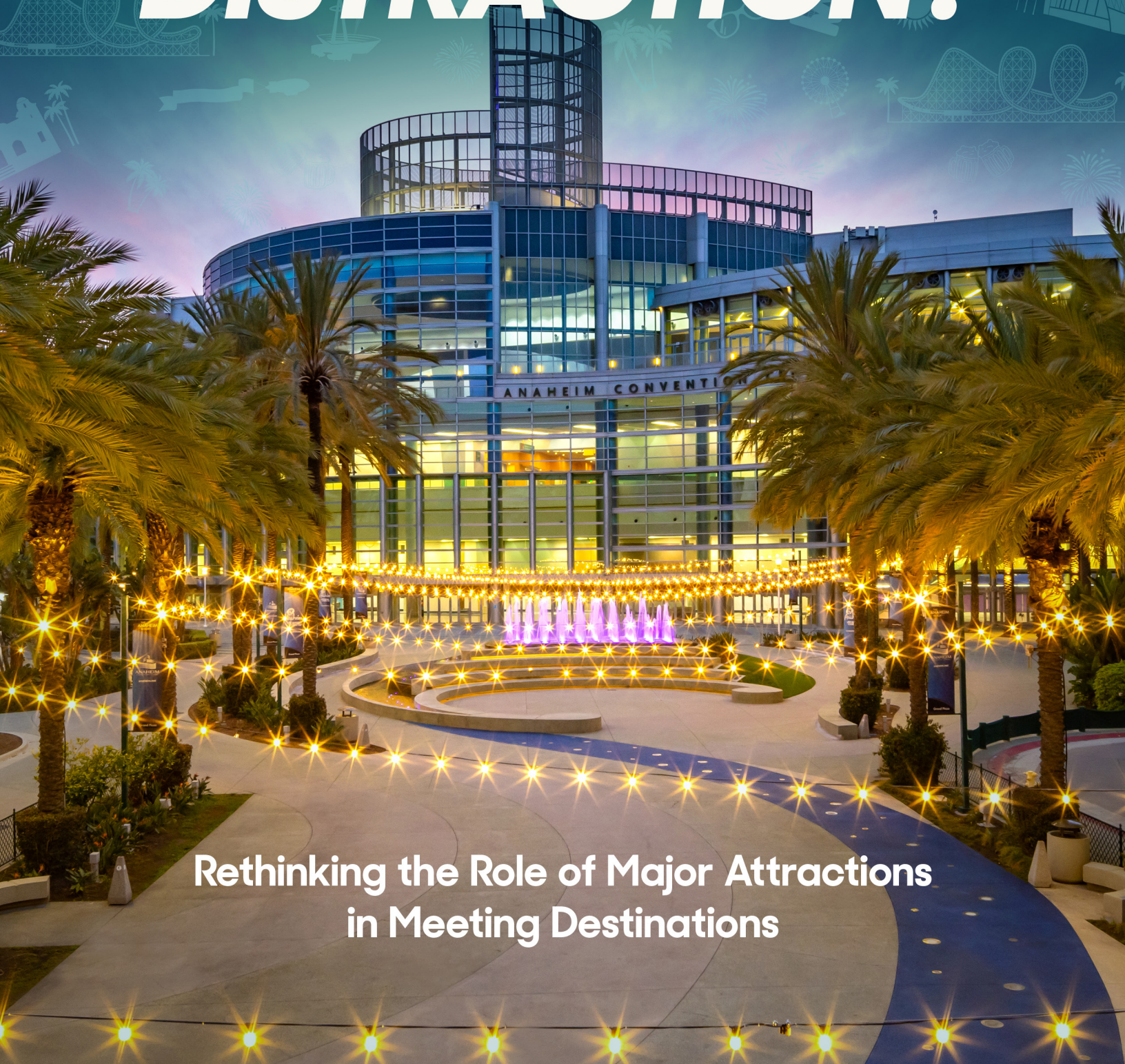
VISIT Anaheim

ATTRACTION DISTRACTION?



Rethinking the Role of Major Attractions in Meeting Destinations



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71%

of attendees identified the host destination as a motivator for attending business events

Executive Summary

This whitepaper explores the advantages and considerations of hosting events in destinations with major attractions, and highlights how these high-energy environments can boost attendance, create built-in engagement, and elevate attendee experience.

Using Anaheim as the prime example, it shows how planners can capture the benefits of world-class entertainment while still maintaining control and focus, thanks to the city's walkable campus, strong infrastructure, added security measures, and experienced convention services teams that help seamlessly manage or strategically separate attraction elements as needed.

