

A Market That Did Not Break

The GCC Events Industry:
From Geopolitical Shock to Structural Reset

UAE MICE: Adapting
before the Crisis Ends

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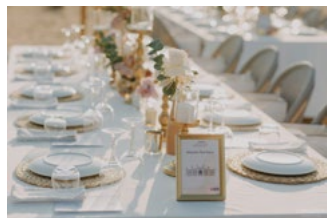
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From the Editor

This issue was assembled during one of the most unusual quarters the GCC events market has seen in years.

In February 2026, a geopolitical shock reset the calendar of an entire region overnight. Hundreds of events were cancelled or postponed. Western corporate demand vanished. The industry held its breath.

And then - **kept working.**

That is the thread running through this issue, even in articles that were never written about crisis. Rhiannon Downie-Hurst on fam trips that generate real ROI rather than Instagram content. Oleg Kryuchkov on technology that turns engagement into measurable outcomes. Labeed Assidmi on Saudi Arabia re-writing the rules of experiential delivery. Guido Sperzaga on replacing accidental networking with intentional connection. Denis Panchenko on the shift from excess to precision in event design.

None of these are comfort reads. They are arguments - made by practitioners - for a more deliberate industry.

That argument feels particularly urgent now. A market under pressure separates those who understand what they are selling from those who do not. Atmosphere is not a strategy. Scale is not a result. A beautiful event that leaves no measurable trace is, increasingly, a hard sell to clients who have learned to ask harder questions.

What the contributors to this issue share is a refusal to operate on autopilot. Gauri Chadha rebuilt an entire event universe in 30 days when her venue fell through two weeks before the show. Artem Kulikov reframes conference catering as a production system, not a hospitality function. Alina Shlyakhtova writes about hosting a gala dinner in the desert when hotels couldn't, and about Abu Dhabi Tourism personally showing up for stranded guests during the worst of the uncertainty - because that's what the right partner does.

The market did not break. It adapted. Sometimes elegantly, sometimes under enormous pressure, sometimes by turning a flood into a stage effect. But it moved forward.

This issue is about the professionals who knew how.

Sergey Larin
Editor-in-Chief,
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A Market that DID NOT BREAK

The GCC Events Industry: From Geopolitical Shock to Structural Reset



by Sergey
Larin

On February 28, 2026, the United States and Israel carried out airstrikes against Iran. The tourism market responded immediately. According to CoStar/STR data, Dubai hotel occupancy in February stood at 84.7% - down 5.9% year-on-year. March was harsher: 33.1% against 49.3% the previous year. Some properties fell below 10%. Hundreds of flights were cancelled. Of the 269 events planned across the Gulf for spring, the majority were postponed or cancelled.

The numbers look like a crisis. In reality, they are a test. And the industry is passing it right now.

Q1 Shock: What Happened

The impact was asymmetric. The Western corporate segment - Europe and the United States - virtually disappeared: air connectivity was disrupted, insurance risks rose, and corporate travel policies blocked business trips.

Meanwhile, regional demand - UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Asia - held. The market split along passport lines: those who live nearby did not leave.

The specific losses are clear. The JP Morgan MENA Summit was cancelled. The UITP Summit 2026 was cancelled entirely. Arabian Travel Market shifted from May to August. M&I Expo was moved to 2027. X: by micebook relocated from Oman to Spain. According to Northbourne Advisory, the UAE alone recorded 17 cancellations and 50 postponements.

But amid this list: the Dubai World Cup ran on schedule. Art Dubai was reformatted and held in May. Navruz brought together 300 guests. The first GTO fitness test outside Russia took place at Dubai Sports City. By April, more than 238 events and attractions across the GCC had resumed operations.

Demand did not disappear - it shifted.



GCC: Each Country has its Own Version of the Crisis

The impact was distributed unevenly across the region - and this is important to understand, rather than treating the GCC as a monolith.

Qatar found itself in the most vulnerable position. Iranian missiles and drones specifically targeted Doha and the Ras Laffan infrastructure. The airport closed, air connectivity collapsed. The Qatar Economic Forum was postponed. The Finalissima between Argentina and Spain, scheduled for March in Doha, was cancelled. MotoGP and the Diamond League were pushed to summer. Qatar Airways is gradually restoring routes via controlled corridors, but market confidence remains fragile.

Bahrain - the smallest and geographically most vulnerable GCC state - absorbed some of the Iranian strikes: debris from intercepted missiles fell in residential areas, and sirens sounded

regularly. For the events industry, this meant a near-complete halt of the international segment during spring.

Kuwait played the role of strategic balancer. Direct strikes on its territory were minimal, but the closure of airspace and Hormuz logistics weighed on business activity. International events were either postponed or converted to regional formats centred on local audiences.

Oman traditionally maintains relations with all parties and suffered no direct strikes. Nonetheless, the industry was affected: the Muscat International Book Fair was postponed, X: by micebook moved to Spain. Organisers cite not a security threat, but the "regional situation" - which more accurately reflects the nature of the losses: not fear, but logistics and audience confidence.

Renovations: A Pause as an Investment

Amid falling occupancy, several flagship UAE properties closed for major refurbishment: Burj Al Arab - for the first time since 1999, for 18 months. Armani Hotel, Park Hyatt Dubai, St Regis The Palm, JW Marriott Marquis, Radisson Blu Media City - simultaneously, one after another.

Analysts draw an important distinction: this is not what happened in 2020. Back then, renovations were impossible - no labour, no materials. Today logistics work. A smart operator uses a low-demand window to enter the next cycle with a refreshed product. This is not about new carpets - it is about rethinking the entire asset philosophy: ESG standards,

energy efficiency, smart technology, water recycling systems.

"Many of these closures are not contraction - they are preparation," says Klaus Assmann, CEO of United Hospitality Management for the Middle East. The venue market has temporarily contracted. But what opens in 2027 will be of a different calibre.

"Many of these closures are not contraction - they are preparation."

Saudi Arabia: From Volume to Value

The Saudi events market is undergoing a quiet but fundamental transformation. Corporate demand is becoming increasingly targeted. Not "hold a conference" - but solve a specific problem: close a tender, introduce teams, get a signature on an agreement. Business travel is taking on a distinctly project-based character, and event formats are shifting accordingly.

Large plenary conferences are giving way to compact but high-intensity meetings: leadership retreats, client summits, partner sessions,

"Corporate demand has expanded and become more targeted."

training programmes. Fewer people - more substance. Networking is becoming curated, not accidental. "Corporate demand has expanded and become more targeted," says Abdulrahman Alghamdi, Director of Sales at Shangri-La Jeddah. "We see a stable base of government-oriented traffic and major Saudi corporations, where growth is driven precisely by project-oriented travel."

Hybrid format has ceased to be a temporary solution and has become a standard expectation. Clients no longer want "a room with a projector" - they want guarantees: response time, SLAs, AV reliability, streaming bandwidth. The real competition is unfolding elsewhere: the quality of curation, precision in audience engagement, and creating an atmosphere no algorithm can replicate. Vision 2030 is generating not tourist but business demand here - sustained and less dependent on external conditions.

What is Changing Structurally

Amid the geopolitical noise, the UAE is steadily building the next layer of its economy - manufacturing, technology, project-driven. Dubai's GDP grew by 6.4% in Q4 2025. The Make it in the Emirates Forum in May 2026 brought offtake agreements, investment deals, and intergovernmental partnerships to ADNEC. This was not an exhibition - it was a working instrument of industrial policy.

The client profile is also changing. Corporate clients no longer want a "beautiful event" - they want measurable outcomes. CFOs demand ROI and ESG reporting. Organisers who can speak the language of business metrics are winning out over those who still sell "atmosphere."

What Authorities are Doing

The response was swift. From 1 April, Dubai introduced a three-month moratorium on key fees: hotel sales fee, Tourism Dirham, and F&B taxes. In parallel, an additional support package is being prepared - on top of the already-launched AED 1 billion package.

On 12 April, GCC tourism ministers held an emergency video conference and reaffirmed their commitment to the 2024-2030 strategy and a unified visa policy. Not a single long-term project has been cancelled: the Dubai World Trade Centre expansion, ADNEC development, the Gold Line metro, Etihad Rail - all are on track.

Conclusion

The GCC events market has not collapsed. The geopolitical shock of Q1 is painful, but temporary. The structural shifts - from volume to value, from tourism dependency to a diversified economy - are permanent. Those who use this pause to rebuild teams, refresh formats, and double down on regional demand will enter 2027 with a competitive advantage. Normality has changed its address. The industry understands this.





by Sergey
Larin

Event Mania Festival:



A networking format built around real event leads



The event industry has no shortage of networking events. The problem is that most of them still rely on passive communication: people exchange business cards, add each other on LinkedIn, and leave without clear follow-up or commercial outcomes.

EventMania Festival was designed around a different principle - structured business interaction with direct access to buyers, event agencies, corporate clients, HR departments, hotels, and private organizers actively searching for suppliers and performers.

The 2026 edition of the festival will take place on September 9 at SkyLight Gallery, Arjaan by Rotana Dubai Media City in Dubai. Notably, the event will once again be held on 9 September - continuing the date already associated with the EventMania format and its positioning at the start of Dubai's new business and event season.

At the center of the project is the Event Maze - a speed-dating system adapted specifically for the event industry. Instead of waiting for visitors to approach exhibition booths, sup-

pliers rotate between meeting tables where event planners and buyers are seated. Each presentation lasts three minutes. Around 30 meeting points are planned, giving participants the opportunity to introduce themselves to approximately 150 direct event clients during the networking rounds alone.

The format is intentionally built for fast qualification. Suppliers immediately understand:

- who organizes events regularly,
- who controls budgets,
- which companies are currently sourcing contractors,
- and which contacts are relevant for future collaboration.

Unlike traditional expos, where traffic quality is often unpredictable, EventMania focuses on concentrated access to decision-makers





already working inside the event ecosystem. The model proved itself during the previous edition. According to participant feedback, several suppliers received direct booking inquiries and follow-up meetings immediately after the festival. Entertainment acts secured new event dates, while agencies expanded their supplier databases for upcoming seasons. The structure of the event creates conditions not only for visibility, but for immediate commercial conversations.

The festival combines several formats simultaneously:

- speed-dating networking,
- supplier exhibition,
- stage showcases,
- keynote sessions,
- podcast interviews,
- and live demonstrations of event services and activities.

Participants are encouraged to present themselves dynamically rather than relying on printed materials alone. During meetings they can perform, demonstrate interactive mechanics, showcase samples, or create mini-presentations directly for potential clients. This is particularly important in the

event industry, where emotional presentation and live delivery often influence purchasing decisions more than brochures or websites.

The event is also designed to reduce one of the biggest operational problems in the GCC event market: fragmented supplier discovery. Many event agencies still spend significant time searching for reliable contractors through recommendations, outdated databases, or social media. EventMania compresses this process into a single business environment where agencies can update supplier contacts, compare services, and discover new market players within a few hours.

For suppliers, the advantage is equally practical. Instead of spending months attempting to reach agencies through cold outreach, they receive face-to-face access to multiple buyers in one day.

The numbers behind the platform also reflect growing industry interest. The EventMania professional community currently includes several hundred event professionals across LinkedIn, WhatsApp, Telegram, and Facebook channels, creating an ongoing communication ecosystem beyond the festival itself. Previous editions also generated coverage through regional and international event industry media.

The venue infrastructure supports the networking-heavy format. SkyLight Gallery at Arjaan by Rotana Media City offers open gallery spaces, welcome zones, exhibition areas, stage infrastructure, parking access, and valet service - allowing the event to combine expo, meetings, performances, and informal networking inside one integrated flow.

Importantly, EventMania is positioned not as a mass-attendance festival, but as a targeted professional environment. The organizers openly focus on relevance over volume - prioritizing qualified event buyers, agencies, and active industry participants rather than general public traffic.

This reflects a broader shift happening across the event industry itself. Increasingly, companies are evaluating industry events not by attendance numbers alone, but by the quality of contacts, meetings, and business opportunities generated inside the room.

In that sense, EventMania functions less as a traditional expo and more as a lead-generation platform built specifically for the event market.

For many participants, that difference is exactly the point.



UAE MICE: Adapting before the Crisis Ends

Why the UAE events market doesn't wait for stability to return - and what that means for anyone working in it.



by Alina Shliakhtova
General Manager
of Atravel

The industry is in limbo again. Confirmed projects are being cancelled or pushed to autumn. New requests are coming in, but decisions are stalling.

This feeling is familiar to anyone who has worked in the UAE for any length of time. Crises arrive regularly here. Only the reasons change - geopolitics, economics, pandemics. The question has never really been whether a crisis will come. It has always been: how fast will the UAE adapt this time?

Why Dubai behaves differently

The UAE economy is structurally built around tourism, aviation, and international mobility. Tourism in Dubai alone accounts for roughly 10% of GDP in its direct form - and when you factor in aviation and related infrastructure, it becomes one of the foundational pillars of the entire system. A model like that cannot afford to stop and wait.

The pandemic made this unusually visible. Dubai International Airport closed on March 17, 2020. It reopened on July 7 of the same year - three and a half months later, while much of the world remained shut for over a year. That was not improvisation. It was a deliberate strategy: not to wait for complete safety, but to learn to operate while managing risk. Testing, protocols, restrictions - but the market stayed on.

The message was characteristically pragmatic: yes, there are rules. We are open. Come.

The structural features of the UAE tourism sector - high dependence on external markets, sensitivity to geopolitical shifts, fast demand cycles - are the same factors that make it vulnerable and flexible at the same time. They are why the response to a crisis here begins before the crisis is resolved.

What is happening on the ground right now

From the inside, the current picture follows a familiar pattern. Group projects are slowing. Clients are taking longer to commit. Budgets are being revised. Timelines are shifting. None of this is surprising, and none of it means the market has disappeared.

It has contracted and changed shape - which is not the same thing.

This distinction matters practically. During the pandemic, MICE activity came close to a full stop, but FIT and VIP requests continued moving. That is a reminder worth keeping in mind now: a market that looks frozen from one angle is often still moving from another. Dependence on a single segment - even a dominant one - is a structural risk.



What adaptation looks like in practice

During COVID, a client came to us needing a full MICE programme, including a gala dinner. The problem was straightforward: restaurants and hotels could not legally host that kind of event. The format the client needed did not technically exist anymore.

The solution came from stepping outside the standard toolkit. We proposed holding the gala dinner at Sonara Camp in the desert - an open-air venue that fell outside the category of establishments subject to indoor restrictions. All protocols were observed: distancing, safety requirements, documentation. The client received a complete event at a time when that was simply not possible in most countries.

This was not creative problem-solving for its own sake. It was finding a workable answer under real constraints.



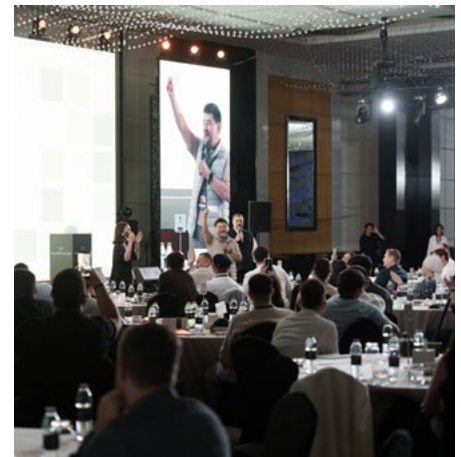
Why this market keeps moving

Looking beyond individual cases, the UAE has several structural advantages that explain its pattern of behaviour in downturns.

- **Speed.** Decisions are made quickly - at the business level and at the government level.
- **Flexibility.** Formats, venues, and approaches can change mid-process without the whole structure collapsing.
- **Pragmatism.** The operating standard here is not the ideal scenario. It is the workable one.
- **Coordination.** When it matters, industry and government tend to move in the same direction.

That last point is worth noting concretely. In March 2026, before the market had begun to recover, Dubai approved an AED 1 billion business support package for the hospitality and tourism sectors. It included deferrals on hotel sales fees and the tourism dirham - measures that directly reduce cost pressure on MICE operators during a period of uncertainty.

The significance is not only in the package itself, but in its timing. Support came before demand returned, not after.



The real skill in UAE MICE

Working in this market is not - or not only - about access to an exceptional inventory of venues. Dubai has hundreds of world-class spaces, and that matters. But it is not the differentiator.

The actual skill is the ability to operate when stability is not guaranteed.

That is what this market trains you for. And perhaps that is precisely why it does not stop when conditions get difficult. It adjusts its shape and keeps moving.

DUBAI: Manual



by Alina Shliakhtova
General Manager
of Atravel

Dubai is one of the most over-used destinations in MICE - in every sense of the word. And one of the most misunderstood. You hear it all: too expensive, too artificial, nothing but shopping malls, no soul, zero authenticity. And yet people keep booking it - corporate events, incentives, conferences, award ceremonies, year after year.

I've lived and worked in the Emirates for the past 15 years. And I've long had the feeling that the people who criticise Dubai and the people who choose it are talking about completely different cities. Some arrive with a head full of stereotypes. Others arrive with open eyes. The difference in outcome is enormous.

What Dubai actually is

If I had to explain Dubai in a single image, I'd call it a transformer city. Not in the sense of "everything is here" - that's a marketing line that says nothing. I mean infrastructure that genuinely reconfigures itself around any scenario.

Want ultra-modern? Here you go: skyscrapers, floor-to-ceiling glass conference halls, hotels that look like concepts from an architecture magazine. Want seclusion? There's Al Maha Desert Resort, where gazelles peer through your window and you physically cannot believe the city centre is less than an hour away. Want a family-friendly format? Atlantis, with its scale and attractions. Want an intimate VIP experience? One&Only The Palm - 109 keys, no crowds, a meeting room for 30.

This isn't an advertisement for specific hotels. It's about the fact that the range here is real - not "luxury or very luxury", but genuinely different vibes, different formats, different stories. All in one city where the distances, by any European destination's standards, are laughably small.



When Dubai Works Perfectly

Large international groups - this is probably Dubai's strongest card. Flight logistics, visa arrangements, 1,500 rooms under one roof, ballroom capacity, exhibition spaces that convert into event venues for thousands - it all works here in combination and at scale. If you need to bring together 1,000 people from 15 countries, Dubai handles it systematically, not heroically.

Tight deadlines. This sounds surprising for an Arab country - but Dubai is the exception. Projects can be assembled quickly here. The market is built for speed, suppliers are used to urgent requests, and "that's not how we do things" is not a popular answer.

VIP and incentive. Honestly, I haven't encountered a more VIP environment anywhere. The service level, the attention to detail, the willingness to create a wow moment - this isn't accidental or just marketing, it's a systemic part of the product. If the goal

is to impress, Dubai delivers reliably. Service - and the genuine desire to provide it - is a story of its own. I was recently in Singapore: fell in love at first sight, a stunning city. But when I wanted to have dinner at one of the top locations, I discovered there were exactly one and a half restaurants there. Literally. God, if that location were in Dubai, there'd be a restaurant under every bush, and within three square metres you could choose between Italian, Asian and Peruvian. That difference in approach to service explains a great deal about why MICE keeps choosing Dubai.

Once, a client insisted on a farewell dinner at an Arabic restaurant with a view of the Burj Khalifa. With alcohol. As it turned out, there was only one Arabic restaurant at that location serving alcohol - and it was already booked on the date we needed. We couldn't exactly build a second one in a month - our capabilities, after all, are not unlimited. But

one of the restaurants at that location was part of a group that included venues with different cuisines across the city. The Italian one had the Burj Khalifa view. Its "sibling" on The Palm was Arabic. We made a deal: the Italian restaurant provided the space; the chefs, crockery and everything else came over from The Palm for one day. Genies build palaces overnight. We turned an Italian restaurant into an Arabic one - for exactly one day. In Dubai, this is possible.

