

5TH MAY 2020

THE FUTURE OF THE EVENT INDUSTRY

What measures can we expect to see?
What does this mean for revenue?
How can we proceed?

THE NEW BLACK STUDIO.

Kemp House | 160 City Road | London | EC1V 2NX
0207 315 4025 | Create@thenewblackstudio.co.uk

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INTRODUCTION.

It's a turbulent and unprecedented time for all businesses, and it's safe to say that due to lockdown measures hospitality and tourism have been hit particularly hard.

A recent survey from ONS showed that out of 6171 businesses surveyed 82% reported a temporary pause to trade (1). So, how can we prepare to economically and logistically recover from Covid-19? What measures could be implemented to help support the return of events?

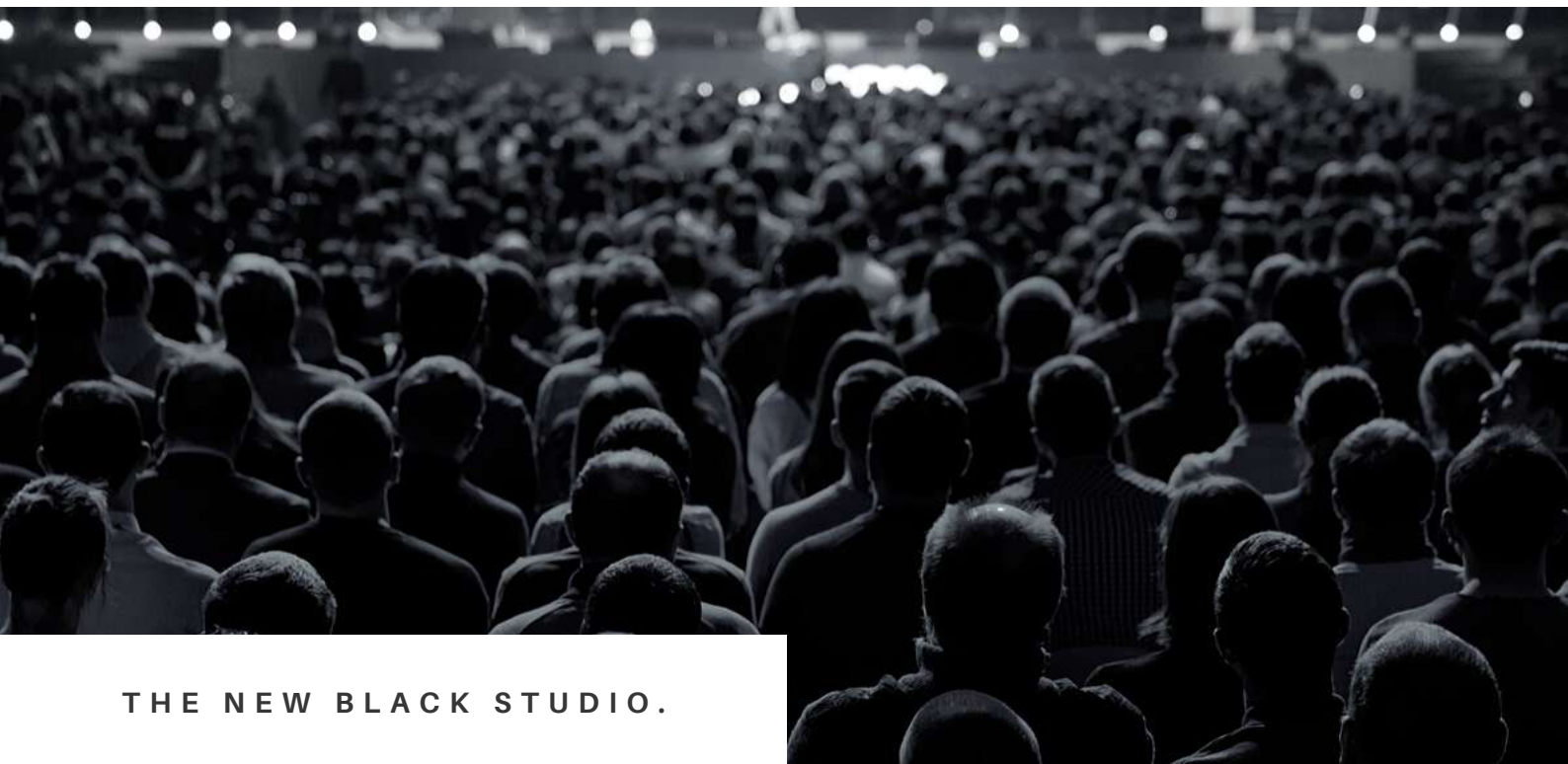
The New Black Studio is a corporate event agency based in London. Like many other businesses, we find ourselves trying to paint a picture of the future, but we have no idea what the finished piece will resemble. As we work with our clients to create event delivery plans for 2020 and beyond, we remain positive and excited to return to event planning.

