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CEO's Note

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Social Distancing & Events: Is it even possible?

It's now been almost four months since we locked ourselves down and I am sure we all have had a lot of time to reflect on our lives and priorities. During this period, the one term that we've all probably heard the most would be "Social Distancing" and this has really set me thinking on how this would work during events, be it social or corporate.

On 8th July, Test Cricket formally began once again between England & the West Indies. Both teams were asked to adhere to social distancing norms & needless to say, the match was being played to an empty stadium. Things were proceeding well until the third day when the English fast bowler James Anderson picked up the wicket of the West Indian batsman Roston Chase. Anderson completely forgot about the social distancing rule and went ahead to hug his teammates to celebrate the wicket he fought all day to get. As I watched the game, I realized Anderson's reaction was not planned but rather one that was instantaneous and something he would naturally have done anyway!



And this made me ask myself 3 questions:

- Can "Celebrations" with "Social Distancing" work at all?
- Can Social Events with current norms of guest number restrictions, food & beverage guidelines & logistical constraints be executed in a manner that satisfies all stakeholders?
- The future of Meetings & Conferences. Will this change forever or will it be business as usual after a certain period of time?

Can “Celebrations” with “Social Distancing” work at all?



Frankly, when I first got to hear about guidelines on maximum 50 people, wearing masks, checking temperatures and so on, I felt these were so impractical that most people would just postpone their celebrations to a date when things start to normalize. However, with so many saying this was the new normal, there were some people who decided to go ahead with their plans. I was fortunate enough to attend one such wedding. It started well with a registration desk to take names and temperatures & I was given a pocket sanitizer to keep with me. It was a large space of about 6000 sq. ft. and there were a total of 50 guests, which was more than being compliant on social distancing. Dinner tables were set apart and food was being served instead of a buffet. Everything seemed to be progressing well and it took only about 45 minutes for most people to start taking off their masks, embrace each other, followed by dancing and singing. Much like James Anderson,

the cricket player, all guests at the wedding got into a celebratory mode, without realizing that social distancing was the order of the day! So I've come to realize that in any celebration, be it 10, 50 or 500 people, it would only be a matter of time before social distancing as a rule is violated.

So, the important question is does one go ahead in this format or just wait for this pandemic to retreat? We certainly belong to the camp that believes that it's best to just wait for normalcy to return, because the “new normal” can lead to enhanced personal hygiene, more sanitized and safer spaces but it can't mean that social distancing as a phenomenon is here to stay in our lives!

Can Events with current norms of guest number restrictions, food & beverage guidelines & logistics constraints be executed in a manner that satisfies all stakeholders?



The stakeholders here are the clients, the event company, the hotels and the vendors. And the important factor is how to satisfy everyone keeping in mind these new guidelines. The clients would of course want to have a safe event for all their guests. The hotels have built large spaces for hundreds of guests, have to cap their guest count at 50 people and at the same time deploy extra manpower for service, given the constraints on laying food on the buffet, all leading to extra costs. The vendors like decorators, light and sound teams now have to invest in safety equipment like PPE suits, gloves, face shields at work because the hotels require it.

Lastly, the event organizer would have to ensure that a balance be maintained at the same time safety not get compromised. Would it be possible in such a scenario to satisfy all stakeholders? From whatever we've seen so far, clients are looking at smaller events (as completion of rituals with their immediate families in attendance in regards to weddings), digital events, hybrid events etc., often hoping to have a larger (and happier) celebration/function at a later time. And why not?

The future of Meetings & Conferences: will they change forever, or will it be business as usual after a certain period of time?

In this case, the landscape is quite different when compared to social events. Businesses across the globe are preparing for the unknown future based on the following question

- Are we a "Lockdown Affected Business" or a "COVID Affected Business"



For those who are lockdown affected, normalcy at some stage will return without having to tweak their business models too much, as long as they can sustain until then. Such businesses are in a position to resurrect their cash flows faster and while they would want to save costs and ensure delegate safety by migrating meetings and conferences online, we do believe at a later stage, the face to face events will return as people miss the human connection and networking is usually key in corporate events. We also believe many events will initially become hybrid (combination of live and virtual events) to ensure those delegates who cannot or do not want to travel may also participate and hybrid events may be here to stay, as they offer tremendous exposure and outreach.

Now for those who are Covid affected, there are existential threats, which if not addressed would lead

to collapse. Those businesses that address these threats will live to fight another day and probably get bigger and stronger over time as weaker players exit. In the near term, we can expect a number of businesses to close, which would mean a permanent loss of spend of MICE that arose out of these companies. In the longer term, the businesses that survive will occupy the space left behind by the ones who exited and get bigger. Thus, we can expect MICE business from such companies to eventually kick-start, although that will take some time.

Shloka Events: What we are doing?

As a company, this period has given us a very good opportunity to assess the external environment to capture opportunities going ahead. We took this time to re-skill our teams, train our new staff (Yes we hired people!), engage with our external partners on what we believe would be the short and medium term trends in the business. For our clients, our advice has been simple: This is a good time to start planning & to block future dates, without really investing too much, as we believe that once this pandemic retreats, there could be significant surge in demand, with inventory of rooms & spaces remaining as it was or even lesser. We also meaningfully engaged with numerous hotel Brands to understand new guidelines, rules etc. so that we are well prepared for business in the future and so that we can guide our clients accordingly.

I have tried my level best to help you understand the current environment in the simplest way I could, and I hope you found this noteworthy for whatever it is. I wish you and your families the very best! Here's hoping that the light at the end of the tunnel is visible to us soon.

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