And finally, budgets that are commonly assumed to be "too small for Dubai". We once had a group of around 20-25 people with a ground budget of \$30,000. Four days, a programme covering both Dubai and Abu Dhabi. It worked. You just need to understand what's expensive here and what isn't: dinner at a good restaurant can cost as much as a hotel room. That doesn't mean Dubai is inaccessible - it means you have to budget differently.



When Dubai Doesn't Work

This section matters more than the previous one, because almost nobody writes about it. When the budget doesn't match the expectations - not in the sense of "not enough money", but in the sense of "back home in city X it costs less". AV equipment, performers, transfers, catering - these are priced differently here. Not necessarily more expensive across the board, but differently. And if a client arrives with a budget built around another country and just wants to "plug in Dubai prices", the conversation usually ends in disappointment on someone's side.

When an authentic cultural experience is required - in the classical sense. Yes, this country doesn't have millennia of ruins and the remains of "great civilisations" in the usual tourist understanding. But I'd push back on the idea that there's no authenticity at all - it's just a different kind. Here you can witness how, in 50 years, a desert with camels and Bedouins became one of the leading players in global tourism. That's a phenomenon almost nowhere else can replicate. You just have to know how to read it.



When a client wants a "European format". I'm not entirely sure what that means, but I can guess. It means: *"do it the way we did it last time, just here."* That doesn't work anywhere - not in Dubai, not in Tokyo, not in Johannesburg. Every destination has its own logic, its own strengths and its own limitations. If you come to Dubai to recreate a Berlin corporate event, you will most likely be disappointed. If you come to see what Dubai has to offer, the conversation goes somewhere else entirely.

There's an old question from Russian folklore, the one Baba Yaga asked every traveller who crossed her path: are you travelling to see the world, or to show yourself to it? In travel - and in MICE travel especially - this applies literally. Those who come to see almost always leave with a good event. Those who arrive with a ready-made template tend to be frustrated that it doesn't fit into someone else's story.



Why People Actually Choose it

Strip away the marketing and ask honestly - why do clients keep choosing Dubai - and the answer has nothing to do with luxury or shopping.

Accessibility. For a vast number of countries, it's a short flight. The visa regime is one of the most convenient in the region. An airport that actually functions the way it should: efficient, clear, no endless waiting.

Safety. That word carries particular weight right now. Dubai is one of the few places where "predictable environment" is not an exaggeration. Even now, in these difficult times, there are no empty shelves, no panic, flights are running, services are working. During the pandemic, when many places were in freefall, Dubai held its level. That's not coincidence - it's the result of how the system is built.

And here is the key thought I want to leave you with: **Dubai isn't chosen because it's the most beautiful. It's chosen because it's the most predictable.** This is a country organised like a well-run company. Clear rules, transparent procedures, control at every level. When you need to run an event, you know what you're going to get. That is worth a great deal.



Real Limitations - No Varnish

Seasonality. It's real. Summer is hot, and that's true. But Dubai has an answer: practically everything is air-conditioned. We had an event in August - an awards dinner and a concert, all indoors. Guests arrived by air-conditioned transfer, walked straight into the venue - and that was it. No discomfort whatsoever. Plus, summer prices - especially right now - are very attractive. The market is working hard to bring clients back.

Last-minute booking. Dubai in season is not sitting empty waiting for you to make up your mind. The best hotels, the best venues, the best deals - they go early. Booking six months out is optimal. Those who come

two weeks before get what's left. This isn't a Dubai-specific issue - it's basic planning logic, it just works harder here because competition for good dates is real.

Suppliers. A separate story entirely. I personally know several companies that position themselves as Dubai-based - while physically not being there, with almost no on-the-ground experience, and their entire Dubai presence is a well-designed website. In a city where atmosphere and quality of execution matter enormously, that's a risky game. A DMC isn't there to "know the nice spots" - it's there to genuinely know which website has something real behind it, and which one doesn't.

Dubai is a tool. A very good tool, with a wide range, a high ceiling and a very specific operating logic. Openness to what the destination offers, an honest conversation about budget, early booking and the right partner on the ground - and the transformer city configures itself around you. Bring a ready-made template and it probably won't fit. Not because Dubai is bad. Because it's different.

Dubai works
when you
understand how
to use it.



Abu Dhabi: The Luxury of a Quiet Morning



by Alina Shliakhtova
General Manager
of Atravel

When a client says “I want to go to the UAE,” they almost always mean Dubai. That’s understandable: Dubai is loud, vivid, everywhere. Abu Dhabi operates differently - it doesn’t shout. It simply is the capital. I’ve spent fifteen years working in MICE across the region - half of them with Atravel - and long ago stopped comparing these two cities. They are different products with different logic. Dubai is the transport, tourism and trade hub of the Emirates. Abu Dhabi is the financial and political centre. Once you understand that distinction, conversations with clients about destination choice become much simpler. Dubai is for those who want to be seen. Abu Dhabi is for those who no longer need to be. In Dubai, event photos go on social media. In Abu Dhabi, you get press accreditation.

A Different City - A Different Pace

The first thing you feel in Abu Dhabi is the pace. Not slow - just different. Dubai is an international megacity where everything is built for movement and speed. Abu Dhabi is, at its core, an Arab city. A capital. There are embassies, government buildings, quiet waterfronts and greenery - considerably more than you find in Dubai.

There’s a particular quality to Arab conversation - the long, elaborate greeting. Not “hi, how are you, let’s get to it,” but *Kayf Halak* (“how are you?”), *Shu Akhbarak* (“what’s new?”), how is the family, how is your health, how is life in general - and only then, twenty minutes later, do we gently ease toward the matter at hand. In Dubai, this ritual is often compressed under the pressure of pace. In Abu Dhabi, it lives in full. And that, oddly enough, is very pleasant.

There’s one understanding of luxury - many brands, much glitter, everything at once. And there’s another: a quiet morning, coffee without rushing, a day that begins when you’re ready. Abu Dhabi is the second kind.

Venues You Can’t Simply Buy

If Dubai’s main advantage is scale and variety, Abu Dhabi’s is something else: venues with meaning. That’s not a marketing line.

Qasr Al Watan is the presidential palace, open to visitors. It’s not a museum in the usual sense, and it’s not a banquet hall. This is where state delegations are received at the highest level. To hold an event there is not simply to choose an unusual venue - it’s to give your company a context that cannot be purchased.

Emirates Palace is an iconic place in the fullest sense of the word. Technically it’s a hotel, but in practice it’s something else entirely. On the top floor are eight presidential suites that cannot be booked at will - only by invitation. A small detail that says everything about the level of this property: crew arriving for event setup are required to follow a dress code equivalent to that of a government institution - covered shoulders and knees. Hosting an event there means giving your company a context that money alone cannot buy.

The Louvre Abu Dhabi. Yes, that one. It can be rented in full as a private venue. But this isn’t simply a matter of budget - the Louvre considers the client’s profile. It looks at whether you belong in its portfolio. The relationship works both ways: either they choose you, or they don’t. For the right client, that’s exactly the point. The Guggenheim is under construction - the roster of world-class venues in Abu Dhabi continues to grow.

The Formula 1 circuit. Yas Marina Circuit is one of those venues people want to use simply because it exists. Events there draw consistent demand, especially around the Grand Prix - an annual event that in itself attracts large corporate groups from around the world.

There’s also TeamLab Phenomena, the Abrahamic Family House - three faiths on one site, a concept that exists nowhere else in the world - and the Sheikh Zayed Museum, which opened very recently and is already receiving excellent reviews. Abu Dhabi is building its cultural infrastructure deliberately and for the long term. You can feel it.

February 2020: 350 People and Five Points of Arrival

My personal history with Abu Dhabi began earlier than I realised it mattered.

February 2020. Our first large group - 350 people. Somewhere in the news there was something about a Chinese virus, but it seemed distant and irrelevant. We were working.

The project was booked at the last minute - literally. Everything was taken. We needed the Ritz-Carlton and its ballroom, and nothing else would do for the client. In the end we got it - pulling it away from an Indian wedding that had been eyeing the same dates. I still hope things worked out for them somewhere else.

Guests arrived at five different points: three terminals of Dubai International Airport DXB, Al Maktoum, and what was then

still the old Abu Dhabi airport. People had booked their own flights, so the information came in every which way. I won't describe all of it - any professional knows what logistics look like when guests book their own tickets - but in the end we met everyone, transferred everyone, and settled everyone in.

In two days: a conference, a gala dinner, a tour of Qasr Al Watan, and a jeep safari in branded vehicles bearing the client's logo. Everything happened. Everything went off brilliantly.

Two weeks later the country closed. We made it - literally caught the last train. This event remains one of those I remember with particular warmth. Not because everything went smoothly. Because we pulled it off against the odds - and it worked.

When the Sky Closed

The second case is a different kind of story - and perhaps the best illustration of what it means to work with Abu Dhabi as a partner, not just a destination.

A group was in the city when everything started - strikes, closed airspace, uncertainty. The kind of situation where it's very easy to find yourself alone with panicking guests and a sense of complete helplessness. I wrote to Abu Dhabi Tourism. Not a contact form - I wrote directly. A representative came in person. She met with the group's leaders, talked with them, and brought calm - not through protocol, but person to

person. Abu Dhabi Tourism then covered full accommodation and three meals a day for all stranded guests throughout the period of forced delay. Part of the group flew out a day later. Part - only after four days. Every one of those days was fully covered by Abu Dhabi Tourism Board.

This was not a decision made for one group - this is how Abu Dhabi Tourism acted toward all stranded guests. It was a decision made at the emirate level, taken because it was the right thing to do. Moments like this are remembered forever. And they determine who you work with again.

DCT: Support That Actually Exists

The Department of Culture and Tourism Abu Dhabi actively promotes the destination and supports major events. There is a support programme through which, in certain cases, sponsorship can be obtained for part of the programme - a gala dinner, for instance. I deliberately don't go into the details - they change, and it's better to check directly for each specific group.

As for working with DCT in general - yes, it's a government structure, with everything that implies: processes are not fast, approvals take time. But they support press and fam trips, and are genuinely willing to help with destination promotion. And in a critical moment, they can allow themselves to make decisions after which you forget about long approval chains and other inconsequential details.

Real Limitations

There are significantly fewer hotels than in Dubai. That's a fact to account for when planning. Last year we had a group of 250 - we needed a ballroom for four consecutive days: setup, two days of conference, gala dinner. Finding a venue with that kind of uninterrupted availability proved nearly impossible. In the end the gala dinner moved to Emirates Palace - which, honestly, turned a constraint into an advantage. But it required flexibility from the client, and fortunately that flexibility was there. Fewer suppliers too. Yachts are a story of their own: many private yachts in Abu Dhabi

simply aren't available for charter because the owners don't need to rent them out. Finding a good yacht for an event is harder than in Dubai. Audio and visual equipment is often brought from Dubai - an hour and a half on the road, and that's been the norm for a long time, not a problem.

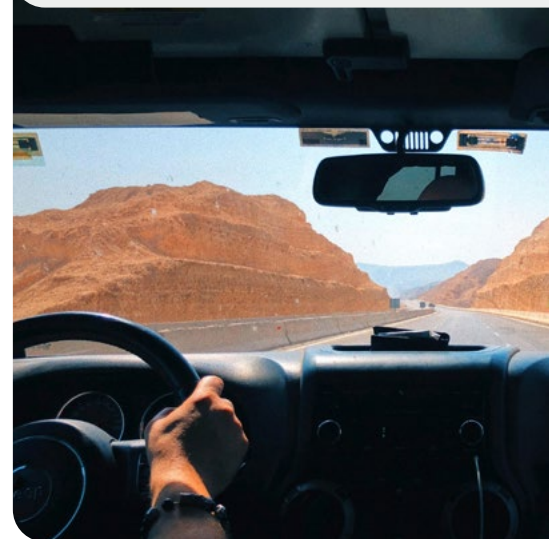
Less nightlife. But honestly, I've long since moved past the age when that would be an argument against anything. For a corporate group that came for culture and status, it's not a minus at all.

Who this Destination is for

I won't say people without taste go to Dubai. But I will say that people with a particular kind of taste go to Abu Dhabi. Those for whom substance matters more than spectacle. Who need not the most popular venue but the one that is right for them. Who want the event to be remembered not for what it cost, but for what it meant.

Government and semi-government structures, large corporations with protocol requirements, companies for which the status of a partner and location matters as much as logistics - that is the Abu Dhabi audience. And it's worth noting that during the pandemic, when international tourism stopped, the city remained relatively resilient for exactly this reason: internal corporate events, government structures, local companies - demand didn't disappear, it simply changed shape.

Abوظبي doesn't try to be Dubai. And that, perhaps, is its greatest strength. This is a destination that knows what it is - and offers exactly that, without apology and without unnecessary noise.



The actual skill is the ability to operate when stability is not guaranteed.

Flexibility: the Most Valuable Asset in Event Planning



by Alina Shliakhtova
General Manager
of Atravel

There's a misconception I hear very often. A flexible DMC is one that agrees to everything. No. A flexible DMC is one that knows when to agree - and when to hold its ground. These are very different things.

Flexibility is not the same as a permanent "yes." Flexibility is the ability to find a solution where one exists, and to honestly stop where it doesn't - always in the interest of the client.

Fighting for the Client is the DMC's Job

There's a fine line between flexibility and losing one's professional standing. When a client says "I want it this way," the DMC's job is not simply to nod and say "yes, sir, of course, sir." The job is to explain why it won't work that way. And if the client still insists - they must be informed of the consequences. So that later they cannot ask: "why did you know and say nothing?"

On the other hand: if a client needs a conference, a gala dinner and several activities delivered in two days - the DMC's job is to try to make it happen. At maximum capacity. Fight for the right dates, the right format, the right venue. Until you run into an absence of common sense or a legal constraint. Only then does the time come to honestly say "no."

We had a project where the client wanted a hall with ceilings of seven metres and above - and at the same time did not want a beach hotel, so that guests would stay focused on the

conference. We called literally every hotel in Dubai with suitably high ceilings. The best option turned out to be a beach hotel - precisely the one the client had originally wanted to avoid. The DMC's job in such a situation is not to choose for the client, but to help them choose for themselves. What matters more: the ceiling height or the absence of a beach? In the end the client chose the hotel, and at a good price - low season. The one that had started out as the least suitable.

How do you tell whether a DMC is genuinely flexible? Very simply. Count how often you hear "no" from them. The more often - the less flexible. But something else matters just as much: if "no" comes without an explanation, that's not professional. You need to understand why. And it's also worth remembering that when someone says "yes," it still needs to actually get done. Not every promise can be kept, and not everyone has the honesty to say so upfront.

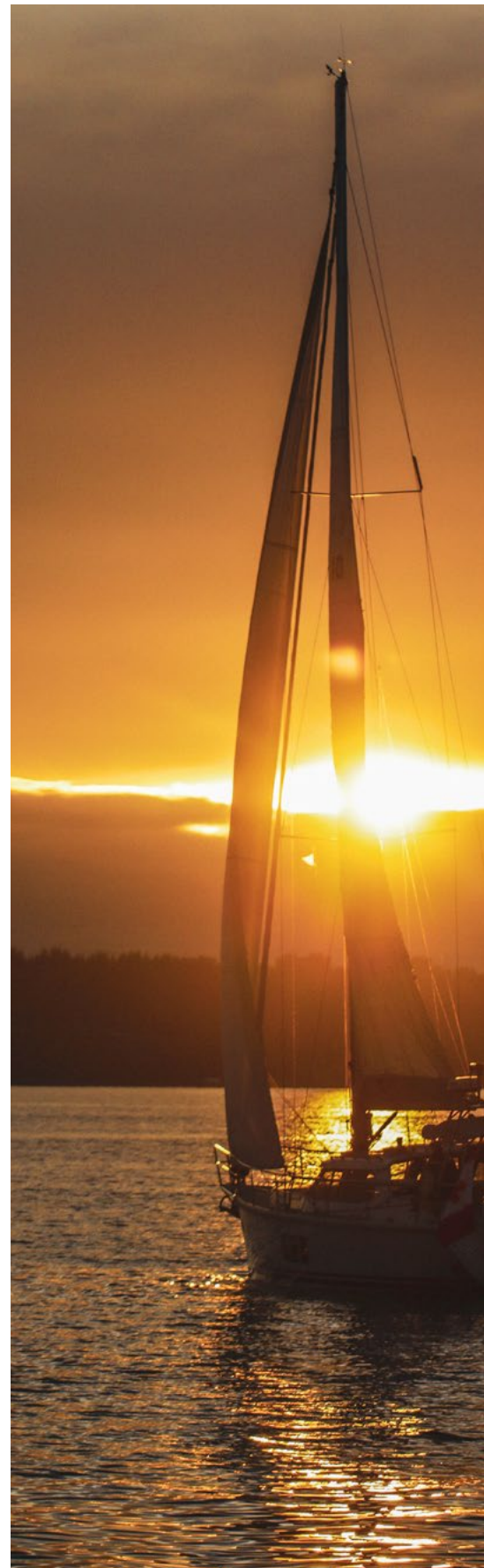
Flexibility as a Business Strategy

We often hear about large companies going bankrupt. We never hear about small ones failing - but that's easily explained: nobody knows they exist. The question, however, is not about size.

There are companies that resemble a cruiser - enormous, solid, with large reserves. They don't sink, but as a rule they survive because they're tied to some other business that keeps them afloat. Because our industry - event and MICE - reacts to any political or economic shift faster than almost any other. One escalation in the region is enough, and bookings start unravelling, dates shift, budgets get revised. In those moments, it becomes very clear who can adapt quickly and who cannot.

In my understanding, a flexible DMC is neither large nor small. It's a sailing vessel that moves with the wind - but when necessary, picks up the oars itself. It grows quickly - through staff or freelancers - when there's demand. It sheds everything unnecessary just as quickly when the market drops. And it always has several revenue streams to draw from.

This was clearly visible during the pandemic. FIT and VIP requests returned first - not MICE, but they helped stay afloat until group travel resumed. Some went into private events, which DMCs usually overlook. Some launched virtual formats. Those who couldn't adapt quickly left the market. Those who could - survived.





Flexibility Towards Oneself

There's something rarely discussed in the context of flexibility. Sometimes the right answer is to decline a project.

There was a client who made clear from the start: we'll handle audio and video ourselves. Entertainers too. And the venue, in the end, they also chose themselves - after we had already proposed and costed several options, conducted site inspections, and the space the client ultimately selected was considerably below the level of their original brief. It was evident the client had given inaccurate budget information from the outset. The client then asked us to cost the AV anyway - presumably

to benchmark their own supplier's pricing. Our response: "We're sorry, but we have no intention of competing for the title of Dubai's cheapest DMC." Our time and our resources deserved better use.

We see working with clients as a collaboration, not a service transaction. For a project to succeed, all parties need to put in the effort. Yes, the client needs a great event just as much as we do - if not more. But this is a two-way street. If what you need is for someone to run after you and fulfil every request - that's not a DMC. That's a different arrangement entirely.

The Region: Where Service is a Culture

There is another dimension of flexibility - the readiness of the market as a whole. And here, the Middle East occupies a particular place.