At The New Black Studio, we always give our honest and realistic thoughts. We hope this report will educate, inform, and show that there is light at the end of the tunnel. We hope all readers find themselves safe and well during the unprecedented circumstances we find ourselves in. #homesafehome

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

At the time of writing, (3rd May 2020) we are entering the seventh week of lockdown in the UK. We have had over a month to adjust to the cancellation of many of our events, and the consequent detrimental effects on our industry. Boris Johnson has recently announced we have passed the peak of the virus and has outlined five requirements we must meet before lockdown is lifted (2). With more shops and restaurants opening their doors for business once again, we are starting to see signs of normality on the horizon.

We have also recently seen one of the industry's biggest events, The Meetings Show, reschedule to October. This has largely been seen as a bold decision as safety measures for large gatherings remain undisclosed. Boris Johnson declared that "we can now see the sunlight" (2), but what does that mean for the event industry specifically?



INDUSTRY THOUGHTS

Facebook recently announced the cancellation of all events of more than 50 people until 2021, but is this a measure the industry as a whole feel is necessary? Scientific evidence has not yet suggested that such drastic measures are required.

In complete contrast, The Meetings Show, an events calendar highlight, has confirmed it will plan to go ahead in October 2020. Over 5,000 people normally attend the exhibition, so this has been seen as a positive step forward. Although the show may look different, it's encouraging to see forward thinking.

Jack Marczewski, Event Director of The Meetings Show, said (3):

"We are, of course, closely monitoring developments and the evolving Government advice on social distancing and will continue to do so as we formalise plans for the show. The health and wellbeing of everyone involved in the show has been at the heart of any plans being made."