Why Destination Now Influences Attendance More Than Ever

The way we think about destinations is changing... and that impacts business events. What drives people to say yes to business events? For over 90% of people, education is the main driver of event attendance, while 76% percent of people prioritize networking and social interaction. So far, so good... but the destination itself, and the perceived experience it allows, is a close third, motivating 71% of respondents. That's a departure from how things used to be, where event destinations were chosen based on value or convenience, rather than distinctiveness.

Now, the game has changed fundamentally. Since 2017 planners are increasingly choosing specialty venues such as sports stadiums, museums, and vineyards, for networking events, according to IACC's Meeting Room of the Future report. These made up 51% of venues in 2025, compared to only 33% in 2023.

Attendees are looking for exciting, memorable meetings, rather than three days in a hotel, New York-based event planner Karen Shackman told The Meeting Magazines. "An experiential strategy is also a way of better engaging attendees for a more successful meeting," Shackman was quoted as saying. "That's why it's becoming a mainstream trend. ...what you're seeing is planners looking at just how far they can push the envelope to create experiences that attendees will really remember."



"In fact, Disney is an essential part of Anaheim's success. Disney puts a bubble around Anaheim that creates safety, security, cleanliness, hospitality spirit, and walkability."

Ronnie Collins, CSO Visit Anaheim

This also ties in with the upward trend of "bleisure" travel. Attendees' focus on work-life balance and wellness means they are increasingly likely to integrate leisure activities, even while attending work events. In 2024, 55% of business travelers took at least two trips that blended business and leisure, according to The State of Corporate Travel and Expense 2025 published by Navan + Skift. More than half of business travelers took the opportunity to explore local areas. Visit Anaheim previously found that 44% of bleisure travelers had actually turned down work trips, as there would not have been enough leisure time at their destination.

The Draw of Major-Attraction Destinations

When it comes to host cities, major-attraction destinations are in a different league. These destinations are often described as "dream" or "bucket-list" destinations. They capture travelers' imagination and offer a wide range of activities and experiences. More than 70% of travelers say entertainment and cultural experiences play a greater role in their destination choices, according to research by Skift and Qiddiya City.

Major-attraction destinations offer prestige and even cultural cachet. They increase event desirability and, ultimately, attendance levels. But planners often worry that hosting their event at a major-attraction destination could end up hurting engagement as attendees shift focus to destination attractions.



"We had a convention that was looking at our destination a few years back, and they were reluctant to even let us bid," recalls Ronnie Collins, Chief Sales Officer for Visit Anaheim. "I reached out to the planner and I said, 'I think we're a perfect fit for your convention and I would love the opportunity to bid.' Their response to me was, 'We don't consider Anaheim a viable destination because we don't want Disney."

"In fact, Disney is an essential part of Anaheim's success. Disney puts a bubble around Anaheim that creates safety, security, cleanliness, hospitality spirit, and walkability. In Anaheim, you can enjoy as much Disney as your schedule permits or not at all, opting instead for any number of other unique experiences in and around the city," he explains.

This gives Anaheim an advantage compared to other destinations. As a non-urban city, one of the few with a large convention center, it is relatively insulated from common urban issues such as safety and security and homelessness.

"They did allow us to bid on the convention, and we were lucky enough to win. They executed their convention and had the best attendance they've ever had, and they're looking at future business with us," he says.

Major-attraction destinations offer several benefits to planners that make business travel easier. They have strong transportation infrastructure, so they're easier to get to, with plenty of hotel beds and dining options. They're also likely to have advanced technological support, including complimentary, high-speed Wi-Fi – and trusted, professional event service providers. For event organizers, these built-in benefits allow them to plan with confidence.

Destination Concerns Holding Planners Back

Meeting and event planners are usually laser-focused on two areas: controlling costs and protecting attendee experience. A common concern around major-attraction destinations is that it will yield higher costs and less value or



may fail to meet attendees' high expectations. Other concerns like crowd management and mobility, program engagement, and logistical coordination are all evaluated in the site selection process, but are prioritized differently based on program needs.

Managing Cost and Availability Fluctuations

Research shows that 73% of event organizers exceed their original budget, so cost control is uppermost for many planners. Since 2019, costs for venue, catering, and audio-visual equipment have surged by as much as 25%, reports NeucitePress.

