

THE BLEISURE BOOM IS HERE.

IS YOUR EVENT STRATEGY READY?

visit Anaheim

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Meeting organizers need to work harder for their event to stand out in an increasingly crowded market. By taking advantage of the "bleisure" trend, where travelers tag on personal time to work trips, they can attract a much larger market.

Every year, over 250 million people hit the road, heading for conferences and meetings throughout the United States. In coming years, even more travelers will be joining them, with the meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions (MICE) industry set to grow at a compounded rate of 5% by 2032. At the same time, the broader U.S. conference, concert, and event market is expected to almost double in value from $340 billion in 2022 to $660 billion by 2030.[1]

Standing out in this market requires a laser-sharp focus on attendee experience. Choosing the right destination that offers both business infrastructure and leisure activities can make all the difference to event success. Partnering with Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs), such as Visit Anaheim, can help organizers offer a unique, customized experience and heighten anticipation for attendees.

DMOs can help with logistics, such as sourcing additional hotel room blocks for a seamless experience, advising on retail and beverage items that tie in with an event's branding and themed colors, or even ideating creative campaigns and competitions for a truly bespoke feel. For a recent convention, Visit Anaheim came on board as a competition sponsor for a VIP helicopter entrance.

Going beyond the business agenda to intentionally build in considered downtime and make wellness a priority can further deepen the attendee experience. Too often, conferences and meetings are overwhelming, with delegates neglecting sleep in favour of networking. The result is exhaustion and, often, less engagement in the final sessions.

Bringing in curated local experiences that showcase the destination's unique culture, cuisine, and attractions can help cut through the clutter. Adding interactive sessions, team building, and social events fosters intentional networking and connection-building. At the same time, organizers can thoughtfully integrate wellness and leisure activities such as meditation, healthy food, and opportunities for movement.

By prioritizing attendee engagement and satisfaction, organizers can create truly memorable events that drive stronger business outcomes and brand affinity.

1 INTRODUCTION:
A THIRST FOR CONNECTION

Gone are the days when business travel was about anonymous hotel rooms and cookie-cutter conference venues. Today's travelers increasingly value experiences, connections, and relationships – even for business meetings. They're actively looking for ways to balance work with lifestyle, to manage stress levels, and cultivate downtime, inspiration, and play.

And meeting organizers are changing up their game. They're competing in an increasingly crowded market and looking for ways to make their event stand out and attract more participants. Understanding what audiences are looking for is vital to success.

Standing out in this market requires a strong commitment to attendee experience with a deep understanding of what today's travelers are looking for.



THE RISE OF THE EXPERIENCE ECONOMY

Younger millennial and Gen Z travelers are looking for better work-life balance, fulfillment, and purpose, even while pursuing corporate careers. This new focus on meaning and wellness impacts their approach to meetings and conferences. Travelers are seeking out experiences that reflect who they are and have meaningful ties to their individuality.[2] Travel is less about visiting specific places to show off where they've been, and more about personal fulfillment – and millennials and Gen Z travelers are at the core of this shift.[3]

This desire is impacting business travel too, as digital nomads integrate leisure travel into their professional lives with the rise of remote work and a work-from-anywhere mindset.[4, 5]

The result is "bleisure," where travelers combine business with leisure time, helped by rising demand for work-life balance, the flexibility offered by remote and hybrid work, and more affordable accommodation.

Marriott International reports that business travelers are staying 20% longer than they did in 2019.[6] And American Airlines says that bleisure travelers are the fastest-growing segment of their business.[7]

Nearly nine out of ten travelers would like to add leisure time to business trips, and over three-quarters have already tacked leisure time onto business trips at least once.[8] For some travelers, bleisure isn't just a nice-to-have, but a deal maker or breaker . Visit Anaheim previously found that 44% of travelers had actually turned down work trips because of a lack of leisure time at their host destination.[9]

Bleisure trips offer several benefits to travelers who prioritize work-life balance (according to 55% of employees).[10] Travelers add leisure activities to their work trips to enhance their well-being and lower stress levels, leading to higher job satisfaction and overall productivity. A full 78% said that leisure time adds value to their job assignments, and 73% said bleisure opportunities were an employee benefit.

While work travel can be an obligation, bleisure trips are attractive in their own right. The right kind of bleisure offers employees a transformative and purposeful experience that is unique to that destination.

Selecting a host destination with an abundance of leisure opportunities is essential for increasing attendance and overall attendee satisfaction.[11] In addition to reliable WiFi for accessing business communication, the ideal destination should also offer entertainment and dining options at a range of price points. And destinations located close to major airports with local transport are even more attractive.

