



AN ACTIONABLE PATH FORWARD

Where the Event Industry Goes From Here

BIZBASH
LEADERSHIP
SUMMIT 2024

Explore the insights and learnings from BizBash's third annual Leadership Summit, where more than 35 event leaders from companies like Disney, TikTok, and TED discussed their shared goals for the industry and how to achieve them.



Introduction

What's going to drive the future of events? This was one of the overarching questions posed to this year's attendees of the third annual BizBash Leadership Summit, held in Las Vegas April 2-4. This incredible brain trust, made up of high-ranking event pros, gathered in person to discuss where the event industry is going, and (more importantly) where the industry *needs* to go.

BizBash brought together more than 35 high-caliber event professionals—from top experiential agencies, event tech companies, and brands like Disney, TikTok, and TED—to unearth what this group would collectively like to communicate, as leaders, to the event industry at large.

This gathering also aimed to spark something transformative, and by the end of this two-day summit, the group generated hundreds of ideas that correlated with a memorandum of understanding. This strategic document captured the group's shared goals and outlined an actionable path forward from these collaborative discussions.

"These kinds of documents are one way to create a shared language and shared understanding about important topics," the summit's facilitator Taylor Buonocore-Guthrie told the group. "They are common in government, philanthropy, and business and they typically highlight actions that have the potential to create meaningful change."

Here, we will break down the memorandum of understanding and explore the ideas presented for each topic.

About the Participants

The Leadership Summit brought together competitors and peers, who cumulatively had hundreds of years of experience in the events industry.

Misha Andaya

Strategic Sales Executive
MC2

Scott Barnes

Director, Events & Hospitality
Comcast Corporation

Anne Baron

Principle Event Program Manager
UKG (Ultimate Kronos Group)

Ryan Birch

Chief Operating Officer
Quest Events

Linda Brookins

Director of Sales Las Vegas
Tao Group Hospitality

Braughnwynn "Bibi" Brown

Chief Operating Officer
TENCUE

Taylor Buonocore Guthrie

Founder + Principal
The Connection Spark

Lindsay Carroll

Head of Marketing & Events
Robin Hood

Dana Casey

Director of Marketing, Experiential
UPSTACK

Michael Dalton

SVP, Strategy
LEO Events

Christina Decker, CMP

Director of Sales
Visit Frisco

Dana DiPeri

Vice President, Head of Events &
Experiences, Americas
ING Americas

Micayla Diener, CMP, CSEP

Global Event Lead
TikTok

Taylor Elliot

VP, Marketing and Brand Strategy
Shepard

Ray Fournier

Senior Manager, Production and
Entertainment Operations
Walt Disney Company / Disney Event Group

Dave Gillis

Chief Operating Officer
Creative Day Technologies

Ryan Hanson

Chief Creative
BeEvents

Denise Hibbard

Head of Events Marketing
Zapier

Suzanne Hogan

Events Director, B2B Marketing
The New York Times

Erin LeMoine

Event Director with emphasis
in content curation
Informa Tech

Ken Malquist

Creative Director
Walt Disney Company / Disney Event Group

Krista McDougal

Vice President, Global Sales
Encore

Heather Munnell

Director
Client Experience, VDA

Lauren Murphy

SVP, Marketing & Brand Strategy
Apartment Therapy Media

Thao Nguyen

VP, Client Engagement & Events
JPMorgan Chase

EJ Oelling

VP, ABX
6sense

Melanie Reid

Manager, Field Marketing and Events
Riskified

Courtney Rohrbach

Managing Director, Live Experiences
POLITICO

Monique Ruff-Bell

Chief Program & Strategy Officer
TED

Ashok Samuel

Chief Executive Officer
Bravura Technologies, LLC.

