



2024 STATE OF THE INDUSTRY: AGENCY REPORT

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4 ways to demonstrate agency value

A pressing need for personalisation, pressure on demonstrating event value, and the integration of events and marketing are just a few of the challenges facing planners right now.

The world is changing rapidly, with both individuals and organisations becoming more aware of their place in the world and what they need to do to survive in a competitive landscape.

And with PR and advertising agencies increasingly dipping their toes into the world of running events and content creation, agencies are now not just competing with each other. So, how can they maintain an edge?

1 Clear value proposition

Solely virtual activity has decreased rapidly, with only a small amount of projects remaining online. The challenge with live, is demonstrating clear value – both for stakeholders and attendees. “Budgets are staying the same, or in some cases are less, however increase in costs is meaning that attendee numbers are down,” says one agency.

“Live event audiences are smaller, harder to recruit and more discerning about what they want in terms of content, outcomes and topics,” another respondent agrees.

To counter this trend, many events are maintaining virtual elements to reach broader audiences and accommodate those who may not be able to attend physically. This extends to “a more open approach to speakers (particularly those who would have to travel long haul) joining virtually.”

There’s a big emphasis on prioritising networking, with many organisations and delegates factoring this into the value proposition. “Prioritising networking time for event attendees has become crucial. Whether through breakout sessions, standard networking opportunities, or post-

event gatherings, fostering relationships and creating lasting memories is a key focus.”

With the ongoing concern for public health, strict health and safety checks plus risk assessments have become standard for in-person events. Technology has therefore become more important, “facilitating things like contactless ticketing, cashless payments, and virtual participation.”

As many teams continue to work remotely, live events are often focussed on extended programmes to increase ‘face time’ with employees. In this landscape “recognition and influencer events are becoming more elaborate to gain those invaluable likes/shares,” says one respondent.

Events with a focus on community building and social impact are gaining traction too. “Events increasingly become platforms for fostering community spirit, collaboration, and addressing social or environmental issues,” one participant explains.

Overall there is healthy demand for face to face, with brands recognising the need

to create more meaningful ‘in real life’ experiences with consumers, staff and B2B partners. “With this trend comes a requirement for live event agencies to be able to think and deliver at a strategic business level and demonstrate clear return on spend.”

Emphasis on budget optimisation and maximising value is also paramount in event delivery moving forward. “Additionally, inclusivity, accessibility, and infusing fun into events are integral aspects driving the evolution of live events.”

2 Hyper-personalisation

Personalisation is levelling up, with a focus on attendee-first event design, tailored agendas and inclusivity.

Part of this newfound awareness is an increased understanding of neurodiversity and realising that the same experiences don’t work for everyone. The result of this is hyper-personalisation.

“Providing audiences control over the content they’re consuming with tailored ▶



comms, interactive sessions, layered content and a mixture of multimedia can bring their learning experience to life. This approach is especially beneficial for neurodivergent people who process information in their own way,” one participant says.

Personalisation and unique experiences continue to be important to clients and brands, therefore AI is proving useful in positively affecting the supply chain. “It allows agencies to do things quicker and smarter, which in turn is leading to higher-quality design and end product that leads to better engagement.”

This kind of technology serves as a tool to amplify the live experience, not replace it, with “AR/VR elements, digital engagement platforms, and data-driven insights used to enhance interactions and optimise logistics.”

Despite this, uptake and meaningful integration are slow, meaning those agencies who stay ahead of the curve will reap the benefits.

Part of this evolution involves a massive shift to experiential, as one agency explains: “Audiences crave unique, engaging experiences tailored to their specific interests. Interactive elements, gamification, and personalisation through data-driven insights are gaining traction.”

User-generated content is part of this immersion, with “a massive focus shift to ‘on-the-day’ content and maximising its potential; people are no longer passive attendees but immersed content-shapers.”

Planners must realise that the word ‘impact’ now holds a new meaning. “A few years ago high-level events that attracted hundreds of people conveyed success. It is now about quality, cutting-edge, experiential events that can shock and add real value to someone’s life personally or professionally.”

3 ESG focus

Conversations around sustainability are moving on to ESG (environmental, social, and governance), which encapsulates a holistic solution.

Part of this is more consideration to wellness elements, or social activities and team building. “This includes incorporating spaces for activities like breastfeeding and reflection sessions during events,” adds one respondent.

Another element is the focus on diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I), as organisers realise that “events attract diverse audiences whose needs must be met



“ALIGNING CONTENT WITH EXTERNAL COMMS IS CRUCIAL, LEADING TO INCREASED COLLABORATION WITH COMMUNICATION AND MARKETING CLIENTS.”

through more relevant delegate experiences.”

“There is tangible evidence that wellness and neurodiversity should be actively integrated into the attendee experience, ranging from yoga or Zumba sessions at the start of daily event programmes to delivery of more diverse content mediums to accommodate neurodivergent attendees,” says another respondent. “This includes subtitles in all video content, live British Sign Language interpreters on stage, and quiet spaces that can be used during the breaks in packed agendas.”

Sustainability conversations are still of course front and centre, as “clients are increasingly seeking inclusive and sustainable solutions, so agencies must stay creative and innovative to meet their demands and remain ahead of industry trends.”

This is leading to trends such as “brands using much less physical merchandise. Instead they are focusing on increased hospitality opportunities and technology-led interactions with digital takeaways.”

4 Marketing integration

The significance of event marketing has surged over the last 12 months, with event teams now closely integrated with marketing teams to enhance collaboration and maximise the impact of live experiences.

As formats evolve from traditional conference styles and embrace inventive forms of delivery, “aligning content style with external communication is becoming crucial, leading to increased collaboration with communication and marketing clients.”

This partnership makes sense as events and marketing teams have numerous shared objectives, including “boosting brand awareness, engagement, and lead generation. This unified approach ensures a coordinated effort, with events playing a crucial role in the overall marketing strategy for a more cohesive brand narrative.”

Brands are more aware of the importance in creating meaningful pre, during and post communications that resonate with the audience, which is where marketing comes in too. “Previously, strategic communications were sometimes more of an afterthought for live events, whereas now, clients are more aware of the importance of every touchpoint.

The imperative to demonstrate event legacy means this collaboration between live events and marketing is “continuing to extend engagement beyond face-to-face interactions with greater interactivity before, during, and after the event – helping to lengthen the event lifecycle.”