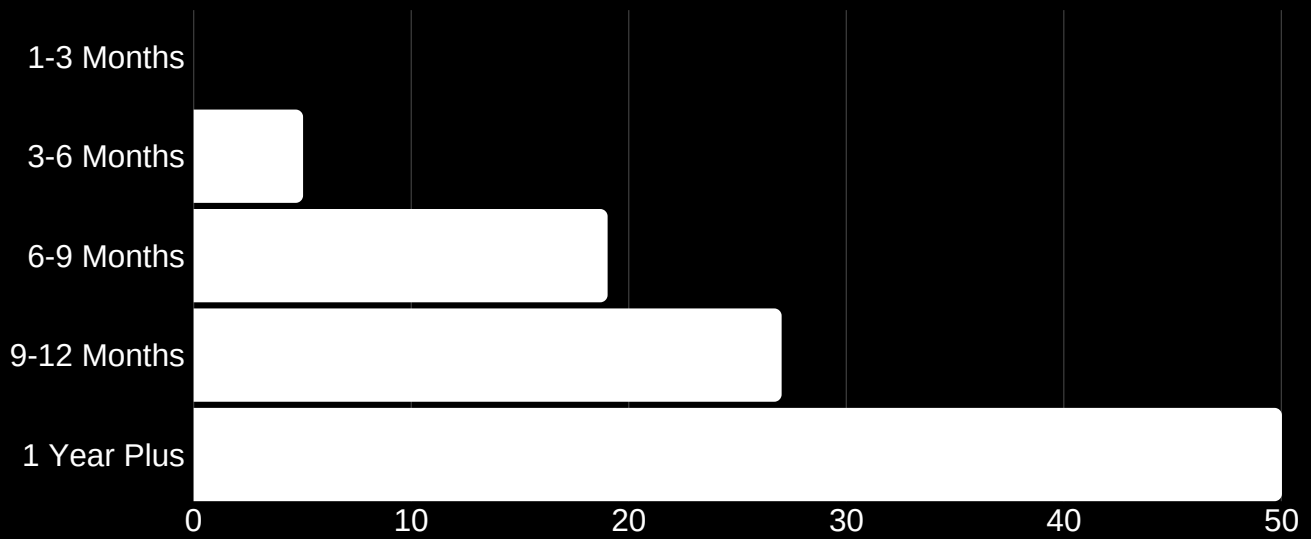


INDUSTRY THOUGHTS

"Companies will now be more prepared with new contracts and insurance clauses. More care will be taken in regards to budget planning, maximising budgets and creating timelines and schedules."

Rianna Elizabeth, Event Planner

How are event planners and suppliers reacting to the latest advancements?



A recent study shows that 40% of event planners expect the industry to return to normal within 6-12 months, with 50% expecting normality to resume in spring 2021. The same study cites that 50% of those surveyed remain optimistic about the future, with a further 12% undecided. (4) This shows there is an overall sense of confidence that our ordinary work routines will return.

Uncertainty is one of the most significant causes of anxiety for humans, so naturally, we are finding ourselves feeling cautious about the future. Many of our job titles at some time or another would have included the word planner. That's what we do. But now, we have been deprived of our ability to plan. For a collection of people who like to be organised and assured of the future, this is understandably extremely unsettling.

However there are positives we can take. We have been forced to dive head first into virtual technology, an area which has been quietly ticking along in the background for many years.

WHAT WILL EVENTS LOOK LIKE?

The future may be looking unsettled, but at The New Black Studio we wholeheartedly believe that if the events industry pulls together and considers a number of both new and existing measures to ease the transition, it will thrive in the future. What measures can we consider now to ease the inevitable shift?

Purpose of Events

Social distancing measures are likely to be in place for some time, which means it will be more important than ever to assess the purpose of your events. Assessing what you want the outcome of an event to be will help determine if it is safer to host the event online or in person. If you do choose to host in person, it will help to identify the areas of importance on which you should focus.

MEASURES TO CONSIDER

Demand for Large Venues

The easiest way to physically distance is to add more space. We expect to see a significantly higher demand on larger venues as planners attempt to adhere to measures by keeping attendees apart where possible.



Theatre Style Seating

At The New Black Studio, we aren't huge fans of theatre-style seating. It allows attendees to hide in a mass of people, and as we know, masses of people will be discouraged. Instead of theatre style, consider cabaret or U-Shape. It's a much more conversational and interactive style of seating, plus you will be able to sit people further apart.

Has this been done before?

Yes, at plenty of conferences across the globe.



Unmanned Exhibition Booths

Organisers should consider the number of people who are operating exhibition stands, if any at all. With increasing pressure on exhibitors to create booths which encourage engagement and follow up post-event, it would be incredibly intriguing to see the impact on engagement if all exhibition stands are unmanned. Would we see an increase due to not feeling harassed/awkward/like we're being sold to? Or will the need for human engagement prevail?

Has this successfully been implemented before?

No. We will need to think cleverly about how to ensure attendees still engage without human interaction. Producing visually compelling and creative booths will be paramount, with clever design being vital.

Catering

Buffet stations are often an essential of conference catering, but with so many shared serving utensils, will this be a safe option going forward? Boxed catering is a much more practical option. Prepared and served by kitchens, which hopefully already have high hygiene ratings, contact can be significantly minimised.

Has this been implemented before?

Yes, at every festival going.

Decreased Numbers

Decreasing numbers is an obvious action, but we will have to see a drastic reduction in delegates at events for the foreseeable future. Fewer people mean a reduced risk of infection.