I remember a client visiting from Europe for a site inspection. We pulled up to the hotel and I was about to get out of the car. She said: "Are you going to leave the car here?" - "Of course, valet parking." She laughed: "Is it always like this here?" Yes, always like this. And the same goes for petrol stations: you pull in, lower the window slightly, say "full tank" - and that's it. The region has accustomed its residents to the idea that being looked after is the default. Those who leave for other countries tend to remember the Emirates with a particular fondness.

For the MICE market, this means a great deal. The willingness to make things work, the genuine desire to please, the instinct toward a return visit - these are cultivated here through culture, not written into a manual. And it shows.

But there are nuances worth understanding. There is a concept - *inshallah*. If Allah wills it. It can mean both "I will do everything in my power" and "unfortunately I cannot" - and no one will tell you which one it is. Only real experience working in the region gives you an understanding of when it's the first and when it's the second. This is why follow-up here is a skill that cannot be replaced by general assurances about trust.

Flexibility is not about saying yes to everything. It's about knowing what's worth fighting for - and what isn't.

Practically every project is a challenge - in at least one element. Sometimes in all of them. Flexibility is not a personality trait and not a slide in a pitch deck. It's a working state - when the project is assembled, the team knows which way to move, and the client knows they can trust - not just the words, but the way you conduct yourself when things get difficult.



Fairmont
THE PALM

Inside a 13-Day Global Incentive Program at FAIRMONT THE PALM

Delivering large-scale incentive programs today requires more than flawless hospitality - it demands operational precision, flexibility, and the ability to translate complexity into a seamless guest experience.

At Fairmont The Palm, a 13-day global incentive program for approximately 320 top-performing achievers demonstrated how multi-layered event architecture can be executed at scale without compromising service consistency or guest engagement.

Designed as an end-of-year recognition journey, the program aimed not only to reward performance but to strengthen long-term loyalty and emotional connection with the brand. This required a carefully orchestrated balance between structured programming, premium hospitality, and experiential moments across multiple venues.



Challenge: Scale, Safety, and Constant Change

From the outset, the program combined several high-risk variables: large guest volume, premium expectations, multi-venue execution, and evolving client requirements.

One of the key moments was a beachfront awards ceremony - a format that required precise synchronization between indoor ballroom programming and outdoor staging. Managing guest flow, timing, and technical transitions between these environments demanded tight operational control and contingency planning.

At the same time, accommodation management became increasingly complex. Last-minute changes included additional room allocations, upgrades, VIP amenities, and extended access to Fairmont Gold Lounge services for a significant portion of the group. Maintaining consistency across these requests without disrupting overall operations required constant coordination between departments.

A critical issue emerged shortly before the event when the ballroom layout - initially developed by an external planner - was found to violate safety standards, including blocked emergency exits and compromised surveillance visibility. The hotel team intervened immediately, redesigning the entire setup within a limited timeframe to ensure full compliance while preserving the event concept.

In parallel, the client introduced a late-stage request for a nightlife experience. Without relocating guests off-property, the team transformed an internal venue into “Club Napola” - a fully operational club environment with integrated lighting, entertainment, and beverage service. This allowed the program to expand without adding logistical risk.

As the events team summarized:

“Making special happen is not just a phrase for us - it is how we operate. We adapt quickly, solve challenges in real time, and never compromise on safety or guest experience.”

Solution: Multi-Venue Strategy and Controlled Guest Flow

The success of the program relied on clear zoning and functional distribution of venues.

The Palm Ballroom became the central hub, configured in a cabaret-style layout for 320 guests. This ensured visibility, engagement, and efficient circulation during award segments.

The Palm Courtyard was reimagined as a “Secret Garden” - serving both as a registration zone and an experiential welcome area. This transition space played a key role in setting the tone of the event while managing arrivals in a controlled and comfortable way.

Additional venues - including Gulf Rooms 1-5, the Crescent Room, and the Boardroom - were used as breakout and operational spaces. This allowed parallel programming, private meetings, and flexible scheduling across the 13-day agenda without congestion in core areas.

Technical production focused on reliability and consistency rather than spectacle alone. Lighting, AV integration, and stage design were aligned with program flow, ensuring continuity between formal and informal segments.

Food and beverage operations were executed as synchronized service for the entire group, with strict control over timing, dietary requirements, and quality consistency - a critical factor in maintaining the overall experience across multiple days.

Operational Framework

The program extended over 13 days and included staggered arrivals, structured business sessions, recognition events, and daily activities. Approximately three days were allocated for setup and breakdown, covering ballroom transformation, technical installation, and multi-space configuration. This required precise scheduling to avoid disruption to regular hotel operations.

At peak engagement, daily team-building activities involved up to 250 participants - becoming one of the strongest drivers of interaction and group cohesion throughout the program.



Outcome and Industry Takeaways

The event was delivered without major disruptions across its full duration, despite multiple last-minute changes and operational challenges. Client feedback highlighted service consistency, adaptability, and the overall guest experience as key strengths. Notably, the integration of daily activities significantly increased engagement levels and strengthened group dynamics beyond the formal program.

From a planner's perspective, several conclusions are clear:

Large-scale incentive programs require integrated thinking across accommodation, programming, and operations - not isolated planning. Flexibility is no longer optional. The ability to absorb last-minute changes without affecting the guest experience defines operational quality. Safety and compliance must remain non-negotiable, even when they require reworking approved concepts.

Multi-venue strategies are essential for long-duration programs, allowing parallel flows and reducing operational pressure.

Ultimately, this project reinforces a fundamental principle of large-scale event delivery:

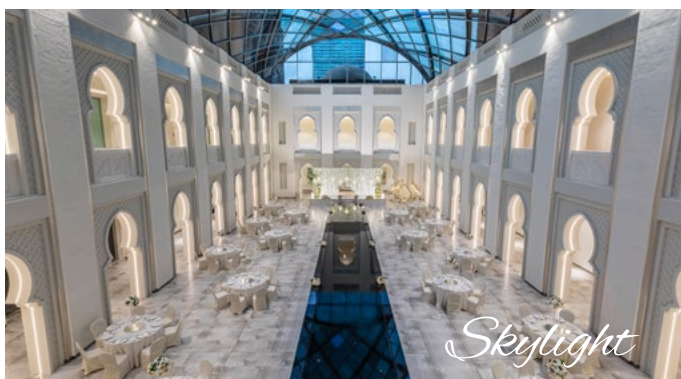
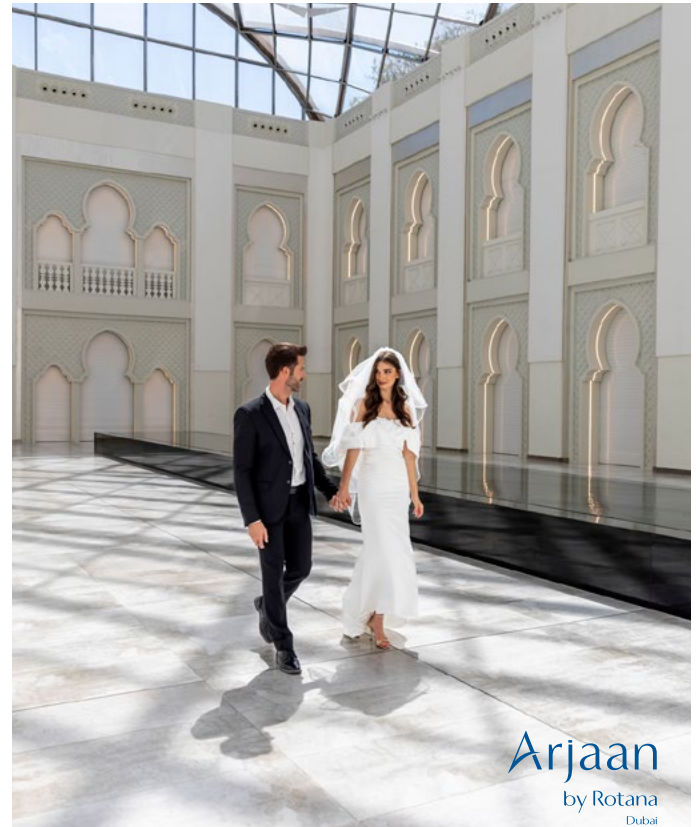
the guest should experience simplicity - even when the system behind it is highly complex.

Integrated Event Solutions in a Changing Market

As Dubai's event landscape continues to evolve, venues are increasingly expected to deliver more than just space. Clients today look for integrated solutions that combine accommodation, event infrastructure, catering, and operational coordination within a single environment.

This shift is particularly visible in corporate events involving regional and international participants, where efficiency and guest experience are directly tied to logistics.

At Arjaan by Rotana Dubai Media City, this demand has translated into a growing focus on flexible event formats supported by in-house hospitality infrastructure. One recent multi-day corporate gathering illustrates how this approach works in practice.



The client's objective was to host a regional meeting for delegates arriving from different GCC markets while minimizing the complexity of movement across the city. Instead of distributing event functions across multiple venues, the decision was made to consolidate accommodation, meeting spaces, and networking environments within the property.

The program included business presentations, breakout discussions, informal networking sessions, and private dining experiences over several days. This required the venue to support multiple formats within the same timeline, often transitioning between them within short intervals.

To achieve this, the events team structured the space using a combination of meeting rooms and adaptable layouts, including boardroom, theatre, classroom, and cocktail-style configurations. The key operational focus was not only on the setups themselves, but on the coordination between them - ensuring that transitions were smooth, timing

was maintained, and guest flow remained uninterrupted throughout the event.

Close collaboration between the venue team and organizers played a central role in this process. Planning covered room allocation, scheduling, branding elements, AV support, and movement across the property, allowing the event to function as a cohesive experience rather than a series of disconnected sessions.

Food and beverage were treated as an integral part of the event design rather than a stand-alone service. Different stages of the program were supported by tailored dining formats, from structured coffee breaks and buffet service to lighter networking menus and private group dining. This approach allowed catering to align with the rhythm of the event and the expectations of the audience.

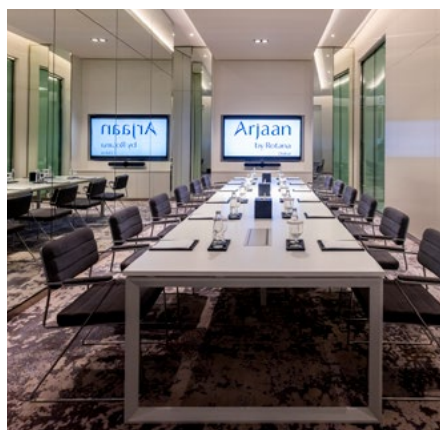
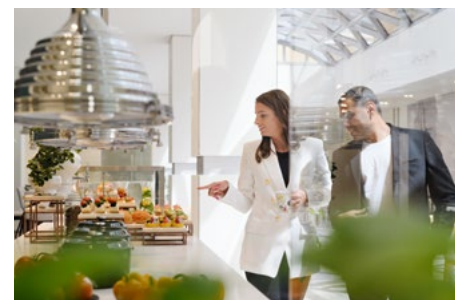
One of the defining advantages of the venue in this case was the integration of accommodation and event infrastructure. Delegates staying on-site were able to access all event areas directly, significantly reducing the need for transport coordination and simplifying the overall logistics. This model continues to gain relevance for companies managing regional teams and multi-day programs where time efficiency and guest comfort are critical.

The property's location in Dubai Media City also contributes to this positioning. It offers accessibility for both local participants and international visitors, while maintaining a more contained and manageable environment compared to large-scale convention venues.

Alongside corporate events, Arjaan by Rotana Dubai Media City has also developed a strong presence in the social events segment through Skylight, its dedicated ballroom and event space. The venue regularly hosts weddings and private celebrations, including culturally diverse formats that require tailored layouts, customized décor, and coordination with multiple external suppliers.

What distinguishes Skylight is its adaptability. The space is designed to transform according to the client's concept, whether for traditional ceremonies, multicultural weddings, or contemporary social events. The events and culinary teams work closely with planners and partners to align every element of the setup, ensuring that each project reflects the client's vision rather than a predefined template.

At the same time, the property is gradually incorporating more sustainable practices into its operations. Efforts such as reducing food waste, selecting more environmentally conscious materials, and improving energy efficiency during event setups reflect a broader shift in client expectations across both corporate and social segments.



From an operational perspective, the emphasis remains on flexibility, responsiveness, and execution. Rather than focusing on scale alone, the approach is built around understanding the client's objectives and delivering an environment that supports both functionality and guest experience.

As demand in Dubai's events sector continues to diversify, integrated hospitality models like this are becoming increasingly relevant - offering planners a more controlled, efficient, and adaptable framework for delivering complex events.

From Spectacle to Strategy:

How Saudi Arabia is Redefining the Experiential Events Standard



by Labeed
Assidmi

There is a moment in every large-scale event when the planning stops and the experience begins. The logistics disappear. The briefings, the vendor negotiations, the rehearsals, the protocol checklists, all of it recedes.

What remains is the audience, the space, and the story being told through it.



Saudi Arabia is producing more of those moments than at any point in its history. And the timing matters. As GCC brands accelerate their presence on the global stage, and as international event agencies and partners look to the Kingdom for their next significant opportunity, the standards being set here are no longer a regional curiosity. They are becoming a regional benchmark.

Behind that shift is something more significant than budget or ambition: it is a fundamental rethinking of what events are for.

The Structural Shift

For most of the last decade, the Kingdom's event landscape was defined by scale. Capacity mattered. Spectacle mattered. The goal was often to signal capability, to demonstrate that the infrastructure, the talent, and the institutional will were in place to execute at a global standard.

That phase is effectively complete. What is emerging now is more nuanced and, frankly, more demanding: events designed not to impress, but to engage. The question has shifted from how large can we build this to how precisely can we design what the visitor experiences inside it.

This is not a subtle distinction. It represents a different kind of professional discipline, one that treats every touchpoint in the guest journey as a deliberate communication decision.

Exhibition Participation as Brand Architecture

One of the clearest indicators of this shift is visible in how Saudi organizations approach major exhibitions. Cityscape Global, which I led as the primary owner for Retail Urban Development across the 2024 and 2025 editions as a Diamond Sponsor, is an instructive example.

The conversation around exhibition participation has matured significantly. Booth design is no longer evaluated primarily on square footage or visual impact. The more

sophisticated questions now center on visitor flow, spatial storytelling, and the quality of engagement at each activation zone. Who enters the space? What do they encounter in what sequence? Where does conversation happen, and where does it give way to experience? What does the visitor carry away, not as a brochure, but as a perception?

These are brand architecture questions applied to physical space. And they require a discipline that sits at the intersection of

experiential design, brand governance, and operational precision.

The procurement and vendor management behind these exhibitions has evolved in parallel. RFPs now carry detailed experiential requirements, not just technical specifications. Vendors are evaluated on their ability to execute against a strategic brief, not simply on production capability. The professional infrastructure is catching up with the ambition.

Protocol-Level Events and the **Zero-Margin Standard**

A separate but related evolution is occurring in the ceremonial and institutional events space. Saudi Arabia's growing slate of national initiatives, royal-level gatherings, and government-facing activations has created a distinct and highly demanding category of event delivery. The IKTVA Forum and Exhibition, one of Saudi Arabia's most significant industrial and investment events, is a direct example of this standard in practice. Over multiple years heading the branding for this forum, attended by HRH the Prince of the Eastern Province and senior figures from the global energy industry, the margin for error was effectively zero. Every visual system, every content element, every spatial identity decision had to hold under the scrutiny of protocol-sensitive environments where brand execution and institutional credibility are inseparable.

What this category of event demands is not simply technical competence. It demands the ability to translate leadership vision into a precise execution framework, to hold creative ambition and institutional requirements in balance, and to maintain brand integrity under conditions where a single point of failure carries reputational consequence far beyond the event itself. The professionals developing this capability in Saudi Arabia are building a genuinely rare skill set. Protocol-sensitive experiential delivery at scale is not common anywhere in the world. The concentration of it currently developing within the Kingdom's events industry is worth recognizing.



The Branding Layer: Where Strategy Meets Space

Across both the exhibition and the ceremonial event categories, the most consistent professional gap I have observed is between brand strategy and spatial execution.

Organizations invest considerably in brand architecture, visual identity systems, and tone of voice development at the conceptual level. The strategic positioning work is often strong. Where it breaks down is in the translation from document to environment: how the brand behaves in three-dimensional space, under different lighting conditions, at different points in the guest journey, and in the context

of a live audience that is making judgments in real time.

This is the discipline of experiential branding, and it is still developing within the Saudi market. The gap is closing, but it remains a meaningful differentiator for organizations that close it deliberately.

The practical implication is that the most impactful events of the next five years in Saudi Arabia will not necessarily be the largest. They will be the ones where the brand narrative, the spatial design, the attendee experience, and the

operational execution are integrated from the outset, where the strategy and the staging room are in the same conversation.

BRANDING PROJECTS

EACH LOGO MUST BE DESIGNED TO COMMUNICATE WITH THE RIGHT TARGET AUDIENCE



What **This** Means in Practice

For event professionals and brands operating in or entering the Saudi market, three implications are worth carrying into the next brief:

Integration cannot be delegated. The organizations achieving the strongest results are those where brand, events, and communications teams share a single strategic framework from the earliest planning stage. Bringing brand into the conversation after

the floor plan is drawn is the single most common and most costly error in exhibition and experiential delivery.

Vendor selection is a strategic decision. The maturity of the Saudi market now demands agency and production partners who can respond to an experiential brief, not just a technical specification. Evaluating vendors on execution capability alone, without assessing strategic alignment,

consistently produces environments that look finished but feel hollow.

The guest journey is the deliverable. Square footage, production value, and visual scale are inputs. The sequence of perceptions the visitor moves through from arrival to departure is the actual output. Planning backward from that sequence, rather than forward from the budget, is the discipline that separates the strongest events from the rest.

Talent, Capability, and the Maturing Ecosystem

There is a final dimension to this story that is easy to underestimate from the outside: the pace at which local professional capability is developing.

The events and exhibitions sector in Saudi Arabia is no longer primarily an imported service. There is now a generation of practitioners who have worked at the highest levels of national event delivery, who understand protocol and brand governance and experiential technology, and who are building institutions, agencies, in-house teams, professional associations, capable of sustaining this standard.

The Saudi Exhibition and Conferences Association's growing engagement with practitioners at the working level, including advisory sessions I have contributed to on protocol design in events, reflects an industry that is institutionalizing its knowledge, not simply accumulating experience.

This matters for regional clients and partners. The capability they can now access locally in Saudi Arabia, across exhibition strategy, ceremonial planning, brand activation, and experiential design, has reached a level of sophistication that changes the conversation about what is possible and at what speed.

A Closing Observation

Saudi Arabia's transformation in the events and experiential space is not primarily a story about infrastructure, though the infrastructure is real and significant. It is a story about professionalization: the gradual, methodical development of a discipline that treats the guest journey as a strategic asset and the live experience as a form of brand communication.

What is worth stating plainly is this: the Kingdom is no longer a market learning from elsewhere. It is a market generating standards that the wider region would benefit from studying. The combination of protocol discipline, brand rigor, experiential ambition, and rapidly maturing local talent makes Saudi Arabia one of the most instructive environments for event professionals working anywhere in the GCC today.

The organizations and professionals driving this shift are not waiting for a template from elsewhere. They are writing one.

Labeed Assidmi is a Senior Brand, Events and Marketing Operations Leader with over 20 years of experience across Saudi Aramco and Retail Urban Development, specializing in brand governance, large-scale exhibitions, protocol-level events, and experiential strategy. He is based in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia.





