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Undergraduate thesis / Završni rad

2021

Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj: **RIT Croatia / RIT Croatia**

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Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2025-03-27**



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COVID-19 Affecting the Event Industry in Croatia

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HSPT-490: Senior Capstone Project

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May 3rd, 2021

Abstract

When the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the entire world and industries within it, the wedding industry was the one in the need of complete re-invention. For getting the deeper insight into which marketing strategies will be used for the year 2021 by wedding planners in Dubrovnik and is there any possibility that virtual weddings become popular in Croatia, electronic survey was created. With data being based on survey done by DWP Insider, it included the sample of 6 currently active wedding planning agencies from Dubrovnik area as it was distributed through e-mail. Received results showed that primary strategy would be promotion of smaller and more intimate events while there is no possibility that virtual events will ever become popular in Croatia. Further importance of the research and its implications have been discussed in the study.

Keywords: COVID-19, wedding industry, student evaluation of implemented strategies, re-invention

COVID-19 Affecting the Event Industry in Croatia

Unleashing the creative side of one's inner self and finding a way to combine that with the profession is a perfect way to describe the event management and its process of planning while turning dreams into a reality and providing people with memorable experience as the final outcome of each event. However, there are many steps and processes which need to be taken into consideration so that everything can run smoothly. According to the Dowson and Bassett, event management is the complete process of organizing and showing a great amount of precision and attention to the smallest details (Dowson & Bassett, 2015).

Event Management

Even though event management as a concept might seem at first as an extremely narrow topic and field of work, it is anything but that. Not only does it require from people in that line of work the ability to implement needed strategies during planning process, their ability to analyze the risks, marketing and budget but it also covers the variety of topics including the one where the search for additional human force is mandatory (Van der Wagen, 2010). Having in mind all these abilities and strategies needed during planning process while each of them requires high level of commitment, each event still needs to have a manager with an extremely high devotion to details in performing tasks as they are the crucial elements responsible for carrying out each event to its end (Dowson & Bassett, 2015). However, it is important to have in mind that events within event management are not only concentrated on those oriented only on celebrations, but they can also have educational purposes, such as conferences, or can be used for promotional purposes, such as fashion shows (Singh Madray, 2020).

Management Approach in Event Management

Another point of great importance that needs to be mentioned is the fact that management approach in this sector includes both external and internal processes as each of them plays a huge role in achieving the final goal: the creation of successful event. According to the article "Events beyond 2000: Setting the Agenda" external environmental forces include policies, resource availability and demand or supply factors. To paraphrase it, external factors are being divided into general environment which has an impact on everything while on the other hand immediate environment influences the event directly. Internal processes, on the other hand are related to determining the organization itself which includes culture within the organization, level of communication and organization's pace of learning (Getz, 2000).

Importance of Event Management

Combining multiple responsibilities into one sector does not come easy and that is why the importance of event management needs to be stated. First and foremost, just because of the previously mentioned fact that event sector actually has multiple sectors within itself, it is easy to conclude why it managed to grow so enormously as it did. In 1997, Brian Losurdo conducted a study of two dozen professional trade associations whose members derive revenue from the organization of events (O'Toole, 2000). According to this study, revenue from that kind of events exceeded \$800 billion per year. Additional numbers supporting this claim are the evidence where International Events Group in Chicago stated that "commercial sponsorship has grown globally from \$6,5 billion in 1996 to over \$9 billion in 1998." There are few drivers of this visible growth. The first one would be the fact that generations nowadays are becoming older and because of that, they are in a constant search for something by which they will mark their milestones in life for instance, fiftieth birthday. The end of such a search is the

organization of celebratory events in which their regular day is being turned into the one with memorable experience.

The second driver of growth is connected to technology: with the meaning that with the rapid development of technological advancements people are in the search and need of high-tech high touch experience but with a bigger emphasis on high touch as according to the article ‘‘A future for event management: The analysis of major trends impacting the emerging profession’’, events remain the single most effective means of providing a high touch experience. The third driver is connected to the income as it is following the growing economy, in this case the one of United States. Explaining this driver in detail, it is safe to say that people who attend events and spend large amount of their income on them seem to be in a way in search of value and their quest will be completed by attending such an event. The last driver of visible growth regarding the importance of event industry is time itself or the people’s perception of time nowadays since people are concentrated on their work and most of them have blurred perception of time. According to the same source research shows that the youngest generations, millennials tend to work hard and spend their free time by going on shorter but more frequent travels (Goldblatt, 2000). Finally, when considering the importance of event management, it is crucial to begin looking at events not only as products integrated on the market but as an authentic product created specifically for a tourism of a certain destination (Gortan-Carlin, 2017).

