



Caught in the storm

Exhibition, entertainment and events leaders speak out

It's not news that Covid-19 hit the world by storm at the end of 2019, and bit by bit we all learned the effects it would have on every industry, community and individual. After almost two years, we now have a bigger picture – but that too is not without its bumps in the road.

With the world's leading minds applied to the effects of the pandemic, we spoke to leaders in the exhibition, entertainment and events industries, a group hard hit on every front. Here's what they had to say.



Hard times, but hybrid innovations have helped

Carol Weaving
MDRX Africa

Many companies have had to scale-down and unfortunately some have had to close their doors. Virtual has played a vital role in keeping our exhibitors, visitors and buyers connected but our suppliers and venues have suffered the most. It is crucial that we are able to host hybrid events where we can take the best of virtual and marry it with the best of in-person.

South Africa's meetings, incentives, conventions and exhibitions industry is vital sector to attract foreign visitors and investment. In 2019, 11.4% of foreign tourism was attributed to this industry, where about one million business delegates are hosted annually.

In the face of adversity comes innovation, and the events and exhibition industry has embraced digital and transformed their offerings – a key part of what has enabled us to survive until now.

The vaccination rollout and other steps to ensure safety, such as a health screening or proof of a negative test or vaccination, minimise risk and should remain in place for the foreseeable future. By doing so, more brands will begin to activate again, and consumer confidence will continue to grow for the sector. To ensure visitors comply, we will provide them with safety expectations prior to the event.

How government could assist at this time is to focus on shutting down superspreader events and also note that exhibitions are not the same as mass gatherings. We are able to adhere to Covid-19 protocols far more effectively than shopping centres which are still open to trade.

A word to Government: The events and exhibition industries are a major contributor to GDP and would impact the economy positively. We must be allowed to operate within the guidelines presented.

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Exhibition, entertainment and events leaders speak out ...continued



Heartbreak in the arts sector

Fahiem Stellenboom
*Marketing Manager,
Baxter Theatre Centre*

The arts sector has been particularly hard hit and – sadly - the National Department of Sport, Arts and Culture has failed both artists and institutions, with money earmarked for COVID-19 relief funding mismanaged or plundered. Several theatres have closed, others are mostly dark because it is not financially viable to open to such small numbers of audiences - or none at all.

Survival for the artists, creatives and technical staff has been impossible, with gigs and productions cancelled and little-to-no income at all. The arts are manna for the soul and any society is incomplete and much poorer without the arts and its significant contribution to the economy.

Our well-being as a society is essential. The arts plays a vital role in healing collective pain and the psyche - in finding meaning, healing and bringing communities together to celebrate humanity and culture.

To survive to this point, online streaming is an option, but isn't theatre as we know it and also too expensive for artists to consider without the assurance of audiences. During the first lockdown, The Baxter created an innovative financial sustainability campaign called Baxter Coffee Angels.

The ask was for patrons, theatre, arts lovers and the public to donate as little as R30 a month (the price of a cup of coffee), or more (where possible), to ensure the iconic theatre's financial sustainability during this time and into the future. The initiative was deeply encouraging, but we've been forced to renew the call for contributions.

One solution would be a speedier roll-out of vaccinations that would not only benefit the arts sector but the entire country and lead to an opening up of the economy.

A word to Government: So far, there is no evidence that theatres and performance venues are super spreaders. As long as all COVID-19 protocols are in place and strictly controlled at all times.



The decimation of a R33-billion contribution to South Africa

Projeni Pather
*Chairperson, Association of
African Exhibition Organisers
(AAXO)*

The exhibitions and events sector has been one of the worst hit globally but in South Africa where financial support for the sector has been erratic at best, the impact has been absolutely devastating.

Despite our sector's ability to adapt our offerings, the constant changes and severity of the Covid-19 restrictions have wreaked havoc among our stakeholders and across the supply chain. Many companies have closed, staff have been furloughed or retrenched and in many areas have suffered beyond the point of return.

Our sector has, however, been extraordinarily innovative in transforming our offerings to accommodate online participation, but a hybrid event incurs two sets of costs, one for the online component and one for the in-venue aspect. Attendance capacity restrictions make in-person events unviable, and online does not carry the same appeal.

The solution in our sector is also rapid vaccination. For attendees, it would provide a level of comfort that the risk of contracting severe COVID infection is significantly lower; and it would build confidence among all stakeholders, exhibitors, sponsors, partners, suppliers and attendees. This is vital not only for our recovery, but for that of the country.

A word to Government: Recognise that the business events industry cannot be switched on and off depending on the level of restriction. Unlike other industries, we require anywhere from four to 12 months to organise our events.

We are a well-regulated, professional industry that has designed additional Safety Guidelines to mitigate the hosting of business events. These guidelines have already been tested at our proof of concept pilot events in 2020 to demonstrate the safety of business events.

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No relief funding from government for the arts & entertainment sector

Ismail Mahomed
Director of the Centre for Creative Arts at University of KZN

The arts festival sector in South Africa has always been an incubator for innovation, new trends and experimentation. In addition, festivals have created employment for artists, technicians and a range of allied workers who service the sector.

Festivals contribute significantly to the GDP of the towns in which they are located. With the closure of all live festivals through Covid-19 the arts sector has been severely hurt. More than this, the hospitality sector that relies on festivals that has been equally hurt.

The Centre was the first South African festival to venture into the online space in March 2020. Since then, we have presented six online festivals. While all our virtual festivals have been hugely successful artistically, it has not been viable to monetise it.

The cost of data in South Africa is exorbitant and in many cases it is a barrier for entry for a majority of audiences. The result is that festivals under Covid-19 protocols have essentially played to niche audiences and the potential of the arts to act as a catalyst for broadening diversity has been significantly lost.

A speedier, more effective roll-out of vaccines will impact most positively on the festival sector and encourage corporate sponsors

from holding back for fear of brand reputation being tarnished by what they may see as potential superspreader events.

A word to Government: Government has failed miserably in serving the arts, cultural and entertainment sector right through the lockdown period by not establishing an Advisory Committee of industry specialists that could work together with the Department of Sports, Arts & Culture to develop and implement a relief, rehabilitation and recuperation strategy for the sector.

There has to be a drastic rethinking on how Government provides relief funding to the sector. Up to now, it has lacked strategic vision. It has been marred by maladministration and even corruption. There has been no strategy by government to ensure that arts companies that provide employment do not shut down.

The Department of Arts & Culture can no longer continue to operate with its head in the sand and ignore the economic challenges of the sector and the important contribution of the sector to South Africa's economy and to the country's wellbeing.

Conclusion: Step up, Government – and trust us

In every sector mentioned here, the call has been largely the same: Mr President, drive the vaccination process far more efficiently and assist our industries with the support funding we deserve for the contribution we make to arts, culture and South Africa's economy.

Then, trust that we – like you – want to do the best for our people, our guests and our supporters. We have already shown our commitment to following pandemic protocols. Don't allow a blanket ruling to steal our chance to help the rebuilding of the country's economy while protecting the soul of South Africa: The arts...

