Strategy for Associations Going Virtual

roadmap to building the right virtual experience

white paper
topics

In this white paper you will learn how to:

plan and deliver
The needs of all stakeholders have changed - adapt.

collaborate with sponsors
Build the event together with your supporters - find new opportunities.

choose a format
See what will work best to achieve the planned meeting goals.

go the extra mile
Avoid the common obstacles to a smooth experience.
In the past few months, almost all types of organisation reshaped their activities to the online world. A lot of small meetings became webinars or online discussions. And a few societies already staged their first virtual conferences.

While some are adapting quicker than others, there remains a general misconception on what is a virtual event - is it something as simple as a giant Zoom call, or does it entail more than that? Can simply renting a platform solve it all? And what is the purpose of event planners now?

Creating strategically a virtual event is as complex as staging a face-to-face congress. This white paper is designed to guide associations through the optimal steps to build a virtual event strategy while understanding the areas that should be consulted with a professional conference organiser (PCO).
how to plan and deliver a virtual conference

With a complete online experience, the needs of all stakeholders have changed, especially those of participants and sponsors. However, as an event owner, you are aware that any event strategy starts with identifying the goals and outcomes of the meeting. Once these are defined, consider the following:
Do the analysis: consider competing conferences and clearly define the target audience (their geographic location matters for the live elements of the event).

Plan, plan, and plan some more: online is a different realm, so the duration of sessions has to be reviewed, as well as the breaks and overall length of the event days.

Speaker sessions: while you would expect speakers to just show up ready at an in-person meeting, here you are more involved with their preparation and content capturing – make sure they are also aware of that.

Hands-on time: allow yourself ample time to build the technical side of the virtual event (no matter if it is a brand-new event or an in-person meeting pivoting to an online experience), followed by all the content creation.
So many tools: your PCO can guide you in the right selection and mix of tools to achieve your planned goals.

Choosing the platform is like choosing a venue: take this step with your event goal in mind.

Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse some more: do a million practice runs and be prepared for the worst-case scenarios.

Introduce the tool to your stakeholders: sponsors and exhibitors want to know about their return on investment and engagement, while the delegates want to feel comfortable with the platform and understand where everything is positioned (just as in any new venue).
preparation

Start with the participant journey in mind: walk it yourself and make sure it is all clear and intuitive.

Have a clear plan of the format and delivery of the content.

Finalise your program as soon as possible so that all pre-recorded sessions can be scheduled for recording early on.

Train all moderators and have clear instructions ready for speakers on how to be engaging when there is no audience in front of them.
Your event days are a celebration: use this energy to excite your delegates.

Clearly mark which areas are for live interaction and what can be watched on-demand.

Interacting in real-time with your audience is precious: make sure everything works and they are well aware of where the action is taking place.

Build a connection by communicating, listening, reflecting together with the delegates on social media and the platform.
Usually you would announce your next event dates at this point, but if the virtual conferences remains available for a few more months, make sure the target audience is aware they can continue the interaction.

Develop a strategy for continuous bite-sized conversations that sparked at the event.

Prepare and send a post-event survey and learn what to improve for the next event (and should it be in-person, virtual, or hybrid?).
plan together with your sponsors

While the virtual realm presents many new opportunities, they won’t be available to either you or your sponsors unless you build the event together. As every in-person meeting, the sponsors should not alter the ultimate event goal or content plan. However, engaging them from the get-go, especially those companies that the association has already a working relationship with, is crucial to get their buy-in, understanding, and ultimately – creating new mutually-beneficial activities together.
Involve sponsors in the decision to turn (or create) a virtual conference – don’t assume that they will automatically follow – ask them early on.

Get informed about their needs and create a tailored timeframe for their technical deliverables.
Educate sponsors – give them materials, hold calls together – be there to support them with all inquiries.

Once the platform is selected, give all details to your supporters – inform them of all the ways they can engage with participants and what is the technical capacity and availability of tools.
Be prepared to adjust the sponsorship packages according to the format, platform, and overall value proposition of the event – be open to creating custom packages too.

Have a ready portfolio of (tested!) engagement activities – from education to gamification.

Give sponsors an exclusive preview and test the platform together before the launch.
Make sure to give supporters the needed recognition and drive traffic to the exhibition area on the platform.

Work together to make sure everything is running smooth, anticipate issues and inform early on all exhibitors if there is any technical hiccup – don’t wait for them to contact you.
follow-up

Provide robust reports – with the whole event happening online, it means that everything can be tracked (but make sure to follow compliance and privacy laws and regulations).

