



RESEARCH REPORT by Meeting Professionals International

The State of Inclusion in Meetings & Events

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In September 2018, Meeting Professionals International (MPI) launched a pan-industry initiative to determine the current state of inclusion in the global meeting and event industry. The mission of the project was to determine a) how and to what extent event professionals plan for inclusivity and diversity, b) knowledge gaps in this area and the need for information and support and c) best practice examples for the creation of inclusive experiences.

To realize this mission, MPI partnered with New York University's Jonathan M. Tisch Center of Hospitality to conduct an exhaustive literature review, research study and series of expert interviews. Dr. Lynn Minnaert conducted 16 interviews and oversaw an MPI member survey that received 1,087 responses. This report presents an overview of the results from this project, and introduces good-practice examples of diversity, inclusion and belonging initiatives.

Methodology

Diversity and inclusion currently dominate political, social and professional discourse. Legal systems exist to penalize active discrimination; however, regulations are not sufficient to achieving actual inclusion and belonging. As awareness of diversity and inclusion grows in the business community, so does the understanding of its complexity. MPI's research found diversity expressed itself in a wide range of categories, including the following.

- **Ability** (emotional, mental and physical abilities)
- **Culture** (cultural background, customs, language, religious and spiritual beliefs)
- **Demographic Characteristics** (age, ethnicity, gender identity, marital status, nursing, parental status, socioeconomic status)
- **Health** (allergies, fatigue, hunger, medical conditions)
- **Personal Characteristics** (happiness, learning preferences and needs, life experience, motivation, political beliefs, sexual orientation)
- **Professional Background** (education, experience, goals, occupation, skills, technologic comfort)

This study examines to what extent, and how, event professionals plan for inclusivity and diversity in their events. It identifies knowledge gaps and areas where there is need for information and support, and it highlights best-practice examples that can be applied in a range of event contexts. The study applies both quantitative and qualitative methods, by means of a membership survey and a series of in-depth interviews with diversity experts and practitioners.

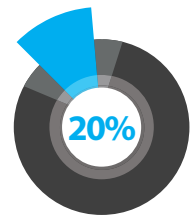
Responses to the survey came from a variety of meeting professionals.

- Total responses: 1,087
- 84 percent female, 15 percent male, 1 percent other / gender on-binary
- 68 percent planner, 22 percent supplier, 10 percent other
- Predominately U.S.-based

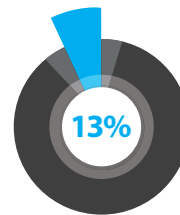
Diversity Practices

The survey asked respondents about the primary objective for diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives at their organizations (see chart 1). For 20 percent of professionals, the main purpose for such programs is complying with legal requirements. Nearly one third of respon-

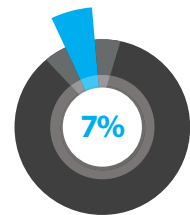
1 PRIMARY OBJECTIVE FOR DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION INITIATIVES IN THEIR ORGANIZATION



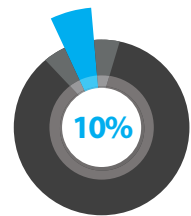
Comply with legal requirements



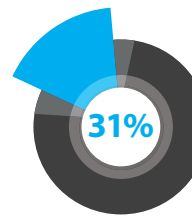
Attract and retain talented staff



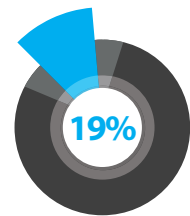
Other



Enhance external reputation



Respond to guest expectations



Achieve business results and enhance the bottom line

dents (31 percent) use D&I reactively, to respond to guest expectations. Nineteen percent of respondents say their main goal is achieving business results, highlighting a strategic approach to D&I that is still somewhat uncommon in the event industry.