The evolution of the event format

Client budgets, awareness of diverse audiences, and a need to prove ROI are some of the factors changing the way events are run.

Live event formats, content and objectives are being shaped by a variety of factors, from tech advancements to changing attendee expectations.

Format translates to ROI

“Events now need to prioritise inclusive spaces like prayer rooms, feeding areas, and quiet zones,” says one planner, while another notes a preference for non-traditional venues plus a need to have the wow factor.

In fact, “litmus testing the entire event journey against EDI, accessibility and community impact is changing the way we look at venues, how venues and suppliers deliver and in turn what the messaging and take-aways are at an event.”

Although budgets are down, this also means that some are finding that clients are receptive to new approaches, says one agency. “We see more digital solutions in live environments where we can access talent without the need to fly them across the world and the costs – both from a financial and sustainable perspective – being incurred.”

Social media content is being amplified, with success increasingly measured according to social influence, a respondent says, and “even b2b brands are now making a play for brand advocacy. Collaboration and marketing through association is also increasing with events seen as a chance to strengthen partnerships. In summary, events are becoming more experiential.”

Objectives are being elevated with a clear focus, says one agency, as the “challenge is to consistently raise the bar year on year, with a heightened emphasis on ROI. Given budgetary concerns, businesses are striving for maximum value.”



Overall, objectives are becoming a lot more people-centric, “with a focus on creating content that provides actionable takeaways to attendees and offers real value to people and their businesses.”

In general, it seems events are becoming shorter with a core message at the event and a cascade post event, a participant says. “Shorter sessions are creating more opportunities to play around with layouts and format, such as providing more breakouts and roundtables – ultimately giving a more diverse offering where the audience can often pick and choose what is most valuable or interesting to them,” another notes.

“We are seeing briefs that want to maximise the time and investment – so less in volume

but more in engagements at events,” says another. “We are also seeing shorter ancillary meetings, meaning more focus on the content – a big show for a one-day event.”

Content is king

Right now content truly is king, as it continues to be at its most diverse ever, from short, sharp and to-the-point presentations, through to experiential, moderated workshops. “Collaboration in workshop environments is seen far more frequently, as companies continue to adjust to hybrid working environments in their organisations,” says a respondent.

Workshops are ideal for bonding among remote teams, getting them talking and problem solving, while “customer events ▶

continue to drive content on thought leadership and the content leans towards innovation, technology and how to deliver results smartly.”

Content, messaging, delivery and the overall look and feel is also changing, with an emphasis on individual choices. “Personalised content, aiming to create meaningful connections with clients’ audiences is also on the rise. Fast-paced content on key themes is gaining preference over longer format sessions in the evolving landscape.”

ESG is driving focus on inclusivity and wellbeing, in addition to sustainability, to accommodate neurodiversity and centre on audience engagement, several participants agree.

Shorter, more engaging and concise sessions are being curated to hold attention, especially for neurodiverse delegates. “With all this streamlining and condensing, the audience has more time to process and the content has more time to shine, giving the speaker the chance to deliver something concise that is authentic and provides genuine value to the audience since there’s no room for fluff or pressure to fill a lengthy time slot!”

Wellbeing is often woven throughout the entire agenda, which mirrors “a more connected and aligned working culture and forward-thinking agencies turn their attention to more effective people strategies that not only meet wellbeing and agile career development for individuals but also sustain the needs of their clients.”

Quality not quantity is dictating how agendas are formed, with objectives decided before the event and measured afterwards for ROI. “Every event needs to be a distinct brand experience and content should support amplification and cascade to drive value from budgets.”

For cost saving but with a big impact, some clients are changing tack: “Money is being spent on content that can be shared online which does the same as face-to-face experiences for launches.”

Networking is key

Live events are still the number one choice of format when the purpose of the meeting is to network and connect with people, and

they are a big factor in adding value to in-person gatherings.

“Making sure time for conversation and to connect is key – looking for more engaging things to do before or after or as part of relationship building,” says an agency.

In a world where delegates have easy access to amazing speakers from the comfort of home or their office, they are less interested in sitting in conference rooms. Instead they are “more focused on networking, making face-to-face connections and participating in working sessions.”

The personalisation of event experiences, including adding more opportunities to connect, is driving forward attendance, flexibility, inclusivity, and personal choice. “Attendees welcome the opportunity to shape their agenda and event format, highlight their needs and utilise free time, plus value face-to-face conversations and networking opportunities to support bonding and creativity.”

14%
OF RESPONDENTS
EXPECT BUDGETS
TO INCREASE
OVER THE NEXT
12 MONTHS

Engagement is a big win

One of the biggest trends for the coming year is a focus on heightened audience engagement to drive value, according to many responses. “There’s a sharpened focus on the audience and how they engage with and experience events – only by truly engaging them based on their wants, needs and desires can the event influence behaviour change and return maximum ROI.”

Audiences expect to be entertained, but also to be able to participate. “Important questions to ask when planning are: how can attendees contribute to the conversation, and how can we make it unique to them? Different techniques can be used to tailor the learning experience so the audience can get as much information as they want and need.”

Quality over quantity is key to capturing audience loyalty so agencies must work towards a very specific value-orientated objective that has been developed collaboratively with the client. “This means the event attracts the right audience, to the right location who also ultimately go on to become brand advocates, followers, customers, and real allies.”

In line with marketing integration, there is a heightened focus on objective setting, creativity and conceptualisation to ensure alignment with the brand’s core objectives. “The recognition that people’s time is exceedingly valuable has led to a demand for expertly curated content that is delivered in an effective and meaningful manner.”

As part of this, there’s a focus on community-building too to retain audiences past a single event. “Event channels are largely continuing to invest in hybrid formats and events with more legacy than a one-off moment. Some more maverick brands are looking to be seen and remembered, and are increasing scope to include more of the PR/social strategy piece.”

Looking ahead, 14% of respondents expect budgets to increase over the next 12 months, while 28% say they expect them to decrease. Over half, 59%, expect them to remain the same.

Ultimately, however, “it is about what is right for the client, for their objectives and the budget; trends will come and go but event planning needs to be personalised and the solution is always the right one for the client through thorough briefing and evaluation.”



Sustainability as a non-negotiable

The events industry is known for its grandeur and extravagance but it's not exempt from transformation. As conversations around environmental responsibility gain traction, here's what agencies are reporting.