Julius Solaris

Founder
Boldpush

Jim Thornton

VP, Account Strategy
BrandSync Events

Leigh Tidwell

Vice President, Event Sales
AFR Event Furnishings Corporate

Brent Turner

EVP, Strategy and Solutions
Opus Agency

Johnice Veals

Associate Director Events &
Employee Engagement
Vertex Pharmaceuticals

Frank Verrilli

SVP, Business Development
Impact XM

Brian Wagner

Sr. Business Development Director
Jack Morton Worldwide

Don Whittaker

VP, Events
Czarnowski

Joslin Witsil

Head of Global Brand Events and Sponsorships
Amazon Ads

Michelle Manakhimov

Sr. Manager Brand Marketing and Strategy
Spectrum Reach

The Methodology

BizBash tapped facilitator Taylor Buonocore-Guthrie of The Connection Spark to lead this year's program. Along with BizBash founder David Adler, Buonocore-Guthrie guided Leadership Summit participants through various icebreakers and workshops to unearth the most important topics to tackle and dissect within the group.

She first used the interactive presentation software Mentimeter to give the group two prompts that they could respond to with a QR code. The answers would populate in real-time on screen in a word cloud.

1. The future of the events industry will be driven by...



2. Share three words to describe the direction your work is heading this year.



This initial icebreaker became a powerful catalyst for the remainder of the summit. Attendees were led through workshops similar to last year, such as the “unconference,” where participants, on the first day, offered input for what should be discussed and explored the next day. On 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.

Other workshops included a “live podcast taping” exercise where participants, in pairs, had a brief fireside chat-like discussion on a topic or open-ended question provided by Buonocore-Guthrie in front of the group. The final exercise was a group editing of the memorandum of understanding, which Adler initially outlined for the group to comment on, tweak, and add their input.

The Memorandum of Understanding

Below are the 12 items found on the 2024 BizBash Leadership Summit's memorandum of understanding. We highlight each item and its mission, then provide further context and explanation.

1. Recognition of the Power of Gatherings' Vital Role

"We recognize the significant potential of thoughtfully curated gatherings in enhancing collaboration, boosting commerce, and strengthening community connections. This MOU is a commitment to utilizing such events as catalysts for innovation and as vehicles for both societal and organizational advancement."

This first point is all about C-suite buy-in. How do you show your executives that events have a unique power to forge connections and foster community? Monique Ruff-Bell, chief program and strategy officer for TED, lead her small group on this topic, and said that a good first step is figuring out how to get into the room with these leaders, so that they "understand who you are." From there, use language that pricks up their ears, and build a network of advocates who are going to speak positively on your work when you're not in the room.

Ruff-Bell's next step: "Creating a roadmap to building trust—how can they trust that they don't have to understand you as an executioner but as a strategist?" Show the C-suite that you think about the company or business in a larger way than just a checklist.

Other tactics the group mentioned included getting involved with the state government regarding tourism, lifting other companies' events on social media to signal universal support, and regularly creating content based on attendees' experiences and how it transformed them.

2. Showcase Economic Impact

"We aim to not only highlight the broad economic benefits of events but also underscore the specific successes of event marketing activities within organizations, demonstrating their critical contribution to economic prosperity and business growth."

Adler mentioned that sometimes our industry doesn't take advantage of the fact that, globally, events are a major economic driver. Last year, the Events Industry Council, in partnership with Oxford Economics, found that business events were a \$1.6 trillion industry in 2023.

To better showcase the event industry's value, the group suggested illustrating how it creates jobs, whether directly or indirectly, in sectors like hospitality, transportation, and retail. The group also mentioned using resources like BizBash to share the money brought in at various destinations—then showing that content to the C-suite/greater community.

Event pros can also prioritize participating in industry advocacy organizations, and release economic data in real time to community, stakeholders, and attendees.

3. Prioritize Purposeful Attendee Engagement

"Recognizing attendees as crucial to event success, we commit to aligning the attendee journey with event objectives, ensuring meaningful engagement and satisfaction."

The group agreed that it's important to treat your attendees like a stakeholder (arguably the stakeholder) in your events.

Here are some of the ideas around this topic that they generated:

- Develop attendee personas and use that as a lens to make different decisions on things like content, design, etc.
- Conduct focus groups with attendees, just like with any other stakeholder.
- Survey attendees prior to or during the event to inform programming decisions.
- Create meaningful touchpoints at every step of the attendee journey to make a memorable impact.
- Don't be afraid to explore new formats and ways to engage.
- Try things like interactive education sessions and gamification.
- Create checkpoints throughout event planning to be sure you're planning with the attendee's needs in mind (not your own).
- Continually redefine and redevelop "best in class" for our industry.