Fifty-six percent of respondents say they have written diversity and inclusion policies, and 42 percent say their businesses host these statements on their websites. Thirty-nine percent report no barriers to creating truly inclusive experiences at their meetings and events, though an additional 40 percent say they have information and knowledge gaps that keep them from excelling in this area.

Barriers to planning inclusive event experiences

13%—I don't have enough time

20%—I don't have the budget

14%—I don't have the leadership support

40%—I don't have all the information/knowledge needed to plan inclusive experiences

39%—There aren't any barriers to planning inclusive experiences

7%—other

Diversity Attitudes

In terms of current attitudes toward D&I, respondents say they feel there is a stronger focus on diversity and inclusion than there was 10 years ago, and that this is a focus area for their organizations. That said, some meeting professionals report

that they believe inclusion initiatives are "just about being politically correct."

Overall, respondents agree somewhat that the event industry needs better training and technical tools around diversity and inclusion (mean 3.8). See Chart 2 on next page.

Diversity Practices by Function

Respondents also reviewed statements that reflect good practices in inclusive event design and delivery and indicated how often, if ever, they adopted these practices into their business operations. The best practices featured five event functions from marketing to event feedback.

Marketing

The research findings show that industry professionals include most good practices more than half the time when marketing their meetings and events. "A statement about the event's dedication to inclusivity" is the only practice implemented less than half of the time, despite the fact that it is easy to implement and sends a strong positive signal to event audiences.

More than half the time

- A designated contact person for the event, with contact details
- A range of contact methods for delegates (in-person, phone, email, text)
- Language that is carefully chosen to be easy to understand and universal
- Materials in different formats (digital and paper)
- Web materials that are carefully de-

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STATEMENT	MEAN SCORES
There is more focus on diversity and inclusion now than there was 10 years ago	4.5
Diversity and inclusion are priorities for my organization	4.0
The event industry needs better training & technical tools around diversity & inclusion	3.8
The event industry is inclusive and welcomes diversity	3.8
If our events are not inclusive, it will impact our bottom line	3.6
It is challenging to plan and deliver fully inclusive events	3.2
There is too much focus on diversity and inclusion nowadays	2.5
Diversity and inclusion initiatives are just about being politically correct	2.3

signed to be fully accessible

Less than half the time

- A statement about the event's dedication to inclusivity

Paula Sotnik of the Institute for Community Inclusion argues the importance of using words like "inclusive" to signal event philosophy. "It is a message to the community, and people look for that message. When the messaging is inclusive, people feel more comfortable identifying accommodations they would like to request."

She also advises meeting professionals to study their attendees, and their staff. "Look at who is in the room. Who are you not attracting? Your advisory / planning group needs to be diverse and include representation from different groups. This will allow you to recognize the needs of diverse delegates, and to do targeted outreach."

In addition, images can be powerful indicators of the people meetings welcome—or would like to welcome.

"Attendees need to be able to see themselves in the images we choose," according to industry advocate and strategist Jeff Hurt, a strategic facilitator. "And while meeting professionals use images with people of different ages, races and genders more than half the time, images with people of different abilities, sexual orientations and religions are less common."

More than half the time

- People of different races
- People of different ages
- People of different genders

Less than half the time

- People with different abilities
- People with different sexual orientations
- People with different religions

Craig Jacobs, co-founder of close the gap, says event professionals have the opportunity to lead with inclusivity in marketing, and the images they choose. "In practice, we often have little opportunity to convey our diversity and inclusion message in words, so we can say it with images. We need to be thoughtful about the images we choose—images that add tone and context, that are subtle and hit the perfect tone, that are not cliché, but authentic and intelligent." Jeff Tidwell of Next For Me agrees that "delegates need to see themselves represented in the images we choose."

But challenges exist for meeting professionals looking to enhance their marketing and event materials. "In image banks, searching for 'leadership' will usually yield images of white men. Searching for 'work life balance' usually yields images of distraught-looking women," says Mariela McIlwraith, director of industry advancement for the Events Industry Council. "We need to make conscious choices to avoid this. Images of people in wheelchairs will often be taken with terrible wheelchairs—the type you get at the airport or hospital. It's come to a point where it is hard to have images with people in them, as so many perpetuate stereotypes."

