



# Mapping the FUTURE of Events With TODAY'S Industry Leaders

Explore the insights and lessons from BizBash's inaugural **Leadership Summit**, where 24 event executives from companies like **ESPN, Forbes, Disney, and T-Mobile** discussed some of the industry's biggest issues today—and what's working and not working to solve them.

## BIZBASH LEADERSHIP SUMMIT



## Introduction

What is the future of events, and how do we get it right? Those were two of the questions posed during BizBash's inaugural Leadership Summit—and two questions that are on the minds of event pros across the industry, as in-person events return from their pandemic-induced hiatus. To pique their expertise, this Leadership Summit program brought together 24 executives from experiential agencies, event technology companies, and corporate brands to help map the future of the events industry.

The participants—from companies like ESPN, The Walt Disney Company, Hubilo, Forbes, and T-Mobile—experienced a number of workshops, led by a facilitator, meant to stimulate conversations surrounding some of the event industry's most prominent issues today. The goal was to mine the room, with its decades of combined years of industry experience, for best new practices for a new events world.

**Here, we break down exactly what was discussed and the highlights from those complex conversations.**

# About the Participants

The Leadership Summit brought together competitors and peers from the events industry. The program became an invaluable resource for gauging the most pressing issues facing events right now—and how we might tackle and solve them.

## PARTICIPANTS:

**Larry Abel**

CEO and Dreamer in Chief,  
Abel McCallister Abel

**Jeff Benish**

Vice President of Event Production,  
BlackRock

**David Breen**

Principal Designer and Founder, VDA

**Ruben Castano**

CEO, 6Connex

**Maureen Elliott**

Director of Event Marketing, ESPN

**Matt Emerson**

CEO, AVFX

**Brian Feit**

Owner, BMF

**Jana Friedman**

Senior Director of Events Marketing,  
PubMatic

**Jitter Garcia**

Head of Events and Senior Director  
of Marketing, Univision

**Gianna Gaudini**

Head of Events, Airtable

**Brianna Haag**

Director of Demand Generation,  
Hopin

**Kay Johnson-Frutiger**

Global Commercial, Operations  
Meeting Planner, Labcorp

**Finn Kelly**

Co-Founder and Chief Product and  
Technology Officer, Weve

**Phil Koutsis**

Chief Creative Officer, FGPG

**Erika Kulovitz**

Executive Producer/President,  
Akire Productions

**Philip Mayling**

Director, VenuIQ

**Mallory Mullane**

Vice President, Rabobank

**Cathy Novelli**

Chief Marketing Officer, Hubilo

**Cliff Rigano**

Creative Director and Head of Culture,  
Content, and Experiential Marketing,  
Mast-Jägermeister US

**Holly Robben**

Event Manager, T-Mobile

**Lilian Shen**

Director of Marketing, CORT Events

**Tracy Smith**

Senior Event Manager, Avalara

**Erika Speed**

Manager of Live Programming,  
Forbes

**Taylor Tennyson**

Event Manager,  
The Walt Disney Company

I have never before had the privilege to be embedded  
in such a group of impactful and visionary leaders  
in the events industry.”

