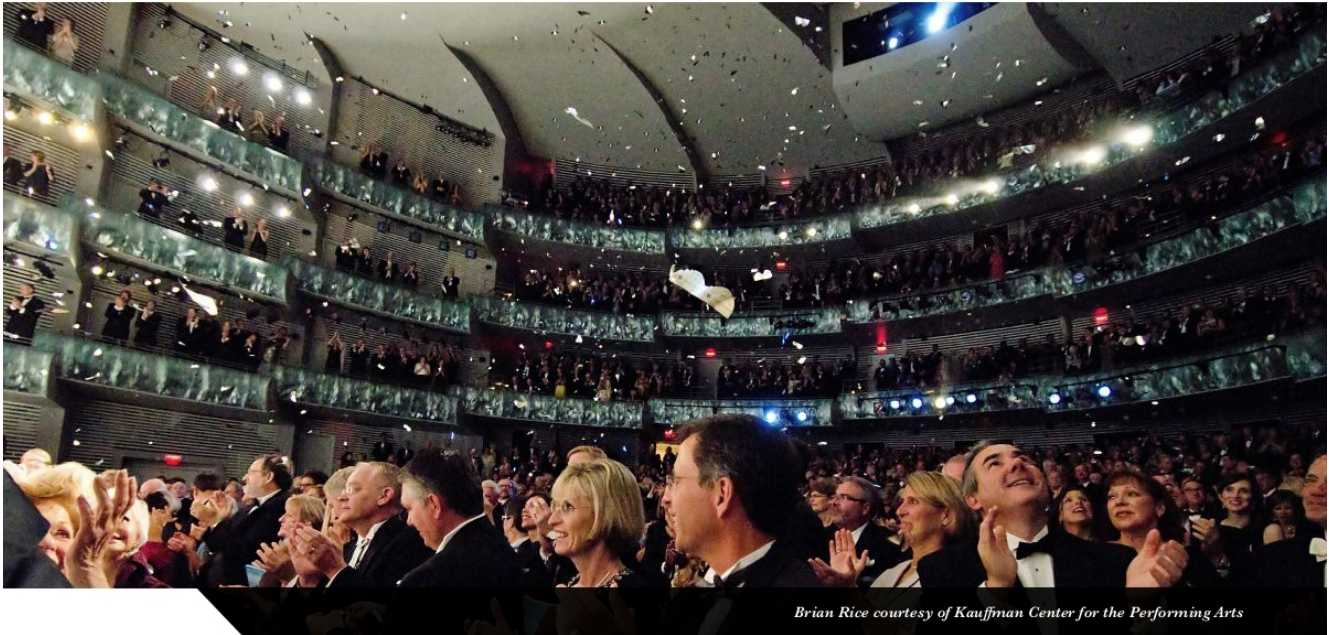


EXPERIENCING VENUES FOR THE FIRST TIME, AGAIN

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Brian Rice courtesy of Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts

After an unpredictable year we're all ready to lose ourselves in a live event again—to feel that sense of anticipation as we walk through the doors and find our way to our seats. As the lights dim and the first round of applause ripples around the room, we already know what it'll feel like—that unmistakable sense of release. That feeling of coming home. Of being in a familiar place with like-minded people, where we can forget our troubles and be transported to another world through entertainment.

It's the experience of being together that we've missed the most. Despite the miracles of technology that have kept us entertained and connected with loved ones this past year, we've realized that nothing beats the experience of being in a room buzzing with people, energy, and excitement. As venues begin to welcome guests inside again, we'll do well to remember this: The simple fact that we're reopening is not enough to rebuild our communities, audiences, and brands. The entire guest journey and experience as our communities rediscover our venues is what will determine the strength of that recovery—and how often they'll return in the future.

Guest experience is more than just great customer service and a friend-

ly greeting, it's about offering a quality service and an enjoyable experience in every single interaction that guests make with your brand or product. This begins from the moment they reach out to your venue online, in person, or over the phone to purchase a ticket or search for information, and it continues on the day of the event as they move around the venue, interacting with staff, presenters/performers, and each other. At every stage of this journey, including after the event has concluded and they're leaving to return home, guests should feel part of a safe, welcoming, and inclusive community.

EVALUATE THE OPPORTUNITIES

While venue managers usually excel at creating a guest-friendly experience, reopening gives us a unique opportunity to reexamine how our venues are designed and operated. After a long absence, even our most loyal and regular guests will be seeing our venues with fresh eyes, so we have the rare opportunity to make a new first impression. And we want to make it count.

THIS LEADS US TO POSE SEVERAL QUESTIONS:

- What can we do to re-imagine our venues to make them more enjoyable and inclusive places to visit?

- What additional protocols should operators consider in a post-pandemic world, beyond basic health screening checks and additional sanitation provisions?
- Should we make permanent changes to our venues?
- How can we adapt our spaces to be flexible as social distancing rules change?
- How will these choices affect the customer experience?