"Every destination has become so expensive," says Collins. "One advantage of choosing a destination with major attractions is the built-in programming this offers meeting planners. Whereas if you're in a destination that doesn't have a lot of built-in entertainment options, you may need to include additional programming such as musical entertainment or tours outside the destination. While there are some higher costs, because we're such a big leisure destination, there are efficiencies where you can save money as a planner."

It's also true that location significantly impacts pricing. Tier-1 cities can be up to 40% more expensive than tier-2 destinations, but make up for this with superior infrastructure. And peak tourism periods can drive up costs in highly visited areas, sometimes resulting in substantially higher costs for attendees than were budgeted for, across air travel, hotels, and venues.

This is where relationships with destination marketing organizations (DMOs) can add value. DMOs are able to work with planners to put early blocks on hotel rooms and recommend mid-sized alternatives. As true destination experts with valuable, local partnerships, they can connect organizers with appropriate resources. They can also keep you informed on local events that could impact pricing and availability.

Generally, holding a convention in California is likely to cost slightly more, due to built-in costs such as energy and labor, but it also comes with advantages. "You're going to get outstanding weather; you can do an event outside any day you want. It's safe, and it's secure," Collins says.

Working with the local DMO, like Visit Anaheim, can help planners lean into their destination and unlock efficiencies. By hosting a convention in a city like Anaheim, planners can tap into unique local expertise. This means Anaheim can support programming with unique keynote speakers, subject matter experts, and facilitators to engage attendees looking for respective industry insights.

Maintaining Program Focus

Event planners are often concerned that attendees may choose to skip conference programming in favor of tourist activities. But there's little point in booking an attractive destination if there's no time to enjoy it. Local attractions don't have to be distractions. Instead, planners can keep attendees engaged and design experiences by including off-site activities in their event programming. Weaving in ample free time also alleviates concerns around attendance. Focusing on core programming that is immersive and compelling can help meet attendees' needs for education, networking, and adventure.

Connie Strouse, Vice President of Events & Field Marketing at technology provider Telarus, organizes a three-day conference for around 1,800 delegates every August. She says location is critical to their success – especially as many delegates want the option to bring their families along. Anaheim's location allows many delegates to take direct flights to the destination, while hotels provide soft-shoulder bookings for those who want to add extra days.

She admits that her stakeholders were initially skeptical about booking Anaheim, but the experience was transformational. "When we got back from that event, my executive leadership team told me to book it again. I fell out of my chair!" she says. "I rarely grade myself an A for an experience, but it really was. And we got a near-perfect score from our attendees."



"We planned our event around using the attractions," says Strouse. "The night before our event started, we used Disneyland as a VIP experience for our top 10 partners, giving them an exclusive cocktail hour event. We also embraced Angel Stadium and offered a baseball game to another group of people. So by doing that, we incorporated the fun of the destination into the business end. We also worked with Disney for our main partner event, where we did an After Dark buyout of Disney's California Adventure Park. That gave us the park to ourselves. It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience for every single one of those people."

"There are so many ways to embrace the area and get out of the hotel and conference center. You can leverage Visit Anaheim for contracting and logistics arrangements. Work with the attractions and leverage them," she says. Strouse says they were able to book out the entire Anaheim Marriott hotel, within walking distance of the Anaheim Convention Center. They booked food trucks for an authentic Southern California feel and visited the Anaheim Packing District.
Her advice? "Go outside of your conference space. A lot of conference planners make the mistake of keeping attendees inside the hotel and the conference space. We've learned they want to breathe fresh air, and so we move them outside. Then they're fine the rest of the day with the structured program."

"Fortunately, many attraction-driven destinations have invested heavily in infrastructure and technology designed to accommodate high visitor volumes."

140+

Meetings & Conventions hosted in Anaheim annually

1M

Average annual attendees hosted

Crowd Density and Mobility Planning

High tourist volumes are often viewed as a challenge, but with thoughtful planning, they can be effectively managed. Popular destinations naturally attract larger crowds, which can lead to longer wait times for attractions, increased traffic, and busier public spaces during peak periods. For meeting planners, these factors require proactive coordination to ensure attendees can enjoy the destination without impacting the event schedule or overall experience.

Fortunately, many attraction-driven destinations have invested heavily in infrastructure and technology designed to accommodate high visitor volumes. Timed-entry reservations, mobile apps with real-time wait times and navigation, advanced transportation systems, and coordinated crowd management strategies help visitors move efficiently throughout the destination. Scheduling offsite activities during non-peak hours, securing group reservations in advance, and incorporating flexible itineraries can further minimize congestion while maximizing the attendee experience.