—Maureen Elliott, Director of Event Marketing, ESPN



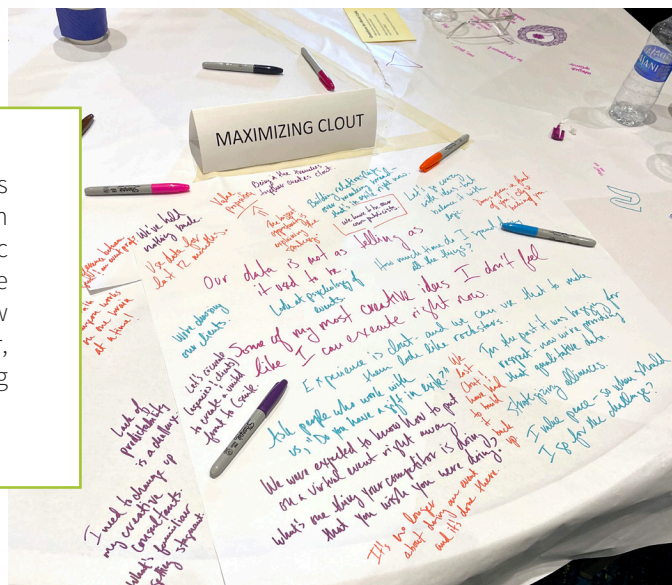
# The Methodology

Prior to the Leadership Summit, attendees spent an evening together for a “Jeffersonian-style” introduction to one another. Two simple questions helped break the ice and foster the bonding process: What was the first job you had and what did you learn from it? Answers included food service jobs, newspaper jobs, and working as a camp counselor (the event pro who gave that final response quipped that “not much has changed”).

**Adrian Segar, founder of Conferences That Work, facilitated two main workshops during the Leadership Summit.**

## 1 WORLD CAFÉ

This is a format for creating dialogue in small groups around questions/topics that have been determined in advance. Four tables were labeled with a different topic to be discussed by five to six participants for 20-minute rounds. The participants then rotated and sat with new groups for other rounds. Tables were covered in paper, so participants could quickly jot down interesting points or thoughts with colored pens.

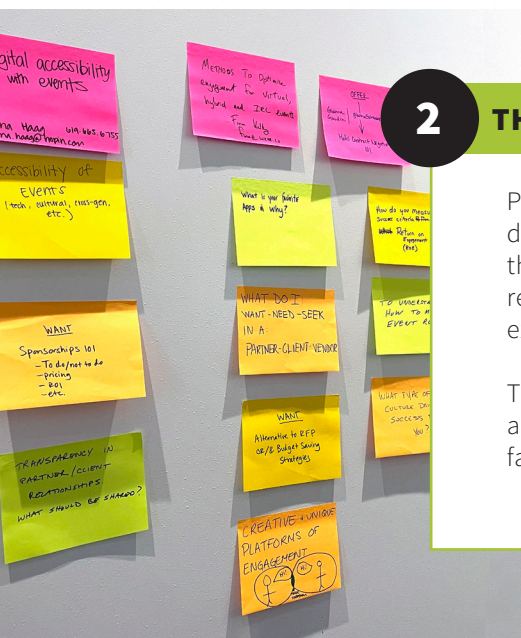


## 2 THE UNCONFERENCE/OPEN SPACES

Participants offered input for what should be discussed and explored the next day. On large sticky notes, they were asked to write the title of a session that they'd like to attend and could also offer to facilitate that session. BizBash representatives and Segar decided on the three sessions and facilitators in an exercise known as Open Spaces.

These Open Spaces consisted of three, simultaneously running sessions designed and facilitated by Leadership Summit participants. Those who were not facilitating were able to leave one session and try another at their leisure.

The following topics reveal concerns and issues that influential event professionals debate regularly. These workshops help create a path forward for a more collaborative process in overcoming obstacles.



## Part I:

# The Partnership Puzzle

How do planners and producers work together with suppliers and vendors now that things have changed so much since 2019? What are some new pain points? Here are some key takeaways:

### **“PARTNER” IS A PREFERRED TERM OVER “VENDOR.”**

Instead of saying “vendor,” event pros should be using “AV partner” or “creative partner.” It opens up a bigger picture for collaboration and conversation. If you’re seeking something transactional, “vendor” might be the correct word. But if you’re looking for a long-term, strategic relationship with someone that’s going to stay with your brand and fully understand and engage, that’s where “partner” is vital.

### **TRANSPARENCY AND HONESTY ARE KEY.**

Supply chain issues and budget shock are very much straining partnerships right now. Partners’ clarity about expectations and full transparency is extremely valuable in event planning today—as is awareness of when things don’t go as planned.