The sentiment among event agencies is unanimous: sustainability has transitioned from being a mere afterthought to a core focus: "sustainability has so much more importance now – not that it didn't before – but we have a clear policy and way forward now," one planner notes. "We are seeing some clients requesting our credentials and what we do including asking for reporting as part of their supply chain."

Core focus for clients

Gauging sustainability through tangible measurement is still leading the way in eco-consciousness – as another planner notes: "We are measuring all events now. That's so we can operate with sustainability intelligence, not just intention. Environmental sustainability has become more of a hygiene factor as part of our process, akin to health and safety. Most brands are asking for our formal accreditation at the procurement phase. We were awarded our Ecovadis accreditation earlier this year, which goes a huge way to show we are practising what we preach. Operating from a strong data set has meant we've been able to influence production decisions early, and reconsider travel and transport modes across all projects."

Clients are increasingly demanding transparency and accountability regarding the environmental impact of their events. As one planner notes, "clients are now actively

"THERE'S A GROWING DEMAND FOR SUSTAINABILITY AND ZERO-WASTE INITIATIVES LEADING TO AN INCREASED EMPHASIS ON SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES"

looking for and expecting demonstration of how agencies can assist them in meeting set targets." This shift is evident in the meticulous measurement and reduction of carbon emissions for every event, alongside efforts to minimise waste and promote eco-friendly practices.

Moreover, there's this growing expectation for agencies to integrate sustainability seamlessly into event proposals and execution, reflecting a broader societal consciousness towards environmental stewardship. One agency states that, "in the past year, our focus on aligning business practices and event delivery with environmental, social, and governance (ESG) criteria has become more profound. We've observed a growing demand for sustainability and zero-waste initiatives from our clients, leading to an increased emphasis on

sustainable practices in our event planning and execution. We adopt the 'Remove, Reduce, Reuse, Recycle' approach."

This isn't the case for everyone however, as one agency notes, "although there is a lot of talk about sustainability, we are seeing mixed changes to behaviour across our clients. In many cases it still feels like a tick box exercise. It's now about making clients a little more focused."

Budgets restricting progress

While sustainability is hailed as a priority, budget constraints are still posing a challenge in fully relaying eco-conscious event objectives. An agency suggested these crucial details are often overlooked in the discussion: "the conversation is typically led from the ▶



top and not by the team delivering the event – where budgets are tighter, sustainability initiatives are often overlooked. I would argue it is a buzzword in our industry and the conversation should not just be focused on the event spend with clients but much more on the annual spend and future plans.”

Struggles with budgets continue to be rife, as one planner noted: “Despite this focus on sustainability, current budgets fall short of supporting the desire for greener events. Further investment in event budgets is crucial to support sustainable event goals.”

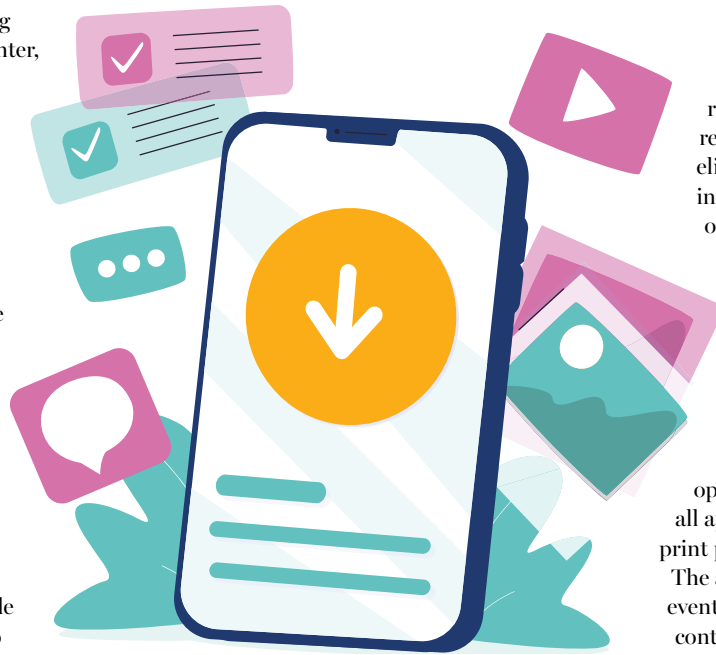
Despite the desire for sustainable practices, some clients struggle to allocate sufficient funds to support these initiatives, another added, “Sustainability is a high agenda point. We still find the same issue, which is to hit their objectives truly, they do not have the budgets to support the sustainable activity or to offset. So they always end up compromising.”

This discrepancy underscores the need for a more concerted effort to align financial resources with sustainability goals. Event agencies find themselves navigating the delicate balance between meeting client expectations and advocating for sustainable solutions, emphasising the importance of education and support in driving meaningful change.

Mindful venue and travel selection

Another notable trend is the emphasis on venue selection and travel logistics. “We have noticed that event locations are changing,” notes one planner, “this is to ensure delegates are travelling shorter distances and utilising sustainable methods of transport where travel is required.

The popularity of hybrid events is continuing, some of which are now being run with no live audience.” This concerted effort to minimise travel-related carbon emissions by opting for regionalised events and hybrid formats is widespread. As another planner states: “clients are increasingly considering the long-term environmental impact of live events and the wider picture of where this impact originates. They’re looking



beyond the travel to and from their venue as well – into energy consumption, waste management, F&B and carbon emissions.”

Another said that this, “increased awareness of location versus delegate travel” is causing an increased demand for venues close to public transport links or with a solution to transport delegates from a station. “Travel is a key consideration and where delegates are travelling,” said one agency, “in some cases, we are seeing that sustainability is often a reason for being more selective when looking at F2F attendees. Clients are also leaning towards combining projects – eg. by attaching standalone meetings to existing congresses – in order to reduce travel requirements (and environmental footprint) for their attendees. We are seeing a definite impact on clients preparing to pay for agency staff to travel onsite.”

It appears clients increasingly prioritise venues with eco-friendly credentials, such as proximity to public transport hubs and sustainable operational practices. This shift reflects a strategic approach to reducing the environmental footprint of events while maintaining logistical efficiency and attendee engagement.

Integrating sustainability

Agencies were eager to note that sustainability extends beyond venue selection and travel logistics to encompass

all aspects of event operations.