Event Management and Tourism

Regarding the role of the event management in the tourism sector, it is already known that each destination which wants to focus on attracting large number of guests needs to focus on developing broad and detailed plan by which events will be organized. But what factors

provide events with such a power? Not only that well shaped and realized events have ability to improve attractiveness of a certain destination but they also come with a great power of satisfying the tourist's needs for great value and reinforcing loyalty. That is why it is extremely important for the events to be planned and organized each year. In addition to that, another importance of the event's role comes out of the fact that they possess power to improve other sectors of tourism. Most common examples include improving occupancy of hotels and accommodations nearby and increase in the quality of life within the local population. Furthermore, their role of a true saviors is seen in destinations which are operating only during summer season. On that way, events like conferences are attracting tourists even during off-season period (Oklobdzija, 2015).

Advertising in Event Management

The role of event management in itself has another crucial point in attracting future tourists and that is advertising. There are few ways by which organizers of events can spread the message and they include traditional media, printed media and digital content and digital media as well (Tomičić Furjan, 2020). The usage of each media depends on the type of event and guests who companies aim to attract but still event managers need to bear in mind the current trends which are popular among current generations. The best way, which has proven to be the leading one during establishment of current trends, is trend-spotting. Future, representing the time frame which is unlikely to be the same as the past and certainly cannot be predicted, is the very own reason why trends have such a large impact on the events. Being stated in the article, trend-spotting is a great observant system by which we can detect possible threats and surprises in their early stages. However, it can also be useful in a sense that detected trends will present a positive impact on the events and by that provide a chance for the companies to capitalize on the given opportunities (Dowson & Bassett, 2015)

The Impact of COVID-19 in Event Management Industry

Having in mind trend-spotting and the current situation in the world, it is of great importance to state the pandemic situation, caused by the Corona Virus Disease. Being detected in China by the end of 2019, this disease altered the human lives causing the large impact not only on health of the humans but on the economies, following the national and global level (Singh Madray, 2020). Dates that are significant to the rise of the pandemic start with December 31, 2019 when Corona Virus was firstly identified in Wuhan, Hubei Province. On January 13, 2020 first cases of virus outside of the China were recorded as by following January 30, 2020 a total of 7,818 cases were recorded there were recorded while most of them were in China (World Health Organization[WHO], 2020). March 11 was however the day when WHO made the decision that COVID-19 should be characterized as a pandemic (World Health Organization[WHO], 2020).

To this day, number of Corona Virus cases reached the number of 114, 386, 001 with the 2, 537, 686 deaths worldwide. Recovered cases count 89, 938, 513 while the current active cases in the whole world count 21, 909, 802 of infected patients (Worldometer, 2021). Battling with the pandemic, governments across the world needed to consider and implement different measures throughout which they ensured safety and health of their citizens. Most common measures for which governments ensured to be imposed were quarantines, lockdowns and travel bans. The government of China was the one who imposed quarantine to over 60 million people just to limit the transmission of the virus. Government in Italy imposed lockdown within which residents were prohibited of leaving the area. In addition to that, schools in affected regions were closed. On the other hand, the governments of South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore decided to reduce the number of travelers coming from other countries with significant number of virus outbreaks (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

COVID-19 measures within sectors

The measures imposed by world-wide governments also resulted with other imposed measures for each sector within the tourism industry. Necessary precautions regarding the food and beverage industry resulted with food buffets not being recommended as they carry large risk of physical contact between people. That is why any indoor dining space should have a maximum 4 people in 10 square meters while the distance from the back of one chair to the back of another one should be at least 1 meter apart. Guests entering the area should be reminded about cleaning their hands while masks are recommended to be worn both by guests and staff (World Health Organization[WHO], 2020). Precautions needed in the hotel or any other accommodation establishment include washing hands frequently, usage of hand-sanitizers before the entrance into the dining halls, restaurants or bars. Possible coughs need to be covered with a bent elbow or tissue which after usage needs to be thrown away in a closed bin while distance of minimum of 1 meter between guests and staff needs to be respected (World Health Organization[WHO], 2020). In the case of event industry, precautions implemented carry an important role as they are preventing transmission of virus between people and ensure that venues for the events are being converted into safer environment. That is why during the small gatherings which include weddings, parties or sports tournaments, attendees should always check the current regulations in power before attending the gatherings, stay at home if they are not feeling well and comply with the rules of maintaining a least one meter distance from others, covering a possible sneeze or cough with bent elbow or with a tissue and to be washing hands frequently (World Health Organization[WHO], 2020).