“We had a vendor make a major mistake during an event, but we appreciated that they took ownership of the failure,” said Jeff Benish, vice president of event production at BlackRock. Clarity can be a struggle, which is all the more reason to champion transparency from vendors. “That is the greatest hurdle with any partner,” said Cliff Rigano, creative director and head of culture, content, and experiential marketing at Mast-Jägermeister US.

### **BEING ABLE TO TRUST PARTNERS IS VITAL.**

This allows event pros to go to bat for them when it comes to answering to stakeholders or C-suite executives. And it goes both ways. “Partners are truly an extension of my team—if they trust you, it works out better,” said Jitter Garcia, head of events and senior director of marketing at Univision.

“Partners are truly an extension of my team—  
if they trust you, it works out better.”

—Jitter Garcia, Head of Events and Senior Director of Marketing, Univision

## Part II:

# The Engagement Dilemma

One of the most discussed topics among the industry today, and during the Leadership Summit, is how to keep attendees actively engaged in meetings and events. What are some examples you've implemented? Here are the highlights of what Leadership Summit participants shared:

### INCORPORATE ELEMENTS THAT ARE MOVING, SUSPENSEFUL, OR SURPRISING.

Leadership Summit participants shared recent examples of engagement tactics that have worked:

- Bringing in a **famous actor** at a financial meeting to read the financial reports.
- For a hybrid event, **intentionally inserting mistakes** into the program to keep participants on their toes.
- Implementing **gamification**, like a scavenger hunt with location-based clues, creative challenges, or photo and video challenges.

"There will be more boutique-style engagements and less [business] travel, with all of the different costs and changes happening right now," said Finn Kelly, co-founder and chief product and technology officer at team-building platform Weve. "So it has to be more special when people finally do get together."

### CREATE A JOURNEY WITH YOUR EVENT, RATHER THAN LEAVING NO ROOM FOR SURPRISE.

"I don't like coming to an event where you can immediately see the entire event," said Larry Abel, CEO and "dreamer in chief" at full-service experiential agency Abel McAllister Abel. "It needs to be a journey, because attention spans are too short. There should be elements of surprise and suspense. And each element should tell you something different about that brand or company."

### ENGAGEMENT ROI CAN BE HARD TO MEASURE.

What metrics do you use for measuring ROI on engagement? Unfortunately, there's no "magic bullet," but Leadership Summit participants shared that anecdotal feedback has been helpful in this arena—this can include comments received on surveys or personal messages received by sales teams. A universal theme is that more needs to be done to invite conversations around feedback.

You can't put a quantity on emotion, but event pros need to change the narrative on how they're asking for feedback. If they're using surveys, the surveys should:

- Comprise **less than 10 questions**
- All questions should be **heavy-hitting**
- Ask attendees to complete the survey (or for feedback in general) **right away**, potentially right after the final session

Express to attendees that their input really is needed, and help them understand that this is meant to further improve their future experiences.

## Part III:

# Maximizing Clout

**How are you being legitimized in the eyes of the C-suite? How has the fact that engagement and experience design is becoming so important changed your relationship with executives? Here's what Leadership Summit participants broached on this topic.**

### **EVENT PROS HAVE TO BE THEIR OWN PUBLICISTS.**

Sometimes C-suite executives don't see event teams for what they really are, which are true strategists. Events have a much bigger purpose than just how many people attended or number of sales. Event pros need to define to their C-suite what success can look like and the fact that there are many ways to measure it. If we start to bundle those metrics together, the event space could be a lot more powerful than the rest of the world might think it is. Proving that value will only allow this period of event entrepreneurship to flourish and for event pros to continue challenging and innovating the events industry.