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by Rhiannon Downie-Hurst

Rhiannon Downie-Hurst ("Rio") is a multi-award-winning entrepreneur and wedding industry consultant in the UAE. In 2012, she pioneered the region's digital bridal market by launching Bride Club ME. Drawing on a background in media sales and marketing at ITP and CPI Publishing, she later established Bride Club ME Business (BCME Biz), a B2B community dedicated to strengthening industry connections. Today, as EventME's wedding columnist, Rio provides strategic, future-focused insights into the evolving GCC wedding landscape.

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Fam Trips Done Right:

The planner experience that actually drives ROI

Fam trips have long been a staple in destination weddings and luxury hospitality. Yet despite the time, effort, and budget invested, many fail to deliver meaningful return on investment. They look beautiful, feel enjoyable, and generate a flurry of Instagram stories, but often result in little more than vague "great experience" feedback and very few tangible outcomes.

A successful fam trip is not about generosity. It is about strategy.

holidays disguised as marketing. So what separates the two?

When designed properly, fam trips can directly influence bookings, long-term partnerships, destination advocacy, and brand authority. When done poorly, they become expensive

Here's how venues and hotel partners can design fam trips that actually drive ROI, while creating an experience planners genuinely value.

STEP 1. Curate, don't invite

The biggest mistake venues make is inviting too many people, or the wrong people.

As someone who regularly works with tourism boards, venues, and hotels in a consultancy capacity to curate planner guest lists, I see this happen far too often: planners being invited who will never realistically bring paid business to the destination.

Guest list curation is the single most important ROI lever. Ask:

- Does this planner work with our target market?
- Do they book internationally or locally?
- Do they influence client decisions, or simply execute briefs?
- Do they actively create content and thought leadership, or only attend?

Ten well-aligned planners will outperform thirty generic attendees every time

STEP 2. Design an agenda with purpose, and breathing space

One of the most common complaints planners share about fam trips is that everything feels rushed. Back-to-back site visits, tight schedules, and information overload often result in fatigue rather than clarity. Fam trips should feel intentional, not exhausting.

Every element of the agenda should answer one key question: *How does this help the planner confidently sell this destination or venue to their clients?*

A high-ROI agenda includes:

- Clear venue walkthroughs framed within real wedding

scenarios

- Practical discussions around logistics, capacity, weather, seasonality, and cultural considerations
- Dedicated time for commercial questions and honest conversations
- Case studies and real examples, not sales pitches

Equally important? Downtime.

Time to reflect, absorb, and experience the destination as a guest, not just a buyer, is critical. Planners don't need to be constantly "wowed". They need to feel informed, grounded, and equipped.





STEP 3. Showcase the destination. Not just the venue

Planners are not only selling a ballroom or a beachfront. They are selling an entire experience.

Today's couples care deeply about what their guests will experience beyond the wedding day. This means fam trips must go beyond rooms, menus, and event spaces.

Incorporating:

- Local culture and traditions
- Authentic activities and excursions
- Culinary experiences beyond hotel dining
- Art, heritage, wellness, and lifestyle touchpoints

- ...helps planners understand the full guest journey.
- When planners experience the destination holistically, they are far better positioned to articulate value to clients, and to design multi-day celebrations that feel immersive, not transactional.

STEP 4. Facilitate meaningful interaction

Planners buy into people just as much as places.

A well-designed fam trip allows time for:

- One-to-one conversations with decision-makers
- Honest, open Q&A sessions
- Peer-to-peer discussions between planners

These moments build trust, and trust drives recommendations far more effectively than polished presentations.

STEP 5. Content amplification is not optional

If content creation and amplification are not built into the fam trip strategy, ROI will always be limited. This doesn't mean enforcing posting schedules. It means enabling storytelling.

Venues and destinations should:

- Provide clear hashtags, handles, and messaging guidelines

- Offer professional imagery or video assets post-trip
- Encourage narrative-driven content, not just tagging
- The goal is sustained visibility and long-term recall, not instant coverage.

STEP 6. Measure what actually matters

ROI is not measured solely by immediate bookings.

Meaningful metrics include:

- Post-trip enquiries referencing the venue or destination
- Inclusion in planner proposals and pitch decks
- Long-term planner relationships and repeat collaborations

- Editorial features or destination advocacy that follow

Fam trips are relationship investments. Their value compounds over time. The bottom line is, when executed with intention, balance, and strategic clarity, fam trips become one of the most powerful tools in a venue or destination's marketing ecosystem. Not a cost centre. A growth driver.

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A Fusion of Tradition in Dubai:

The Wedding of Shifa & Shahzeb



by Hansani Nipuni
Executive Administrative
Assistant at Vivaah
Weddings

The union of Shifa and Shahzeb, an Indian & Pakistani couple based in Atlanta, Georgia, was celebrated in a grand multi-day wedding extravaganza across some of Dubai's most iconic venues. With guests flying in from the USA, India, and London, the festivities beautifully blended culture, colour, and creativity, resulting in a truly unforgettable celebration. The entire wedding was executed with meticulous planning, at an approximate budget of USD 1.4 million.



17th October - Welcome “to Dubai” Lunch at Hilton Al Habtoor City & “Dubai Bling” Sangeet at Delano Dubai

The wedding celebrations began with a vibrant Welcome Lunch at Hilton Al Habtoor City. Embracing the theme “Welcome to Dubai”, guests were treated to an elaborate spread of local Emirati and Indian delicacies. Ayala dancers greeted everyone, offering a warm, cultural introduction to Dubai. The atmosphere was energetic and full of excitement as friends and family reunited.

Later that evening, the couple hosted a dazzling Dubai Bling - themed Sangeet at Delano Dubai. The venue was transformed into a neon & crystal-inspired spectacle, glowing with colour and energy. Dabka dancers welcomed the guests, building the hype before the couple made their spectacular entrance accompanied by traditional zaffa performers.

The night unfolded as an audiovisual extravaganza. Bhaven Dhanak captivated the crowd with his electrifying live performance, followed by tunes from the DJ, who kept the dancefloor alive well into the night. The emcee kept the evening flowing seamlessly, engaging the audience, sparking laughter, and bringing together friends and family from across the globe. His crowd interactions added life to every moment, ensuring everyone felt part of the celebration. With striking mocktails, mouth-watering multi-cuisine food, and an atmosphere brimming with laughter, dance, and love, the Sangeet set the tone for the celebrations to come.





18th October - “Romantic” Nikkah & Dinner at Four Seasons Resort Dubai

The next day, the serene Dana Garden and ballroom at the Four Seasons Resort were transformed into a dreamlike floral wonderland. Soft hues of blue, white, and green set the scene for an ethereal Nikkah ceremony. Guests were left speechless as they entered the space, which resembled a fairytale garden brought to life.

The bride made a breathtaking entrance down a mirrored aisle, surrounded by lush florals, accompanied by a live violin performance. The intimate Nikkah ceremony beautifully united two families, with guests attentively taking in every moment of the heartfelt proceedings.

To capture the magic in real time, a live painter translated the ceremony's most beautiful moments onto canvas. Guests watched in admiration as the artwork unfolded, an everlasting keepsake of the couple's union. A delightful high tea featuring cold coffee, ice cream, and a selection of Indian and Arabic street delicacies was served, alongside personalized gifts, dates, and chocolates distributed as tokens of appreciation.

The evening concluded with a lavish dinner featuring an extensive variety of Indian and international dishes. Conversations throughout the night echoed with admiration for the stunning décor and emotional beauty of the ceremony.

19th October - “Grand” Reception at Atlantis The Royal

The final celebration was a luxurious red-themed reception at the iconic Atlantis The Royal - an evening that left guests in awe. The ballroom was transformed into a breathtaking art installation, with a handcrafted fluid fabric structure draped across the ceiling, complemented by cascading flowers and crystals. Above the dance-floor, a striking floral sculpture concealed a surprise waiting for the couple's grand entrance.

The evening was one of indulgence and elegance, with gourmet cuisine and signature mocktails to match. A major highlight was the dramatic reveal of a four-tier white floral cake descending from the floral sculpture on the ceiling, eliciting gasps across the room.

The emcee once again elevated the evening, uniting the crowd, creating laughter, and ensuring every moment felt warm, engaging, and unforgettable. Heartfelt speeches from family and friends added emotional warmth to the regal setting. Another sentimental moment was the same-day edit played on the big screens, showcasing highlights from the past three days in a 4-minute cinematic journey. After dinner, Asees Arshad performed nostalgic melodies that had guests of all ages singing and dancing. The celebrations continued late into the night with an electrifying after-party.

The evening concluded with Shifa's emotional ruksati, as loved ones surrounded the couple with sparklers, blessing their journey ahead. Shahzeb whisked his bride away in a striking red Ferrari, a picture-perfect ending to a magical weekend.

Challenges & Solutions

Challenge 1: Coordinating multi-day events across four high-profile venues with international guests.

Solution: Detailed itinerary planning, dedicated transport arrangements, and a 24/7 event coordination team ensured smooth transitions and timely arrivals.

Challenge 2: Blending Indian & Pakistani traditions while respecting cultural nuances.

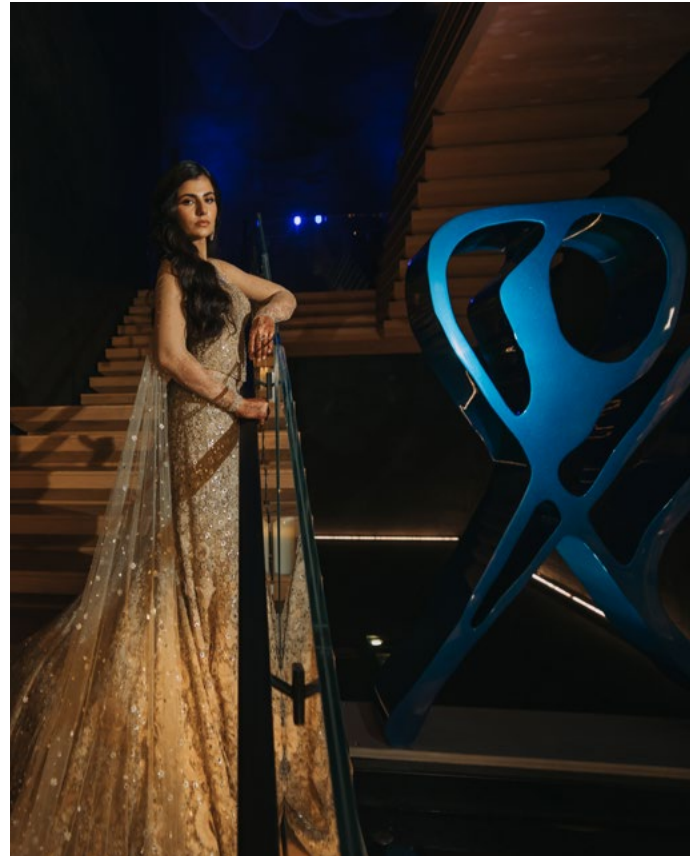
Solution: Meticulous scripting of ceremonies and performances, incorporating key rituals from both cultures seamlessly, guided by cultural consultants.

Challenge 3: Maintaining guest comfort and engagement in Dubai's October weather.

Solution: Strategically planned indoor and outdoor spaces, climate-controlled venues, shaded lounges, and customized welcome kits with refreshments.

Challenge 4: Real-time documentation and personalization.

Solution: Live painters, same-day edit videos, and personalized gifts ensured that each guest experienced the celebration as unique and memorable.



A Wedding to Remember

Every event across the three days was a masterpiece in design, emotion, and cultural harmony. The décor, performances, and heartfelt moments came together to create a celebration that guests will cherish forever. The photos and videos capture the sheer beauty of this magnificent union, one that truly speaks for itself.

Vivaah Weddings is a multi-award-winning premium wedding planning & management company with its head office strategically located in Dubai, UAE. For over a decade, our team of experienced professionals has conceptualized, managed, and delivered in excess of 200 weddings & events globally. Known as innovators and trendsetters, we offer couples a way to blend the expected and much-loved traditions of a wedding with unique twists and modern elements. With attention to every last detail, we take care of all aspects of planning for that most special of occasions.

We aim to make the journey as stress-free and as enjoyable as the celebration itself. To our team, this is the true meaning of the company's legend: "The Ultimate Wedding Experience."

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Venues:

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Delano Dubai [@delanodubai](#)

Four Seasons Resort [@fsdubai](#)

Atlantis the Royal [@atlantistheroyal](#)

Bridal Hair & Makeup:

Aisha Khan [@makeupbyaishaa](#)



by Vaishali Shah
Founder of Creative ID
and Ananya Cards

With 25 years of experience working on 500+ events across the UAE, UK and internationally, I run Creative ID, a branding and marketing consultancy, and Ananya Cards, a premium event stationery studio. I help event businesses, venues, international hotel chains, DMCs and agencies refine brand touchpoints and create delegate experiences that stand out.

Based between the UAE and UK, I bring local insight and international perspective to every project.



What differentiates one event from another is not the ballroom but the care in the experience.



The Moments That Matter:

Touchpoints as Part of the Delegate Experience in Business Events

In the rush to deliver flawless logistics, many business events forget something fundamental: delegates are not just processing information, they are experiencing emotion. The success of a business event is rarely determined on the day itself. By the time delegates walk through the door, the experience has already been shaped by dozens of interactions. Over 500 events and 25 years working across branding, marketing and premium event stationery, I have watched carefully designed programmes unravel because organisers fixated on content and overlooked the experience. Conversely, I have seen average agendas elevated into memorable experiences through intelligent touchpoint design.

A touchpoint is any interaction a delegate has with your event, whether digital, physical or human. The collective impact of these moments determines not only how the event is perceived but whether it drives the behaviour you need: engagement, recommendations and return attendance. Some organisers treat touchpoints reactively, addressing them as isolated tasks rather than as part of a complete experience.



The Delegate Experience Perspective: from Logistics to Experience



The shift from viewing MICE events as logistical programmes to curated experiences changes every decision. When an event is seen as an experience, the focus shifts to how each moment makes a delegate feel.

In the GCC, where competition for premium events is fierce, this matters commercially. What differentiates one event from another is not the ballroom but the care in the experience.

In creating bespoke stationery for corporate conferences, incentive programmes and leadership summits across Dubai and the UAE, I work closely with event organisers on everything from registration materials to welcome packages to delegate gifts. When these elements are personalised by delegate role, reflect cultural nuance and feel premium rather than generic, the impact is measurable. Event organisers report higher satisfaction scores and delegates specifically mention the attention to detail in feedback.

Key Touchpoint Moments in Business Events

SOME TOUCHPOINTS ARE OBVIOUS. OTHERS ARE INVISIBLE UNTIL SOMETHING GOES WRONG. HERE ARE THE MOMENTS THAT CONSISTENTLY SHAPE DELEGATE PERCEPTION IN THE GCC.

Pre-Event Communication

I am sure we have all registered for an event and received the automated 'Your registration is confirmed' email with no context, no personality and no sense that anyone actually noticed we signed up. The tone you set before anyone arrives influences everything. A message that acknowledges the delegate by name and previews what to expect signals that care began the moment they registered.

When event organisers segment pre-event communication by delegate type and tailor content accordingly, the impact is significant. Personalisation creates an inclusive atmosphere and signals that the event has been designed with individual needs in mind. It transforms a transactional email into something delegates want to attend.



Registration and Badges

The first physical touchpoint on-site sets the tone. Working with an event organiser on a high-profile conference, we introduced tiered registration: VIP delegates had a dedicated desk with hosts who knew their names. Standard delegates had fast-track self-service kiosks. The difference was immediate: shorter queues, calmer atmosphere and delegates who felt welcomed rather than processed.

Badges are another overlooked touchpoint. Clear typography, role identification and colour-coding by sector, seniority or interest area can help delegates identify relevant connections at a glance. Material choices matter too. At sustainability-focused events, badges and lanyards made from bamboo, recycled materials or biodegradable alternatives reinforce brand values.

Welcome Materials

What a delegate receives on arrival communicates priorities. There is still a place for printed programmes when appropriate, but a 200-page document that will never be opened signals waste. A well-designed card on premium stock with a QR code linking to the full agenda, speaker bios and live updates signals efficiency and environmental awareness.

However, QR codes are only effective when paired with strong, accessible WiFi. I have attended conferences where QR codes were everywhere but the app took long to load or the network was overloaded. Make sure WiFi codes are clearly displayed, the connection is robust and digital solutions actually work.

Session and Breakout Environments

Room setup directly impacts engagement. I have seen panel discussions in theatre-style rooms with no tables, leaving delegates with nowhere to place their devices. When the same format was moved to cabaret setup with tables and charging points, participation in live polls over doubled. In breakout sessions, the layout matters even more: collaborative formats need space for conversation, materials within reach and technology that actually works.

Takeaway Objects and Memory Triggers

The best events leave delegates with something tangible that carries meaning. Working as a consultant to the event organiser for a Marriott VIP media event in Dubai, I developed a gifting concept that engaged all five senses. Given the international guest list, I centred the concept on global connection and travel, with gifts housed in suitcase-style packaging made from sustainable materials that aligned with the hotel's environmental ethos.

Guests kept the packaging and, yes, it was very Instagrammable. In an age where social sharing extends an event's life far beyond the day itself, creating moments worth photographing is smart business. What you give should solve a problem, create delight or remind them of a valued moment.



Digital vs Physical Balance: When Tactile Matters

Event organisers in the GCC often ask how to balance efficiency and technology with memorable, tangible experiences. The answer is using both thoughtfully.

Digital tools (event apps, live polling, QR codes) allow delegates to navigate complex agendas without asking for help. But digital alone can feel transactional. Physical touchpoints create connection and feeling that screens cannot replicate.

In Dubai's event market, where innovation and premium service are both expected, brands that stand out use technology to enhance human connection rather than replace it. QR codes on high-quality materials allow delegates to access digital content while holding something tangible.

The key is intentionality. Every physical element should justify its existence. Every digital tool should solve a problem without removing the human element.

Practical Considerations for Organisers

Designing delegate touchpoints strategically requires discipline, not unlimited budget. Start by mapping the experience: invitation, registration, arrival, check-in, sessions, breaks, networking, departure and follow-up. For each touchpoint, ask: What is the delegate trying to achieve? What friction might they encounter? How can we exceed expectations? Not all touchpoints carry equal weight. The first five minutes on-site and the first post-registration communication are disproportionately influential. Invest where impact is highest.

Cultural context matters in the GCC. Personalised service and high-touch gestures at registration build trust. Understanding your delegate profile shapes how touchpoints should be calibrated.

Finally, measure what matters. Ask delegates whether the event felt designed for them, whether they would recommend it and what specific moments stood out.



Conclusion

Business events in the GCC operate in a market where excellence is expected. What elevates an event from competent to memorable is not scale but care.

Touchpoints are where that care becomes visible. When designed with intention, they transform events from logistical exercises into experiences delegates remember and recommend. The return shows in repeat bookings, referrals and lasting reputation.

The question is not whether touchpoints matter. The question is whether you are designing them with the same rigour you apply to content and logistics.

