IN THE KNOW

SPONSORSHIP DOLLARS IN THE AGE OF VIRTUAL MEETINGS

A MULTIVIEW EMAG
Virtual Events Open Doors to Digital Display
All virtual content, from webinars to forums to presentations, provides options for display advertising.

SPE Pivot To Virtual Yields Success
In a case study showing the potential of virtual events, SPE took its major event online and hit a home run.

Trade Show Alternatives
The nature of the trade show has slowed its transition to the virtual environment, but options exist.

Retargeting: Promote and Profit
Virtual events are bringing in new audiences. Make sure you reach them.

Providing On-Demand Options for Your Members
Content doesn’t just have to be produced, it must be delivered.
Many organizations were able to successfully make the instant leap into virtual events, but now must learn how to navigate a world where they’re more rule than exception.

It was major news when Mobile World Congress announced its cancellation in February, but it was also a prelude to the long list of exhibitions, trade shows and conventions that would become casualties of the COVID-19 pandemic. An industry that had been largely focused on evolving the attendee experience of live events was confronted with a sudden alternate reality – one in which there was no such thing as live-in-person.

Scrambling to provide for members and sponsors, organizers pivoted to virtual and digital environments. That so many events were partially or wholly transformed was a testament to the capabilities of associations, and now months into our post-COVID world, virtual events have become commonplace. But questions remain about the role they’ll play when live, in-person events are again an option.

“This sudden pivot to virtual alternatives certainly filled a need, and in the near term that need will still exist,” Michael Candela, MultiView’s Executive Vice President of Partnerships said. “But we also need to start thinking about what association events will look like when that critical in-person element returns. That personal experience plays a vital role, but I’m sure virtual aspects of all events are here to stay.”
When events will return to destination venues remains a moving target, but research carried out by Event Manager Blog in May found almost half of event professionals (48%) assume they’ll start getting back to live events in Q4 of this year. Almost four in ten (39%) said it would be at least 2021.

Even when live events do return, it’s expected they’ll be forever changed, and challenges will have to be overcome. Venues will likely operate, at least initially, at a reduced capacity. Social distancing measures will factor in, as will the willingness or abilities of potential attendees to travel.

If we’re able to find a silver lining here, it’s that our forced swim in the virtual waters has afforded us first-hand opportunities to recognize the benefits of virtual events, such as reach, inclusivity, sustainability and cost savings.

For years, there has been plenty of talk and brainstorming (and some action) about incorporating virtual aspects into events. Lack of resources, capacity – and perhaps some misguided ideals – limited this. After all, virtual events suffer from a few primary deficiencies when compared to live versions, namely networking, live demonstrations/sampling and collaborative activities.

There’s also another key component to live events that often fails to translate directly into a virtual environment: sponsorship. Organizers rely on sponsors for much of the revenue generated by events, and sponsors rely on the exposure their investment brings.

“Associations made the sudden jump to virtual events primarily with their members in mind, and rightfully so,” Candela said. “But reality is that most events don’t exist without sponsors. It’s a major component and weaving that component into this new incarnation of virtual and hybrid events will dictate their survival.”

The fact that sponsors want the audience and want to be involved in the organizations will leave them open to new concepts and forms of sponsorships. It’s up to the associations to identify these opportunities and where they can offer value to the sponsors. One accommodating feature of virtual events is the inherent data produced. This data can illustrate how online audiences behave and what they engage with (including sponsorship content).

Tradeshows are slowly starting to revive. Both China and Germany reopened exhibitions in May. Other parts of the world will start to follow as they see decreases in threats of coronavirus. But the process will be measured and uneven, requiring that events and conferences look to virtual manifestations in the interim. ASAE, for example, has moved to an all-virtual format for 2020.

Even if we ever reach the point coronavirus is a painful memory in our past, the digital assimilation into live events is unlikely to recede. Virtual and hybrid events will be the new normal, and the most successful planners will be those who can leverage the opportunities for monetization.
Taking an event out of the exhibition hall removes physical marketing opportunities (e.g. signage, swag bags). But moving an event online presents new marketing opportunities. All virtual content, from webinars to forums to presentations, provides options for display advertising.