SITE Head of Events Tahira Endean adds that images need to be diverse, but also authentic; it's important that they don't appear chosen just for diversity's sake. Ideally, she recommends planners use pictures of actual events rather than stock photos, or choose stock photos based on actual representation during events.

Longtime industry leader Joan Eisenstodt of Eisenstodt Associates points out that choosing images deliberately is also important when event programs, websites and materials include advertisements, and event professionals may be in a good posi-

tion to educate advertisers and sponsors on imagery that will connect well with the target audience of the event.

Registration

Many meeting professionals feel that it is challenging to make the registration form both short and comprehensive. A request to indicate food restrictions is the most regularly included request related to inclusion. Interestingly, a deadline to make requests for accommodations is rarely included.

Most of the time

- A request to indicate food restrictions
- Examples of the type of requests that delegates can make (e.g. different dietary options, access needs, etc.)
- A designated contact person for the event, with their contact details

Half of the time

- A variety of registration options (online, telephone, text phone, email)
- Information about accessible parking near / transport to the venue
- A request to indicate food preferences
- Information about the accessibility of the venue
- A request for delegates to share any personal/medical information they feel is important for you to know

Rarely

- A request for delegates to highlight any diversity requests they have
- A deadline to make these requests
- A request for delegates to write down their goals for event
- A request to indicate the preferred gender pronouns of the delegate
- A question about whether personal care attendants will be accompanying the delegate

SITE's Endean points out that registration forms can be challenging. "What should you ask, and how do you ask it in a sensitive way? Privacy laws in some countries do not allow us to collect certain information—that means sometimes event organizers have to prepare based on assumptions. In Canada, organizers of government conferences cannot ask about specific dietary requirements. This is why we provide menus in advance and mention that dietary needs can be accommodated."

In situations where it is allowed, Tracy Stuckrath, president and founder of Thrive! Meetings & Events, recommends asking an open-ended question, such as: "Do you have any dietary preferences?"

She also asks guests to explain their requests by offering a number of categories, such as allergies, religion, illness or interaction with medicine. She advises against using menu cards that can be freely picked up at registration.

“Menu cards at events don’t work if they are just left on the registration table for delegates to pick up,” she says. “Anyone can take one, so the card may not reach the person who requested it. This means no accurate numbers are available for the chef and the wait staff. It can result in a delay for the correct meal to be produced, which means guests may not be able to eat together, leading to potential embarrassment.”

Being conscientious about dietary needs will not only lead to higher attendee satisfaction, she says, but also helps protect the event planner legally. And trust plays an important part in this process. “We need to gain the trust of our attendees, so they will disclose information. Many may have had unpleasant experiences in the past. The more information you provide about F&B policies and

represent them. She points to HSBC as a good practice example. The bank introduced 10 gender nonbinary pronouns for customers to choose from (Mx, Ind, M, Mre, Msr, Myr, Pr, Sai, Ser or Misc).

Event Design

Meeting professionals say they carefully select the dates of their events, conduct site visits and discuss their inclusivity goals with caterers most of the time. Discussions with the venue, speakers and suppliers about inclusiveness, however, happen only around half of the time, and venue staff members are rarely briefed. Sharing event menus in advance, preparing event materials in different languages and providing prayer rooms are also rarely implemented practices. Language patterns may vary based on region.

Most of the time

- A carefully selected date that does not coincide with religious holidays in different faiths
- A site visit to assess the accessibility of the destination and the venue
- A discussion with the caterers about your

inclusivity goals and needs for the event

Half of the time

- A discussion with the venue about your inclusivity goals and needs for the event
- Selection of speakers/presenters that reflect the diversity of the audience you wish to attract
- Internal planning meetings focused on inclusive event design and planning
- A discussion with other suppliers about the inclusivity goals and needs for the event

Rarely

- Event menus that are shared in advance
- A brief primer related to interacting with diverse participants to all venue staff
- Event materials in different languages
- Prayer rooms onsite

Meeting professionals say delegates’ accessibility needs are important considerations when planning events.