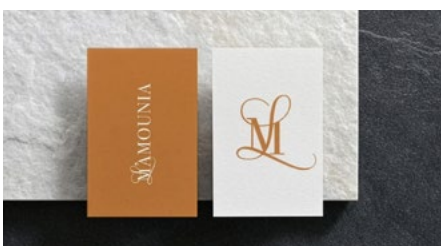
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by Tatiana Presniakova
Founder & CEO, Fashion
Holidays | UAE & Montenegro

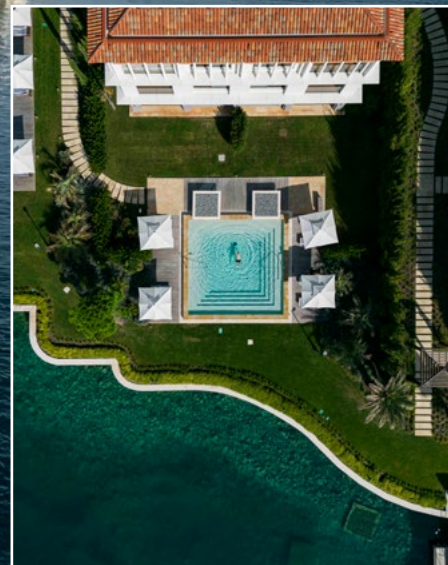
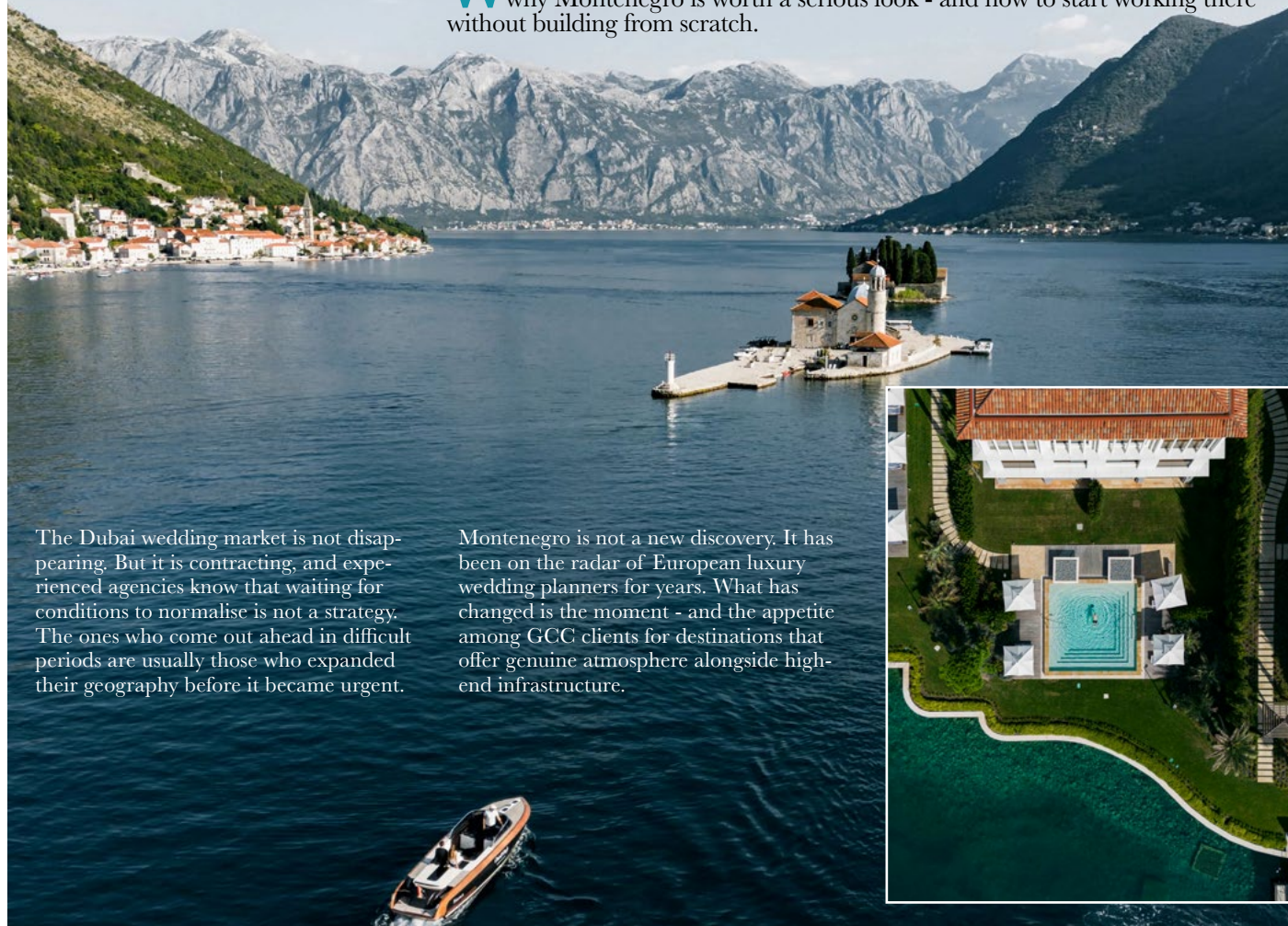
Montenegro:

A new direction for Dubai Wedding Agencies

When the local market slows, experienced agencies look outward. Here is why Montenegro is worth a serious look - and how to start working there without building from scratch.

The Dubai wedding market is not disappearing. But it is contracting, and experienced agencies know that waiting for conditions to normalise is not a strategy. The ones who come out ahead in difficult periods are usually those who expanded their geography before it became urgent.

Montenegro is not a new discovery. It has been on the radar of European luxury wedding planners for years. What has changed is the moment - and the appetite among GCC clients for destinations that offer genuine atmosphere alongside high-end infrastructure.



Why this destination sells itself to GCC clients

The pitch is straightforward. Montenegro sits on the Adriatic coast with a landscape that stops people mid-sentence: medieval walled towns, mountain backdrops, water so clear it looks implausible. The Bay of Kotor is regularly compared to Lake Como, but with less traffic, lower prices, and a quieter quality of light. For couples from the UAE and Russia - two of the most active outbound wedding markets in the region - entry is frictionless. No visa required for either nationality. Flight connections through Istanbul, Belgrade, or Podgorica keep travel time manageable.

The season runs comfortably from April to October, with winter offering an entirely different product: mountain chalets, intimate interiors, snow-covered landscapes.

The venue inventory is stronger than most agencies expect. One&Only Portonovi, Aman Sveti Stefan, Mamula Island, Mövenpick Teodo - these are not compromise options. They are properties that hold their own against anything in the Mediterranean. And because the destination is less saturated than Tuscany or the Amalfi Coast, availability and pricing work in the client's favour.

Clients who have done Italy and Maldives are looking for somewhere that feels undiscovered. Montenegro still has that.



The practical questions agencies ask

The first concern is always logistics: who handles things on the ground? Coordinating suppliers, decor, entertainment, and documentation from Dubai across a different time zone and regulatory environment is a real operational challenge - and the main reason agencies hesitate before entering a new market.

The second concern is legal. Can the marriage actually be legally registered? For most nationalities, including UAE and Russian citizens, the answer is yes - and the process is considerably simpler than in most of Europe. A passport, birth certificate, and proof of single status are the core requirements. Two witnesses are needed; a local partner

can provide them. Documents can largely be prepared remotely.

The third concern is decor and production quality. Clients who have experienced Dubai-level execution have high expectations. Can a destination like Montenegro actually deliver?

What a local partner changes

Tatiana Presniakova has been producing weddings and events in Montenegro since 2014, with a parallel operation in Dubai. Her company Fashion Holidays covers the full production stack: venue relations, decor through her own studio Married.up, entertainment and artists, coordination, and on-the-ground logistics.

For a Dubai agency entering the market, this removes the primary barrier. You are not building supplier relationships from zero, navigating an unfamiliar legal system alone, or hoping that a venue's in-house team will meet your clients' expectations. You have a partner who has already solved those problems - repeatedly, across weddings for international couples from the GCC and Europe.

- Decor and floral production handled in-house, not outsourced
- Established relationships with top venues across the Bay of Kotor and the coast
- Artist and entertainment network for international productions
- Legal registration support for couples of all backgrounds
- Bilingual coordination in Russian, English, and local languages



How to start

The most practical entry point is a familiarisation visit - ideally timed for spring or early autumn when the destination is at its best. Seeing the venues, meeting the local team, and understanding the production environment firsthand is what converts a destination from an idea into something you can confidently sell.

For agencies that already have clients asking about European destinations, Montenegro can be introduced as a qualified alternative rather than an experiment. The combination of accessible entry requirements, genuine luxury infrastructure, and an established local partner makes the conversation with clients straightforward.



The question for agencies is not whether Montenegro works. It is whether they have the right infrastructure to deliver it properly. That infrastructure exists.

The 50th Orbit:

Engineering Legacy Through a Celestial Narrative



by **Gauri Chadha**
Co-Founder & Creative
Director
The Big Night Events



In an industry often defined by scale and spectacle, The 50th Orbit emerged as something far more profound a masterclass in transforming a milestone into an immersive, multi-sensory narrative. Conceived as a 50th birthday celebration, the event reimaged the passage of time itself, drawing inspiration from Saturn the cosmic ruler of cycles, evolution, and legacy.

Moments that redefined Spectacle

The Equine Dance: Royal horses thundered across the desert, led by Bora Bora in a gravity-defying performance.

The Pyrotechnic Descent: Six skydivers fell from 5,000 feet, trailing 20-meter fire streams like falling stars.

The Digital Ring: Fifty drones formed Saturn's rings in synchronized aerial motion.

The Living Stage: Music, illusion, and performance merged into a single immersive experience



Objective part

Honestly, this is one of our favourite themes so far, a story not just told, but lived. 'The 50th Orbit' was never intended to be a mere celebration; it was a living narrative designed to blur the boundary between guest and protagonist. Over three days, the landscape physically shifted, evolving from an intimate reflection of a life lived into a monumental display of legacy. We moved away from the traditional constraints of event planning to embrace a landscape of "architectural grit" that shifted with every chapter, where massive custom-built installations forced guests to navigate a world that seemed to grow out of the earth itself. Each day felt like a new chapter, transitioning from quiet, personal moments into a cinematic spectacle that commanded the horizon.

The visual heart of the experience was defined by a staggering scale of light. Imagine standing before a flickering sea of 10,000 hand-placed wax candles, an amber carpet that stretched into the darkness until the air itself felt warm. When a sudden storm transformed the venue into a literal mirror of water, we didn't retreat. Instead, we used the flood to our advantage.

The entertainment was designed to challenge the impossible. We watched live stallion royal horses thunder through lines of fire, their silhouettes cutting through the wind in a raw display of power. Even as the sky threatened to break with a big storm, skydivers defied the elements, dropping through the clouds with precision to signal the start of a new movement. By the third day, a profound, shared disbelief hung in the air. The success of 'The 50th Orbit' wasn't found in the applause, but in the collective intake of breath when the elements raged, and the standing ovation from the guests and our own peers including the venues had followed when we refused to let the dream break.

The journey began at sunset, where the rooftop transformed into a crimson-hued cosmos.

A Three-Act Cosmic Journey across Dubai

Spanning Hilton Dubai Palm Jumeirah, Caravanserai Desert Camp, and Delano Bluewaters, the celebration unfolded as a three-act narrative, each chapter deepening the story.



Day One: Saturn Rises



A sculptural wave-shaped screen traced Saturn's ascent, setting a tone where science met symbolism and time became the central character.

The atmosphere was immersive yet intentional, drawing guests into a narrative both expansive and personal.

Day Two: After Dusk

At Caravanserai, warm golden tones and Rajasthani-inspired architecture redefined the space. An infinity staircase rose from the sands while thousands of candles created a hypnotic interplay of light and shadow. Tradition and futurism merged into a unified narrative language.

The desert became a living canvas of celestial wonder.



The boundary
between stage
and sky dissolved
into experience

Finale: Skyfall

Deep royal blues and midnight tones set the stage for performances by Guru Randhawa, Sukhbir Singh, Shaan, Suhani Shah, DJ Aqeel, and DJ Buddha. Each act became part of a larger emotional crescendo, dissolving the boundary between audience and spectacle.



The 50th Orbit' sits at the heart of our identity because it wasn't just a logistical challenge; it was an elemental trial that tested the absolute limits of our resolve. We inherited the project just one month before the event following a client's disappointing experience elsewhere. With invitations already sent and foundational parameters locked, we stepped into a landscape of rigid restrictions. When the Day One venue fell through only two weeks before the curtain rose, we were forced into a total creative reset, racing to engineer a new universe that felt destined rather than designed.

Then, the sky shattered. A violent storm submerged our meticulously crafted world, ruining custom carpets and compromising technical rigs. As winds hit safety thresholds, our overhead elements became immobile, forcing us to condense eight technical runs into a frantic 90-minute window just as high-end Bollywood talent arrived. Amidst

this chaos, the greatest uncertainty lay with the royal horses. With zero rehearsal and despite the sensory overload, a horse named Bora Bora was flawless. As she soared upward with breathtaking grace, our Creative Director surrendered to the moment, bowing alongside her. In that instant, the event transformed from a birthday celebration into a story of raw grit and quiet magic.

The defiance continued with the sky-diving segment. Volatile weather permitted only one test jump, leaving us with no data only instinct. We launched the jump seconds before takeoff, and as 350 drones emerged from the dunes to frame the descent, we knew we had achieved the unthinkable. The success of 'The 50th Orbit' was not found in the final spectacle alone, but in our relentless, poetic refusal to let the storm win. We didn't just manage a crisis; we transformed a compromised situation into an editorial triumph against all odds.



When Nature Tested the Narrative

What could have
been chaos
became operational
poetry

A historic rainstorm across Day One and Day Two threatened execution. Instead of compromise, the team re-engineered the experience in real time.

Rain became texture. The atmosphere became emotional. The vision adapted rather than collapsed, revealing a rare level of creative resilience.

Beyond Spectacle: Designing Emotion

The 50th Orbit redefined milestone celebrations by shifting from visual excess to intentional storytelling. Time was not marked it was experienced.

Take Aways:

The 50th Orbit is no longer just an event; it is a "proof of concept" for their brand. Here is the condensed practical takeaway:

1. Crisis as a Signature Service

The ability to transform a "shattered sky" and a flooded venue into "operational poetry" is your greatest USP. You aren't just selling a party; you are selling absolute certainty in the face of chaos.

2. Narrative over Logistics

By framing a birthday as a "Three-Act Cosmic Journey," you proved that storytelling justifies scale. Moving forward, your value lies in being "Experience Engineers" who design emotional arcs, not just floor plans.

3. The "30-Day Miracle"

Executing this in under a month with a venue change 14 days out positions you as the go-to team for high-stakes, high-speed luxury. It proves your network and "grit" are unmatched in the Dubai market.

4. Elemental Audacity

Using "architectural grit" (raw desert, fire, wind, and 10,000 wax candles) creates a "collective intake of breath." Your takeaway is to keep blending high-tech precision (drones) with raw power (stallions) to create moments that feel lived, not just seen.

5. From Planners to Protagonists

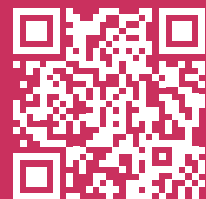
The standing ovation from peers and venues confirms you have set a new benchmark. The takeaway? Never retreat. When the elements rage, use them to heighten the drama. That defiance is now your brand identity.



Gauri Chadha, an award-winning filmmaker in Hollywood and Bollywood, brings cinematic storytelling to luxury events. As Co-Founder and Creative Director of The Big Night Events in Dubai, she transforms celebrations into immersive experiences that defy convention, pushing beyond imagination to create unforgettable moments.

Alongside her husband and partner, Kunal Rupani, Gauri Chadha has redefined luxury events in the UAE and beyond, owning and operating a diverse portfolio of brands including The Big Night Events, Wild Child, I Do Weddings, and Paw Party. Collaborating with global celebrities and brands like Netflix, VISA and Tonino Lamborghini to name a few, her visionary approach disrupts norms.

From skydiving firework displays, dancing horse shows to recreating Parisian streets, she sets new creative standards across the industry. Her bold, visionary approach consistently redefines industry standards. With a background in film and theatre, she approaches every event through a cinematic lens transforming each celebration into a masterpiece of storytelling and spectacle.



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by Denis Panchenko
Founder & Creative
Director of Celebration
Station UAE

Denis Panchenko is the Founder and Creative Director of Celebration Station UAE, where event design is approached not as decoration, but as a study of atmosphere, emotion, and spatial identity.

Holding an MBA, currently a DBA candidate, and a PMP-certified professional, he bridges creative intuition with structured thinking - bringing clarity, precision, and intention into every project. With nearly two decades of experience, his work reflects a deep understanding of materials, light, and composition, shaped by global influences and refined within the dynamic landscape of the UAE.

His approach challenges the idea of excess, focusing instead on restraint, balance, and the power of a single, well-defined concept. Each space is designed to feel effortless, yet carefully controlled - where every element exists for a reason.



“True luxury is not what you see at first glance - it is what you feel, without needing to ask why.”



Designing Emotions:

The Evolution of Event Decor in the UAE

The United Arab Emirates has become more than a global destination for events - it has become a benchmark for how modern celebrations are designed, experienced, and remembered.

Clients here are exposed, well-travelled, and highly aware. They arrive with references, expectations, and a clear understanding of what has already been done. This creates a unique dynamic: the industry is not competing on scale alone, but on refinement.

As a designer, I have seen a clear shift. Events are no longer defined by how much is added, but by how precisely each element is chosen.

“This transformation has fundamentally changed the way designers approach their work. Client briefs today are more structured, more visual, and more intentional. Instead of broad directions, clients often come with curated references, mood boards, and a defined emo-

tional outcome they want to achieve. At the same time, the role of the designer has expanded. It is no longer about offering options - it is about interpreting, refining, and sometimes even challenging the brief to create something cohesive and meaningful.”



"Luxury today is not about how much you add - but how precisely you choose."

Understanding the Modern Event Landscape

The GCC event scene is defined by diversity - from intimate private moments to large-scale productions - all driven by a shared demand for **experience-led design**.

Proposals and private celebrations are becoming more refined, focusing on emotion, location, and precision rather than scale. Birthdays have evolved into curated visual experiences, especially for adults, where elegance and personalisation take priority.

Weddings remain the most layered format, designed as a complete journey rather than a single moment. In parallel, corporate events are moving toward minimal, clean aesthetics that balance branding with functionality.

Across all categories, one shift is clear: Events are no longer simply decorated - they are intentionally designed to create lasting impressions.



A well-designed space doesn't ask for attention - it controls it."



What truly defines Great Decor

There is a common misconception that great decor is defined by complexity. In reality, it is defined by control.

Control of space - understanding proportions, scale, and how elements are positioned within the environment. Control of light - shaping mood, depth, and focus through both natural and artificial sources. Control of interaction - how materials, textures, and structures respond to each other within the same composition.

The strongest designs are built on a clear foundation:

- composition
- lighting
- material quality
- spatial flow

"One of the most common mistakes, even in high-budget projects, is treating these elements separately. For example, lighting is often considered after the decor is already designed or installed. As a result, even well-executed setups can lose depth, atmosphere, and clarity. This is why a budget alone does not guarantee a strong result. Without alignment between space, light, and materials, even the most expensive elements can feel disconnected."

Each of these elements works together to guide the experience - subtly directing attention, movement, and perception without overwhelming the space.

When these elements align, the result feels effortless - even when the execution behind it is highly complex.



From Excess to Intention

The industry has evolved. There was a time when decor meant volume - more flowers, more layers, more visual impact. Spaces were filled to impress.

Today, the most refined designs are moving in the opposite direction.

Not empty - but **intentional**.

We are seeing a shift toward:

- clarity over chaos
- balance over overload
- focus over saturation

This is not minimalism as a trend. It is maturity in design thinking.

“This shift is also reflected in how budgets are distributed. Instead of spreading resources across multiple elements, more emphasis is placed on fewer, higher-quality components - materials, lighting, and execution.