Microphones

Q&A sessions should be considered post Covid19. The well-known ritual of a microphone handed from person to person down a line of delegates will be a big no-no, so what can we do instead? Event apps are likely to come into their own more than ever. There are plenty of apps which allow attendees to submit questions straight from their phone to a screen displayed adjacent to the speaker.

Has this been done before?

Yes, at countless conferences.

MEASURES TO CONSIDER

No Contact Registration

The registration desk is a staple part of a typical event set up, but they come with significant contact and shared surfaces. Plenty of people have touched name badges by the time they make it to a desk, so we must consider ways of reducing contact. Printing badges at home could provide an effective way forward, with self-scan registration points upon entrance. It works in the same way as an oyster card, tap in tap out.

Has this successfully been implemented before?

Yes, at every London tube station, and events such as Venues & Events Live.

Sanitiser Stations

An undeniable addition to events going forward will be sanitiser stations. Thankfully they are significantly more straightforward to order now than in March. Sanitiser stations are likely to become a staple at hotels and other venues.

Distance at Exhibitions

We're used to seeing The ExCel and Olympia filled to the brim with exhibitors, all tightly squeezed into one space. Right now, of course, they're being used for food banks and temporary hospitals. As venues resume their normal practices, we should be wary of the lurking virus and allow for more space between each stand.

Has this successfully been implemented before?

Yes. As planners, we have the tools to create and enforce floor plans appropriately.



Seated Networking

Undoubtedly networking is one of the main reasons for any business event, and we must find a way to guarantee this can take place effectively. An invaluable asset to any professional's tool kit, networking will continue, in a slightly different way. Drinks receptions, even at a distance, will be challenging to deliver. However, introducing seated formats similar to speed networking will be easier to control.



Goodbye Round Tables

Round tables are tight at the best of times. Seating ten people on a 5ft table used to pass as acceptable. In reality, it's too close for comfort, and that's before any measures are in place! Even a large round is only 6ft. Placing just ten people rather than the standard twelve will still not be enough distance. It's tough to hold a conversation across a 6ft table! Long tables are a much more flexible alternative. The standard width per person is 2ft, but industry-wide we should be considering increasing this by at least double. On a standard 6ft by 3ft table, you will still be able to have ample conversation with five people surrounding you, while maintaining a safe distance.

Has this successfully been implemented before?

Yes, at plenty of intimate networking dinners.

Tea & Coffee Stations

Tea and coffee stations are a fundamental part of any conference, workshop or seminar. Self-serve urns and vast stacks of cups with saucers will likely be a thing of the past. Disposable cups will be used more often, with one well-protected person serving beverages.

"As an industry, we have always been able to quickly adapt. Having a plan A, B and C in your pocket at all times is an essential part of being a planner. This is no different.

***Rebecca Brennan-Brown,
Event Planner***

Directional Signage

Signage is nothing new to a successful event. Often a key element to keeping order at exhibitions, and now used in most supermarkets, attendees will be used to this new normal of following a guided route around an event.

Longer Build Times

Going forward, we will need to allow for longer event build times to keep contractors safe. Consider scheduled slots rather than all suppliers arriving at the same time.

HYBRID EVENTS

Without a doubt, more events will become a hybrid of in-person and online. For this to be sustainable long term, we need to see a change in how content is delivered. However, at the moment, we are creating content explicitly designed to engage audiences over platforms like Zoom. When live events return, it won't be as simple as setting up a camera at the back of the room.

We now all know the skills and techniques used to engage those audiences who aren't physically at the event, and we should continue to apply these techniques across all live events.

A common misconception we hear regularly is "all online events are free". The vast majority of online events are indeed free. They're often used as a hook to engage potential audiences. We've all seen the "Free Webinar" Facebook ads. However, if you are providing value, whether in person or online, it is OK to charge. Perhaps you could discount the online-only ticket, as you're not paying for the delegate's food, drinks, etc. But if there is a value, there should be an exchange.



ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

How can we keep focus?