Universal and accessible design expert Rosemarie Rossetti says that assessing venues starts with accessible parking and ramps near the entrance. Doors need to be accessible, with curb cuts nearby, and without gravel or grass. Inside the venue, there needs to be a clear path of travel. When conducting site inspections, event professionals should mind the width of doors and hallways and pay close attention to floor surfaces. While carpets tend to be ubiquitous in hotels, some can be difficult to navigate for attendees who use manual wheelchairs.

Room set-up is also of great importance. Rossetti says she often sees tables and chairs set close together to accommodate as many guests as possible. But this is challenging for attendees who use wheelchairs. It is important to have reserved places (and not always at the back of the room). Attendees who use wheelchairs may also find it hard to sit at round tables.

People who use sign language interpreters will need to sit at the front of the room, as will people who lip read or use electronic hearing aids. Aisles should be kept clear—center, left and right. People don’t want to be intrusive and disturb others, for example, when they need to leave to use the restroom. There should be ample time for delegates with disabilities to move between sessions and rooms.

For large events, it is good practice to



“In image banks, searching for ‘leadership’ will usually yield images of white men. Searching for ‘work life balance’ usually yields images of distraught-looking women.”

practices, the better off you are legally. State the kitchen is not allergen-free if that is the case. You will show you have thought about it, which may instill confidence. Be honest and transparent and prepare meals to the attendees’ restrictions without intent to harm.”

Gender pronouns are another aspect of registration forms that can be non-inclusive, if only two options are offered. Bernadette Smith, founder and president of The Equality Institute, says that non-binary guests may feel frustrated if they are forced to choose a pronoun and none

reserve space for attendees with differing abilities and their guests, or to provide them with early access to the space, in order to avoid getting caught in crowds. When it comes to catering, it can be hard for attendees who use wheelchairs to reach elevated buffet food. Table-height items are preferred, and Rossetti suggests raised flower arrangements instead. Ideally, buffets should have access on both sides, with adequate room to move around, and the tables should not be too close to the wall.

Rossetti says the stage should also be accessible from every angle, and should not be too small. Lapel microphones help speakers use their hands to navigate. Ramps should be carefully checked; often they are inappropriate for the height of the stage.

Sotnik highlights the importance of



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being prepared for onsite access requests. “Including accommodation requests on the registration form is key, but bear in mind that many requests will be made once delegates reach the venue. For example, a delegate may request a scooter in a large convention hall, even if they are mobile.” This means it is vital to have funds set aside to make these accommodations, and to have telephone numbers available for specialized service providers if unexpected needs arise.

McIlwraith also cautions meeting professionals to consider technology carefully. “We have added bells and whistles to PPT presentations to make them fancy, but we don’t always think of people with low vision.” HDRC (2009) states that materials are easiest to read when printed using

a sans serif font in high-contrast colors. Sans serif fonts are types that do not have serifs (the extra strokes that often look like tails at the start and end of the letter). The most widely used serif font is Times New Roman. Examples of sans serif fonts are Arial, Helvetica, Verdana, Futura, Univers and Franklin

The destination is an important consideration for attendees in the LGBTQ community. Smith says LGBTQ customers can still be refused services legally in 29 U.S. states. Meeting professionals could consider choosing places that have LGBTQ inclusive ordinances, she says.

In terms of education, meeting professionals select speakers / presenters that reflect the diversity of the audience they wish to attract about half of the time. And the “manel” (or all-male panel) has increasingly become a contentious issue in the meeting industry.