Response of Event Management to COVID-19

Precautions implemented within event industry resulting with the pandemic itself caused an enormous impact on the event management industry, leaving it to fight for its

survival. Bearing in mind that \$1000 billion event planning industry is a business where people are coming together while celebrating important occasions, it is safe to say that during the times of pandemic it is one of the most affected industries globally (Singh Madray, 2020). Recent studies that are conducted globally, have reported a loss of more than \$666 million within event industry only (Singh Madray, 2020). Following expected impacts such as cancellations of events, daily wages workers suffering from brutal economic conditions and businesses suffering from huge capital shortages, it becomes clear that event management industry had to respond quickly in order to survive. Taking into consideration the amount of free time which companies suddenly had, the research shows that most companies used this time to upgrade their skills by focusing the most on the technology (Singh Madray, 2020). Technology provided event planners with an opportunity to overcome operational costs by presenting the concept of virtual events. Virtual events were implemented not only to ensure the survival of event management industry but also as there is no certain escape from the current pandemic (Singh Madray, 2020). However, with sudden turn towards technology, main and most challenging consequence were canceled and postponed events by organizers as they followed the newly established measures and guidelines implemented by governments (Mohanty, 2020).

Event Industry in Croatia

Being the industry which was one of the first ones to experience the impact of the pandemic, event industry in Croatia responded to it by becoming as loud as it can be. Just by joining the global initiative “Red Alert”, Croatia wanted to raise awareness among government and citizens regarding the current and future state of event industry. Being the country which withholds more than 2,000 private businesses with more than 12,000 employees, the importance of this industry can easily be seen (Croatia Week, 2020). As Van der Wagen stated (2010, p.4) ‘events play a vital role in profiling a country as an attractive tourism

destination and event tourism contributes significantly to a country's economy.' In addition to that, 'events are often the trigger for spikes in the tourism industry' (Van der Wagen, 2010, p.4). The vital role of events within Croatia is proven just by connecting it with its generated revenue of 4,5 billion annually (Croatia Week, 2020).

Dubrovnik as an Event Industry Destination

Carrying the title as the most known Croatian tourist destination and one of the leading European cities based on its culture and heritage, Dubrovnik plays a significant role in the overall tourism sector of Croatia. Being a tourist destination the value of which is further enriched with many concerts, festivals, sports, religious and cultural events, Dubrovnik has truly added value to Croatian offer (Sentić, 2017, p.274). Having in mind the enrichment of all those events, there are certainly few of them responsible for making Dubrovnik more recognizable than ever and listing it on the covers of many prestige and luxury magazine covers. According to Sentić (2017, p.274), Dubrovnik Summer Festival is the most known manifestation within the city as it also became a trademark for cultural events. During the Festival, attendees have the opportunity to enjoy in works of art presented by actors and musicians. The feast of St. Blaise is the event where thousands of visitors and tourists are commemorating in a traditional way to St. Blaise, who is also the protector of the city. During the feast of St. Blaise, in Dubrovnik's theatre many performances are being presented, different exhibitions are being held in museums while attendees can be a part of many cultural and entertaining parts of the event. Being declared as one of the ten top events in the whole world, New Year's celebration on Stradun is a manifestation during which many different cultural, cinematic and musical festivals are being held in Dubrovnik. Additionally, there are also other events worth of mentioning as there are more than 400 business gatherings with around 30 000

attendees including many sport manifestations like DUMotion and Dubrovnik RUN league (Sentić, 2017, p. 274).

