

FACE TO FACE

Putting Commune Back in Community

BY LAURA MORIARTY

IT'S HARD TO BELIEVE NSAA'S 2022 NATIONAL CONVENTION AND TRADESHOW will be the first gathering of its kind in three years. In the wake of the pandemic, the ski industry is still sorting through a legacy of changes and challenges it never asked for. Every aspect of our way of living and working was upended, and that included our ability to convene and commune safely in person. Technology stepped in to bridge the gap, enabling webinars, education sessions and award ceremonies. And though it just wasn't the same, the consensus remained: Virtual is a small price to pay to keep our teams safe and healthy.

In the lead up to Nashville, several ski areas weighed in with their reflections on the live experience of attending conferences versus the virtual world we have become accustomed to (IRL fist-bumps are imminent), as well as the advantages and disadvantages of meeting and communicating virtually, including how they are using resort channels to cascade information, and train and develop their people.

Being Human

Throughout history, people have always gathered for survival, safety and security, and more recently, for a sense of belonging. Trusting and supportive relationships enhance our ability to survive under difficult environmental circumstances. It doesn't matter how technologically savvy we become,

emotional connectivity will remain an essential part of being human. We continue to need each other, not the way we did evolutionarily, but for psychological survival.

"The emotional support provided by social connections helps to reduce the damaging effects of stress," wrote Jane E. Brody in a 2017 article about social interaction's relationship to mental and physical health for the New York Times. "... a societal decline in social connectedness may help to explain recent increases in reports of loneliness, isolation and alienation, and may be why loneliness has become a leading reason people seek psychological counseling."

And that was years *before* the pandemic.

"I think teams come together, and strengthen, by the reality of shared struggle, shared success and shared problem solving," said Steve Wright, president/GM at Jay Peak Resort, Vt. "That physical connectedness provides an opportunity to learn, improve and plan without the one-step-removed quality of operating across a video chat."

It's clear that when resort operators reflect on the resilience it has taken to transcend the operating challenges of the previous two years, the adage that "people really are our most important asset" rings true.

"Surviving a struggle not only gets you a win in the here and now, it calibrates a team so that they can survive and manage themselves through the next one," added Wright.



How the ski industry feels about a return to in-person events.

“To the extent we can make managing ourselves through these struggles easier through physical connectedness, we’re not only helping each other navigate situations with grace, but we’re putting ourselves in a position to — and more importantly convincing ourselves that we can — get through the next one.”

In his book “Tribes,” celebrated author Seth Godin says that at heart, tribes are about belief in an idea and belief in a community. It doesn’t matter what the belief is — religious, ethnic, economic, political, lifestyle, a brand, love of sport or even music — what matters is that all members share that belief. Snowsports, including resorts, staff, guests, and the ancillary businesses that supply and support operations, qualify as one such community. We all have similar goals: To encourage overly stressed and stimulated people to unplug and celebrate the outdoors, and to embrace time with family and friends in a healthy, safe mountain environment where they can make memories and tell their stories until they can return again and again. Members of a community also believe that they belong with each other and that we’re connected by our shared interests (ask any Deadhead or Parrothead). It’s our nature.

In the Room Versus Zoom

While virtual communication has its benefits, most would agree that learning and networking in person cannot be replaced.

“NSAA shows are as much about education as they are personal connection and getting to catch up with your peers and counterparts from other areas to idea share, commiserate and celebrate,” according to Hugh Reynolds, chief marketing officer at SNOW Partners, N.J. “There is something about getting away off-campus and disconnecting from the day-to-day distractions of operating. With virtual conferences, it’s just too easy to be half present, distracted by multitasking or the pile of work sitting on your desk.”

Regarding that education component to NSAA’s shows, we can all anecdotally appreciate the value that in-person learning provides, especially from an engagement standpoint. Even the most entertaining or informative Zoom meeting or recording is no match for that email, Slack or text that just pinged “Look at me!”