Event agencies are championing initiatives to reduce waste, embrace reusable materials, and promote responsible consumption. From eliminating single-use items to incorporating sustainable catering options, every detail is scrutinised

through a sustainable lens. One planner said, “one of the most significant changes we’ve seen over recent years is the adoption of apps across our conferences, exhibitions and corporate golf days. For example, floorplans, premium sponsorship opportunities and live golf scoring are all app-based now, removing excessive print production.”

The adoption of technology, such as event apps and digital signage, has contributed to the reduction of paper waste while enhancing the attendee experience. As another planner

states: “some clients have switched from printed banners to digital banners, which is a significant cost, but they have done it regardless. The process did make last-minute changes to graphics more flexible while being more sustainable.”

These holistic efforts underscore a commitment to sustainable event management practices that prioritise environmental stewardship without compromising on quality or innovation. One planner argued, however, that there is still much left to be done. “There’s an increasing number of clients who are looking for materials that can be recycled and repurposed. There isn’t such a focus on ethically sourced materials yet but hopefully that will be the next step.”

Challenges and opportunities

Despite significant progress, challenges persist in fully realising the potential of sustainable event planning. Budgetary constraints, client expectations and the need for broader industry collaboration pose ongoing challenges for event agencies. However, amidst these challenges lie opportunities for innovation and collaboration. While challenges remain, the collective efforts of stakeholders across the industry offer promise for a future where sustainability is not just a buzzword but a guiding principle in event planning.

The tech revolution is here

From personalised interactions to immersive content delivery, here's what event agencies are embracing in technological advancements.



In 2023 we saw the integration of cutting-edge technologies, from artificial intelligence (AI) to virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR). These innovations reshaped the way events were planned, executed and experienced, and it doesn't show any signs of slowing down.

Revolutionising personalisation

Unsurprisingly, it seems AI still holds the reins in guiding event technology. As one planner notes, "AI-powered chatbots will provide instant assistance and information, guiding attendees through the event schedule, answering questions and provisioning recommendations based on their preferences."

Moreover, AI-driven data analytics are unlocking valuable understanding into attendee behaviour, preferences and engagement patterns, enabling event organisers to optimise future events for maximum impact. As one planner states, "from chatbots and facial recognition to predictive algorithms and virtual assistants (such as AI-note-taking apps), [AI] show great promise, leading to higher levels of personalisation and helping to streamline several repetitive data entry and organisational tasks, freeing up more bandwidth and headspace for teams to focus on top-level thinking."

However, many still seem tentative, as one agency notes, "AI is something we appreciate but approach with caution. Real life

opinions, personalities and careful ideation with the client and speakers will always supersede a computer algorithm."

It seems these sentiments underscore the transformative potential of AI in enhancing event experiences and driving meaningful connections between attendees and brands.

Blurring boundaries

In tandem with AI, immersive technologies such as VR and AR are blurring the boundaries between reality and imagination, offering attendees captivating experiences that transcend traditional event formats.

As one planner notes, VR "continues to give events the ability to reach bigger audiences through brand extension and presence outside the physical confines of an event." ▶

Agency planners agree that VR and AR technologies enrich content delivery, allowing attendees to engage with multi-layered experiences that captivate their senses and foster deeper connections with event themes and messages. However, some maintain that, “AI, VR and AR are all part of the conversation, but have not yet replaced great human content.”

Some agencies are leveraging innovations such as immersive 3D walls, holographic projections and augmented reality overlays to bring content to life in ways previously unimaginable. Many agencies are still cautious, however. As one planner notes: “we love the creativity technology offers, and we’re excited to incorporate more into our projects, but something we are aware of is falling into the trap of having tech because it’s the newest thing and a fad. But, if used with purpose, technology can be a powerful tool when aligned with the desired outcomes.”

As attention spans dwindle in an era of information overload, agencies suggest that these immersive tools serve as powerful aids to capture and maintain audience engagement.

Integrating tech and sustainability

In this pursuit of innovation, event agencies are also mindful of their environmental impact and it emerges that many are using sustainability and tech in tandem. As one planner says: “we’re using the latest, most sustainable innovative AV to get a message across.” Digital solutions such as online menus, digital environments and even apps are not only enhancing attendee experiences but also reducing waste and promoting eco-friendly practices. As one agency aptly states, “technology is pivotal in reducing waste.”

Another planner noted that, “dependent on budget, we always try to promote new technologies that align with our clients’ brief and sustainable objectives.” By embracing sustainable event technologies and practices, agencies are not only aligning with client objectives but also contributing to a more environmentally conscious industry landscape.

Looking forward

AI, VR and AR appear to be the key crucial elements currently shaping events, but hurdles still stand in the way. As one planner

notes: “budget is the biggest barrier to adoption. We expect AI to represent the biggest opportunity for progress in this area. As with all new technology, how and why it is adopted will determine whether it is successful. We see 2024 as a year of experimentation – looking at how to adopt it into project planning. Collaborative project management tools are now embedded in planning between agency and client teams so this is a natural next step.”

Whilst budget constraints and adoption caution still hinders the development of technology to snowball, most agencies are committed to leveraging it to deliver exceptional experiences. Like one agency states: “utilising new tech can help us create multi-layered content, which allows you to tailor the learning experience so your audience can dive in as deep as they want.”

As tech continues to advance and evolve, the journey towards redefining event experiences promises to be both exciting and transformative, as most agencies appear to be enthusiastic at the prospect – if not, some tentative feelings do remain.



What's going on with client budgets?

As budgets for events remain largely unstable, agencies react to the challenges – and innovations – they are experiencing.



Uncertainty in the events industry is being driven by economic, political and social instability. Fluctuating budgets, date changes and attendees pulling out are all commonplace.

As we come into 2024, budgets are still under scrutiny for many organisations, with a number of macro-environment factors encouraging caution.

Quality over quantity

Fortunately, many agencies are reporting that the number of enquiries are stable and clients are still choosing to hold events as part

28%
OF AGENCIES SAID BUDGETS HAD INCREASED

of their marketing strategy and employee engagement programmes.

“Budgets overall are more closely scrutinised and tightly managed across the industry, but organisations are united on the value of events as a marketing channel and including it in their audience engagement

strategies and communications mix,” says one participant.

However, there is some disagreement on budgets, with some reporting that “the size, quality and budgets of the events have increased,” while others are saying that clients are holding “more events but with the same or slightly lower budgets.”

Of those surveyed, 28% of agencies said budgets had increased, while 53% said they have stayed the same as before. Only 19% said they have decreased.

