away. I remember hugging a good friend at the last event I attended before the first lockdown, to gasps of horror from the committee organising the event. We were being introduced to a world of hand sanitiser and social distancing that seemed completely alien to us.

How times have changed in such a short period. When vaccines have been jabbed and we're allowed to return to something like normality, our world may well have turned on its head, with social distancing and speaking through masks the norm and a firm handshake and broad smile feeling alien.

It's really hard to predict exactly how we will feel. I think we are going to experience a manic mix of emotions, wanting to greet people warmly – particularly those we feel comfortable with – but feeling awkward doing so.

Many people struggle already knowing how to greet people. When do you hug rather than shake hands? Is a kiss on the cheek appropriate? That social awkwardness will only grow until we readapt to the post-Covid environment. People will have very different ideas of what's acceptable and how much personal space they are comfortable with.

Despite this, it won't take long for events and conferences to start buzzing again. People are sick of being confined to their spare bedroom, fighting the kids for bandwidth and balancing relationship building with home schooling. We want to break free and meet in person. The sense

I get from the meetings industry is that in-person events are just around the corner.

That doesn't mean a return to what we were used to. There are people, particularly introverts who often found networking events uncomfortable, who have discovered the convenience of cyber-networking and will want to connect more online than off.

And, of course, Zoom calls allow us to connect over distance. I spoke recently to an association meeting planner who has seen attendance at their events more than quadruple since they moved online. People in remote parts of the UK are delighted to have the opportunity to join events without prohibitively expensive travel and they won't be happy to see that taken away from them. Nor will organisers want to see that level of engagement drop away.

So, I believe we will move carefully into a world of hybrid events. With speakers and attendees both in the room and on the Zoom. And people will find it easier to follow up with people through 'virtual coffees' rather than having to find the right time and place to meet in person. In fact, I would love to see the number of relationship-building (as opposed to agenda-driven) meetings grow as people feel more comfortable catching up online.

That last development may remain a wish though. My experience so far of lockdown, particularly among people working for corporates, is that relationship-building meetings have, in fact, all but slipped off the agenda. We pack our diaries with meetings we have to have but miss the small talk that builds relationships and releases the pressure.

After the pandemic, if we're not going to connect online at least we'll have more opportunities to do so in person. Even if we're not quite ready to shake hands. ♣

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