Academia offers some quantifiable evidence. While The Brookings Institution cites several studies that paint a complicated view of virtual learning’s impact on student success, one article published last year stated: “For now, college professors and administrators should consider that college students pushed online may be less prepared for future follow-on classes, their GPAs may be lower, course completion may suffer, and overall learning may have declined relative to in-person cohorts in previous years.” (And that’s without even getting into the psychological and

emotional tolls virtual learning has taken on young students and their parents.)

Whether it’s in an education session, keynote, panel, roundtable or committee meeting, in passing between these opportunities, or during the evening extracurriculars, NSAA event attendees have a chance to learn from their peers. Without the in-person format, Kris Blomback, GM at Pats Peak, N.H., thinks the industry lost its ability to network efficiently.

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Over the past two years, NSAA has worked to buoy resorts and foster a sense of connectivity by conducting frequent webinars to hear from subject matter experts, share best practices and brainstorm to find solutions. Of course, resort leaders don’t have to rely on a Zoom invitation to stay connected. Do operators pick up the phone and check in with nearby competitors?

“Sure,” said Kevin Mitchell, GM at Homewood Mountain Resort, Calif. “But at the live conference, networking is more organic, not so targeted where you seek out someone deliberately. A spontaneous connection is more casual and often provokes more organic thoughts, ideas and solutions.”

Many have benefited from advantages of virtual gatherings, such as reduced cost and a broader reach into deeper layers of the organization, which can result in greater participation for those without the means to travel. However, Mitchell put a fine point on additional advantages of the live meeting.

“NSAA takes us to interesting cities where we get to experience local attractions and service standards at fine hotels and local restaurants,” he pointed out. “Even during winter, when it can be difficult to get away because we are so busy in our own resorts, the opportunity to travel, network, meet new vendors, and ski and ride at other resorts will always be more compelling than a virtual meeting.”

Virtually Limited

Thankfully, technology that allows us to meet virtually has become widely adopted and increasingly intuitive. But that doesn’t make it the ideal. ▶

“Early on, there was tremendous adaptation to a new way of connecting that was beneficial,” Mitchell remarked. “Now, we’ve gotten so used to having meetings and social occasions with people in boxes that we have Zoom fatigue.”

Melinda Stearns, director of human resources for Sierra-at-Tahoe, Calif., ensures the ski area uses interactive tools to encourage and promote the resort’s strong, collaborative culture. Still, she feels as though “There’s something important missing when we have Friday morning meetings on Zoom.”

“People who are new don’t get the full experience of our culture,” she said. “They don’t get the opportunity to have an impromptu and productive ‘meeting after the meeting’ where they offer to help each other get the work done. We’ve learned how to multitask even more. On some Zoom calls, it’s easy to observe people working on other projects as they ‘listen.’ How truly plugged in or engaged in that meeting are they?”

To that, John Rice, Sierra’s GM, added that this technology that enables us to communicate also comes with its own layer of complexity that impedes communication.

“Without using virtual tools effectively, calls can get stale,” he said. “It’s harder to interrupt with a question or contribute a different point of view. It’s a challenge to notice body language, to see who is leaning in or pulling back, who is distracted in the chat. And at times, cameras may not be

turned on. In the virtual world, we need to do more checking for understanding.”

One of the most used business phrases of the past year is “You’re muted!” as people are startled into contributing. In person, Rice noted that the expectations are clearer from the outset.

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“Sitting in a room with others in a live setting takes effort and can be uncomfortable,” he pointed out. “Listeners are expected to contribute ideas and opinions, especially if the topic is something critical to culture, like discussing values, service and the human element.”

Reynolds agreed that the magic of in-person collaboration doesn’t always translate to video format and also brought up ▶

IN FAVOR OF IN PERSON

Whatever your sentiments on work travel, most agree that we’re all missing connecting in person these days. In fact, an informal poll of NSAA members revealed 92% prefer in-person events. While many benefits to gathering virtually certainly exist — eliminating travel cost, time and carbon footprint — nothing can replace the tangible engagement and inspiration that circulates throughout a room of passionate people. Here’s what a small sampling of NSAA members had to say:

“The process of going somewhere and interacting with others heightens the ability to learn, hence your knowledge increases.”