Although the prevention and control Of Covid-19 is the current top priority, we as an industry have made tremendous efforts in the past few years to become more environmentally friendly. Covid-19 should rightly be the most immediate concern of businesses and individuals alike, but we should not undo the hard work that has already been achieved. With the use of disposal items becoming more and more prominent, where possible it's essential we remain aware of how much we are sending to landfill. Innovation and invention of environmentally friendly alternatives are at an all-time high, and consequently, we have more options available than ever. From biodegradable cutlery to memory sticks made from recycled plastic, we must remember to keep a focus on other areas.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM OTHER NATIONS?

Each country follows its own unique path and curve in the battle against Covid-19. The efforts of other countries could be a good source of inspiration, as many are further ahead than the UK on their trajectory of the pandemic. We are looking at all aspects of virus spread prevention across the world to try and gain a crystal ball vision. The problem is, the ball was dropped, and we're left trying to look through the cracks. We can't be sure that we will follow the same path as any other nations, but we can learn from their efforts. From Wuhan, the first city to go into lockdown, to our closest neighbours Scotland. What can we learn from other countries regarding how to proceed?

China

At the time of writing, Wuhan, the city with the first known cases of Coronavirus, is slowly returning to

normality. The city was in lockdown for a total of 76 days, which slowed the rate of infection significantly. Now, residents are making small efforts to return to familiarity with businesses re-opening, outdoor exercise increasing, and make-shift hospitals beginning to close.

Although signs of past times are returning, schools remain closed, gyms continue to keep their doors locked, and restaurants are allowed to serve to take away food only. CNN cites "for every opened shopfront, there is another one shuttered" (5). If the UK remains in lockdown for the same period of time as Wuhan, we can expect restriction to begin to ease on the 7th June 2020.

Good News!

The first large scale exhibition since the outbreak has taken place in Changsha. Organisers of The China Changsha International Auto Show decided to proceed with the exhibition, incorporating strict identify and health checks prior to attendance. Staff are obligated to wear masks and wash their hands frequently to ensure the safety of attendees. This is a welcomed development in global event industry recovery.



Switzerland

Switzerland has a different approach to Covid-19. It is one of the few countries who did not impose a lockdown as such, but implemented measures to prevent the spread of the virus. Subsequently, we recently saw salons, florists, DIY stores, dental and medical centres re-open their doors. Schools plan to open in mid-May, with mass gatherings currently scheduled to resume in June. (6)

Italy

Recently an announcement from the prime minister stated Italian football players would be resuming training in May (7). Is there an end in sight for one of the hardest-hit countries? A few businesses will be allowed to re-open on 4th May, but the majority of companies such as bars, restaurants, hairdressers and so on will be allowed to re-open on 1st June (8). It seems that Italy will be deciding to keep schools closed until September.

Scotland

Our closest to home comparison comes from Scotland after Nicola Sturgeon released a 26-page framework (9) for decision making regarding Covid-19. The document clearly states what needs to happen for the lockdown to be lifted in Scotland, and says that:

"We are likely to require that gatherings in groups, for example at pubs or public events, is banned for some time to come. (9)"

The report suggests that with innovative approaches to maintain and enhance physical distancing, some form of normality could return. The report does not include any dates.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM OTHER NATIONS?

Are there any lessons we can learn from Countries who are further along their own Covid-19 curve?



Currently, it would be ill-considered to take any significant findings from other nations response to Covid-19 as certainty. We can be reasonably sure that we will remain in lockdown for a least a few more weeks to come to ensure the safety of vulnerable people and the protection of our NHS. It is also reasonable to suggest social distancing in some form will become part of the norm for some time after lockdown.

As the situation is constantly changing, information changes quicker than we can update this report.

[Click here for a reality check.](#)



HOW DOES THIS APPLY TO REVENUE?

As we all get used to planning online events, many questions are arising as to what that will mean for ticket sales at future live events. Many businesses have already suffered monumental revenue losses from cancellations, but how will this translate going forward?

We're seeing many people trying to upskill at the moment, from using this learning a new skill to getting in shape. People are using their spare time to invest in themselves, so how can you provide opportunities that support these trends?

