

NOW WHAT?

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Bobby Fripps cleans a handrail at the Convention Center, which has not had an event since March. JESSICA GRIFFIN / Staff Photographer

Convention industry aims to show it can open safely

Big money at stake as Phila. center eyes a hybrid future.



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President Donald Trump may have given up on holding a convention in the midst of a pandemic, but not Mark Yuska.

A professional meeting planner, Yuska is so convinced that convention centers can be made safe that he decided to organize a gathering for the people who manage the world's conferences and trade shows. His company, Alliance Exposition, booked the main hall at Orlando's convention center, went into sanitation

overdrive, and signed up a room's worth of exhibitors. On July 24 — while Florida was experiencing an unprecedented surge in coronavirus cases — 1,400 people poured into the building for the Together Again Expo, believed to be the first major trade show since America's convention centers went dark in March.

"It was proof that it could be done safely," said Cathy Breden, who runs the International Association of Convention Centers. See **CONVENTIONS** on A19

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“**Networking, in-person product demos and impromptu breakout face-to-face meetings are important parts of the convention experience that have not translated well in the digital convention ecosystem.**

Josh Swissman,
a hospitality consultant

Ashley Dabb, senior communications manager at the Convention Center, photographs an air-quality tester in use at there as new COVID-19 precautions are put in place.

JESSICA GRIFFIN / Staff Photographer

Conventions

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ciation of Exhibitions and Events and who was one of the speakers.

Well, not actually proof, since there has been no follow-up to determine if any of the attendees contracted the virus. What the event does demonstrate is how desperate the vast convention-industrial complex is to find a way to restart their meeting halls.

Conventions and trade shows are now wrestling with the same challenges facing schools, religious groups, and professional sports. Whenever large numbers of people gather indoors, in tightly enclosed spaces with mechanical air circulation, odds are that spikes in coronavirus infections will follow. But conventions aren't merely an optional social get-together; they are also the linchpin of America's urban economies, supporting a \$100 billion ecosystem of hotels, restaurants, and entertainment venues. That's why Yuska and hundreds of others in the meeting business are trying to adapt convention centers so that large events can still take place, even under the extreme constraints demanded by the pandemic.

Since people may be leery of attending big gatherings for some time to come, their efforts could determine how quickly cities are able to get back on their feet. In Philadelphia, hospitality is the second-largest industry, pumping \$7.1 billion a year into the city's economy, according to Econsult. Some 77,000 residents owe their jobs to those suitcase-toting, lanyard-wearing conventioners. And unlike office employees, they don't have a work-from-home fallback option. Not a single event has been held at the Convention Center on Broad Street since the Philadelphia Flower Show closed March 8, and nearly 60% of the city's hospitality workers are now unemployed. The loss of tax revenue for the city is immense.

Yet, as Trump discovered when he was forced to cancel the major portion of the Republican National Convention, safely assembling several thousand people in the same building is a daunting undertaking. Some believe that Herman Cain, the former presidential contender who died from COVID-19 on July 30, contracted the virus during

Trump's June 20 rally in a Tulsa, Okla., arena. This will be the first election year in American history that red-white-and-blue-clad party delegates do not assemble in person to select their presidential candidates.

Even the Consumer Electronics Show, an annual mega-convention that attracts 180,000 gadget geeks to Las Vegas, threw in the towel and announced that the event will take place online in January. People will just have to watch the theatrical product rollouts on their screens. While many people think of gambling as Las Vegas' main business, the

pleted.

But the remote meeting did little good for the city where our alumni council normally gathers. Not a single airline ticket, hotel room, rental car, or restaurant meal was purchased, and no one stayed late into the night at the bar, racking up an impressive tab.

For many conventioners, the bar — not the meeting hall — is where the most fruitful exchanges occur. “Those serendipitous exchanges won't happen online,” Karamat predicted.

“Networking, in-person product demos and impromptu breakout face-to-face meetings are important parts of the convention experience that have not translated well in the digital convention ecosystem,” Josh Swissman, a

building. The downside is that that there will be fewer out-of-town visitors staying in hotels and spending money.