“Catching up with old friends over a beer or a meal is what makes the conferences so appealing. The trade shows are also much more valuable when you can see and touch the goods.”

“Learning from industry leaders is important, but a very powerful reason for attending such events is socialization.”

“I honestly don’t see people building strong relationships through fiber/copper or whatever may be the

hardware to get multiple ends connected. Actually being together brings camaraderie that virtual cannot compete with. For the sake of the industry as a whole and its future, in-person is key.”

“Zoom-like platforms are a wonderful and necessary tool to gather groups or individuals for training and to have time-saving meetings. But using any platform as a virtual event leaves us cold. It just doesn’t cut it for our team to replace the in-person meet and greet. I am guessing, we are still biologically social animals, and there is something built into our nature that makes face to face feel more ... authentic? trusting? engaging all the senses? ... in delivering the most meaningful, lasting impressions and connections. Still, I feel that virtual anything is really just another great tool like telegraph, telephone, faxes, cell phones, internet, email and texts as they have evolved, but face to face is a deeper biological thing and can’t be duplicated.”

“Connections are more personal, it’s waaay more fun. I am SO OVER virtual meetings. I miss hanging out with my friends and colleagues!!”

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A pre-pandemic managers meeting at Jay Peak Resort. NSAA members agree, meeting face to face breeds engagement, excitement and inspiration.

CASE STUDY: RESORT TRAININGS

The author works directly with dozens of resort executives, managers and supervisors coast to coast on strategic planning and a variety of leadership development classes. She, too, pivoted successfully to virtual facilitation, creating the diversity, equity and inclusion learning platform “Awaken Unconscious Bias for Ski Industry Leaders” in mid-2020.

Moriarty’s team was able to go back out on the road to deliver live training in May of 2021. What they’ve learned about combining the best of live and virtual sessions is that it’s a win-win for diverse learning styles. They can deliver “Awaken” as a hybrid, with the intact resort team absorbing and discussing the content in an online community chat first, culminating with live, on-site strategic sessions to drive implementation. Whitefish Mountain Resort managers experienced both formats during last summer and fall.

“We’ve learned that a critical component of a person’s work-life happiness is dependent upon their connection to their peers and our purpose,” said Nick Polumbus, Whitefish president. “There just seems to be a higher level of trust developed through in-person meetings within our team. Clearly, there is nothing more important than trust in developing a team.”

a prevailing point: While technology has opened our eyes to a new possibility of what work can look like, it continues to jeopardize work-life balance.

“Zoom and Google Meet have also enabled one to feel too accessible at times, and that line between ‘at work’ and ‘at home’ can get blurred,” he explained. “I think this will continue to be time for learning for all industries as more flexible work environments are what the workforce is looking for.”

Best Practices

When planning both learning and meeting strategies, it’s apparent that live, virtual and hybrid communication styles are here to stay. The industry can learn from resort leaders who use virtual platforms proficiently as well as from teachers who are blazing the trail for hybrid learning. Educators who were “checked-in” excelled at recording lessons for their students and posting them on paid-for learning platforms, some becoming bona fide YouTube stars. The lockdown smash-hit PE With Joe Wicks has families gathering to experience Joe’s workouts, which are livestreamed weekday mornings.

At Mt. Hood Meadows, leadership training, orientation, executive meetings, town halls, appreciation events and orientations have all been held virtually.

“In our monthly town halls, we provide updates on COVID policies, upcoming events, transportation changes, etc.,” said Matt Troskey, VP of people/learning at Mt. Hood Meadows, Ore. “We can answer questions in real time on Zoom, so information goes directly to team members instead of relying on

cascading information from director to manager to supervisor to employee. We've found this stops rumors and speculation.

