

Eight COVID-friendly ways to create a five-star corporate event experience



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It's undeniable the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted every facet of our lives, both personally and professionally. Travel is one factor that crosses into both.

The global pandemic has been a true “black swan” disruption for the travel and hospitality industries so while I won't say COVID-19 has a silver lining, I am seeing some positive trends emerge that should have staying power. These reinforce the belief that you can have a “five-star” travel experience even with restrictions and mandates in place:

- Food and beverage preparation has not only become safer, the presentation has actually elevated from what it was pre-COVID.
- We can still socialize and conduct business in a “contact-light” environment.
- Hotels, airlines and cruise lines have never been cleaner or more focused on delivering a safe experience.
- Gifting experiences are streamlined yet still remain effective to surprise-and-delight guests.

So when you think of “COVID-era” corporate events, don't think of stacks of pre-boxed meals, sacrificing an exciting destination or luxurious hotel for a dull, safe one or experiencing impersonal service. Instead, think of curated food and beverage carefully prepared and artfully presented, top-notch destinations and hotels who use their space more creatively and service that is more attentive and more personal.

I recently attended a corporate event that delivered a true five-star experience while following all protocol and restrictions at the beautiful Salamander Resort in Middleburg, VA. Yes, we wore masks, watched our distance and had fewer people at tables but nothing about the experience was compromised and, in many respects, it was enhanced.

Inspired by my experience at the Salamander Resort, here are eight ways you can deliver a five-star event experience despite today's current limitations:

1. Pre-arrival communications:

Understanding what to expect while on-site is a critical component to setting the stage and instantly generates confidence from attendees. Create “know before you go” communications, like the one pictured here, that not only outline key details (What are the local mandates? What will it “be like”

COVID/SOCIAL DISTANCING GUIDELINES

- Masks are required in all setting (including meetings) with the exception of food and beverage events, restaurants and outdoor activities.
- **Please bring the masks you find most comfortable to wear.** We will also provide plenty of disposable masks.
- The current state of Virginia physical distancing guidelines will be observed at Salamander.
- ALL high-touch areas will be sanitized frequently
- Hand sanitizer stations are available through out the property and at every event.
- Culinary team members are required to wear masks and gloves when handling food on food lines.
- Temperature screenings will take place at all events.
- Plexiglass and distance markers will be used for guiding guests.



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when I step inside the hotel? How can I ensure the experience matches my comfort level?) but also offer a resource for each traveler to ask questions that are important to them. Concerns can be addressed and assuaged, right from the start.

2. Registration:

This is your first in-person opportunity to show guests they're in for a safe yet familiar event experience. Make sure you think about the elements you typically include at registration and get creative about how you can still include them; it might only require a subtle shift. For example, when we arrived at the Salamander Resort, we were met with carefully packaged snacks, waitstaff who served beverages and a visit from the resort's mini-horse, Cupcake, which made for great photo ops. Nothing felt vastly different from a typical registration experience.



3. Meetings:

Careful space planning will go a long way for your attendees. With classroom seating, you may only seat one person per table instead of two or three people. With crescent round seating, you may have a limit of three per table, with bottles of water pre-set instead of pitchers of water. Another creative idea is to use a lawn area for the presentation (speakers or entertainment) and have attendees sit on their balconies, overlooking the stage. You'll find your attendees not only appreciate the careful planning but also likely enjoy the extra space!

4. Meals:

Traditionally, food and beverage at an event has mostly been about scalability and efficiency. While those two things are still absolutely necessary, the additional safeguards in place lend nicely to a more individualized approach. For example, instead of chafing dishes or family-style meals, guests can be treated to individual serving sizes or chef- and server-attended food stations. An added bonus at the Salamander Resort was that much of the food was made to order, so I could enjoy the shrimp-and-grits without the shrimp, yet it was easy for the chef to prepare on the spot. This reinforces the fact that a more personalized food experience is not only safe but can really elevate your event.



5. Guestrooms:

By now, most properties are well-versed in what guests expect during their stay but make sure you choose a property that excels at it. First and foremost, significant attention needs to be given to not only preparing rooms (disinfecting, etc.) but to communicating the steps that were taken prior to your guests' arrival. At first glance, guests should see that typical hotel room "hot spots" are diffused with things like TV remote sleeves and clearly laundered robes. Add an extra sense of personalization and increased comfort by allowing guests to choose whether they'd like to have housekeeping service during their stay or not.

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6. Gifting:

You can still treat your guests to a variety of gifting options, both on-site or post-event drop-ship. If you prefer an on-site experience, simply control the way it's handled. Space out gift stations, schedule individual "shopping" times or segment your gifts into themed rooms, keeping everyone from standing in one line or around one table.

7. Room amenities:

Food and beverage amenities delivered to guestrooms are practically a staple of five-star events and do not have to be sacrificed during the COVID era. Presentations under cloches (glass domes) immediately signal it was handled safely and look even nicer than a standard presentation.



8. Venues, décor and entertainment:

Hotels are becoming more creative with their space, as evidenced by my experience at the Salamander Resort. One dinner was held in the equine stable with chef-attended stations, beautiful linens and floral centerpieces, and another was in the culinary garden. Entertainment can be stationary or strolling. Greater care is given to handling food, interacting with guests and servicing tables.

Do not think COVID restrictions mean the end of an era of luxury or five-star events. Instead, be ready to usher in a new era and know that your important audience will be thrilled with safe, thoughtful, personalized experiences.

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