If you have women in the audience, you should have them on the stage, says Sam Lippman, president and founder of Lippman Connects. That said, leadership expert Joe Gerstandt notes that white males should not be excluded from discussions about diversity. “We need to engage white men. This is sometimes seen as a fringe perspective, but organizational power still rests there. They tend to not be in the conversation, so we don’t develop a com-

mon language, a common world view.”

John Nawn, founder of The Perfect Meeting, points out that the key motivations for attending conferences are education and networking. “When it comes to learning, we can measure success by examining how much information is retained and transferred back to the job. Most learning at conferences is not designed for maximizing retention and transfer, which makes it a waste of time and money. We need to think more inclusively and design differently.”

Endean adds that learning methods can vary by background. “Too many events are like learning modules from the ‘50s. ‘Here is your manel. Take away what you can.’ We need to consider there are different ways to access, learn and contex-

tualize information, for example, workshopping, testing, prototyping.” People remember images better than bullet points, she adds. “As an industry, we are not yet good at that. We are good at creating flashy videos that leave you with a feeling, but can create a cacophony in the brain. They create energy and excitement but are not good for learning.”

This also applies to networking. Leading experience expert Hurt says he tries to approach networking in an inclusive manner, paying particular attention to delegates who may be more introverted. “I always include smaller cubbies in the design of bigger ballrooms, so people can observe what is going on in the bigger crowd, so they can recharge or stay with a few people they feel comfortable with.”

Networking isn’t getting as many business cards as you can, he adds. “I seek out people who are different from me, and introduce them to my tribes. I design and structure the experience. I tell attendees to seek out someone who is different from them and share one thing other people wouldn’t know about them. This releases oxytocin, the bonding hormone. I aim to build a deeper ‘connexity’ with just a few people, rather than superficial contact with many. Networking is seen as a way to get a hand up—finding a new job, service or deal. I approach it differently: What can I offer you? What do you need? By being more serendipitous about it, it becomes more authentic.”

Rossetti says space design and furniture is important, and accessibility for people with mobility aids should be considered. “It can be problematic if there are only bar-height tables. At networking events there should be more seating and lower tables. This is not only helpful to people who use wheelchairs, we also need to think of people who can’t stand very long.”

In terms of catering, meeting professionals pay close attention to making inclusive and beverage arrangements, bearing in mind food restrictions and intolerances, religious norms and health considerations. Daniel Love, co-chairman of the MPI Diversity and Inclusion Taskforce, emphasizes that “food is a very personal and private thing. When you are in a position to make F&B decisions, understanding that personal desire to feel good about what you consume is critically important to the success of the event. Food can be a bridge to other people. F&B can also be an opportunity to educate the audience about culture and people.”

Stuckrath agrees that food provides opportunity to bond. “We use F&B at events to create connections. Yet, we don’t always

go about it the right way. People may be excluded if they have a food allergy or religious dietary restrictions. We need to be more mindful.”

Key allergens include wheat, soy, milk, eggs, tree nuts, peanuts, fish and shellfish. The EU, Canada and several other countries have laws that require producers of fresh and pre-packaged foods to clearly indicate if these allergens can be found in foods. In the U.S., this rule only applies to pre-packaged and not fresh food. Stuckrath supports labeling as an inclusive practice. “Labeling is comprehensive and comforting. Guests who are used to the system may be disappointed it isn’t available at U.S. conventions.”

Onsite Delivery

When it comes to onsite delivery, meeting professionals consider obstacle-free pathways, clear food labeling and easy-to-understand signage most of the time. They offer different types of seating, discussions with onsite event staff and moderators and diversity-trained event managers about half of the time. However, multi-lingual event staff, designated nursing spaces for mothers and child care options are rare (though, again, language may regionally vary).