"What a travesty if we went through two years of COVID and everything went back to the way it was," he went on. "We've evolved. Instead of going back to doing everything in person, let's figure out how to show up and be present, regardless of the medium."

As efficient and effective as Mt. Hood Meadows has become at utilizing technology to their advantage, award ceremonies are an exception because "Standing up and applauding a team member in person versus hitting the applause icon in Zoom is a palpable difference," Troskey said.

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Absence Makes the Heart Grow Fonder

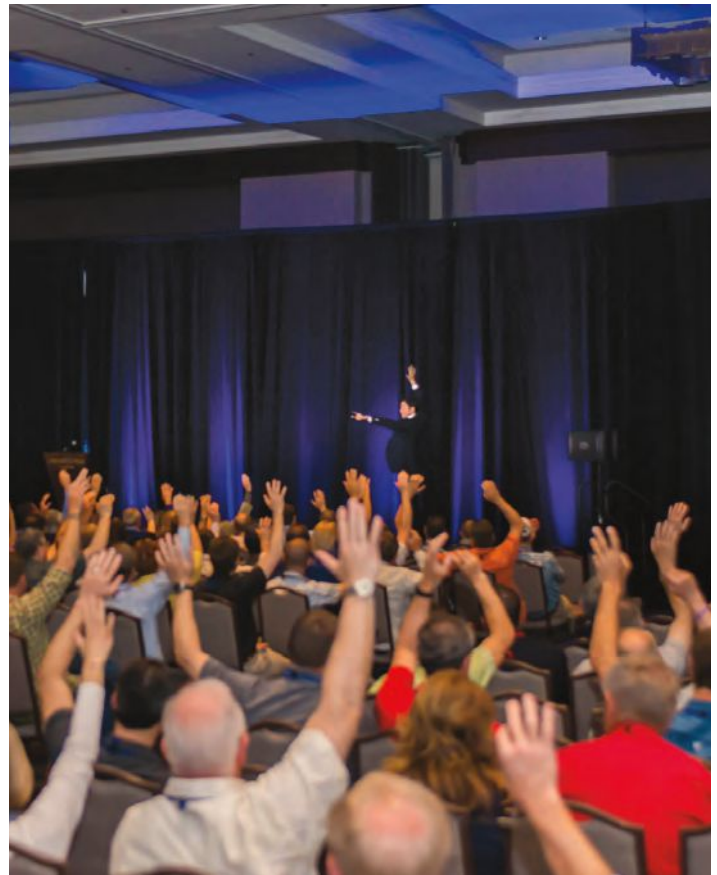
There's no better example of the essential human need to connect than following the recently displaced team from Sierra-at-Tahoe that continues to cope with the temporary closure of the resort after the devastating Caldor fire. John Rice's staff parks their campers in a tight cluster at nearby Kirkwood Mountain Resort to gather for après in their sun chairs, enjoying a beer together. At Sierra, gathering and information sharing is the fuel that preserves its strong culture and their ongoing recovery, and it's reciprocal. Top-down, leaders keep the team in the loop with planned virtual and live events. Bottom-up, team members reach out on social media to initiate their own plans for ongoing gathering opportunities.

Rice summed it up with an emphasis on how loyalty, commitment and compassion stoke connection, quoting Bruce Springsteen's "Human Touch":

**You might need somethin' to hold on to
When all the answers they don't amount to much
Somebody that you can just talk to
And a little of that human touch**

Here's to big smiles, high-fives and hugs at the upcoming NSAA National Convention and Tradeshow. Let it be a true revival, a gathering of our community. 🎉

Laura Moriarty, SPHR, SHRM-SCP, president of Tahoe Training Partners, is a nationally known speaker, corporate trainer and creative strategist. She has led a variety of workshops, including Awaken DEI content at several NSAA events.



Who's ready to be back in person in Nashville (pictured here in 2016)?

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