Furthermore, digital sponsorship opportunities have a distinct advantage over most traditional ones – data. Collecting attendee and engagement data allows you to demonstrate performance to sponsors. Data analysis, including clicks, impressions and conversions, can help sponsors determine ROI, as well as guide you in adapting your sponsorship pricing structures moving forward.

It’s impossible to directly transfer some traditional marketing opps, like branded charging stations or sponsored coffee bars. But that doesn’t mean you can’t get creative and effective in the online environment. Here are some simple display options for putting sponsors in front of important eyeballs.
**Banners and Pop-ups:** Perhaps two despised words to most internet users, don’t let the stigma drive you (or your sponsors) away from this option. Similar to venue signage, this steady mainstay of digital advertising can be tolerable and effective in the setting of a virtual event. Banners are great for use during livestreams or presentations – think of how sponsor ads are placed on-screen during soccer matches. Pop-ups can be utilized between sessions, given their more disruptive and intrusive nature.

**Video:** One of the most popular and growing forms of digital advertising across the entire web, video is a dynamic and effective marketing option. In case you need proof, consider that the second-largest social network out there (YouTube) is entirely built around a model of sponsored intros and video ads.

Video can be used within the event itself, or in marketing leading up to and following the event. Bumper videos can intro content and videos can fill interludes between sessions. One of the biggest advantages of video is that it’s engaging – and that engagement is what every sponsor is after.

**Branded Breakout Sessions:** Many of your in-person networking and interactive sessions will have sponsors. This can carry over to the virtual environment, as well. The platforms you use will have something to say about how you work logos and branding into the sessions, but these are moments of the event where attendees are typically highly engaged, meaning quality opportunities to grab attention.

**Sponsored Poll Questions:** Pop-up advertising during presentations might be resisted, but there are ways to incorporate sponsors into welcome and useful parts of a presentation – such as poll or survey questions related to the content being shared. These can be tastefully branded. The truth about the digital environment is that the screen is always brandable real estate. You’ll want to keep it tasteful, but sponsorship opportunities exist, and by showing sponsors ROI they’ll keep coming back.

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**CASE STUDY:** SPE Pivots To Virtual Yields Success

*In a case study showing the potential of virtual events, SPE took its major event online and hit a home run.*

As late as March 11, the Society of Plastics Engineers was promoting its annual ANTEC® event, one of the largest and most respected technical conferences in the plastics industry, which was to be held in San Antonio, Texas, March 29-April 2. But when the host city was forced into lockdown, SPE had no choice but abandon plans for its live event. Despite having only two weeks to work with, the 78-year-old organization decided it would rather go virtual than go home. *(continued on page 6)*
Case Study: SPE Pivots to Virtual Yields Success

“While moving our annual conference from an in-person three-day event to a virtual offering was not an easy decision to make, we decided our only option was to change our course of action rather than postpone or cancel,” SPE CEO Patrick Farrey said in a press release.

The quickly re-imagined ANTEC® 2020: The Virtual Edition morphed from a three-day affair into a six-week-long smorgasbord of content. Once the dust settled, SPE had clocked more than 3,300 participants – about double the number that had been registered for the live event. Around half of the virtual attendees weren’t registered for the original meeting.

“Technical session audiences grew exponentially for our virtual event,” Farrey said. “Some sessions had nearly 300 attendees, which would have been unlikely in our onsite event when we schedule a dozen or so concurrent sessions. For speakers, this meant that their research and findings were exposed to a larger, more diverse audience.”

Making the content consecutive, as opposed to the concurrent content offerings of the live event, was a driving factor for the new format – and proved a prudent choice based on the engagement data.

One thing any virtual event has trouble replicating is all the aspects outside of presentations, and SPE had some ideas up its sleeve for that, as well. In total, the virtual ANTEC logged more than 93 hours of airtime with 167 technical presentations, 14 keynote speakers, 20 livestreams, multiple networking opportunities, several podcasts, demonstrations, live music performances, DJs between sessions and even a golf lesson.