Destination design also plays a significant role. Walkable convention campuses, like Anaheim's, allow attendees to travel between hotels, meeting venues, restaurants, and attractions without relying on vehicles, reducing both travel time and traffic-related delays. Dedicated pedestrian pathways and integrated district planning create a safer, more seamless environment, allowing planners to take advantage of nearby attractions while maintaining control over logistics, attendee flow, and event timing.

Logistical Coordination

Successful meetings and conventions depend on seamless coordination behind the scenes. While planners oversee the attendee experience, destination marketing organizations (DMOs), convention services teams, and local partners play a critical role in managing the operational details that keep events running smoothly. From securing permits and coordinating transportation to facilitating public safety resources and navigating local regulations, experienced destination partners help planners reduce complexity and mitigate risk before attendees ever arrive.

One of the greatest advantages of hosting in an established meetings destination is access to local expertise. DMOs have deep relationships with venues, hotels, municipal agencies, law enforcement, transportation providers, and event suppliers, enabling them to anticipate challenges and coordinate solutions quickly. Their familiarity with seasonal demand, major citywide events, traffic patterns, and emergency response procedures allows planners to build contingency plans with confidence. Whether preparing for severe weather, adjusting transportation routes, or responding to an unexpected incident, local teams provide guidance that helps events remain safe, organized, and on schedule.

In Anaheim, this level of coordination is part of everyday operations. Visit Anaheim's Destination Services team supports more than 140 meetings and conventions annually, giving planners access to a seasoned network of professionals experienced in events of every size and complexity. From coordinating with city agencies and venue partners to helping develop customized logistics and risk mitigation plans, the team serves as an extension of the planner's staff. This collaborative approach allows organizers to focus on delivering exceptional attendee experiences while relying on local experts to manage the operational details that ensure events run seamlessly.

How Major Attractions Can Strengthen Event Outcomes

Even with the perceived challenges posed by major-attraction destinations, they remain a popular choice for event hosting. Here are some of the other advantages these destinations offer, which can sometimes go overlooked.

- Greater attendee appeal. Well-known destinations with recognizable brands are more likely to capture attention, drive registrations, and increase attendance.
- More opportunities for memorable programming. A diverse mix of attractions, dining,



entertainment, and cultural experiences allows planners to create richer, more engaging agendas.
- Stronger accessibility and connectivity. Major destinations typically offer more direct flights, robust transportation networks, and walkable districts that simplify the attendee journey.
- Purpose-built infrastructure. Large convention destinations are equipped with modern venues, hotel capacity, and technology designed to support events of every size.
- Enhanced safety and operational readiness. Established destinations invest in comprehensive security, emergency preparedness, and coordinated response plans that help planners mitigate risk with confidence.

Additionally, those destinations that are investing in their own future growth help to sustain event appeal over the long term – often a key metric for planners. For instance, Anaheim's OCVIBE, a mixed-use development, is expected to be completed in 2030 and will offer a new entertainment and cultural district for Southern California. Event organizers can strategically use anticipation of what's to come to drive attendee interest.

Anaheim's Perspective



Robert Donahue, Director of Sales and Services at Disneyland® Resort says Anaheim-based events see stronger registration and attendance as delegates take advantage of the area's location to add on a trip to the parks either before or after their meeting.

"Planning ahead is critical, as is talking with my team in advance to identify white space on the program that can give attendees free time or the opportunity for an excursion. Make sure there's time for the destination experience," he advises. While Disneyland® Resort can provide experiences for meetings of every size, Donahue says his team likes to understand the group's needs first and tailor the activity accordingly.

"Event marketing and promotion are critical," he adds. "It's really important to plan ahead, market ahead, and then make sure the attendees know there are plenty of opportunities for pre- and post-stays to enjoy a Southern California experience."

Event planners are becoming more discerning. "What we've seen is there is a desire for customized, personalized and thoughtful experiences for groups, no matter the size. Expectations are high and professional event organizers are really looking for destinations that can deliver a very creative, strong concept. Of course, you still have to deliver strongly on hospitality and food," he says.

Bolstered Safety and Risk Management

Major-attraction destinations that are accustomed to high visitation numbers come into their own, as they proactively invest in safety and security. These landmarks are aware that potential guests assess them on how safe will be when visiting, so they proactively invest in safety mechanisms to protect visitors and employees alike.