4. Streamline Technology

"We commit to employing efficient and user-friendly technological solutions for planning, execution, data analysis, and attendee engagement, enhancing overall event experiences."

AI continues to be a hot topic. And although there are conversations around risk and ownership to consider when it comes to artificial intelligence, the session on AI and technology, led by Brent Turner, EVP of strategy and solutions for Opus Agency, highlighted more optimistic ways to use it to benefit attendees.

His group mentioned something as simple as a chatbot on an event experience platform, to more complex implementations like personalization features for attendees that might do things like suggest certain agenda items. "As AI makes it easier for everyone to get instant, personalized information, our attendees are developing completely new expectations for live learning experiences—these expectations will impact instructional design in classrooms, and they will transform content delivery throughout our future events," Turner said.

Denise Hibbard, head of events marketing for software company Zapier, shared she is also using AI for personalization for her virtual events, where thousands of people attend online. "Our product can serve so many different industries, role types, and use cases, so one of the things we struggled with as an event of our size is offering a personalized experience for all those different users," she explained. "AI has really been a critical part of our work in trying to bring more of that into the events."

Other tactics the group mentioned included creating a technology task force that meets regularly to discuss and provide ideas, suggestions, and recommendations; making it a goal to meet with new technology vendors per quarter to evaluate whether you're using the best platform for your attendees; and using AI to review data and surveys to help define customer personas for customer journey mapping.

5. Implement Universal Measurement Standards for ROI Analysis

"Standardized metrics and a shared language will be established to consistently refine our understanding of success, fostering alignment across agencies and brands for the benefit of the entire industry."

Finding a clear ROI solution in the event industry continues to be a challenge. The group agreed that, to establish meaningful ROI and align expectations, conversations around it must happen early with your stakeholders and decision makers. Clearly define the KPIs, and implement regular check-ins of the progress that's been made.

The group also brought up the importance of collaboration within your company or organization. Lean on different departments, whether it's marketing or sales, for the data they have access to. Ask questions about how you can pull data together that can

help you understand whether you need to reallocate costs—or maybe continue doing the same thing because it works.

Looking at your event as a product was another tactic mentioned; it is an investment, not a cost. But there should be a balance as well—some focus should be put on the societal, organizational, and individual impacts of the event.

6. Market with Integrity

"Ethical marketing practices, based on transparency and trust, will be the cornerstone of our approach, enhancing relationships with participants and stakeholders."

When marketing events, the group agreed that the industry needs to emphasize transparency and a respect for privacy. Event pros should avoid misleading tactics and instead engage audiences with integrity. How do you do that? The group mentioned solutions like maintaining ethical standards that align with brand standards through checks and balances in the public sector.

Other potential solutions included following GDPR standards across all marketing avenues; and in the age of AI, if AI was used to create content or art involved in the marketing of an event, add a caveat that it was used in the creation of this ad/promotion/campaign.

7. Prioritize Health and Safety

“Developing and regularly updating comprehensive health and safety plans, incorporating lessons from recent challenges, will be fundamental to our event strategies.”

This is something the event industry undoubtedly understood during the COVID-19 pandemic. But just because the restrictions and regulations from that time period are gone, doesn't mean the industry's focus on health and safety should be too.

To keep health and safety a priority, the group suggested things like engaging with a partner to advise on your annual schedule of events holistically (versus a one off); training all on-site staff for CPR and other critical life-saving measures; creating and practicing a crisis plan; and broadening “safety” and “well-being” to include emotional, spiritual, and mental health.

8. Embrace Holistic Sustainability

“Sustainable practices will be integrated into all facets of our events, minimizing environmental impact and supporting green initiatives.”

One of the most popular topics at this year's BizBash Leadership Summit was sustainability. How do you grapple with a concept that seems so broad, while also battling a shrinking budget?