Wedding Industry in Dubrovnik

Analyzing the events which contributed to the overall popularity of the city of Dubrovnik and its recognizable charm, one model of event industry managed to increase its value within the historic city and brand it as ‘top destination’. Wedding industry in Dubrovnik embodies many other activities within itself such as catering, flower shops, decorations and musicians, which only displays the significance of that industry for the city. Overall, weddings are known to carry significant value within all Croatian regions as such significance comes from long tradition and customs which were nurtured for many years (Vitez, 2004). Even though the effect of globalization caused various changes within wedding ceremonies in Croatia, wedding planning agencies still remained faithful to its tradition. That faithfulness arises as an outcome of dealing with the history where weddings and other religious activities were pushed aside however, weddings are now being looked at not only as deeds of faith but the deeds of aspiration for the holy ceremony, prestige and memorability (Vitez, 2004, p.197). Having in mind preservation of tradition, within the county chamber of Dubrovnik, a professional group of wedding organizers was found whose main goal is to unite all the wedding agencies from Dubrovnik area and connect them into one great marketing story with the main goal of branding the City as an ideal wedding destination (Jukić, 2020). Comparing it with Istria, which started evolving its wedding industry in 2014 by creating specialized website whose main purpose was to additionally improve and promote Istria as a perfect wedding destination, a similar project such as this will bring a lot of benefits to Dubrovnik as well. The development of wedding industry would not only decrease the seasonality of tourism but it would also increase the profit of local community while at the same time promoting

private entrepreneurs. However, the current pandemic forced many private agencies to start recognizing their activities and adopt to new conditions, prone to quick changes as for them situation was constantly changing as what was allowed one day regarding measures and policies for the events, it was not for the other. That is why this research is being driven by two hypotheses; which marketing strategies will be used in the current year 2021 by the wedding planning agencies and is there any possibility for virtual events to become popular in Croatia.

Method

This qualitative research aimed to provide a deeper insight into the marketing strategies of active wedding planning agencies in Dubrovnik and their point of view on the future of wedding industry which is currently highly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The sample size included 6 wedding planning agencies located in Dubrovnik area as being selected based on the location of their business and the active status, the participants were reached through e-mail as the chosen sampling method was snowball sampling. Participating in the research was completely consensual and in order to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, participants were not obligated to state their names or even names of their agencies for the needs of the research.

The research was based on the model published in DWP Insider where a primary survey for the deeper insight in destination wedding industry was created (Soni, 2020). The form of the instrument was an electronic questionnaire that contained a set of 21 questions, which were mostly based on multiple choice questions with one open-ended question at the end of the questionnaire. Within the questionnaire there were 3 categories: demographic questions, questions related to the changes in the policies and strategies and those connected to the future of wedding industry.

The electronic questionnaire was written in English and distributed by e-mail to all currently active wedding planning agencies in Dubrovnik area and they all responded to the survey.

Results

The results of the research start by identifying marketing strategies which will be used in the year 2021. The majority of the respondents (4 agencies) stated that their main strategy would be promoting smaller and more intimate events. The remaining 2 agencies will besides promotion of smaller and more intimate events also focus on improving the quality of future events by offering virtual components and an increased level of personalization. The promotion of smaller and more intimate events comes as the best strategy to be implemented since, according to current COVID-19's measures and policies, it minimizes contact between the guests attending celebration and reduces spread of the virus.

As for the changes in the policies, three agencies will be offering refunds to their customers and it is interesting to state that all these agencies have been in the business for more than 6 years and have a larger number of employees. The other half of the respondents is still considering implementing refunds as they have less than 5 employees within the company and one of the respondents have been in the business for less than 6 years. When it comes to discounts for the following season of year 2021, the majority of the respondents stated that they will not be offering any.

The strongest agreement among all of the respondents was achieved in the awareness and recognition of the changes within the wedding industry because of the impact of COVID-19. All respondents stated that they were well aware of and fully recognize the changes brought by the pandemic. The interpretation of this result needs to be seen in view of the previous one in which the respondents had to identify the greatest challenge with which industry is being faced

during the times of pandemic. Here, the need to face the last minute changes comes as the biggest challenge as one respondent even stated: “uncertainty of the situation where guests have no idea if they will be able to travel, let alone have a wedding of dozens of people.” Therefore, the main solutions for the event management industry have yet to be determined as the pandemic continues to tailor ability to travel for future guests.