20% longer stays

89% want leisure time

73% find **bleisure opportunities** an employee benefit



A REVITALIZED MEETING EXPERIENCE

Organizers now have a unique opportunity to go beyond what's expected to surprise and delight their attendees. Audiences are craving authentic experiences, opportunities to recharge, and spaces for connection. Globally, 86% of travelers agree that the opportunity to participate in entertainment, sports, and cultural experiences when they travel is important to their overall sense of happiness and well-being.[12] And almost three-quarters said this was more important to them now than it had been five years ago.

Organizations and meeting hosts have also begun to understand the importance of happiness, play, and creativity in fueling workplace productivity and satisfaction. For instance, workers are measurably more productive when they are happy.[13] In this context, the benefits of play – unstructured, creative fun that adds joy and relieves stress – are linked not only to increased productivity, but also higher job satisfaction, greater morale, and reduced burnout.[14, 15]

Kristen Goldman, Global Head of Events at Amadeus, told Globetrender's Business Travel Trends 2024: "With the rise of remote working, people are embracing every opportunity to have meaningful face-to-face interactions, and they are making the most of the events already...happening to do this...Attendees and organizers...realize that organic human interactions (such as socializing and networking) are equally as valuable as a plenary or lecture."[16]

Goldman said there was an uptick in breakout sessions, add-on meetings, team-building activities, and built-in networking opportunities such as happy hours, walk-around lunches, dinners, and city tours. This fostered human connection and also helped clients optimize attendee time.[17]

DJ, author, and keynote speaker Amani Roberts has seen this shift in hospitality firsthand, with attendees building in leisure time before or after an event so that they can take a day or two to explore the destination.

"I think that overall, you'll see more people actually attend the events. Often, people decide whether or not to attend based not only on the content of the program, but also on the opportunities for leisure activities outside the program. When they see all the different attractions and activities available in the local area, like in Anaheim, it encourages them to register and attend the event," Roberts says.[18]

MUSIC THAT SETS THE TONE

"Thinking about the soundtrack to your event can subtly cue attendees and help them focus at the right times," says Roberts.

Music can be transformational when used throughout the event, not just for walk-on and walk-off intervals. DJs can help curate the music to match the theme and energy of the event, support engagement, and create more memorable experiences. Using local musicians or artists further strengthens the ties between your event and the destination.

"Never forget the music!" said Roberts.[19]









WELLNESS BY DESIGN

Designing interactive events that tick all these boxes requires intentionality and thoughtfulness.

Events often leave attendees exhausted rather than energized, explained corporate event planner David T. Stevens, highlighting the need to consider individual wellness.[20] He recommended that organizers consider attendees' need to rest during an event in order to help them stay alert. Stevens suggests reconsidering late-night networking breaks and early morning fitness classes in favor of wellness and self-care breaks and interactive sessions during the day.

At the same time, wellness tourism – travel associated with personal well-being – is accelerating. Prior to COVID-19 lockdowns, the global wellness tourism market grew 50% faster than the overall tourism industry between 2017-2019, reaching $720 billion in 2019 at its peak. With wellness becoming mainstream, even business meeting participants appreciate an agenda that allows for conscious engagement.

Organizers can consider three dimensions of wellness: mindfulness, movement, and food.[21] By including meditation, focused breathing, or reconnection with nature, and by designing an agenda that allows for mental space and meaningful conversations, organizers can help attendees feel at peace and ready to engage.

Allowing for movement and exercise can help improve learning and retention. This can include individual free time and extended access to fitness centers, as well as planned group activities such as fun runs or scavenger hunts.

As a third dimension, consider the food that fuels people's participation.[22] Include healthy meals and snacks that support learning, and label foods to make it easier for attendees to prioritize their health.

LEISURE IS THE KEY TO GREATER ENGAGEMENT

Attractive leisure options are an essential ingredient for bleisure success, heightening anticipation ahead of the event and ensuring a memorable experience for attendees.

Research shows that leisure activities help to lower stress and improve cognition, promoting overall well-being.[23] Leisure has a positive effect on mental health and resilience.[24] In turn, well-being is closely associated with job satisfaction and job performance.[25] By implication, including selected leisure activities in a conference program supports positive emotions for attendees, helping them re-energize and making the overall event more memorable.

Local destination marketing organizations (DMOs) such as Visit Anaheim can be an invaluable partner for event organizers looking to craft memorable events, sharing their knowledge of local attractions, handpicked suppliers, and supporting creative campaigns and sweepstakes to grow attendee lists.