An added challenge is that “tighter budgets heighten the need for value and impressive ▶

ROIs, often requiring fewer but more impactful events.”

Overall there is a mix in which clients and sectors are cutting back, while others are spending more freely. One agency reports: “We are seeing mixed trends in our client behaviour when it comes to budgets; some clients are really cutting back as we head into 2024, while some are just changing how they spend their money.”

The same agency explains that certain clients are “mostly focussing on congress spend and the ancillary meetings around congress, for example. In terms of in-person events, clients are becoming more and more selective in regards to in-person attendees – especially for internal events. Though this can be driven by budget restrictions, it’s good to see that this often also relates to quality over quantity, and increasingly sustainability.”

Another respondent cites increased costs – mainly due to inflation, material costs and freelancer rates – particularly when it comes to production. “Also in many cases clients are in denial about these cost increases and as a result budgets are getting squeezed in the middle resulting in decreased margins on projects if quality and reputation are to be maintained.”

Ultimately, “clients are committed to sales and customer events but sign-off for internal events is taking more time due to budget restrictions.”

Great expectations

Even though many agencies say that budgets are down or staying the same, clients are still expecting increasingly show-stopping events, placing emphasis on activating efficiently and effectively.



“WE ARE SEEING A DECREASE IN BUDGET, YET THE EXPECTATIONS REMAIN THE SAME, IF NOT HIGHER, PUTTING PRESSURE ON IN-HOUSE EVENT TEAMS”

“We are seeing a decrease in budget, yet the expectations of course remain the same, if not higher,” says one response. “However, clients want to be more creative, moving away from the typical event layout and format. There is an appetite for changing the mould, looking for alternative ways to bring people together, be it venue type, content, or technology delivery.”

Brands are requiring more robust, data-driven evidence on how an event is delivering against their objectives, says another. “Brands are looking for a more experiential approach to content rather than an analogue or passive approach. This also allows interactivity and personalisation of content, making it increasingly relevant to the individuals within the audience.”

More creativity and higher levels of production execution are being demanded but for the same budget as previous events. This means there is “greater pressure on in-house event and marketing teams and therefore a closer relationship and more reliance on their agency. Finding the right partner (and the right chemistry) has never been more important,” says a participant. ▶



Sustainable solutions

Another pressure on lowered or flat budgets is the focus on elements that were not required so much before, such as sustainability, but particularly the ESG elements and the special and economic sustainable impact an event can have on the community.

One response summarises the mood and client landscape by saying: “EDI, accessibility and diversity are finally now being seen as a hot topic in the event planning process,” while another explains that “sustainability is becoming more of a real consideration with our clients and we are seeing this included in a lot more RFP’s and RFIs.”

Many are seeing “an increased demand for sustainability and inclusivity solutions for events such as carbon measuring, quiet rooms and accessible content solutions,” – all of which of course, although essential, add to stretched budgets.

Although sustainability is now a priority on many briefs and business agendas, “progress is slow given the urgency of the situation.”

Another response adds: “Sustainability is more of a priority, but often not at a deep or strategic enough level. Diversity is being driven well by a small number of brands but not by enough.”

Client caution

After the initial explosion in spend and optimism following Covid and numerous lockdowns, clients are now exercising more caution in forward planning. “This is due to redundancies made in house and uncertainty in the year ahead, although it is starting to look very positive,” says an agency.

However, it’s not all bad news, as the same respondent notes: “I saw a decrease in Christmas events for 2023 but for 2024 enquiries and interest are already high. I think get-togethers and events are seeing a real resurgence – the importance of bringing your team together to connect is finally being understood.”

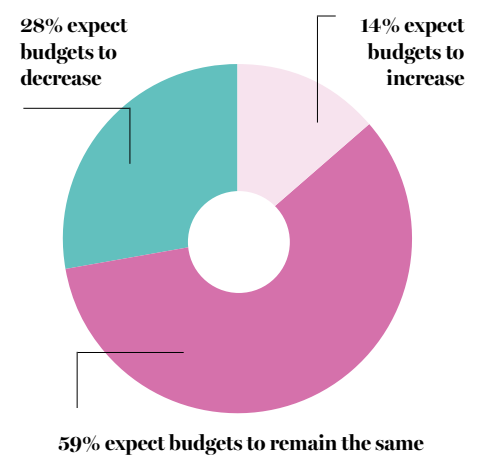
Others are indicating that clients are changing their strategy to deliver impact with less money, for example: “In response to budgetary constraints and the need for broader reach, roadshows are gaining popularity as a cost-effective and versatile alternative to large-scale events.”

Looking ahead, 14% of respondents expect budgets to increase over the next 12 months, while 28% say they expect them to decrease. Over half, 59%, expect them to remain the same.

Overall, more strategic allocation of resources is becoming necessary

as budgets continue to be at risk of being cut further. A precinct summary comes from one respondent: “This year is about being smart, embracing technology to help deliver at a lower price point and using suppliers that share a passion for delivering extraordinary events.”

What agencies expect to see from client budgets in the next 12 months



The problem with pitching

Agencies share their frustrations with the pitch process, from its use as a benchmarking exercise to clients shamelessly stealing ideas.

Pitching is a consistent hot topic among agencies, often inciting strong feelings and opinions on client processes.

The market is oversaturated with the number of agencies, meaning there's stiff competition, also exacerbated by under-staffing issues.

This is just the tip of the iceberg, however, according to agencies surveyed.

Lack of transparency

One of the biggest pet peeves is transparency, or rather lack of. Mainly this involves a "lack of disclosed budget as ambitions and desire for creativity and innovation grow."

One agency goes into detail, saying: "We are seeing a lot of clients not declaring a budget for the project we are pitching for, as well as pitches involving a very high number of agencies. Challenges also arise when we don't receive feedback on pitches

we lose, as feedback is integral to informing future pitches to the same client, such as on event rosters."

It seems that clients across the board are inviting multiple agencies to pitch for a project, with agencies "not being told how much competition is involved", which creates a domino effect of issues.

This also creates a big problem with "meeting client expectations where venue availability, resource, and cost still present major challenges."

"It's frustrating as you might have 10 agencies all chasing the same hotel for the same brief. The rates become locked and the only way to win the race is by racing to the bottom," one respondent says.