In an era of mega-events, where large-scale events are shaping attendee expectations and experiences, it is critical for host cities to prioritize emergency response plans to keep visitors,

athletes, performers, fans, and spectators safe. It's about collaboration, using advanced technology to anticipate and respond before incidents become unmanageable.

Mike Lyster, the City of Anaheim's Chief Communications Officer, says the city welcomes 26 million visitors a year, creating a responsibility to host them safely. In addition to the theme parks and convention center, Anaheim also has professional baseball and hockey teams – all of which bring visitors.

"We've hosted championships before. We're a city that hosts everyone, from heads of state, presidents, vice presidents, to major celebrities at least every month. All of this brings peace of mind for the average visitor. If we can safely accommodate visits like that, or events like a major playoff, then there is a baseline of safety for everybody who visits our city," he says.

Hosting presidential and other high-profile visits can be particularly challenging, but Anaheim has done so successfully many times before.

Such a track record is enabled by proactive and thorough coordination behind the scenes, with Anaheim's dedicated police, fire and emergency services departments working closely with the city's attractions, hotels, and other.

"There can always be challenges, as with any destination. It's about how those issues are addressed in the moment and going forward," Lyster says.

Case Study: How Anaheim Turns Major Attractions into a Strategic Advantage

Anaheim demonstrates that major attractions and successful business events are not mutually exclusive, they can strengthen one another when supported by thoughtful destination planning. While the city is home to world-renowned attractions, professional sports, and a vibrant entertainment district, it has also been intentionally designed to support meetings and conventions of all scales. A walkable resort campus, the largest convention center on the West Coast, abundant hotel inventory, and integrated transportation network allow attendees to move seamlessly between accommodations, event venues, dining, and attractions with minimal disruption.

For planners, the destination addresses many of the common concerns associated with high-profile tourism markets. Visit Anaheim and the Anaheim Convention Center work alongside organizers throughout the planning process, providing expertise in logistics, hotel coordination, attendee marketing, transportation, and on-site event support. Combined with experienced public safety teams, established security protocols, and coordinated emergency preparedness, planners gain confidence that operational risks are being proactively managed while attendees enjoy a world-class destination.

Rather than competing with business events, Anaheim's attractions enhance them. The city's infrastructure, destination services, and decades of experience hosting more than 140 conventions annually enable planners to leverage nearby entertainment as an extension of the attendee experience—creating memorable events while maintaining the control, safety, and professionalism expected of a premier meetings destination.

Practical Takeaways for Event Professionals

Planning an event in a major-attraction destination? Here are key pointers for addressing stakeholder concerns around attendee engagement in tourist-driven destinations:

Balancing Engagement with Program Focus

- Protect the program agenda by scheduling tours and outings for break time and evenings. Attendees are more likely to attend core sessions when they know that leisure activities have been provided after hours.



- Use destination attractions such as networking icebreakers and team-building activities.
- Bring the destination to attendees by including local music or delicacies in the core program.
- Survey attendees on their priorities before the event to protect key content.

Leveraging Safety and Infrastructure

- Strong transportation infrastructure means attendees will spend less money and time arriving to your events
- Highlight major events (if any) as investments in ease of travel for attendees.
- Explore DMO partnerships with local vendors to elevate attendee experiences
- Maximize walkability – plan activities that take place close to main meeting venues.

Coordinate with Local Teams

- Get to know the IT, ops, and local liaisons early on and map out workflows and responsibilities.
- Understand emergency preparedness and security protocols from the beginning. Dry-runs with destination-specific scenarios help you refine contingency planning. Consider coordinating a site planning visit with the host DMO.

Questions to Ask Your Host Destination:

Attendee experience and appeal:

- What unique local offerings are on offer to complement attractions and make for a well-rounded attendee experience?
- How have other events leveraged local attractions to engage attendees?
- Can you provide past client or attendee feedback or references from similar events?

Value, costs, and pricing:

- What are on and off-peak tourism seasons I should keep in mind when planning my event?
- What ways can the destination support cost mitigation?

Safety, security, and logistics:

- What security and emergency preparedness protocols are in place to maintain attendee safety?
- In the event of an incident, what support can I expect?
- Can you help me develop contingency plans for my event?

Conclusion

Major attractions don't have to compete with your event, instead, they can elevate it. While planners may initially associate attraction-driven destinations with added complexity, the right destination transforms those perceived challenges into opportunities, delivering stronger attendance, richer attendee experiences, and greater event value without compromising operational control.