### **INFLATION HAS BEEN A CONSTANT CONVERSATION.**

An ongoing issue that event pros throughout the industry are experiencing, some Leadership Summit participants mentioned that they have had to constantly explain to their C-suite why things are costing more when it comes to producing successful events. It's about making them understand that if they keep budgets flat, the events can't be at the same level of production. "Some of my most creative ideas I feel like I can't execute right now," said David Breen, founder and principal designer at experiential marketing and event design agency VDA. Giving the C-suite tangible examples of what a flat budget would look like at the event in question, and being diligent about managing their expectations, has been effective for some.

“

Some of my most creative ideas I feel like I can't execute right now.”

—David Breen, Founder and Principal Designer, VDA

## Part IV:

# The Digital Future

**Virtual, hybrid, metaverse—what’s useful and what might be hype?**  
Here are some new rules to live by, as voiced in the Leadership Summit.

### DON'T GO VIRTUAL JUST FOR VIRTUAL'S SAKE.

Participants agreed that, although there's room for improvement, virtual/hybrid meetings have allowed them to reach many more people. But it's paramount that event pros be intentional about their use of virtual or hybrid.

### VIRTUAL ATTENDANCE DROP-OFF HAS INCREASED.

In 2020 and 2021, virtual/hybrid was novel for attendees, and now “Zoom fatigue” is setting in. Here are suggested ways for combating this:

- **Incentivizing potential attendees** with thoughtful gifts or experiences—just one really appealing thing with intention behind it, versus something used in the past that may feel like old hat.
- **Avoiding long stream times.** One participant shared that, for their global sales conference, their CEO wanted every attendee to hear the same information at the same time, which would translate to four days of seven-hour livestreaming. But this event pro instead suggested recording the content, and then giving attendees 10 days to watch it on their own time, and then bringing everyone together for a celebratory event at the end. Participants agreed that shorter time blocks have made for successful virtual events; while a 40-minute in-person session is engaging, the same content might resonate better online if it's only 20 minutes.
- **Thinking beyond the PowerPoint.** During one of the Open Spaces, participants discussed the fact that speakers, including virtual ones, have gotten a little too comfortable with the PowerPoint style of presenting. Event pros should encourage them to try other tools that can be successful. It's all about presenting information in a way that's easily absorbed. What are you trying to communicate, and what's the most effective way to do that? Try moving away from the standard broadcast-style lecture to something more participatory. It can be messier, but the learning experience is likely to be better.

### “HOLISTIC” MIGHT BE A MORE APPROPRIATE TERM THAN “HYBRID.”

Event pros should consider using the word “holistic” over “hybrid.” Leadership Summit participants said that as event and experience designers, they put on holistic events—that's what they're giving their clients and partners. In whatever platform, it's what their clients want, and they supply it. It might be in-person, virtual, or both.

### SELL THE VALUE-ADD OF VIRTUAL/HYBRID.

Why would someone rather watch an event than attend it? Leadership Summit participants discussed the value-adds when it comes to virtual and hybrid events. These included allowing people to remain in the comfort of their own home, and the fact that virtual/hybrid allows attendees to get behind-the-scenes access that they might not be able to get at a live event.



## Conclusion

The inaugural BizBash Leadership Summit fostered conversations around some of the most heavy-hitting issues affecting the events industry today, many stemming from the seismic shift caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. More changes, caused by external factors out of event pros' control, are certainly in store. And although participants didn't solve every issue in two days, they continually expressed how beneficial it was to see other event professionals facing the same exact obstacles as they were, and that they are not alone.

They felt reassured that, while no one has all of the answers, everyone is working to combat these issues and is innovating in some way. Some who felt like competitors going into the summit left feeling like the field was leveled—how do we join hands, in a sense, and solve this together?

**This won't be the last BizBash Leadership Summit. BizBash looks forward to further forums to bring the industry's best minds together to share insights that are valuable to all event pros. Stay tuned on how you might be able to participate in the future.**

# Thank You!

We greatly appreciate the time our Leadership Summit participants spent with us on-site in Puerto Rico and for their invaluable input and insights.