When researching the planned events for the upcoming season 2021 all of the respondents stated that they have planned events on which they were working on. When asked to compare if they believed they were ready to face the challenges brought by the pandemic, 3 agencies stated that they are not ready to face the challenges of the pandemic while other 3 agencies are still not certain. It only shows that even though uncertainty presents huge challenge for the success of this industry, agencies are still not willing to give up.

Even within the light of uncertainty, the results of the survey still show a certain dose of algorithm as it is believed by the majority that the concept of destination wedding will still exist even after the pandemic, and respondents predict that wedding industry will not change completely once the pandemic is over. In addition to that, wedding budgets are also seen as a factor which will neither decrease nor increase but rather remain the same.

Having in mind the future of virtual events in Croatia, the majority of the respondents (4 agencies) will be offering live video streaming for those who are not being able to attend the weddings while other 2 agencies are still considering this model. Even though agencies will be offering virtual components as part of their offer, when it comes to the model of virtual weddings as a whole virtual celebration and its possibility of becoming popular in Croatia, all of the respondents strongly disagreed with that option as one of them even stated: “Weddings should not be anything but live.” This result is completely contradictory to the acceptance of the virtual celebrations in America as there, virtual weddings have been practiced the most and have already changed the world of wedding industry.

Overall, the answers to the questions about the marketing strategies used in the current year 2021 and if virtual weddings will ever become popular in Croatia confirmed the hypothesis. The expectations of this research were that wedding agencies will manage to re-invent themselves following the pandemic outbreak and its challenges which they managed to do by implementing new policies like offering refunds and virtual components. As for the possibility of virtual weddings becoming popular in Croatia, most wedding planners in Dubrovnik believed that wedding industry would acknowledge some parts of virtual aspects during celebrations which the industry managed to do but it still remained true to the original concept of the wedding, the live one.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the wedding industry's future and new strategies which the industry in Dubrovnik plans to implement in order to overcome challenges brought by the pandemic. The received results support both hypothesis which state that event industry will manage to re-invent themselves and that it will manage to implement virtual aspects into their offer but still remain true to organizing weddings as live celebrations. Following the pattern of results, it has shown that within past research done by Soni (2020) for the DWP Insider, researchers have found that majority of respondents believe that destination wedding industry will not be the same after the pandemic is over while the present study shows that respondents believe that the industry will not change at all. Another difference among the results comes from the fact that in the past research, the majority believed that budgets would decrease while in the present study, budgets are expected to remain unchanged. Received results of the present study also have some consistencies with the previous research being done as those include no offering discounts to the future clients and performance of outdoor events as the social distancing became a new norm.

The results of the research strongly imply that the biggest challenge which wedding industry needs to face is uncertainty. Being brought by the pandemic and increased by the constant changes within the measures and policies used to reduce the number of infected by the virus, uncertainty is truly the key driver that is causing wedding industry to take risks and initiative. As shown by the results, improving the offer by providing refunds, virtual components during celebrations and focusing on promotion of more intimate gatherings signifies wedding industry taking those first steps towards keeping the industry alive. In addition to that, it is interesting to mention the difference between virtual weddings being accepted in America where they have been practiced the most, unlike in Croatia where only virtual components were approved by the respondents of this research as they stated that virtual weddings will never become popular in Croatia.

Difference in the acceptance of the virtual weddings leads to the very limitation of this research where the reason of virtual weddings not being accepted has been questioned. Here, the main role plays tradition and meaning of Croatian weddings which is being accompanied with many customs. For Croatian region, virtual weddings will not only cause the loss of meaningfulness and beautiful scenery but for the locals, they will also cause the loss of many customs such as buying the bride, banner holders, process of protecting the bride and many more.

Even with this limitation, the gathered results also provide potential intervention implications such as raising awareness about the current and future state of event industry due to pandemic outbreak, emphasizing the importance of the event industry for Croatia and prioritizing changes in promotion strategies and offer of the planning agencies.

Although the past and present studies both support changes within the wedding agencies' offer as a way of dealing with arising challenges, their most important contribution might arise from the fact that they are raising a couple of interesting questions for future study.

Firstly, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and its limitations which actually proved how important it is for small business to be recognized, will the wedding industry finally be formally recognized even though it is currently the one having large contribution to the travel and hospitality. Secondly, will future situation regarding the pandemic crisis request more profound and more creative ideas regarding promotion of the businesses and their actual way of work. Finally, considering the fast growth of the technology and its increased popularization due to COVID-19, will the technology impose itself to be accept by wedding planners in larger scale rather than just introducing virtual components.