Anaheim demonstrates what's possible when a destination is intentionally designed to support both tourism and business events. There's a reason Anaheim is 3rd on TSNN's Top 10 Cities for hosting 12 of the 250 most influential exhibitions and events in the U.S. Its walkable campus, world-class infrastructure, coordinated safety and security measures, and experienced convention services allow planners to capitalize on the energy and appeal of a globally recognized destination while maintaining a seamless event experience. For organizations looking to maximize engagement, attract attendees, and create lasting impact, the question is no longer whether to choose a destination with major attractions, it's whether that destination is built to make those attractions work in your favor.





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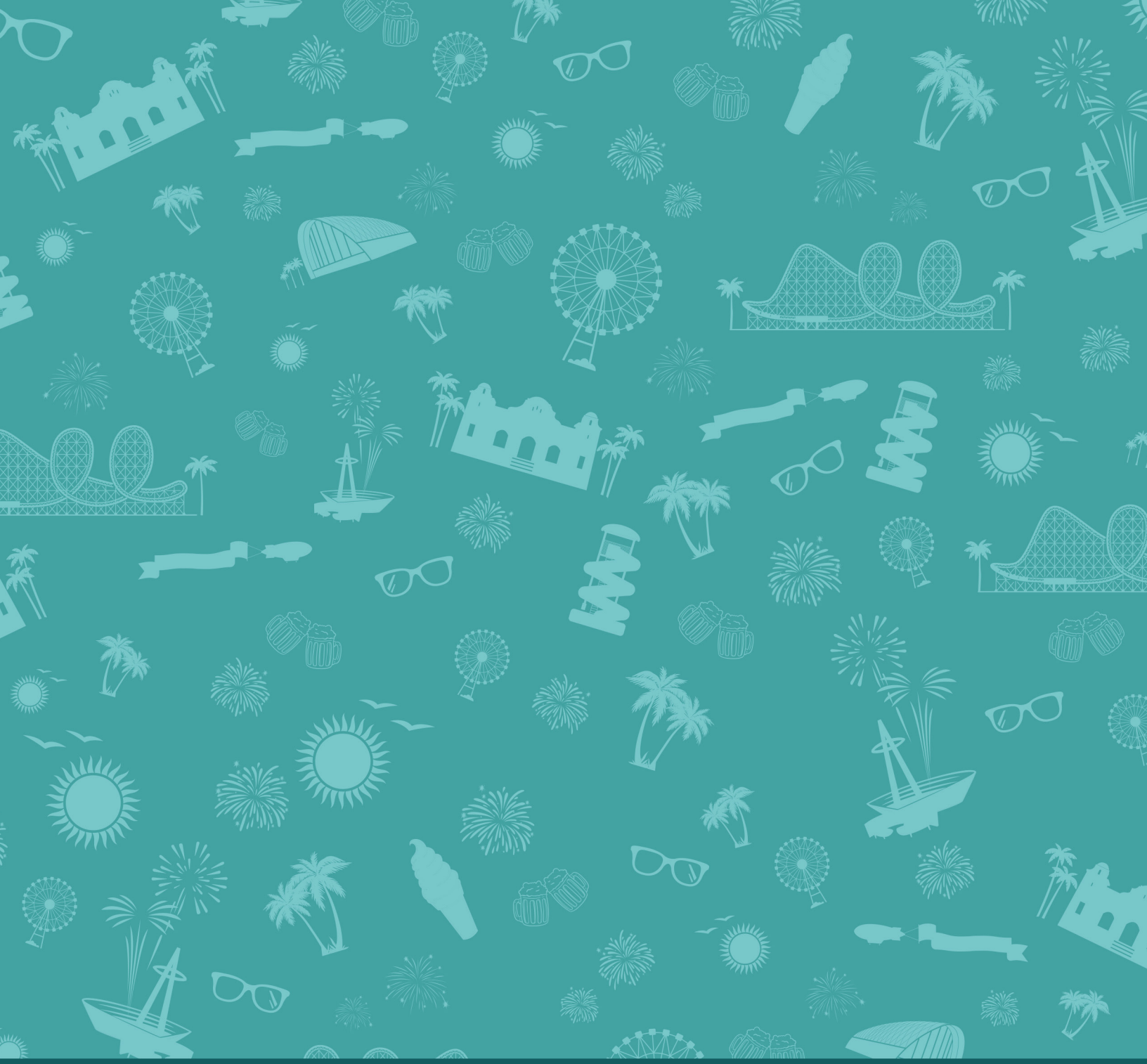
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