Digital culture conference VidCon, which brings together digital creators, platform innovators, fans, and online brands, teamed up with Visit Anaheim to launch a giveaway that offers fans an unforgettable experience in an event that is all about thinking big. Three lucky winners and their plus ones each received a VIP helicopter ride from John Wayne Airport into Anaheim, alongside one of VidCon's Featured Creators, Peet Montzingo, SeanDoesMagic, or KreekCraft. This went far beyond a conventional meet-and-greet opportunity to wow attendees with an exclusive experience. Winners also received a four-night stay at the Anaheim Marriott and tickets to VidCon. Visit Anaheim came on board as a competition sponsor and supported the logistics that made this dream prize a reality.

DMOs can also share local insights with event organizers so that meetings showcase the best their destination has to offer, says Roberts.[26] Consider the overall journey of attendees will have, and create an immersive experience from arrival to departure. This doesn't have to include a helicopter ride – but a memorable entrance certainly helps to set the scene, while earning buzzworthy attention for the event, driving awareness, interest, and potentially registrations.

Bringing in leisure experiences could include team-building events, a workshop at a museum





rather than a conference center, or an outdoor meditation and sound bath session. After hours, attendees could gather for a networking dinner under string lights at a neighborhood restaurant or cheer on a local baseball or hockey game. Designing "Instagrammable" moments for social sharing can also support this connection, Roberts says.[27]

Even in the most packed agenda, there's often room to delight attendees with a glimpse of the destination. Bringing in local food, music, arts, and culture adds to the authenticity of the event and supports casual, informal networking. "You can bring the destination to the people if you don't have a lot of extra time. You can bring local flavor into the venue, through music, cuisine, all five senses – sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch," says Roberts.[28]

Coordinated branding and unique experiences can also help make an event memorable. Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKA) Sorority chose Anaheim for their 2025 Leadership Summit. They wanted to inspire their attendees and empower them to step into leadership roles, and so the weekend was designed around growth, connection, and sorority spirit. Visit Anaheim's Destination Services offered extra support to make this vision a reality. The team helped source additional hotel room blocks so that attendees had convenient access to the convention center and leisure attractions. They also recognized the importance of a customized experience for AKA's attendees and recommended retail items, cocktails, and menu options in the sorority's signature pink and green colors from local restaurants and nearby shops.





"You can bring local flavor into the venue, through music, cuisine, all five senses – sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch."

-Roberts









EVENT SUCCESS METRICS HAVE CHANGED

The new focus on experience and enjoyment has also made for deeper analytics for event organizers. Traditional event success metrics have shifted away from registration and attendance to also consider engagement, satisfaction, and brand impact. Analyzing attendee activity, such as the exhibitors they spent time with, the polls they participated in, and the sessions they checked into, can help reveal engagement levels.[29] Post-event surveys and net promoter scores gauge satisfaction levels and feed into brand perceptions.[30]

Social media mentions, brand mentions, media coverage, and lead generation can also help organizers assess the impact on brand visibility and perceptions.[31]

And in turn, this leads to a renewed focus on the strategy behind hosting events.

"The goal is not just to bring people together but to create meaningful connections, drive lasting impact, and resonate with audiences on an emotional level," said Apple's Yana Rozhkova, marketing manager for Middle East and North Africa (MENA).[32] By helping people to connect at this deeper level, organizers increase the impact of their events and ensure attendees return for the next meeting.

2 ANAHEIM'S COMPETITIVE EDGE

Event planners know that a desirable destination can hold the key to meeting success. Destinations with strong leisure and entertainment offerings are more attractive to travelers, and the right destination can help events stand out in a crowded market.

California holds the largest share of the US tourism market.33 Tourism spending in California hit record highs in recent years, reaching $150 billion in 2023 and surpassing the previous record of $145 billion set in 2019.34 It is also the state with the largest business travel spending, at over $35 billion, suggesting that California is a prime location for bleisure travel.[35]

Within California, the city of Anaheim is a prime event location, attracting around 25 million visitors annually thanks to a diverse array of theme parks, dining offerings, entertainment attractions, as well as its proximity to beaches, nightlife, and other major cities. It's about culture, sports, play, and connection, as well as convenience.









For business travelers, Anaheim is host to the Anaheim Convention Center, the largest of its kind on the West Coast, and has over 150 hotels with over 20,000 rooms.[36] It's a short drive from both Los Angeles and San Diego and is close to major airports.

But it's Anaheim's leisure credentials that make it a stand-out destination. The city is synonymous with *Disneyland*® Park and *Disney California Adventure*® Park, as well as the iconic theme park Knott's Berry Farm.