“Less but better” is achieved not by reducing design, but by increasing precision. Every element carries more responsibility and, therefore, requires a higher level of detail and control.”

Defining Trends of 2026

The Return of Draping

Draping has returned - but in a new form. It is no longer heavy or traditional. Today, it is light, fluid, and architectural. Fabrics are used to shape space, soften structures, and introduce movement.

What was once decorative has become **a tool for atmosphere**



Minimal Luxury & Futuristic Simplicity



Luxury is now expressed through restraint. Clean lines, neutral palettes, and materials such as acrylic, mirror, and chrome define this direction. The focus is not on quantity, but on precision and finish.

“In practice, this approach raises the standard of execution. With fewer elements in the space, every detail becomes more visible - meaning imperfections in finish, alignment, or proportion are immediately noticeable.

Minimal luxury does not simplify the work - it elevates the standard of execution, demanding greater control, craftsmanship, and attention to detail.”



Statement over Saturation



The idea of filling a space is being replaced by defining it. Rather than layering multiple elements, today's approach focuses on a single, well-executed feature - a sculptural installation, a statement centerpiece, or a signature backdrop that shapes the entire space.

This is not about doing less, but about

designing with precision. A strong focal point creates clarity, guides attention, and allows the space to breathe, making the overall experience feel more refined and intentional.

The impact of modern design lies not in quantity, but in how confidently one idea is expressed.

If everything stands out, nothing truly does.

2026 EVENT COLOR PALETTE

Refined Direction

Blush Pink

Dusty Blue

Sage Green

Peach

Lavender

Ivory

Gold

Champagne

Metallic Silver

Gold

Soft Pastels

Metallic Accents

Ivory Sand Beige Warm Taupe Mocha

Gold Champagne

Midnight Navy

Colour Direction
in 2026

Colour is becoming more intentional. “Soft pastels, warm neutrals, and subtle metallic accents define the base palette, while deeper tones are introduced selectively to create contrast and depth.

In practice, this layered approach allows designers to control the atmosphere more precisely. Instead of multiple competing colours, the palette works as a system - supporting zoning, depth, and visual hierarchy.

This is also why the industry is moving away from overloaded palettes. When too many colours are introduced, the space loses clarity, and the overall composition becomes harder to read. Restraint, in this context, is not a limitation - it is a tool.”

Why Trends always Return

Design is cyclical by nature - but never repetitive.

Trends do not disappear; they evolve. What changes is not the idea itself, but the way it is expressed. Materials become more refined, technologies allow greater precision, and perspectives shift with each new generation

of designers. As a result, familiar concepts return - not as copies, but as reinterpretations shaped by the present moment.

What once felt traditional can suddenly feel modern again, simply through a change in scale, texture, or context. Draping, for example, has existed for decades, yet today

it appears lighter, more architectural, and emotionally driven.

The future of design is not about constant invention or chasing something entirely new. It is about understanding what already exists - **and reimagining it with clarity, purpose, and intention.**

The Source
of Creative
Inspiration

Inspiration rarely comes directly from the event industry. It comes from observing the world - architecture, travel, fashion, and nature.

Architecture teaches structure and proportion. Travel brings new atmospheres and cultural perspectives. Fashion introduces texture, layering, and colour balance. Nature adds movement and organic flow.

Over time, these influences form a perspective that shapes every decision.

Because inspiration is not about copying what exists - it is about translating what you see into something people can feel

Why Trends always Return

There is always a moment - just before a guest fully enters a space - where everything is still unknown.

That moment is where design begins. Event design is not about individual elements. It is about how they come together to create a feeling.

And that feeling is never created alone.

Behind every refined event is collaboration - planners, florists, production teams - professionals who understand not only execution,

but sensitivity. The strongest results come from teams that elevate each other.

At the same time, one of the most critical layers lies in the materials the client rarely sees. Every material is selected not only for aesthetics, but for:

- safety within the environment
- structural stability
- interaction with lighting

Because a design that looks beautiful but does not perform perfectly is not luxury.

Florals follow the same logic. Fresh and artificial elements are not in competition - they serve different roles.

Fresh flowers bring life and softness. Artificial elements provide structure and consistency. The most refined designs combine both - seamlessly. And then comes the most important decision: what not to add.

Because today, the most powerful spaces are not the most filled - they are the most intentional.



The Final Layer

In the end, people do not remember the number of flowers or the scale of the setup. They remember how it felt.

“What stays with them is often not a specific detail, but a sequence of impressions - how their attention was guided, what caught their eye, where they paused, and how naturally the space unfolded around them.

This is where design becomes more than visual. It becomes a way of controlling perception - directing focus, creating rhythm, and shaping how the experience is absorbed.”

The atmosphere. The emotion. The moment.

And that is the true role of design. Not to decorate a space - but to shape something invisible.



We are not
designing events.
We are designing
emotions.



by Ruslan Minov
Technical Director and co-owner of Pixel Media

17 years of experience in the events industry – starting as a DJ and sound engineer, and growing into a Technical Director and co-owner of Pixel Media. More than 4,200 projects, including over 500 events in Dubai in recent years. Work spans across 10+ countries, covering projects of all scales - from private events to large international productions.

In addition to events, involved in the development and technical execution of restaurants and nightclubs – more than 15 projects in Dubai, many of which are well-known and set the standard in the local scene.

“Over time, I’ve learned that experience matters - but it’s not everything.”



Technical Production in Conferences

Where attention is actually managed

When conferences are discussed, the focus almost always shifts to content - speakers, topics, agendas. In reality, however, the audience’s perception is shaped not by what is said, but by how it is delivered. Technical production is not a supporting layer. It is the environment in which the content exists.

In today’s context, this becomes critical. Attention spans are shorter, distractions are constant, and without a properly designed delivery system, even strong speakers fail to hold the room. This is why technical production is no longer about “equipment rental.” It is about controlling attention.



Sound is the first filter in this system. At a conference, it should not be “powerful” - it should be intelligible. Clarity of speech matters far more than volume. If a message is not understood instantly, the audience disconnects. Uneven coverage, lack of monitoring for speakers, or incorrect microphone choices rarely look like production failures, yet they directly reduce engagement. People do not complain - they simply stop listening.

In Dubai, this challenge becomes more complex due to multilingual audiences. Translation is not an add-on; it is a parallel layer of communication. If simultaneous interpretation is delayed, if the audio quality in headsets is inferior, or if interpreter booths are placed without proper acoustic consideration, a significant portion of the audience is effectively excluded. The paradox is that organizers often invest in high-level international speakers while

underestimating translation quality - and as a result, much of the message is lost.

In a region where English, Arabic, and often Russian coexist in the same room, interpretation becomes an integral part of the content architecture, not a service.

Lighting presents a similar issue, though it is less obvious. It is still widely treated as decoration, while in conferences it functions as a tool of focus. If the speaker’s face is not clearly visible, if color temperatures are inconsistent, or if the stage is not properly separated from the audience area, attention begins to dissipate. In Dubai, this is often complicated by venues with large amounts of natural light. Panoramic spaces look impressive, but they reduce control over lighting conditions, especially for video. As a result, the visual image becomes unstable - and this directly affects perception.



The stage defines the physical logic of the event. It determines how a speaker moves, where the audience looks, and how comfortable it is to engage with the content. In the local market, this is often limited by venue versatility. The same space may host a conference today, a wedding tomorrow, and an exhibition the next day. The stage becomes a compromise rather than a designed interface, which impacts the dynamics of presentations.

Screens are another area where assumptions often replace strategy. A large screen does not automatically mean an effective one. If content is not adapted, if contrast and scale are not considered, if there is no coordination between the speaker and the operator, the screen begins to compete with the speaker instead of supporting them. In Dubai, there is also a tendency to prioritize visuals that look impressive in photos rather than readable in the room. The result may perform well on social media but fail for the live audience.

A separate layer is multi-camera production and live broadcasting. Today, a conference exists simultaneously in two dimensions: physical and digital. The key mistake is treating video as documentation rather than direction. A single camera records the event, but it does not create engagement. Camera switching, close-ups, audience reactions - these elements define how the event is experienced online and how it lives on in recorded form.

In Dubai, broadcasting introduces additional challenges. Not all venues provide stable internet infrastructure, dedicated

lines are not always available, and there may be technical or administrative limitations on connectivity. As a result, streaming becomes a high-risk component. Any failure - lag, interruption, or drop in quality - directly impacts the credibility of the event, particularly for international audiences.

At the same time, live camera feeds are often displayed on in-room screens. This creates an important dynamic: if the screen image is more engaging than the stage itself, the audience shifts its attention away from the speaker. This is not a technical issue - it is a directing decision.

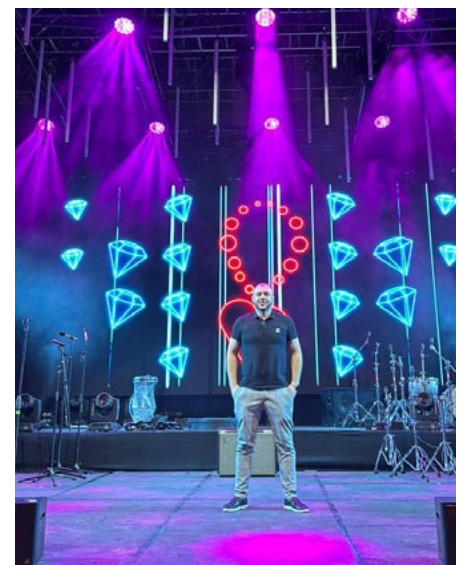
Teleprompters are another understated but critical tool. In a market where executives, government representatives, and international speakers frequently present, precision matters. A teleprompter ensures structure, timing, and consistency. However, improper use immediately exposes a lack of confidence. Like any professional tool, it requires experience, not just installation.

When all these elements are considered together, the core issue becomes clear. The problem is not in individual components, but in the absence of a unified system. In many projects, sound, lighting, video, interpretation, and broadcasting are handled by separate contractors. Each delivers their part, but no one is responsible for the overall perception.

In Dubai, this is amplified by the pace of the market. Projects are assembled quickly, teams are often international, and standards vary. Add venue restrictions, permit requirements, and limited setup time, and technical production frequently operates under compromise.

Yet this is precisely where the opportunity lies. A modern conference is not a collection of services - it is a synchronized system in which every element reinforces the others. When this system is properly designed, even average content performs better. When it is not, even strong speaker lineups fail to deliver impact.

Ultimately, content creates meaning. Technical production determines whether that meaning reaches the audience at all.



Hybrid sales architecture:

How OASIS STUDIO redefined high-stakes real estate transactions in Dubai



by Eugene Solovev

In an industry where the Dubai market is saturated with “luxury” and “exclusivity,” traditional communication methods have hit a ceiling.

In a city where every skyline-altering project claims to be the world’s finest, the battle is no longer over square footage - it is over the immediate attention of top-tier brokers and global investors.

The Middle East context: Trust at a distance

For the GCC market, and Dubai in particular, the “Trust Gap” is the biggest obstacle to a sale. International investors from Europe, Asia, and the Americas often make million-dollar decisions remotely. A simple video or a static PDF brochure is no longer enough to move the needle.

To lead in this environment, we must move beyond the “livestream” and embrace **Hybrid Sales Architecture**. This approach combines the emotional urgency of a live event with the data-driven precision of a digital sales funnel, specifically designed for the high-velocity Dubai real estate ecosystem.



The Challenge: Breaking the passive barrier

When OASIS STUDIO took on the challenge of producing a flagship event for MIRA Real Estate, I approached it as a strategic reconstruction of the sales journey. The primary failure of most corporate broadcasts is the passivity of the viewer. In high-stakes real estate, people are conditioned to consume video as background noise. To break this, I engineered a “Live Presence” architecture.

Phase 1: The interactive hub & real-time connection

Rather than simply broadcasting speakers against a backdrop of renders, we designed a system of instant immersion. We integrated a “Hotline” via Zoom and dedicated chat platforms directly into the broadcast grid. Live Dialogue: I insisted that viewers should have the ability to literally “enter” the studio via voice and video. This transformed a static presentation into a high-stakes, live auction

atmosphere where a broker in London could challenge a developer in Dubai in real-time. Instant Conversion: We embedded “Instant Deal” functionality. While the speaker detailed the architectural nuances of a new tower, a broker halfway across the world could click a single button to initiate a reservation, eliminating the friction that typically kills a purchase impulse.



Phase 2: Depth of trust via the podcast format

I knew that high-energy presentations create emotion, but seasoned investors require rational foundations. To bridge this gap, I implemented an **expert podcast segment** within the same event.

We brought the top management of **MIRA Real Estate** into a curated “fireside chat” environment. We deconstructed complex investment cases, legal hurdles, and real-world ROI data. This allowed us to retain the audience after the initial hype, converting “cold” viewers into loyal, informed partners through authentic expertise.



Why it works: The OASIS STUDIO philosophy

For the international brokerage community, time is the most valuable currency. Hybrid Sales Architecture respects that time by providing everything - emotion, information, and the ability to close - in one seamless window.

As a producer, I believe that a successful digital event in the UAE stands on three pillars: **Speed, Transparency, and En-**

gagement. In the MIRA Real Estate case, we didn't just “show a video” - we built a high-trust environment where:

The Broker feels valued: Their questions are answered by industry leaders in real-time.

The Buyer feels secure: The transparency of a live, unedited broadcast builds a level of trust that no pre-recorded video can match.



Engage Your Audience:

How to hold audience attention in the era of clip thinking



by Alexander
Popov

Interactivity at events is no longer a “cool feature” - today, it is the baseline standard for conferences, forums, webinars, and corporate events. The reason is simple: audience attention has become the scarcest resource.

In the past, participants could listen to reports for hours. Today, concentration begins to dip after 10 minutes. You aren't just competing with other speakers; you are competing with messengers, social media, video platforms, and the personal affairs of every participant. In these conditions, the winning events are not those with “good speakers,” but those where the audience becomes a co-participant in the action.

In this article, we'll break down why interactivity is now mandatory and how to use it to amplify the impact of any event.



Today's reality is this: short-form content and "clip thinking" reduce the modern person's concentration span.

Why is attention no longer self-sustaining?

Research shows that the digital environment fosters a habit of rapid attention switching. Today's reality is this: short-form content and “clip thinking” reduce the modern person's concentration span. The engagement problem is confirmed not only by research but by practical experience.

What organizers are saying:

“Twenty minutes after the start, I see people disappearing into their phones. In those moments, it feels like you're speaking into a void.”

“We invest heavily in conferences, but a week after the event - silence. Nothing remains.”

“We have attendance figures, but no understanding of what actually hooked the audience.”

The general conclusion is the same: attention does not remain stable on its own - it must be managed.

Interactivity as the new normal

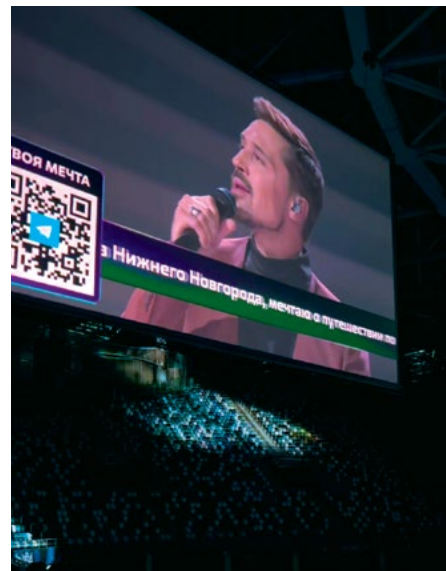
This leads to a logical question: **how do you hold attention and make events truly memorable?**

The answer: **managing attention through interactivity.**

A clear and effective tool for this is **iactive.pro** - a platform offering interactivity for LED screens and broadcasts at events of any format: offline, online, and hybrid.

Key advantages of iactive.pro:

- **Ready-made Scenarios:** A large number of pre-set interaction templates for various tasks and formats. Custom scenarios can also be developed for specific requests.
- **Brand Promotion:** Full customization allows you to adapt the look and mechanics to your brand and event theme (branded graphics, colors, animation). This builds emotional attachment through positive impressions.
- **Easy Start & High Activity:** Interaction happens via messengers that people already use. Participants don't need to install third-party apps or go through complex registration. By scanning a QR code with their messenger, they get the direct access to interaction.
- **Analytics:** The data of participant's engagement is collected. Chat history with all participants is saved.



Entertainment interactives at business events - a new trend

Another trend at business events is the integration of entertainment interactives:

- **“One Question - One Winner”**
Quiz: Based on the conference theme with prize giveaways.
- **Prize Draws:** For the most active participants.
- **Selfie Show:** Displaying photos on LED screens in real-time.

At the MICE Africa events and the Positive Hack Days cyber festival, the Selfie Show integrated very effectively into the business program break, creating a wave of positive emotions.

Voting and Polls are a classic and indispensable tool at any event. Don't put them off, especially if it only takes a participant a few seconds to cast their vote. At first glance, voting is a familiar tool, but with custom graphics, it can turn into part of the show, enhancing the visual impression and audience engagement.



Marketing collaborations and branding

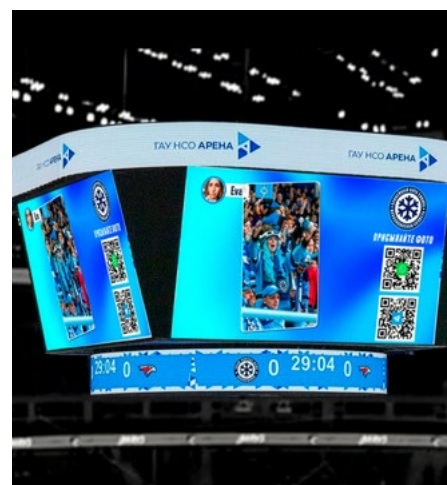
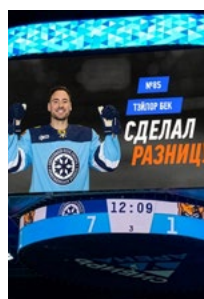
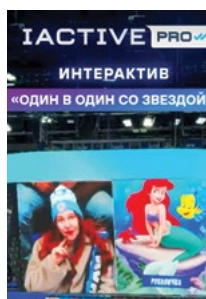
Interactives open up wide opportunities for marketing collaborations:
For example, at sporting events:

- **Noise Meter:** The noise level of fans is displayed on the LED screen in real-time.
- **Selfie Show:** Best photos in club merchandise, increasing interest in the fan shop.
- **No-Money Bets:** Predictions on the first player to score a goal.
- **Look-a-like:** Searching for a fan in the stands who resembles a famous character.

Branding for a Sponsor: Adapting the interactive for an event sponsor: corporate colors, logos in animation, prizes from part-

ners in draws. This strengthens the brand presence and makes it part of the participants' live experience.

The result - live emotions, increased engagement, and additional value for partners and sponsors.



Conclusion

Today, you can't rely solely on the power of content. Interactive elements are becoming an essential part of the script:

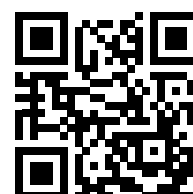
- Simple mechanics bring the meeting to life in the here and now;
- Game formats turn the event into an experience that people want to talk about;
- Analytics and data help improve future events.

When and how to implement interactivity?

Interactivity is only effective when it is integrated into the script, rather than added as an afterthought.

iaactive.pro's experience shows that engagement points every 10-20 minutes work best - a change of format, a question, a game, a visual reaction from the audience.

Want to see how interactive elements work in real life and choose a scenario for your event? We will show you how it works in practice.



IACTIVE PRO

A Wedding to Remember: Dancing, Games, Interactivity!