They add that although pitching is to be expected, many clients are now expecting a fully developed concept – before any form of payment is even discussed: "Quite often, we are expected to develop agendas, source speakers, create timelines, present visuals – and this is before there is any form of investment from the client. The pitch is asking for the finished article from the get-go and I can't think of any other industry where this would be deemed acceptable."

Unrealistic time scales

Another big challenge is the shorter lead times that seem to have become the norm in all areas of the event planning process. "Creating renders takes time, as does collating costs for events over £8m in budget," says one agency. "We are often given 1-2 weeks to develop a full proposal for a large-scale global event, which can be challenging for the team, who typically work on other projects simultaneously."

Unrealistic timescales on pitches and expectations for budgets versus event specifications is also causing difficulties. "Clients are basing expectations on projects delivered in previous years, not considering industry cost increases that are out of our control," says another.

One agency describes the pitch process as a "whirlwind", adding: "From receiving the brief to interrogating it, understanding the objectives and the desired outcome to designing the perfect solution takes time. If it's a poor brief or short turnaround, it can impact team resources and mean some late nights!"

In general, "clients largely don't appreciate the time needed for an agency to receive and qualify a brief, assemble a team to respond, generate the insights, ideas, designs and costs to answer said brief and build a proposal that succinctly plays out the solution." ▶



The delicate balancing act between the submission's cost within tight budget constraints is a massive challenge, compounded by the need to make a meaningful impact in the proposal, says one agency.

The market is oversaturated so "the key to standing out lies in driving innovation and pushing creative boundaries. It is imperative for individuals and organisations to continuously seek innovative solutions to differentiate themselves and capture attention in a competitive landscape."

Unclear budget expectations cause a knock-on effect of other issues too, including the ability to "quote for the appropriate level of service and third-party suppliers," further exacerbated on the other end by "slow responses from venues and suppliers."

The need to save money is beginning to compromise the message of the event in some instances: "Clients can be fixated on the financial or transactional element of the pitch and lose sight of the key objectives of the event or communication goals."

Benchmarking exercise

Internal bureaucracy and lack of honesty from clients sending out pitches is causing a headache too.

Many agencies feel that "unless you have an existing relationship pitching is mainly a benchmarking exercise," and that "there is more 'testing the market' than a true intent to find a new supplier so many pitches end up staying with the incumbent."

Brand and procurement teams need to be more honest about the reason for pitches, says one agency, especially if they have no real desire to change their agency partner. "BAFO (best and final offers) between agencies are not comparing like-for-like proposals or solutions, as the brief is too open-ended, or there's no budget stated," a respondent adds.

"THE KEY TO STANDING OUT LIES IN DRIVING INNOVATION AND PUSHING CREATIVE BOUNDARIES. ORGANISATIONS NEED TO SEEK INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS TO DIFFERENTIATE THEMSELVES"

Sometimes this comes down to clients running a "poorly considered RFP process or box ticking exercise knowing the incumbent will retain the work but to satisfy procurement," or "choosing to stay with the incumbent as the pitch process has been prepared late and switching supplier with the resulting short lead time is deemed too risky even if you have a more compelling solution."

Complaints about procurement involvement and internal bureaucracy are a running theme, often with "multiple stakeholders involved, leading to potential delays and conflicting priorities," and "key decision makers not always being involved in the pitch brief, causing delays in approval to move forward."

Competing with internal teams and the requirement for specific or relevant sector experience can hinder being selected for work, with some agencies even reporting: "We have also seen clients steal ideas in their entirety and deliver them with cheaper agencies."

Team resource

The time and money it takes an agency to deliver a pitch is quite extraordinary and this is often overlooked by the potential client, a respondent says. Added to this, there is mounting pressure to generate value for both agency and client: "The primary challenge when it comes to pitching for business is ROI. Pitching is heavy on time, resources and design cost and it's key that we're achieving ROI." Agencies invest a huge amount of time and resource – staff and financial – with no guarantee to win the business. This hits smaller agencies especially hard: "As a small agency the cost and time pressures in pitching for new business means we carefully consider what pitch invitations we accept," one such agency says.

Some are beginning to shun the pitch process: "The number of companies involved in a pitch can often be large, reducing the chances of success, so we avoid pitches and try to work by referral."

With intensifying competition, the need for differentiation has never been so acute: "Standing out in a crowded field requires constant innovation and a unique creative approach to capture client attention and win pitches."



Which destinations are in and which are out?

As agencies negotiate the global web of client preferences, a mosaic of trends emerges, showing how appetite for events influences destination choice.

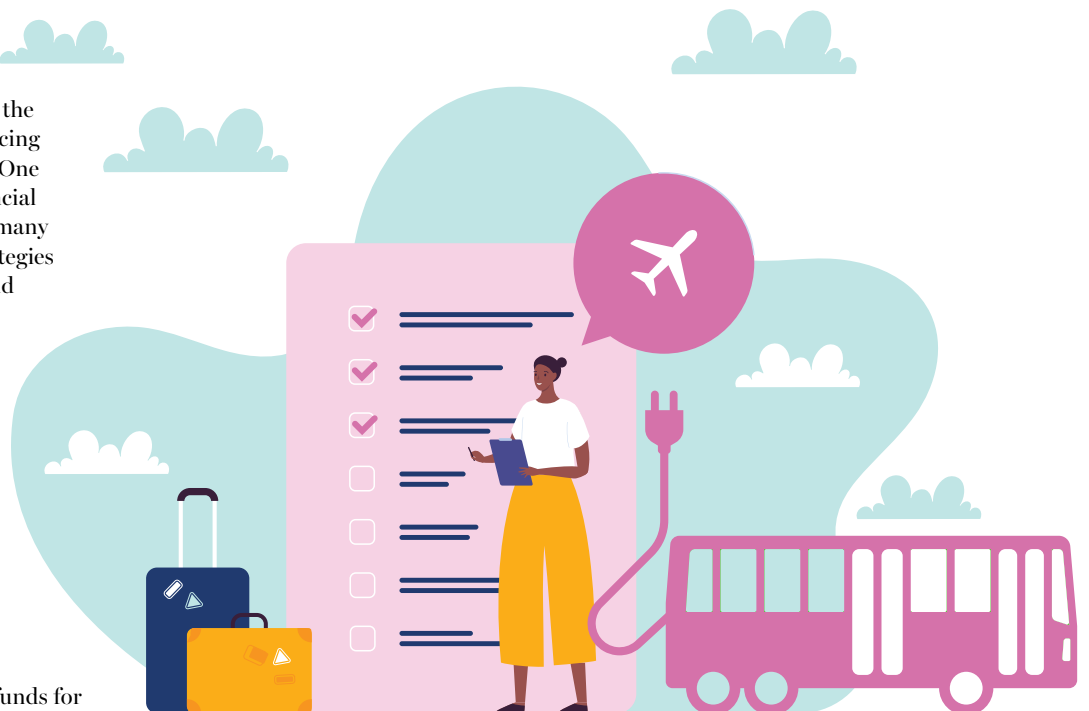
Geopolitical uncertainty

Geopolitical events such as wars and conflicts in regions like Ukraine and the Middle East are significantly influencing clients' choice of event destinations. One agency noted that, "with global financial and political uncertainty, we expect many larger companies to have robust strategies that prepare ahead of geopolitical and macroeconomic uncertainties.