Most of the time

- Consistent obstacle-free pathways into and throughout the venue
- Clear labeling of food options by food restriction/allergy or ingredients
- Signage that is easy to understand or non-text

Half of the time

- Different types of seating/furniture to match delegates’ needs/preferences
- Discussions with onsite event staff about the inclusivity goals of your event
- Moderators who create a safe space for all delegates to express themselves
- An event manager onsite who has received diversity training

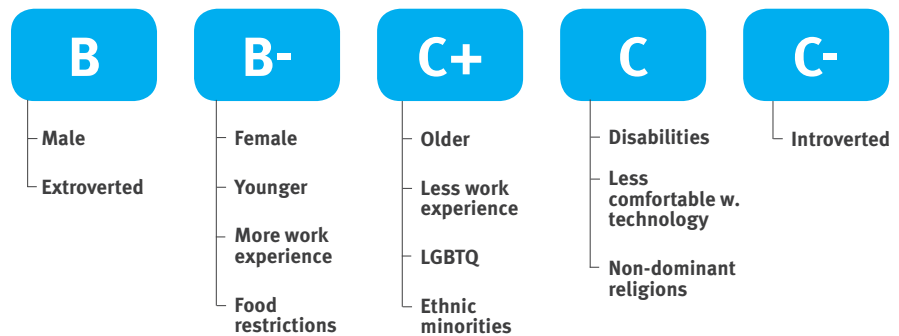
Rarely

- Onsite event staff who speak different languages
- Designated nursing spaces for mothers
- Child care options

Discussions with event staff about the inclusivity goals of the events are fairly rare, and this can lead to participant dissatisfaction, even if the event was carefully planned for inclusion.

For industry expert Eisenstodt, who uses a scooter, poorly trained venue staff can adversely impact her experience, as

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can high check-in and registration desks. Maribel Denner of Marriott International highlights the importance of multilingual staff. As someone who speaks multiple languages, she has experienced how helpful it can be in facilitating communication. “English is not my first language, which means that sometimes I can translate the question in my native language so nothing gets lost in translation.”

Stuckrath points out that people with dietary needs still face incomprehension from personnel. “Event staff may be hired from employment agencies and not be properly trained, so staff sometimes roll their eyes. But it can happen to anyone. You may think, ‘Oh not another one of those people,’ until you are one. I don’t expect staff to know every detail about this, but I do expect them to respect the attendee’s need. There is often not enough training about this. The goal should be to come at the guest with compassion.”

Love says it’s important not to make attendees with dietary needs feel like outsiders. “Nobody wants to be seen as the problem. Attitudes are improving, but there can still be an overt or covert stigma, and the attendee will know it. The only way to really address that is acknowledging the need upfront and following up to make the person feel fully included. For example, if gluten-free pasta is an option, make sure that is stated on the menu. The person may wince if they need to ask.”

Moderators and speakers need to be informed about inclusivity, and these discussions are only held about half of the time. Hurt encourages event professionals to discuss D&I objectives with speakers and moderators beforehand and suggests the use of a presenter-attendee agreement, the goal of which is to create a safe environment, that invites attendees to fully engage.

“If there is not a little bit of tension you are not learning. It can be somewhat discomforting, but we can lead our attendees there. We can make them feel safe and invite them in, but they have the right not to participate if they choose to. We start off every presentation with our presenter-attendee agreement, which has 12 principles. One is the ‘law of motion.’ You have the right to get up and take care of your needs during any presentation. The attendees can also text and share their experiences on social media during presentations. Attendees have free passes. If they don’t want to participate in an activity, that is OK. It is a freeing thing to do. The presenters and moderators are there for the audience, not the other way around.”

Event Feedback

Most of the time, event professionals meet with their teams to review feedback, develop improvement plans and offer participants the opportunity to comment in a variety of formats. They include vendors in the feedback discussions about half of the time, along with asking participants specific questions on how the event could have been more welcoming. However, they rarely include questions specifically focusing on delegate satisfaction with disability accommodations.