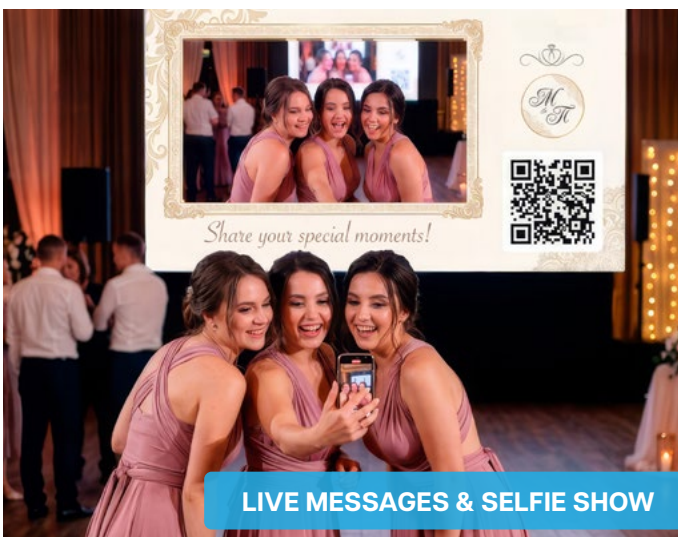
iactive.pro brings your celebration to life with real-time, LED-screen-based entertainment that gets every guest participate, laughing, competing, and connecting.

**LOOK-ALIKE CAMERA**

We select guests who look like celebrities and place them side by side on the big screen. Instant laughter and a moment of glory are guaranteed to the guests!

**QUIZ FROM NEWLYWEDS**

Guests scan a QR code and answer funny questions on LED screens via Whatsapp or Telegram. A great way to tell the love story of newlyweds, learn the history of their families, and show pleasant moments!

**LIVE MESSAGES & SELFIE SHOW**

Guests send photos, videos, and wishes directly from their phones. The best of them are displayed on LED screens, and the best of the best receive a prize from the newlyweds!

**NOISE METER VOTING**

Divide the room into teams and let the crowd's volume decide the winner! High-energy visualization that guarantees a roaring room.

**A live archive of your wedding celebration
is created with iactive.pro**

Don't just host an event. Make it interactive with iactive.pro

uae@iactive.pro / +97 152 983 3054

Beyond the Wow Effect:

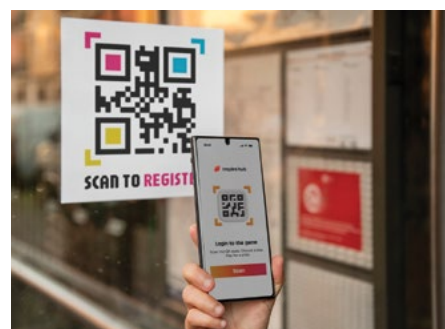
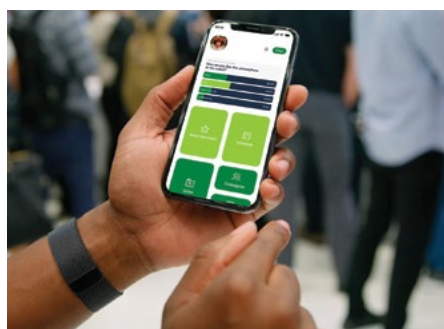
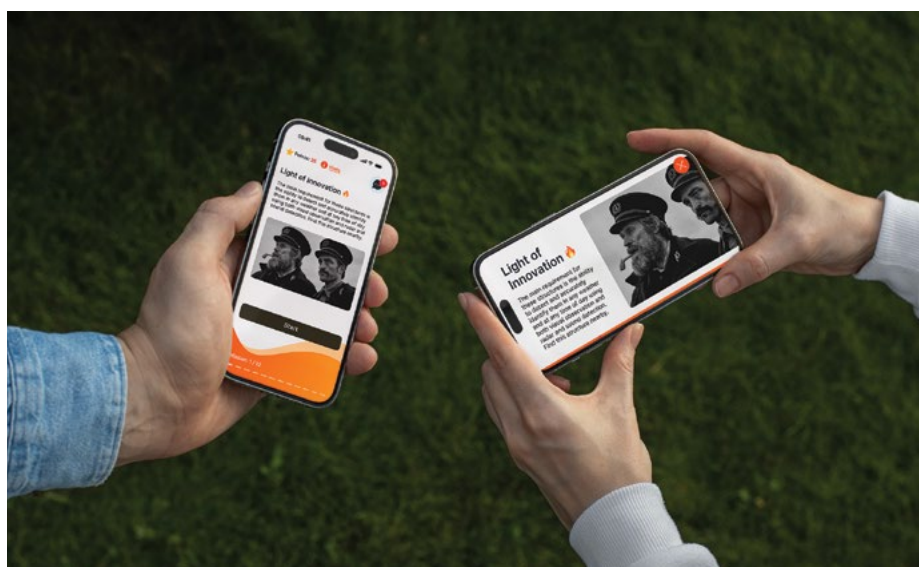
How event technology starts solving real business problems



by Oleg
Kryuchkov

For years, the event industry measured success through impressions. Creativity, atmosphere, and emotional intensity defined value. Agencies competed in originality, brands invested in memorable experiences, and technology often served as an amplifier rather than a foundation.

But expectations have changed. Budgets are more scrutinized, leadership teams ask tougher questions, and “people liked it” is no longer a sufficient outcome. Engagement does not automatically lead to change, and even the most visually impressive experience may leave little trace once participants return to everyday work.



What is the role of digital here

Digital technology does not replace human interaction; it makes participation visible. It turns actions into signals that can be understood beyond the moment of the event and connected to broader business goals.

In manageable event formats, digital layers help to:

- distinguish individual contributions instead of treating audiences as a mass,
- create continuity between decisions and outcomes,
- connect engagement with learning,

- leadership, or commercial processes,
- reduce uncertainty by revealing what actually worked.

This shift is especially visible in large-scale exhibitions, forums, and complex multi-day programs. Participation is no longer just a feature added for engagement - it becomes an operational layer that helps organizers understand how people move, decide, and interact across multiple touchpoints. Technology here does not replace human connection; it provides the structure that keeps large experiences coherent and purposeful.



In a world where attention is fragmented, participation becomes the only solid currency.

What wins in this new reality

The strongest positions belong to those who understand events as part of a broader business infrastructure.

1. Those who work where people pay for results.

Not just for beauty or atmosphere, but for outcomes that can be explained, measured, and repeated.

2. Those embedded in operational budgets.

HR, sales, marketing, and development increasingly treat events as tools rather than celebrations.

3. Those who are reliable and scalable.

Manageable events grow into long-term systems, rewarding partners who deliver

stability rather than one-time brilliance.

Beyond the wow effect lies a more mature role for events - not as isolated moments of inspiration, but as environments that move from spectacle to infrastructure, and from impressions to decisions. As expectations continue to evolve, the industry is not losing creativity; it is learning how to align it with purpose, continuity, and real business impact.

What has changed

The shift is not about abandoning creativity. It is about redefining purpose. Organizations increasingly expect events to function as environments where real decisions happen rather than temporary emotional peaks. Experiences are no longer judged only by emotional response but by their ability to support learning, collaboration, and measurable progress.

Today:

- “Liked it” doesn’t equal “worked.”
- Engagement doesn’t guarantee behavioral change.
- Memorable moments without consequence quickly fade.

In a world where attention is fragmented, participation becomes the only solid currency. Real value appears when participants influence the flow of the experience itself instead of simply consuming content.



Beyond the wow effect lies a more mature role for events.

When Infrastructure can't keep up with Growth:

How Gold's Yacht stopped losing clients

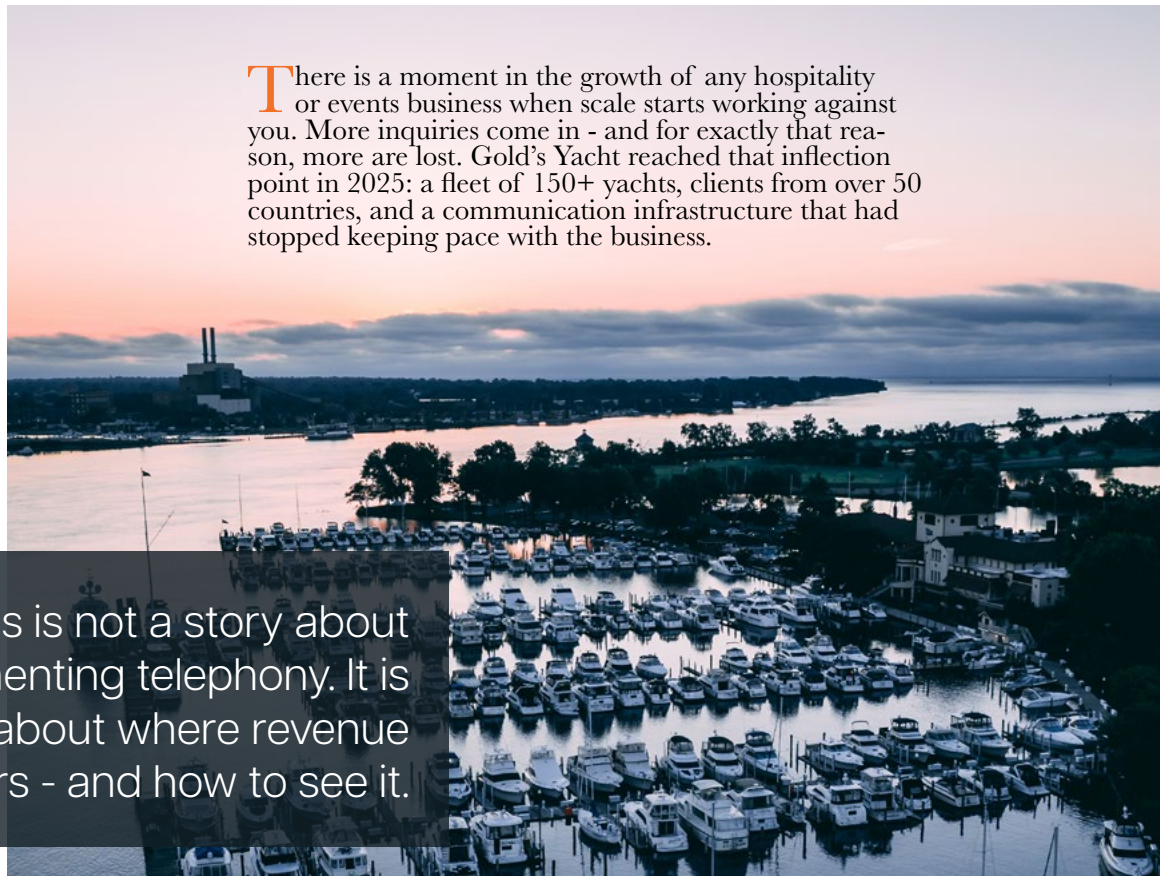


by Sergey
Rybnikov



There is a moment in the growth of any hospitality or events business when scale starts working against you. More inquiries come in - and for exactly that reason, more are lost. Gold's Yacht reached that inflection point in 2025: a fleet of 150+ yachts, clients from over 50 countries, and a communication infrastructure that had stopped keeping pace with the business.

This is not a story about implementing telephony. It is a story about where revenue disappears - and how to see it.



The Problem That's Hard to See from the Inside



When you have five sales managers and a moderate flow of enquiries, the chaos remains manageable. WhatsApp, Instagram, email, incoming calls - each channel runs independently, managers switch between apps, some things get logged, others don't. The system runs on people, not on process.

As the company scaled, the picture shifted. 25% of incoming calls went unanswered. 15% of messenger enquiries were lost in conversation threads. Average first response time had climbed to 20 - 40 minutes. In the premium segment, that window means one thing: the client has already booked elsewhere.

The issue wasn't team motivation or headcount. It was structural: the business had grown, and the communication infrastructure hadn't.



The Operational detail nobody talks about

Premium yacht charter has a specific operational constraint that rarely appears in marketing materials: VIP clients do not want their personal phone numbers shared with captains. Captains, in turn, must see a service number - never a guest's private contact.

At the time of the project, no standard telephony solution in the region addressed this requirement cleanly. Companies faced a choice with no good answer: compromise client privacy, or break the communication link between guest and crew. This constraint became the defining technical requirement - number masking not as a feature, but as a baseline operational necessity for working in this segment.

The Tool and the Logic behind choosing it

Gold's Yacht selected CallGear, a telephony platform operating in the UAE market. The choice was driven not by a feature checklist, but by a specific operational scenario: an omnichannel sales environment, a VIP privacy requirement, and the need for source-level marketing analytics. Implementation was phased, without interrupting existing workflows.

First: call routing. Calls are now distributed automatically based on predefined rules. If a captain is unavailable, the call routes back to a sales manager. Missed calls are instantly forwarded to a shared Telegram channel for immediate follow-up. Number masking protects guest privacy throughout. Missed calls dropped from 25% to 8%.

Second: channel consolidation.

WhatsApp, Instagram Direct, and email were brought into a single interface. Managers stopped switching between apps. Management gained full visibility - the history of every client interaction, response speed across all channels, handling quality. Lost enquiries dropped from 15% to 3%.

Third: source analytics. Dedicated numbers assigned to each traffic channel - Instagram, Google, TripAdvisor, organic - made it possible to see which channels actually generate bookings, not just enquiries. Budget reallocates toward where revenue is created. That is an operational decision, not a marketing one.

What AI call analysis revealed

The platform's built-in call analysis module identified specific loss points: where managers deviated from agreed scripts, where closing opportunities were missed, and how team performance shifted during peak season. Based on these findings, the company revised its sales scripts and improved inbound handling consistency. Without this data, any change would have been based on intuition. With it, decisions became grounded.

Six-Month results

Metric	Before	After	Change
Lost inquiries	15%	3%	-80%
Missed calls	25%	8%	-68%
First response time	20-40 min	5-7 min	-75%
Booking conversion	14%	19%	+36%

85% of previously missed calls now re-enter the sales flow. In a premium segment, each lost enquiry isn't a data point - it's a booking that went to a competitor.

The practical Takeaway

Most event and hospitality businesses start thinking about communication infrastructure too late - after losses have become routine. The right moment for a system audit is not crisis, but growth: when inbound volume begins to exceed the capacity of manual management.

The question worth asking:

Do you know how many enquiries you're losing right now?



by Guido Sperzaga
Founder of DAPme and
TheOnlooker

Founder of DAPme and TheOnlooker, an experiential events agency based in Dubai specializing in corporate and government projects.

With over 20 years in the GCC events industry, he has operated at the intersection of events and business development, where he repeatedly encountered inefficiencies in how professionals connect.

This led him to focus on approaches that prioritize relevance, timing, and proximity in business interactions.

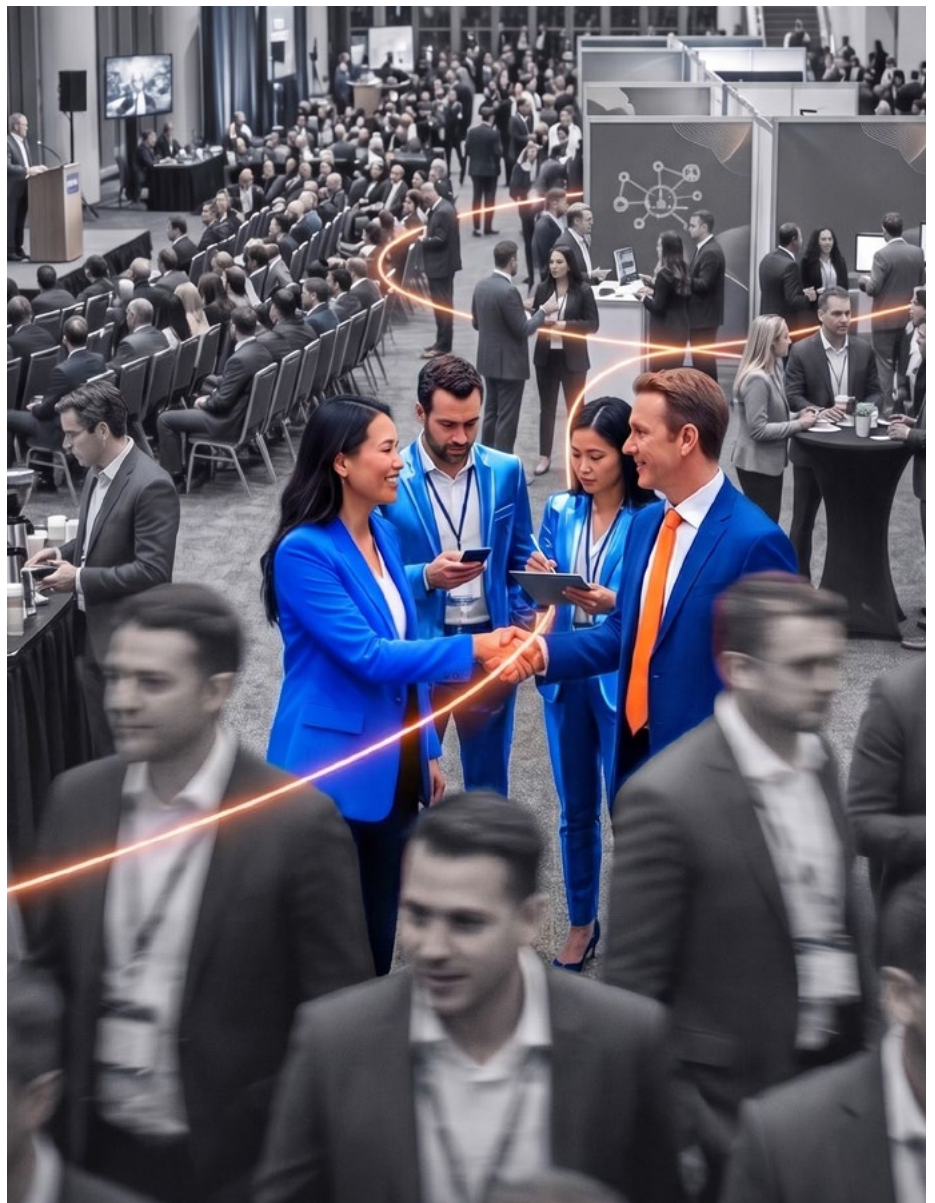
“A new approach is beginning to emerge - one that moves from **accidental networking** to **intentional connection**.”



The End of Accidental Networking

How Proximity Intelligence is Reshaping Lead Generation at Events

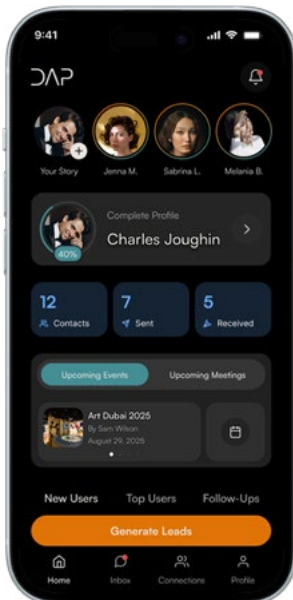
For decades, networking at events has relied on one dominant model: **Chance**. You walk into a room, meet whoever happens to be nearby, start a conversation, and only then discover whether there is any business relevance. It's a system built on proximity, but without precision.



Context / Problem

In smaller events, this was manageable. In today's environments, where conferences and exhibitions bring together hundreds or thousands of professionals, it becomes increasingly inefficient. The issue is not attendance. Opportunity is abundant. The problem is **accessing the right people within that density**.