These companies typically conduct rigorous risk assessments and have contingency plans allowing for last-minute adaptations. However, smaller and medium-sized businesses may struggle to weather the storm of conflict and supply chain issues should they continue for an extended period. On a positive note, we expect more budgets to be allocated for sustainability, sponsoring local communities and causes, or raising funds for those affected by global conflicts."

Safety and security have emerged as paramount considerations, another planner stated, "Geopolitical uncertainty continues to influence decisions on event destinations. Multiple ongoing conflicts around the world have had (and continue to have) a significant impact on travel to the countries and surrounding regions. These geopolitical

"GEOPOLITICAL UNCERTAINTY CONTINUES TO INFLUENCE DECISIONS. MULTIPLE ONGOING CONFLICTS AROUND THE WORLD CONTINUE TO HAVE A SIGNIFICANT IMPACT ON TRAVEL"



uncertainties cause concern for travelling safely and can affect various supply chains, leading to higher costs and longer lead times in some cases.

More clients are prioritising destinations perceived as safe havens amidst global instability. Concerns about potential disruptions and safety risks have led to a shift towards safe and more stable locations, sometimes favouring traditional hubs like the USA and Europe.

Environmental consciousness

The mounting importance of sustainability has wholly reshaped event appetite and destination preference. One planner states: "clients are opting for more environmentally

friendly travel arrangements. One client recently chose Paris as the incentive destination as the Eurostar is considered a more sustainable form of transport."

It appears clients are increasingly inclined to pick destinations with sustainable credentials, prioritising venues and locations that actively support carbon reduction efforts. As another planner noted, "we are seeing more of our clients choosing destinations based on the sustainable credentials of its hotels and venues and how they can support carbon reduction. Budget also plays a factor, of course. The volume of events may be increasing, but so are costs, and budgets don't always match that."

Factors such as accessibility by train, ▶

renewable energy policies and eco-friendly practices have gained prominence in destination selection criteria. One agency spoke about their increased consideration for climate risk and carbon footprints for the coming year, stating, “due to the increasing global emphasis on sustainability, businesses will be eager to lessen their carbon footprint. This is beyond the carbon footprint of travelling to the destination, but clients will also evaluate environmental factors of a location like local legislation, environmental policies, the availability of sustainable venues, access to public transport and so on.” This desire to reduce carbon emissions and minimise environmental impact has led to a preference for local and regional events reducing the need for long-haul travel.

Cost-effectiveness

Budgetary considerations continue to exert a significant influence on destination choice for events. Many agencies agree that the general client appetite is still strong, but budgets act

as a hindrance, one noting, “the appetite is definitely there and we have started the year really strong, but budget and lead times are still an issue.” Another agency stated that, “client appetite is still the same, but budget sign-off is quarter-to-quarter instead of annual, meaning we are getting last-minute requests or sign-off.”

Inflation and the size of budgets continues to drive more regional or local events. As another planner stated, “we’ve seen a reduction in long-haul destinations due to flight costs eating up a greater proportion of budgets.” Clients are vigilant about managing costs and seeking destinations that offer competitive pricing and value-added services.

World economics has impacted client views on the budgetary constraints; as one agency states: “there’s much more awareness and respect for current affairs but appetite for events is not impacted. The economy is much more in the public domain so events that shout louder typically bring bigger ROI. It also must be said that although client budgets have stayed the same, sadly

the global economy has not and prices have gone up significantly across the board in all areas, from hotels, F&B to transport and air. So we find ourselves working harder to create the same value and experience on effectively smaller budgets.”

However, another agency remarks, “destination wise, our (healthcare) clients generally tended to stick to ‘safe’ destinations anyway and they weather the economic crises relatively well, so budgets are more dependent on their pipelines rather than world events. There is still an appetite for events – both UK and international, but also virtual – and hybrid options are coming back on to the radar after the spike of IRL events we saw post-pandemic. Clients have become more selective and are often combining projects.”

The economic uncertainty compounded by factors like inflation and rising living costs has intensified the need for cost-effective solutions. However, this isn’t the case for all agencies. As one states: “our clients are investing more in their event programmes, and budgets are back to pre-pandemic levels as clients are experiencing such fantastic returns on investments. For example, one client said their event generated \$108 million in marketing influence, ▶

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PIPELINE**



representing a 78% YoY growth and a 10% attendance growth in comparison to last year, with 92% of registrants attending.”

Agencies are being tasked with finding creative approaches to deliver impactful events with tighter and more constrained budgets, often opting for shorter-haul destinations that offer a balance between affordability and quality.

Technological advancements

The advent of new technologies from AI to VR has revolutionised events over the past year, ushering in an era of more accessible hybrid and virtual experiences. Agencies noted that clients are increasingly embracing virtual or hybrid formats, driven by factors such as cost-efficiency, accessibility and safety considerations.

One agency touched on how global uncertainty is impacting the need for technology: “in an increasingly unsettled world, social anxiety remains high, so offering state-of-the art technology and thorough risk assessments provides peace of mind for planners and attendees.

Clients require destinations and venues with technology and infrastructures that can support all expectations including those of hybrid events, such as high-speed internet and modern AV equipment. Diversity and inclusion policies are also high on the agenda for many organisations. Destinations and venues need to be equipped and capable of offering amazing experiences for any and every type of attendee.”

Another discussed the importance of technology for the new generations of the workforce, “for Gen Z clients or audiences, promoting diversity and having



a strong technology infrastructure and unique venues offering is integral.” The ability to deliver immersive and engaging experiences through technology has led to a reimagining of event planning strategies, with agencies leveraging innovative solutions to cater to diverse and intergenerational audience preferences.

