

Technological innovation is key to post-pandemic conferencing

Tourism has been hugely impacted by lockdowns and regulations, and reigniting the leisure tourism sector is understandably a hot topic, but the dramatic decline in business tourism has dealt its own significant blow to the economy.



According to Cape Town Tourism's latest impact report on how Level 3 (implemented on 28 December 2020) impacted the sector, tourism across the board has been exceptionally hard hit. The combined loss revenue across all Cape Town Tourism's members is a startling R2bn, while more than 11,000 jobs have been lost. The report further states that 68% of businesses have already let staff go and 83% have implemented pay cuts.

One Cape Town Tourism member that has been affected by the decline in tourism is Century City Conference Centre and Hotel.

"Our business relies on business tourism, both national and international. Corporates are, understandably, wanting to do the right and responsible thing. We fully support following regulations and have our Covid-19 Commitment to Care programme in place, ensuring that we do our part to conduct business in a safe environment for our staff and guests," says Kim Weber, business optimisation manager for Century City Conference Centre & Hotels.

Building, maintaining relationships

One shining light, however, is that many clients have opted to postpone events instead of cancelling or go ahead with their event based on the event restrictions that are in place, especially as we can provide adequate, comfortable and exclusive space given the physical distancing requirements. Weber says that the goal now is to drive the business forward through continuing to meet and exceed clients evolving needs through various solutions including technological innovation.

"We are constantly evolving our virtual and our in-person offering. Last year, we accelerated our virtual offering by light-years. We now have a virtual team that researches new developments and enhancements the industry to ensure that we have the latest offerings for our clients. At the same time, we have a team developing new offerings and products for our in-person delegates including new day conference packages and in-person technology," she says.

She believes that people are eager to get back to face-to-face networking because it's an integral part of building company culture and maintaining relationships. That said, virtual conferencing is here to stay in at least a hybrid form.

"At this stage, our events have around an 80 to 100% virtual component. It will probably drop to around 50 over time, but a combination of face-to-face and virtual will be invaluable for many businesses," shares Weber.

In terms of hotel stays, Weber adds that business in Cape Town is generally depressed. In fact, she shares that bookings in January in accommodation across Cape Town was at 17% occupancy compared to 71% the same time last year.

Prioritising safety protocols concerns

"This is a sector that has been affected throughout every level of government restrictions. People started becoming more confident, dreaming about holidays and companies started to consider retreats. But all of that confidence was lost when the second wave hit and restrictions harshened," says Weber.

She believes, however, that post Level 1 announcement, the recovery of confidence will be quicker and business will bounce back faster. Conferences will continue to be held, within the necessary safety parameters.

"We are fully aware of the enormous responsibility it entails to provide an environment that will protect both our guests and our staff from the threat of Covid-19. The health and safety of guests and staff have always been a top priority for us, and we have always adhered to the highest standards in this vital area. However, the light of the coronavirus pandemic, we have elevated our processes and protocols to fight this disease.

She is hopeful that together with the support of local and national government, both leisure and business tourism will see a sharp recovery in the not-too-distant future.