Perhaps you run a course to brush up on your networking skills or use this time to teach your clients how to host a small event themselves. Create resources,

create content, create a value exchange. Revenue will follow such a pivot in business model. And who knows, you might unearth something that sticks.



With all of the above suggestions, there is room for sponsorship opportunities. Many businesses have now accepted that bookings will be minimal and are focusing on reach and engagement instead. Presenting another company to your audience might be the exposure someone else is looking to achieve. Sponsored reports, publications, interviews are all still very viable options.

39%

of planners surveyed have taken bookings in the last month. (4)

THE FUTURE OF OUR INDUSTRY.

The future is unsettled, but bright. Events will one day be in high demand again, and we'll be wishing for the luxury of being furloughed for a day.

Normality will resume, but we also have a huge responsibility as an industry to be safe. As we all know, weighing finances with risk is an incredibly delicate balancing act to be playing right now, but encouraging crowds of people to be in the same room without following official advice would not only be irresponsible but extremely dangerous. Just as we always carry out risk assessments, this situation should be no different.

At the moment, the risk is too high, and it looks as if it will be for a while longer. For the next few months, we will all be going through the process of assessing, and reassessing. Right now, staying up to date with information and continuing to stay educated is the best we can do in an attempt to recover. Knowledge is power, and businesses should take solace in that fact that very few people have the information they need right now.

Whether we take Facebook's long-term approach or The Meeting Show's more optimistic view, eventually normality will return. We will once again enjoy a glass of wine at Banqueting House or an exquisitely cooked meal from Bubble. But until then, we must remain informed and resilient. See you at the reg desk.



A WORD FROM REBECCA



Founder, The New Black Studio.

I'm not here to try and pull the wool over your eyes. As stated in the first paragraph, we always take an authentic approach. It's a frightening time to work in events. Jobs are at risk, and our workloads have cleared. It's not just the money that's an issue as many media outlets are reporting. For many, it's heart-breaking to see events we've worked on for many months, sometimes over a year, cancelled. It's a very personal process, for us at least, unique to every client. To not see the ideas you've worked so hard on coming to life is devastating.

But, like the world, the industry must go on. We must adapt. We must be strong in adversity. Can you imagine how many people will want to go to the pub when this is all done? The event industry is no different. We should give people the craving of freedom they will want and need. We should respectfully celebrate making it out the other side of a crisis by hosting events with a purpose, reconnecting people.

Sure, the technology available to us now is more powerful and versatile than ever before. But we all know it will never replace a conversation over a good glass of red or a joke shared over a dinner table.

Times have been and will continue to be tough on many businesses' finances, so I fully appreciate that investing in an event won't be possible for all. I'm not for a second suggesting that we should come out of a distressing period with luxurious and lavish dos, I believe that would be quite insensitive. However, I do think focussed, well put together, and impactful events should be encouraged. We all have a responsibility to keep the wheels of this economy turning.

There's no time like the present. Many events teams are finding themselves with a severely reduced workload, and I'm sure we would all rather our teams are working. Events are always planned in the same way: find the date, and everything else follows. In times where nothing is the same as before, we have to flip that on its head. Who says we need to have the date first? Suppliers have very open diaries, and it's strangely achievable to plan an entire event and make finding a day the last box to tick. If you feel you need to, you can always put a few dates on hold.

Here's a list of things that we can do now remotely:

Create the event design

Curate the content

Reach out to sponsors

Reach out to speakers

Find a venue

Find a production company, florist, caterer, and so on.

Set a budget

Invite guests, but instead of a date, ask them to register their interest, and a date will follow.

I would urge businesses to forward plan now. Have the foresight to look to where we might be in 6, 10, 12 months, and make your plans.

People need hope, connection, and enjoyment.



SHARE WITH YOUR COLLEAGUES

If you have found any value from this report, please share with your colleagues and peers. Tag us on social media so we can continue the conversation!



THE NEW BLACK STUDIO.

www.thenewblackstudio.co.uk

0207 315 4025

Create@TheNewBlackStudio.co.uk

Instagram:

@StudioTNB

LinkedIn:

The New Black Studio Event Management

THANK YOU FOR READING!

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