While venues still in design can be reimaged to create more spacious rooms and corridors for safer people flow, more breakout spaces for smaller gatherings, and higher-end HVAC and filtration systems for ventilation, existing venues can't be adapted so easily. Upgrading these facilities to keep pace with those changing design trends will be costly and, most likely longer term, unnecessary. Since we can't just move existing walls to create more room for the attendees to gather in, we have to look at our spaces anew to anticipate problem areas and be creative about using spaces that may have been underutilized in the past.

There are hundreds of variables to consider in preparation for fully reopening, and we strongly recommend that you include a fresh pair of eyes on the matter. Your familiarity with your community will be invaluable in knowing what they'll want and expect when they return, but your familiarity may lead you to miss things that contribute to the optimal guest experience. To get it right, you need someone who can see your space with the same, new eyes as your attendees.

Let's examine some of the most common issues we'll face as an industry when we reopen.

SAFETY FIRST

Creating an environment where guests can feel safe within their chosen level of social distancing, while being aware of venue capacity needs for revenue generation is one of the more immediate concerns. While scientific research suggests that fully vaccinated people are less likely to have asymptomatic infection or transmit COVID-19 to others, we mustn't forget that research is ongoing and that some of our community members are not—and will not—be vaccinated, including young children. Guest preferences for distancing will vary and may not be easy to predict at first. Make guest safety and meeting different comfort levels your top priority—guests will pay attention to how venues manage this when they first return.

ENTRANCE PROTOCOLS

Imagine mapping your guest experience, starting with how you will welcome them upon entry. This is their first encounter and will set the tone for the rest of their experience, so it's imperative that we do all we can to get it right. Every venue has unique entry/gate management procedures and restrictions, so there's no one-size-fits-all to this.

Consider all the tasks that now must be completed upon entry of each guest—security screening, ID check, ticket scanning, and now potentially vaccination and/or negative test verification. What can you do to streamline and organize this process to instill confidence in guests who may be feeling excited, anxious, or fearful about attending their first in-person event in over a year? Will you need to create separate entry points for vaccinated guests and un-vaccinated guests, who you may need to check for symptoms or a negative test result?

CLEAR COMMUNICATIONS

Loading guests into their seats or into meeting rooms for an event will take longer than it has previously, so remember to keep it simple and don't disregard the importance of being friendly yet efficient during

this process. Communicating the process and your expectations to your guests in advance and while in line will help achieve this—and help to avoid confusion and frustration among those who remember how things used to be done or how they previously traveled around and experienced your venue. Well trained staff that are armed with a knowledge base to inform guests are also an invaluable part of the quality experience.

Advance operational planning, including physically walking the experience with key team members, and a communications plan will help you to establish the best guest experience, while also making sure to complete all the tasks to keep everyone safe and open. For example, if your staff will be wearing masks, consider asking the front-line staff to wear clear masks. These clear masks not only allow guests to see a smile, but they also help with hearing in a potentially loud setting. A clear mask can also be more welcoming and inclusive for those with hearing loss or cognitive issues that may be aided by lip reading.

PINCH POINT PREVENTION

Key zones where large numbers of people gather throughout an event, such as around box offices, will call stations, restrooms, and concessions, are important areas to consider when keeping optimal guest experience and safety in mind. Simple operational changes using digital ticketing, contact-less payments, and pre-order services for refreshments can help to avoid or reduce long lines. Improving signage throughout the venue can also direct attendees through the space efficiently, to designated areas that may not have existed pre-pandemic.

COMFORT ZONES

Offering special social distancing zones may also be something worth considering. Depending on how much space your venue has—or what community expectations are—you may be able to offer guests the option of seating areas and intermission facilities where it's easier for them to be socially distanced and where they may feel more comfortable having space between them and other attendees. For any zone or special designated areas, remember to keep them accessible and to include clear signage so guests know exactly which direction to head toward. (We can't emphasize enough the importance of good signage!)

PLAN FOR THE FUTURE, AIM FOR EXCELLENCE

But it's also important not to focus solely on today's social distancing needs, which could be relaxed or reinstated at any time. Having a plan that is adaptable will be a key to your success, just as is remembering that the quality guest experience is more than just how you execute these post-pandemic related tasks.

As you map your guest experience and update your service standards and guidelines, don't forget about the importance of inclusivity and accessibility, as well as your minimum service behaviors. Guest experience refresher trainings as a part of re-opening trainings will help to remind front line staff and volunteers of the common purpose that guides them through their tasks. As you re-design your guest experience program, consider what can strengthen and improve upon what is already established practice in your venue. There's often a simple, achievable, and more cost-effective solution than starting from scratch. And, if you're not sure about something, it never hurts to get a second opinion! **VP**

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