In reality, the most valuable connection is often physically close, just not visible. It might be in another room, across the venue, or a few meters away. Yet without a way to identify that person, the interaction never happens. Instead, time is spent navigating conversations that lead nowhere, exchanging contacts out of courtesy, and following up without clear intent. As the cost of participating in events continues to rise, this model is becoming harder to justify. A new approach is beginning to emerge - one that moves from **accidental networking to intentional connection**.



The Shift: From Chance to Precision

This evolution is not about increasing the number of interactions, but about **improving their quality before they happen**. It reflects a broader change in how professionals approach networking, less as a social exercise, and more as a structured, outcome-driven process. Three principles are defining this shift:

- **Identity over job titles:** Professionals are no longer defined simply by their role. Clear positioning, across industries, specializations, and capabilities, creates a more accurate representation of who they are and what they offer.
- **Relevance over random introductions:** The goal is no longer to meet more

people, but to meet the right people. Compatibility is increasingly established before the first interaction, rather than discovered during it.

- **Proximity over passive networking:** Physical presence becomes a strategic advantage. Instead of relying on chance encounters, professionals can identify relevant counterparts within their immediate environment and act on that proximity.

Platforms like DAP are emerging within this context, not as standalone tools, but as part of a broader shift toward proximity intelligence: the ability to understand who is around you, why they matter, and when to connect.

Real Use Case

At a mid-size industry conference, a business development manager arrived with a clear objective: identify potential clients within a specific sector. Traditionally, this would involve moving through the venue, initiating conversations, and gradually filtering relevance. It's a familiar process, and a time-consuming one.

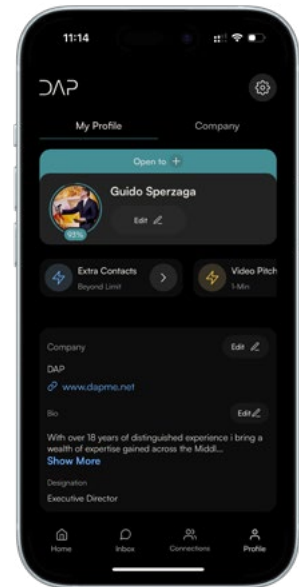
By applying proximity-based filtering through DAP, the user defined the type of profiles they were looking for - industry and decision-making level - and scanned the immediate environment. Within minutes, they identified a shortlist of relevant professionals already present at the event. The shift was immediate. Conversations were no longer exploratory; they were intentional. Time was spent engaging with people who already aligned with the objective, rather than discovering misalignment midway through an introduction. What changed was not the number of interactions, but their precision.

Results & Industry Implications

The most immediate impact of this approach is a change in how time is used. Instead of moving from one uncertain interaction to another, professionals focus on conversations that have a clear basis for relevance. This reduces friction and accelerates engagement. When both sides understand each other's role and value before speaking, discussions move faster into meaningful territory. The traditional introductory phase becomes shorter, and the interaction becomes more purposeful. The outcome is not more leads, but **better ones** - fewer in number, but stronger in potential.

This shift has broader implications for the events industry. For organizers, it introduces a new dimension of value. If attendees can generate targeted, high-quality connections, the event becomes more than a gathering; it becomes a **business environment with**

measurable outcomes. This can drive stronger attendance, deeper engagement, and a more results-oriented audience. In this sense, it creates a clear **win-win dynamic**: participants gain efficiency and relevance, while organizers increase the perceived and actual value of their events. For participants, the change is equally significant. Instead of relying on chance, they can build structured pipelines of opportunity simply by being present and intentional in the right environment.



A New Standard for Event Networking

Most events today are still optimized for attendance. The next generation of events may be optimized for **connection quality**. This represents a fundamental shift in how value is defined - not by how many people are present, but by how effectively those people can connect, engage, and generate outcomes.

In this context, proximity is no longer just a physical condition - it becomes an **intelligent layer** that, when combined with clear identity and defined intent, unlocks opportunities that were previously invisible. The implication is simple but significant: **event success is no longer about meeting more people, it's about meeting the right ones, at the right time, with the right context**.

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Beyond Phygital

How TechnologistDXB Designs Control into Live Experiences

EventMag.Me talks to **Sujoy Cherian (@TechnologistDXB)** – Creative Technologist, CEO of Option 1 Group, three-time Guinness World Record holder

Q: What tends to fail most often in live event technology environments?

A: It's rarely the technology itself. The real issue is a lack of clarity around ownership and decision-making. Systems don't fail in isolation - people do. Most breakdowns happen at the intersection of departments: content vs. AV, lighting vs. media servers, or creative vs. operations.

Another common issue is over-complexity. Teams try to push too many systems without simplifying the workflow. When something goes wrong, no one knows where the problem originated.

The biggest lesson I've taken from this: if a system needs explanation during a live show, it's already too complicated.

Q: What kind of technical architecture do you typically implement for complex live experiences?

A: I approach every project like a control system, not just an event. That means clear signal flow, defined hierarchies, and separation of critical and non-critical layers.

At a high level, I work with:

- One central control logic - not multiple competing ones
- Independent systems that can operate even if one fails
- Clean data flow between content, lighting, audio, and interactivity
- Minimal reliance on "last-minute integration"
- And of course my secret coded Cue Sheet

I prefer modular builds over monolithic systems. It gives flexibility, but more importantly, it gives you control when things go off-script - which they always do, especially in the Middle East and Asia.

Q: Where does AI genuinely deliver measurable value in events - and where is it still mostly hype?

In live events, the difference between a flawless show and a visible disaster is rarely the technology. It is the architecture around it - the decisions made before the first cue fires, the fallbacks engineered before the first rehearsal, the operators briefed to act before the first thing goes wrong. Sujoy Cherian has spent years building that architecture at scale. We asked him to open the hood.



A: AI is powerful when it removes friction, not when it tries to replace creativity.

Where it works:

- Audience data analysis and behavior prediction
- Real-time content adaptation based on inputs or engagement
- Operational efficiency - scheduling, logistics, and reporting

Where it's still hype:

- Fully "AI-driven experiences" without human direction
- Generic content generation that lacks context or emotional depth
- Over-automation in live environments where human judgment is critical

In live events, timing and instinct still matter. AI can assist, but it shouldn't lead - for now.

Q: How do you design redundancy into live systems to ensure reliability under real-world pressure?

A: Redundancy is not about duplication - it's about intelligent backup.

Every critical system should have:

- A fallback that is simpler, not equal
- A manual override option - this is never optional, never skipped
- A human who understands both the primary and backup systems

I also believe in designing "graceful failure." If something drops, the audience shouldn't feel a crash - they should experience a transition.

The goal is not zero failure. The goal is zero visible failure.

Q: What does "control" actually mean in measurable terms? Which metrics define it for you?

A: Control is not about restricting - it's about predictability under pressure.

For me, control is measurable through:

- Latency: how quickly systems respond
- Recovery time: how fast you can correct an issue
- System independence: how many systems can fail without collapsing the experience
- Human override capability: how easily a trained operator can step in

But beyond metrics, control is confidence. When my team knows that no matter what happens, there's a path forward - that's real control.

At the end of the day, live experiences are not about perfect execution. They're about controlled adaptability. Technology should give you that edge, not take it away. Our job is to ensure #wemakeithappen



FROM THE FIELD

The Portal Reveal:

What a Live Recovery Actually Looks Like



Theory is one thing. The following account - shared by Cherian from a large-scale immersive opening show - is what his control architecture looks like when it faces its real test. No client or event is named directly; the focus is the systems philosophy at work.

The Setup

The centrepiece of the show was a fully automated mechatronic LED reveal system: two massive LED walls physically split apart while synchronised content moved in the opposite direction, creating the illusion of a transparent portal opening into another environment.

On paper, the sequence was flawless. The challenge was not the animation itself, but maintaining synchronisation between physical motion, media playback, lighting, artist timing, and audience perception - simultaneously, under live pressure. Even a slight latency shift between the mechanical movement and the content engine could instantly break the illusion.

The Failure

During final execution, an unexpected backstage cable obstruction caused one side of the moving screen to jam - moments before the reveal sequence completed. The risk scenario they had rehearsed for had just become real.

The Recovery

Because the system architecture was built on layered control logic rather than single-point dependency, parallel fallback protocols activated immediately:

- Manual mechanical override teams took control of the moving structure
- Media playback was held in a controlled state to prevent visible sync drift
- Backup show callers initiated alternate lighting distraction cues - designed specifically for visual interruption scenarios
- Atmospheric haze and silhouette lighting redirected audience attention while recovery took place



Within seconds, the obstruction was removed. Synchronisation was restored. The reveal completed without visible disruption.

The client later praised the ‘enhanced dramatic lighting moment’ during the reveal - unaware that it was actually a live recovery protocol in action.

The Lesson

That moment reinforced a philosophy Cherian has applied ever since: the objective in live experiences is not eliminating failure. It is engineering systems that recover so intelligently the audience never realises failure occurred.

It also revealed something about the nature of the cue sheet. Over the years, his have evolved far beyond traditional timelines. They now function as operational recovery maps - layered with fallback logic, alternate visual masking cues, manual overrides, and human decision trees.

In live environments, the cue sheet is not just a sequence document. It becomes part of the control architecture itself.



Sujoy Cherian (@TechnologistDXB) is a globally awarded Creative Technologist and CEO of Option 1 Group, credited with three Guinness World Records. Recognized among the world's top event tech leaders, he shapes immersive experiences and AI-powered storytelling across six countries.



by **Artem Kulikov**
Founder and executive chef
of CHUF Catering Dubai

Artem Kulikov is the founder and executive chef of CHUF Catering Dubai – a premium catering company specializing in refined culinary experiences for private, corporate, and VIP events across the UAE.

An esteemed member of the Guild of Chefs of Russia, Artem has dedicated more than 20 years to the culinary industry, including 17 years leading the kitchens of top restaurants in Russia and internationally. His professional background includes organizing high-level diplomatic receptions in Israel and serving as the personal chef to the Ambassador of Israel in Russia.

Catering is only noticed when it fails. That invisibility is the standard you should be designing toward.



How to Feed 1,000 Guests at a Conference:

The operational logic behind event catering - and why most problems have nothing to do with the food itself.

At large-scale conferences, food is almost always an afterthought in the planning phase - and the first thing audiences notice when something goes wrong. Queues that run past the break window. A hot dish that arrives cold. Dietary options buried at the end of the line. Each of these is a signal, and guests read all of them the same way: weak organization. The fundamental error is treating catering as a hospitality function. At a conference of any scale, it is a production element - the same category as stage, sound, and lighting. It either runs precisely or it degrades the entire event experience.



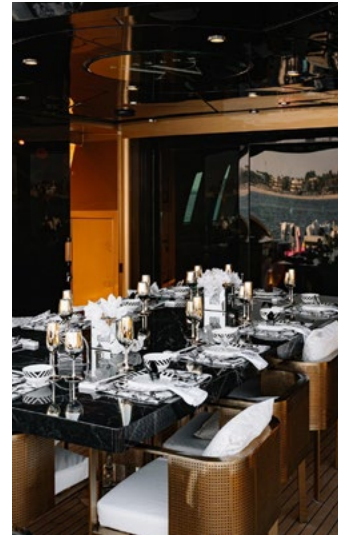
The agenda drives the menu - not the other way around

Every catering decision should start from one question: what happens to the program the moment people start eating? This sounds obvious. It rarely gets answered before the event.

A delayed coffee break pushes speaker slots. A poorly timed lunch returns the audience to the room in waves, with different energy levels. Morning coffee that just “exists” misses the networking window it could have opened. Each of these outcomes is predictable - and preventable - if the catering timeline is built against the program, not alongside it.

The practical rule: design each food moment with a specific behavioral goal. Morning coffee launches networking. The mid-program break restores attention and gives participants space to discuss what they just heard. Lunch either consolidates the group or deliberately separates streams - depending on what the event needs at that point.

Menu weight matters here too. Post-lunch sessions are where audiences go quiet. A heavy meal in the middle of the day is a programming decision, not just a culinary one.



Throughput: the number that determines whether your break runs on time

The most common planning error is treating catering as a linear equation: number of guests $\times$ menu = done. In practice, everything depends on throughput - how many people can move through the system per minute, per station, per break window.

If one buffet line handles 80–100 people in a 20-minute break, a 1,000-person event with two lines is already in trouble before a single guest arrives. The calculation has to happen before the setup - not during it.

Throughput by serving format

Format	Guests / station	Time per person	Risk
Buffet	80–100	45–60 sec	Queue buildup
Plated service	40–60	Controlled	Space & sync
Food stations	50–70	30–45 sec	Space layout
Grab & go	120+	15–20 sec	Zero engagement

These are baseline figures. Actual throughput depends on menu complexity, station layout, staff positioning, and whether guests are moving or stationary. The table gives you the order of magnitude - the site visit gives you the real numbers.

Format is a behavioral choice, not an aesthetic one

Each serving format creates a different pattern of movement, interaction, and timing. The choice is not about what looks good - it is about what the event needs people to do during that break.

A buffet creates a sense of freedom and naturally encourages circulation, but it requires careful line calculation and enough surface

area to prevent bottlenecks. Plated service gives the organizer maximum control over timing but demands tight synchronization with the program and significantly more floor space per cover. Food stations work well at high-energy events - product launches, evening receptions - but only if they are distributed correctly across the venue. Grab & go is the fastest format for throughput, but

it eliminates almost all social interaction and signals to guests that the break is a logistics exercise, not a moment.

There is no universally correct format. There is only the format that matches what this specific event needs at this specific moment in the program.



Dietary and cultural requirements: where the real risk sits

In the GCC market, halal compliance is not a preference - it is a baseline requirement that is not negotiable and not worth elaborating on. Every professional operator in the region knows this.

What receives less attention is the growing volume of vegetarian, vegan, and gluten-free requests - and, more critically, allergy management. A mislabeled dish or an absent information system is not a guest experience

problem. It is a safety problem. Professional catering operators design clear menu navigation as a standard element, not an optional add-on.

The practical approach: collect all dietary requirements from the client before the menu is finalized. This allows you to build a balanced menu from the start rather than retrofitting alternatives that guests will find inadequate or hidden.

Logistics: most problems happen between the kitchen and the guest

A well-designed menu and a correct throughput calculation can both fail at the logistics layer. Serving temperature, delivery timing, holding conditions, synchronization with the program - these elements are invisible when they work and immediately obvious when they don't.

A hot dish served cold does not prompt a guest to think about kitchen constraints

or delivery complexity. It prompts a single conclusion: the event was not well organized. This is where the site visit matters. Walking the venue before the event - mapping the path from kitchen to service point, identifying holding positions, checking power access for heated equipment - is how experienced operators prevent problems that look random but are entirely predictable.

The economics: where cost-per-head misleads you

Cost-per-head is the metric clients focus on because it is easy to compare. It is also the least useful number for understanding where catering budgets actually go or where they get wasted.

Real budget losses appear in misallocated resources: overstaffing one area while another is understaffed, menu items that generate waste because they were never right for the audience, and insufficient reserves for peak

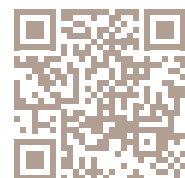
demand periods. These are not budget problems - they are planning problems. They look like cost issues after the event but could have been prevented before it.

The items where cost reduction is not a legitimate option: service speed, food safety, and baseline product quality. These are not optimization zones. Cutting them does not reduce cost - it converts the saving into a reputational loss that is substantially more expensive.

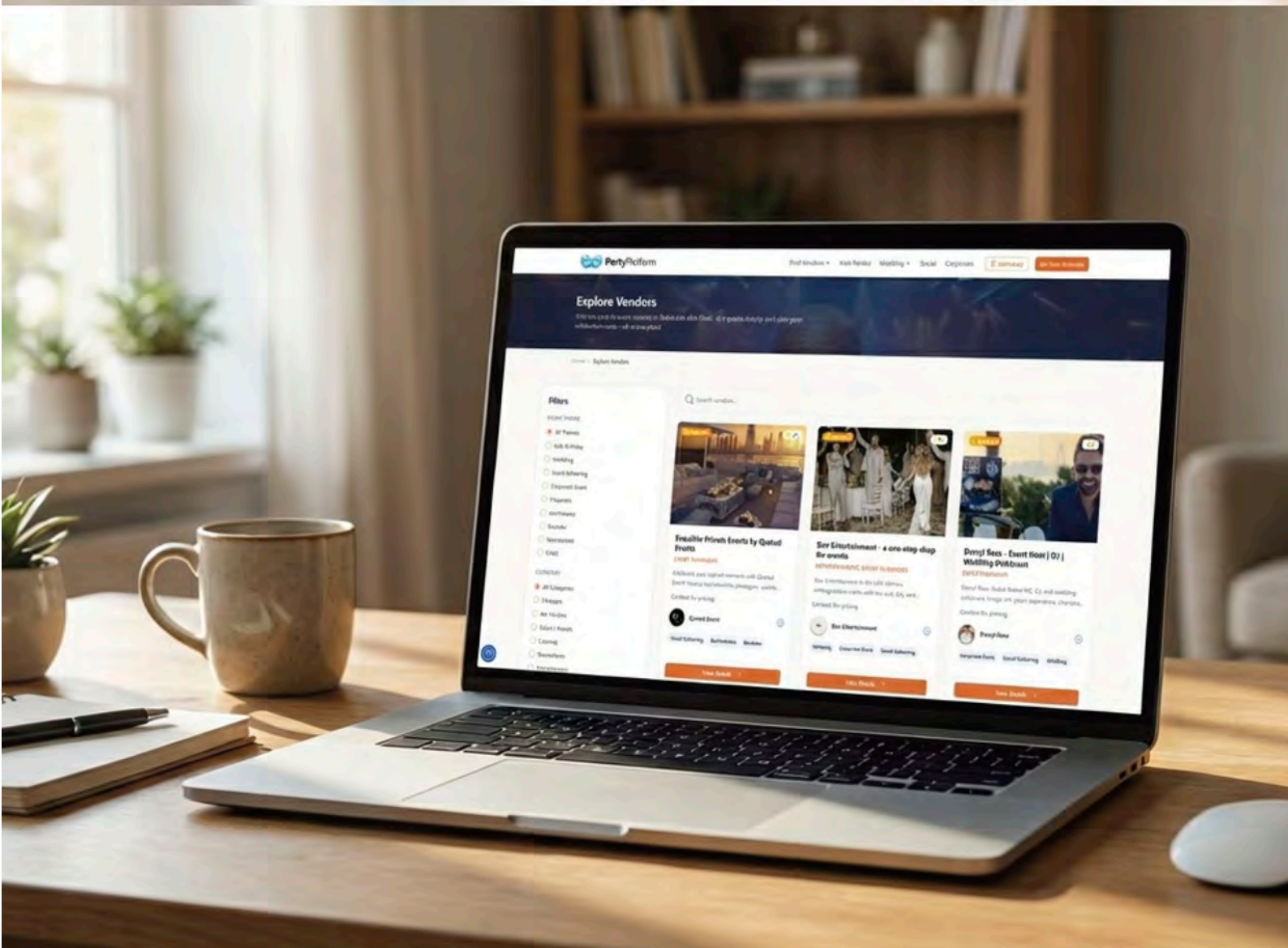
At its core, conference catering is not about food. It is about moving 1,000 people through a system simultaneously without creating chaos - and without any of them noticing that a system exists.

The organizers who get this right do not receive compliments about the catering. They receive compliments about how well the event was run. That is the correct outcome.

The question worth asking in every pre-event review: if the catering failed today, at what point in the program would we first feel it - and what would we lose?



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