Cultural engagement and diversity

The cultural richness and diversity of destinations play a pivotal role in shaping clients’ appetites. Clients seek destinations that offer unique cultural experiences, fostering connections and creating memorable moments for attendees. As one agency states: “cultural engagement is a big factor. Businesses aim to align with major cultural events like the Olympics or Pride weekends to expand their reach and stay relevant to their audience.”

Additionally, there is a growing emphasis on diversity and inclusion, with clients prioritising decisions that demonstrate a commitment to equality and LGBTQ+ acceptance. One planner noted, “safety, equality and accessibility are the main focal points guiding client appetites. EDI covers many points but one often overlooked is a destination’s track record in equality. So many incentive destinations are unbelievably unsafe spaces for LGBTQ+ people.

Hotels, hotel stakeholders and shareholders, suppliers and destinations that infringe equality are starting to be avoided – certainly among our clients. As an industry, we simply should not be engaging in any supplier, destination or community that does not reflect equality for all.” The perception and optics of a destination as inclusive and welcoming have become essential considerations for both client and planners.

Flexibility and adaptability

The volatile nature of the current global state underscores the importance of flexibility and adaptability in event planning. As one agency notes, “flexibility and agility is a key element for us. Unpredictable times prioritise destinations with flexible policies.”

It appears clients are drawn to destinations and venues that offer flexible policies and robust contingency plans, allowing for last-minute adaptations in response to unforeseen circumstances. The ability to navigate uncertainties and mitigate risks has become a hallmark of successful event agencies, enabling them to provide reassurance and deliver tangible ROI amidst evolving challenges.



What does the future look like?

Despite challenges and setbacks, the outlook for the events industry is bright, say agencies. Here are some of their thoughts on what the future may hold.

“Very bright! It is a fantastic industry with plenty of opportunity. We seem to be connected – and help each other more than ever.”

“Continued growth, adaptation and evolution of event types, and more live and experiential events on a bigger scale.”

“It’s an incredibly exciting time, and there is so much more scope to be creative. Audiences want something meaningful, so with new tech and new ways of delivering content, the world is our oyster.”

“I am strongly optimistic about the future of our industry. I feel the return after Covid has been strong but we must keep up to date with the latest technologies and ensure we incorporate them into our future plans rather than stagnate as an industry.”

“No one is better at the business of human connections. Live events continue to play such an important part or organisations inspiring, involving, educating people who are critical to their success.”

“With the pace of change, the continued integration of unlikely combinations of

“THE FUTURE OF THE INDUSTRY LIES IN FINDING INNOVATIVE AND COST-EFFECTIVE WAYS TO MAXIMISE THE IMPACT OF EVENTS WHILE OPTIMISING RESOURCE ALLOCATION”

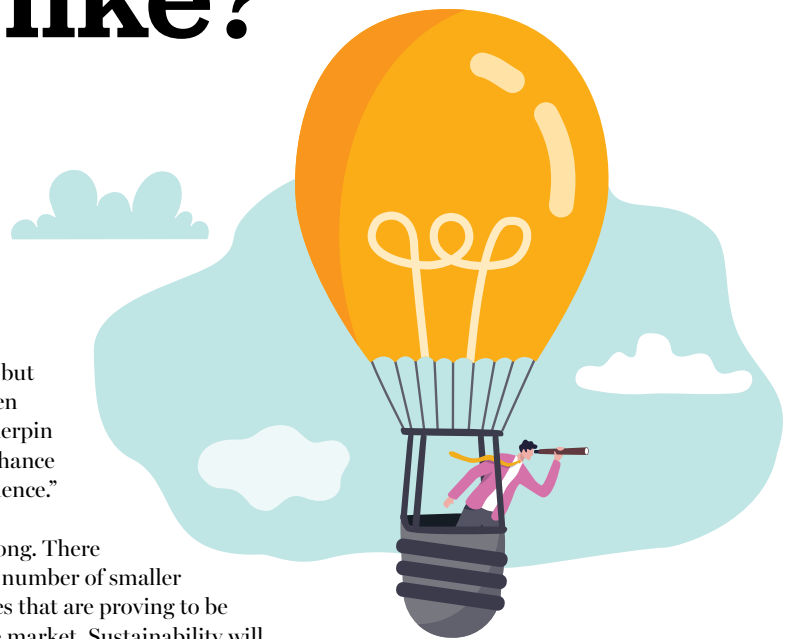
tech in innovative and creative ways will be prevalent, but success will be seen by those who underpin objectives and enhance the human experience.”

“The future is strong. There are an increasing number of smaller upcoming agencies that are proving to be challengers in the market. Sustainability will (and should) be a key focus area, as well as continuing to focus on the objective and the ‘why’ – how can we make an impact?”

“Attendees are seeking more than just information; they crave purpose and meaning from their meetings. This trend is driving a shift towards incorporating behavioural science and prioritising attendee wellbeing to enhance the overall event experience. The future of the industry lies in finding innovative and cost-effective ways to maximise the impact of events while optimising resource allocation.”

“The industry is going from strength to strength, and recruitment is finally settling. But now we need a more level trend – business demand has been up and down year-on-year since Covid, making forecasting and planning more of an issue than it was historically.”

“The future of events is bright as people continue to recognise the value of in-person meetings and networking. Short lead times and changing client briefs are still challenging but that is the nature of the market – make it happen!”



“‘Money can’t buy’ experiential events with tactically cultivated audiences are the future, bringing tech in tow! We will need to be more creative, understanding of clients’ real underlying objectives and our allocative resources will need to flex dramatically to accommodate. A wise colleague said to me recently ‘there’s been events since before Roman times, and there will be forever more!’ – we just need to continue to manage them in a new age!”

“Events are essential for all successful businesses. They provide an incredible platform to collaborate and educate. We believe they will go from strength to strength over the coming years with an increasing key focus on the demonstrable value they have provided.”

“It’s exciting, with the evolution of AI and technology along with sustainability considerations and different generations wanting different experiences. The future is bright but challenging.”



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The logo consists of a dark blue rectangular background. On the left side, there is a vertical red bar. To the right of the red bar, the word 'haymarket' is written in a white, lowercase, sans-serif font. A small registered trademark symbol (®) is located at the top right of the word.