Anaheim's proximity to beaches, good restaurants, live entertainment, and walkable areas like *Downtown Disney*® make for an attractive proposition. Visitors can take in a sports game at Angel Stadium or the Honda Center, enjoy live music at the House of Blues Anaheim, and visit the Anaheim Packing District for a multicultural food hall experience. The new OCVIBE mixed-use development currently underway will include the chef-driven Market Hall with food stalls and bars, as well as hotels, a concert hall, and private event spaces all in the span of 100 acres.

Mike Waterman, CEO and President of Visit Anaheim, says even repeat visitors to Anaheim can be assured of a new experience every time they come.[37]

"Play is different for everybody, and I think for us as marketers and DMO leaders, we have to understand what people want to see. And it varies by day, it varies by time of season. So it's [about having] this abundance of riches at our disposal," he said.

This focus on fun, play, and leisure means Anaheim events can offer unique experiences for team building or networking. Attendees can take part in virtual reality attractions, take on a Disney-inspired challenge, or fly an airplane at the Flightdeck Flight Simulation Center. Back on solid ground, conferences often include craft brewery tours, scavenger hunts, or off-site excursions to local attractions, helping to cement relations between group members.

25 million visitors

$150B tourism spending

20,000+ hotel rooms

3 RETHINKING EVENT DESIGN

Today's travelers have changed their mindset. They're looking for opportunities to reconnect with their purpose, and they're looking for meaning at work as well as in their personal lives. They're balancing work and life, and they're far more aware of their health and stress. They're more likely to work remotely and to be connected with colleagues across the globe.

These values are impacting the way they travel and the destinations they choose. They're no longer content with windowless rooms, isolated cubicles, and grey carpet – and indeed, were they ever? The truth is bleisure's impact can already be felt across tourism and hospitality, by airlines, hotels, and destinations.

By thoughtfully integrating leisure activities and destination experiences, event organizers have a unique opportunity to create truly memorable, high-impact events. Destinations like Anaheim, with their blend of business-ready infrastructure and rich leisure offerings, are poised to help organizers stand out in a crowded market.

Weaving in play, wellness, and connection throughout the event design results in greater attendee engagement, improved knowledge retention, and stronger brand affinity. Rather than seeing downtime as lost productivity, savvy organizers recognize it as a competitive advantage – a chance to delight and re-energize their guests.

In this world, even as the MICE industry continues to grow, there's an opportunity for meeting organizers to intentionally design their events to attract the audience they're looking for and promote engagement rather than consumption. Focusing on the unique strengths of offline events – compared to hybrid and virtual – organizers can offer travelers an authentic, immersive experience and the opportunity to recharge.

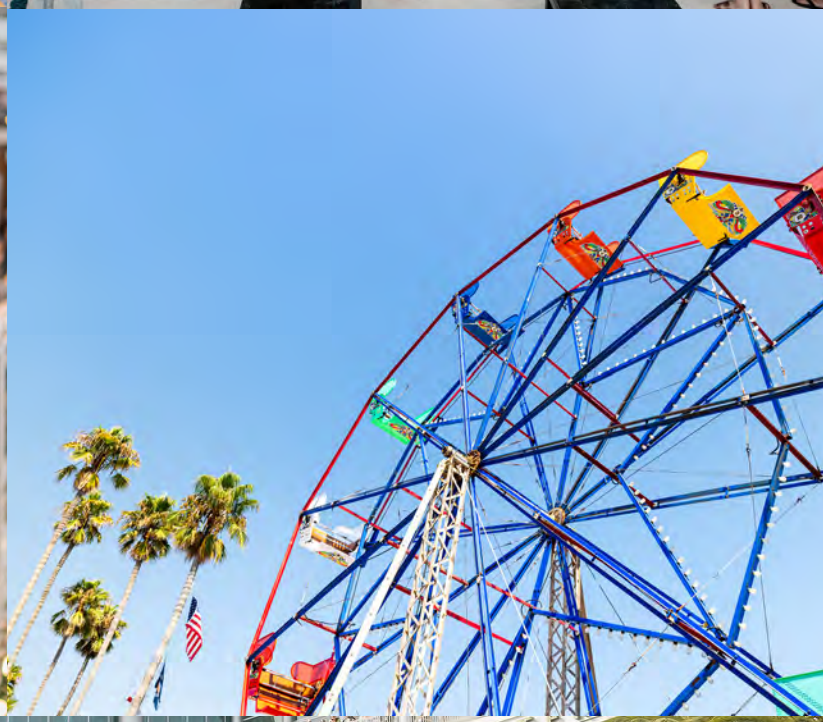
Doing this results in transformative events that break the mold and redefine success metrics to prioritize meaningful connections, holistic wellbeing, and lasting brand impact over traditional measures like attendance and registrations.

These events drive stronger outcomes, greater brand affinity, and deeper, more lasting connections. They are impactful and memorable in the best way.




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