The Convention Center is already retrofitting its three-block-long behemoth in Center City for a hybrid future. Over the last four months, the state-run meeting hall has installed \$3 million in sanitary upgrades, said John McNichol, who oversees the operation. That includes automatic, ultraviolet sanitizers that run underneath the escalator handrails, souped-up air-filtration systems, antimicrobial film on the door handles, and touchless controls in the restrooms. “If you can dream it, we're looking at it,” McNichol said.

Most convention centers are installing similar equipment to en-

and wide corridors, they are a naturally safer environment than buildings with small rooms, like schools, argued Bob McClintock, ASM's vice president. Of course, attendees would need to wear masks and have their temperatures checked before they enter.

But the all-out battle to wipe down pathogens in convention centers may be a fight against the wrong enemy. As an essay in *The Atlantic* argued, the evidence suggests that coronavirus is not primarily spread through surface transmission. The first time an infected person walks into a convention hall, all that deep cleaning goes out the window.

Yuska, who is a leading advocate for restarting conventions, remains convinced they can be done “safely and responsibly.” At the Together Again Expo in Orlando, attendees sat six feet apart as they listened to speakers. The round banquet tables that normally accommodate 10 people were limited to five, even though it meant people had to speak loudly. Everyone wore a mask and dutifully adhered to social distancing, even in the line for the steam tables, he said.

He believes that state restrictions have unfairly lumped convention centers in with bars and concert venues. “Our cleanliness standards exceed what you're seeing in restaurants or Walmart,” he said. At the Together Again Expo, “people told me, ‘I feel more comfortable here than going to my local restaurant.’ “

It's worth noting that about three-quarters of the 1,400 attendees lived within driving distance. An additional 8,200 chose to stay home and watched it online. If convention centers are allowed to reopen, even the most boosterish industry executives say that, initially, future meetings will be regional, rather than international events.

“I don't know what normal is going to be,” Karamat said. “I want to say the ‘next normal.’ That's because I don't believe we're ever going back to what was normal before.”

Since Together Again was envisioned as a proof-of-concept experiment, it's a shame that Yuska didn't arrange a follow-up survey, to determine whether anyone got sick. Then, perhaps, we could know what the future of conventions will look like.

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In Orlando, Fla., a one-day convention was held at the Orange County Convention Center to show such an event could be safe. There have been no follow-up reports on attendees. HEIDI BRUMBACH

city is essentially one big convention venue. “Every hotel is a convention hotel,” said Sherrif Karamat, who runs the Professional Convention Management Association.

Of course, the shows can still go on even if the convention centers stay closed. After the lockdown orders went into effect, many scientific and trade conferences quickly transitioned to online. The 50-member alumni council for my university did just that, compressing a two-day event into three hours. It turned out that the format forced us to focus more efficiently on the key issues. Those who wanted to socialize simply stayed on Zoom after the agenda items were com-

pleted. hospitality consultant, told the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*.

As unsatisfying as the online meeting experience might be, many trade associations believe they are the only option for now. Since many of those groups rely on convention revenue for their operating budgets, online conventions have been a lifeline.

As for cities, their best hope right now is that those online-only conventions can be turned into hybrid conventions, which offer both online presentations and limited, in-person gatherings. Since Convention Center operators believe they can operate safely with 20% capacity, only a portion of the normal crowd would be allowed in the

hybrid model. The industry recently devised an accreditation system called Global Biorisk Assessment, a pandemic-level Good Housekeeping seal of approval, for meeting halls, airports, and hotels. “You can fog and disinfect the building after every event,” Yuska said.

Convention centers have also developed the usual social distancing protocols. ASM Global, the company that manages Philadelphia's convention center, has mapped the meeting halls and trade floors to ensure there will be six feet of separation between chairs, tables, and exhibition booths. Because convention centers tend to have soaring ceilings



Lukas Jenkins, an industrial hygienist, tests the air at the Convention Center. Over the last four months, the meeting hall has installed \$3 million in sanitary upgrades. JESSICA GRIFFIN / Staff Photographer

Lisa Dobbertin, an engineering project manager at the Convention Center, stands next to a sign that notes the handrail is cleaned by UV-light sterilization. JESSICA GRIFFIN / Staff Photographer