Despite the limitation of this study, it still managed to enhance understanding of the event management, its importance and mostly, the importance of the wedding industry for Dubrovnik region. Bearing in mind the diversity of services and other small businesses which wedding industry contains, I hope that these grounds supported with the present study will provide the formalization of wedding industry's importance and that the present study will serve as a great source for the continuing battle with challenges caused by the pandemic.

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[at-hotels-and-accommodation-](#)

[establishments#:~:text=There%20is%20no%20evidence%20that,by%20staff%20and%20gue](#)

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Appendix

Dear Participants of the Survey,

My name is Sara Slabić and I am a senior student at RIT Croatia.

For my research project in International Hospitality and Management, the topic is "The COVID-19 Affecting the Event Industry in Croatia".

Research in question includes completing an online survey which will require approximately 5 minutes of your time. Your participation is completely voluntary as your answers will remain completely anonymous and confidential.

Answers will be used for research purposes only.

Thank you for taking the time to assist me!

1. Is your agency new in the event planning business?
 - Yes, it is
 - No, it is not

2. How long have your agency been a part of event planning industry?
 - A few months
 - From 1 to 5 years
 - 6 years and more

3. Which of the following best describes your agency?
 - Full-time planner
 - Event designer
 - Coordinator of daily activities
 - All of the above
 - Other: _____

4. What are the main services your agency includes?
- Discussing and planning the scope of the event
 - Finding venues and vendors
 - Negotiating contracts on behalf of brides and grooms
 - Navigating additional (rooms for couples and guests, transportation, catering)
 - All of the above
 - Other: _____
5. How many employees work for your agency?
- 1-4
 - 5-10
 - 11 and more
6. Are you aware of the changes in the wedding industry related to the impact of COVID-19?
- Yes
 - No
 - To a certain extent
7. What do you believe is the greatest challenge that this industry faces in these times?
- Integrating a virtual component in the event organization
 - Difference in cost between virtual events and conventional events
 - The need to face last minute changes caused by the pandemic
 - All of the above
 - Other: _____
8. Do you think that wedding industry is ready to face the challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic?
- Yes

- No
 - I am not certain
9. How prepared is your agency to deal with the COVID-19 concerns?
- Very prepared
 - Somewhat prepared
 - Not at all prepared
10. Do you have any planned events that are scheduled for the upcoming season or that you are currently working on?
- Yes
 - Not yet
11. What is your prediction regarding the preferred types of weddings in the current year 2021?
- Indoor
 - Outdoor
 - Both
12. Do you believe that the concept of destination wedding will still exist even after pandemic is over?
- Yes
 - No
 - I am not sure
13. Do you expect that wedding budgets will increase or decrease in 2021?
- Increase
 - Decrease
 - They will remain unchanged

14. Compared to the last two seasons, are you planning to offer to your clients more discounts for your services?
- Yes
 - No
 - I am still considering that option
15. Have you made any changes to your current cancellation policies?
- Yes, we will be offering refunds
 - Yes, we are considering to introduce some changes in our policies
 - No, we haven't made any changes
16. Following the trend of virtuality on the events, will you be offering the possibility of live video streaming for those who are not able to attend the celebration?
- Yes
 - No
 - Possibly
17. Do you believe that number of invited guests on weddings will decrease or increase in the following seasons?
- Decrease
 - Increase
 - It will remain the same
18. Do you worry that digital events will drastically alter the future of face-to-face events?
- Yes
 - No
 - I am not certain

19. Do you believe if, once the pandemic is over, the overall wedding industry will change completely?

- Yes, I believe that the wedding industry will change completely
- Yes, I believe that the wedding industry will change due to the implications of the pandemic
- No, I do not believe that the wedding industry will change at all
- I am not certain

20. What will be your leading marketing strategies for the following seasons?

- Promoting smaller, more intimate events
- Improving the quality. Of events by offering virtual components
- Increasing the level of personalization
- All of the above
- Other: _____

21. Do you believe that the concept of “virtual events” will become popular in Croatia as well? If your answer is yes, please specify the reasons.