Continue to work on common communication plans for the next days that the event remains available and extend opportunities for the attendees to reach exhibitors.
it is all about the format

While drafting a virtual event strategy, consider the format which will work best to deliver the content and achieve the planned meeting goals. Depending on the event length – be it a single day event or a multiple-day one – there is a considerable effect on the following factors:
available budget

If it was an in-person meeting?

Think of it as having the funds to book one hall for a day VS a whole conference centre that you can use for multiple days, including all additional services available in-house.

1. There will be a fewer and simpler platforms.
2. Any add-on will be costly.

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high budget

1. There will be better variety of platforms to choose from.
2. The complexity and tools available will open more opportunities in terms of content delivery.
If it was an in-person meeting?

For a one-day event you will do a couple of sessions only, less networking, and will be limited on creating special events, unlike a full conference taking place over a few days.

1. You will be able to do it live or with pre-recorded sessions.
2. Breakout rooms can be created for short discussions.
3. Interactivity will be limited, and it will be difficult and expensive to add any other products (for example e-Posters).

The content can be pre-recorded, or live, or a mix of the two.
2. There can be various products combined for added delegate interaction and engagement.
3. Include elements such as e-Posters and sponsored symposia.
If it was an in-person meeting?

For a one-day in-person event the sponsors will be less engaged, and their value will be in a few logo displays – the same goes for virtual events. Large conferences will naturally offer more exposure and engagement to sponsors.

1. The only way to acknowledge sponsors is with logo integration and special mentions.
2. Reports will hold limited information.

1. Sponsors can have their logo at the login screen.
2. Graphic advertisements and sponsored videos can be integrated.
3. All supporters can be acknowledged at the footer of the platform.
4. A virtual exhibition can be a part of the event, including different activities for exhibitors to get in touch with the audience and secure new leads.
5. Availability of robust reports.
interaction & networking

If it was an in-person meeting?

Single-day events have some networking opportunities, however, they cannot compare to all the special events taking place at a large congress.

1. Availability of chats, Q&A, and polls.

1-day event

1. Various types of special sessions can be created during the live event days.
2. All types of chat and call functions.
3. A digital briefcase to collect materials, handouts and resources shared by supporters and presenters.
4. Social media wall integration and other interactive products can be added.
If it was an in-person meeting?

You would do a minimum branding for single-day event taking place in one hall, compared to a conference branding, requiring a full marketing plan and activities before, during, and after the event.

1. Custom landing page can be created, however, during the sessions, the branding will be minimal.

1. Design a complete marketing plan similar to that of an in-person event.
2. Brand your conference platform, including meeting lobby design with a welcome video.
long-term value

If it was an in-person meeting?

There would be a crew to record all sessions at a conference, while this will rarely happen for smaller events. However, the virtual realm offers more durability for all sizes.

1. Sessions can be easily captured and uploaded on the organisation’s website for future use.

1. The whole event experience can remain open for future late registrations up to a few months.
2. Once this period has passed, the content can remain in the association’s e-Library for future use.
If it was an in-person meeting?

Travelling and proximity are often deciding factors for attendees of in-person events. However, virtual ones break these barriers easily, and open new opportunities for post-event monetisation.

1. It is harder to re-sell one-day event content.
2. One business model suggests to have exclusive access for free to the event, without the option for on-demand viewing after the meeting is over.
3. Or create the option to view the event live with on-demand access at a minimal price.

1. Post-event access to the full experience remains viable for months after the event.
2. After this second open period, all content can be broken down to e-Library modules.
The best way to make a winning event is by going the extra mile for your participants, no matter if it is live or virtual.

Put yourself in their shoes, especially if you are pivoting to virtual, and avoid these common obstacles to a smooth experience:
battling screen fatigue

The screen-time for all of us has significantly increased. To overcome this problem, plan for compact sessions and physical breaks, such as yoga or guided meditation, for both delegates and sponsors alike.

mastering the experience

Choose a user-friendly platform, but also design the whole experience with optimal use in mind - from the program outline, all the way to the speaker slides. Attention to detail has to be even greater than for in-person events.

infusing energy

Your moderators and speakers set the tone of the whole experience, so spend the time to train them to deliver impactful and engaging sessions.

smoothing technical issues

Train your delegates, sponsors, and speakers how to use the platform with short and easy to follow videos. This will ensure they feel confident with the product, reporting fewer issues. For live events always test in advance and have an IT team available to resolve any problems.
Creating your virtual event strategy is not that different from an in-person meeting. Start with the event goals and objectives, which will guide you through the right format to deliver the event. Often times, each factor that will determine your in-person event plays a similar role when it comes to an online experience too. Work with your stakeholders, follow the guidance of a professional conference organiser, and then going the extra mile will be simple. This is the way to build the foundations of a stand-out virtual event.
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We offer the full solution and service as well as the technology.