The group had a plethora of ideas:

- Engage with a sustainability consultant.
- Develop a checklist that a hotel/event venue can use to evaluate where they fall within your green initiatives.
- Conduct food audits to measure how much is left post-event.
- Source vendors that keep sustainability at the core of their business.
- Use digital signage and mobile apps only—no printed materials.
- Partner with charitable organizations that will accept and upcycle event materials such as furniture and cardboard.
- Add sustainability to attendee engagement.
- Challenge the use of legacy swag like notebooks and pens.
- Align the company's sustainability goals with the event goals.
- Commit to sustainability by allocating budget to those initiatives.

9. Guarantee Universal Accessibility

“Ensuring that our events cater to the diverse needs of all attendees, making them accessible and inclusive, is of utmost importance.”

The group was also drawn to the topic of accessibility in events. “Be proactive, not reactive” was the theme throughout their conversations on this topic.

Ideas generated for how to create more accessible events included:

- Closed captioning
- Simulcast lounges
- Prayer rooms
- Quiet rooms (not workstations—truly calming spaces)
- Trigger warnings for smoke, loud noises, flashing lights, etc.
- ASL interpreters
- Seating closer to the stage for those who might have mobility or hearing challenges
- Translators
- Nursing rooms
- Guided tours of the space before the event begins

10. Champion Digital Well-Being

"We advocate for the responsible use of digital tools and screens, seeking a balance between digital innovation and the need for mindful, distraction-free engagement."

This item was brought up because of a conversation on an article in The Atlantic, which was about how phones, screens, and social media are contributing to high rates of depression and anxiety in adolescents. How do we continue to embrace the technology and connection our devices bring us, but also acknowledge that they can sometimes be a hindrance to our mental health and engagement levels?

When it comes to events, the group suggested solutions like impressing upon attendees, where appropriate, that digital devices are tools, but ask them to make a commitment to be fully engaged (then add in breaks where device use is OK).

Other points made included not forcing tech onto attendees just for the sake of it. Allow tech to be integrated only when it supports the attendee. The group also suggested creating moments within an event that involve things like unique reflections, random acts of kindness, and connection with loved ones.

11. Reinvent Hybrid and Virtual Events

"Our goal is to offer seamless experiences across all event formats, making technology usage intuitive and enhancing participant experience."

Yes, the industry is more than grateful to have live events back after the events of 2020 and 2021. But that doesn't mean the industry's use for virtual and hybrid events is gone. They are still very much a part of the equation.

The group agreed that you shouldn't turn your event hybrid just for the sake of it; make sure adding a virtual component aligns with your event's goals, and choose a format that aligns with your attendees' needs.

Adler mentioned that it's time to make virtual and hybrid events "next generation." They can't be just a speaker on Zoom anymore. Think of engaging ways to present content through tools like polls, live audience Q&As, and virtual breakout rooms.

12. Foster Ongoing Engagement

"We will create programs and platforms that extend the lifespan of event engagement, promoting community building and continuous interaction beyond the event itself."

By the end of the summit, some group members expressed the desire to continue correspondence with each other—and that's exactly what this last point in the memorandum of understanding highlights.

How do you extend the lifespan of an event? When an event leaves a lasting impression, how do you recreate that sense of community again? The group presented tactics like hosting a networking session within your event, where the first initiative is to collect everyone's contact information if they're interested in being part of a post-event community.

Then host in-person meetups in major cities through events like Connect Marketplace, or create virtual meetups 3-6 months post-event with facilitated discussions or happy hours. Or for something more frequent, create things like a Slack or Discord channel where the community can regularly share content and continue to interact with each other.

Conclusion

The goal of creating this memorandum of understanding was to not only foster collaboration within the summit, but to actively shape the future of the events industry. It was meant to be an early case study in how a leadership summit like this can produce something tangible. The hope is that readers will share this document with their event industry peers and even those involved in meeting and event industry associations.

This group in particular demonstrated just how passionate event professionals are to showcase the value of their work. And in an environment like the BizBash Leadership Summit, where titles and companies are stripped away, it's easier to see that event pros are eager to share information and advocate for each other.

BizBash looks forward to further forums to bring the industry's best minds together to share actionable 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 took out of their busy schedules to spend with us on-site in Las Vegas, and for their invaluable input and insights.