Most of the time

- A post-event meeting where the feedback is reviewed with your team
- Action plans are developed to incorporate feedback in future events
- Opportunities for delegates to give feedback in different formats (email, online form, phone)

Half of the time

- A post-event discussion with vendors where the feedback is reviewed
- A specific question asking how you

could have made the event more welcoming for the delegate

Rarely

- Specific questions asking about satisfaction with ability-related accommodations
- and access requests

Nawn emphasizes that data collection and attendee feedback are vital to an event's success. This includes gathering information before, during and after the event—rather than only seeking feedback after the event is over. But this can be challenging. “Often, not enough data are collected at events, or the wrong data are collected, or the right data are collected but the organization doesn’t have the analytical capabilities to make use of them,” he says.

To help event professionals in this area, he introduces participant games that encourage attendees to share information about themselves, their views and their goals. The more information delegates share, the better the host will understand their wants and needs. He sets up a booth at a central location, and shares information about the initiative in advance. Delegates are free to play as few or many games as they like. Some are individual and can be played on an iPad. For example, attendees may answer different questions about a number of scenarios. Others are on a large screen, and a group of attendees can play.

Nawn emphasizes that he doesn’t col-

lect (or need) identifying information. “Most delegates don’t object if you are transparent about what you want to accomplish.” Hurt recommends that staff observe attendee behavior, taking notes on participants and how they are interacting.

Love and Sotnik add that a direct feedback loop is important for attendees who have requested certain D&I accommodations, whether they are accessibility-related or have to do with dietary needs. “It is important to follow up, and make sure you know how delegates with special food requests were taken care of. If there are negative comments, follow up.

Industry Evaluation

The final section of the survey asked meeting professionals how well they felt the event industry serves the needs of different delegate groups on a scale between one (terrible) and five (excellent). On the basis of these scores, a grade can be calculated ranging from A to F. The groups comprised of the following.

- Male attendees
- Female attendees
- Younger attendees
- Older attendees
- LGBTQ attendees
- Introverted attendees
- Extroverted attendees
- Attendees with food restrictions
- Attendees from ethnic minorities
- Attendees with disabilities
- Attendees from non-dominant religions

- Attendees with more work experience
- Attendees with less work experience
- Attendees less comfortable with technology

Meeting professionals say the groups best-served by the event industry are male and extroverted attendees. They say introverted attendees are least-served. See Chart 3.

Lippman offers a few tips that can help introverted attendees feel more welcome. He suggests meeting professionals use technology to allow delegates to ask questions in alternative ways. He also recommends that meeting professionals assign seating at lunch times, which not only leads to new connections, but reduces awkwardness (and can work as a sponsor benefit). Lippman also suggests avoiding loud music or video and keeping addresses short. In networking receptions, he makes sure the room is well-lit and plays low-volume music. He schedules breaks for 40 minutes to allow networking, and does not include commercial programming during the breaks.

Benjamin recommends offering a small-group exercise before asking audience members to speak, so that people have an opportunity to formulate ideas and validate them. Lippman encourages self-introductions during which people share successes—any excuse really to get people talking. “Polling questions can also work to get people engaged,” he says. “Sometimes, I call up certain delegates and ask them to take the lead on certain topics, to ensure the conversation starts smoothly.”



Meeting Professionals International (MPI) is the largest meeting and event industry association worldwide. Founded in 1972, the organization provides innovative and relevant education, networking opportunities and business exchanges, and acts as a prominent voice for the promotion and growth of the industry. MPI has a global community of 60,000 meeting and event professionals including more than 17,000 engaged members and the Plan Your Meetings non-traditional meeting planner audience. It has more than 90 chapters and clubs in 24 countries.

For additional information, visit www.mpi.org.

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The MPI Foundation is a nonprofit organization that fuels the advancement of MPI members by providing them professional development and career opportunities through grants and scholarships. The MPI Foundation also propels the meeting and event industry forward by funding innovative research and pan-industry initiatives that support the strategic plan of MPI.

For additional information, visit www.mpi.org/foundation.

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