“Nobody is denying that in-person events provide an important one-on-one dynamic,” Farrey said. “But our goal with taking ANTEC® virtually was to ensure ‘live’ networking still played an important role.

And we wanted participants to have some fun along the way even though everyone was remote.”

By opening up the platform to chat and Q&A, SPE gave participants opportunities to interact with speakers and presenters. More than 1,100 questions were ultimately answered by keynote speakers and presenters.

“It doesn’t replace everything for sure, but it is a good alternative in our current circumstances,” Farrey told MultiView in a virtual panel discussion. “I do think the virtual piece of this is here to stay. It’s a very efficient way to deliver content. It wasn’t without its clunky parts, but for the most part it went pretty well.”

The success of ANTEC® 2020: The Virtual Edition encouraged SPE to shift other events to an all-digital format, such as Plastics in Aerospace: The Virtual Edition. The association will eventually return to its live format, but expects that hybrid events will be standard procedure going forward.

“Our data concurs that people like this format,” Farrey told MultiView. “That may be influenced by the fact they didn’t have any alternatives – they weren’t choosing to go to a virtual conference over going to a live conference – but the feedback from everybody involved was really, really positive.”

Watch: The Present and Future of Associations for more ideas from association execs.
Virtual events have provided a lifeline to organizations that were forced to abandon plans for annual meetings, conferences and conventions. For content-heavy formats (e.g. keynotes and educational presentations), the virtual environment can replicate fairly directly. But there’s one component to many live events that has more difficulty translating to a digital format – the trade show.

Exhibitions and trade shows are a vital piece of many large industry events. In fact, the exhibition industry is worth more than $135 billion and more than 30,000 trade shows/exhibitions take place each year, according to the Global Association of the Exhibition Industry.

The driving forces behind trade shows – the demonstrations, the product sampling, the handshake discussions – are the things that hinder them from virtualizing. Trade shows are sensory by nature. These senses can’t easily be approximated through a computer screen. But in an environment where live and in-person may be unwelcome or unavailable, virtual might be the only option. And because necessity is the mother of invention, you can rest assured the race is on to find novel methods of taking the trade show floor virtual.

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It’s About More Than Buyers

It’s important to consider the trade show experience isn’t limited to buyers. We tend to contemplate ways to provide them an exploratory experience akin to walking the exhibition floor. But those vendors and sellers have a vested interest in the experience as well. That’s why they spend thousands of dollars to create unique booth activations and innovative, memorable experiences. Thus, a virtual format needs room for creativity. Otherwise, it’s not far removed from simply shopping on Amazon.

Digital platforms for virtual trade show are out there. This article from Event Manager Blog previews a handful of them. But resources – particularly financial – will likely play a factor in whether meetings can provide substantial trade show components. An analysis by Forrester Research noted that virtual trade shows tend to be good for large shows featuring product launches, but smaller shows might not have the capacity to pull it off.

Rethinking Trade Shows for the Times

The challenges to recreating a trade show in the virtual environment haven’t scared away some groups from attempting it.

One such example is United Fresh Produce Association, a MultiView partner. Observing the rapid pivot to digital meetings and presentations, the organization felt a virtual trade show would now feel intuitive to attendees.

Thus, United Fresh set out to provide “a robust expo floor where exhibitors and attendees can share information, view videos and other content, chat live and make the same connections one would at an in-person event.”

Initial response to the event, scheduled for June, was reassuring. More than 1,000 attendees have registered and 40% of those had not previously attended a United Fresh show.

Another example is all about fun and games, so to speak. The Toy Association has revealed plans for a series of “virtual market weeks” to “help toy businesses connect with their customers, suppliers, and the global play community during these uncertain times when in-person meetings and events may not be possible.”

The Toy Association says its incarnation will be “just as if walking a show floor,” and that participants will “be able to explore a calendar of daily events, browse exhibitors by category, and book appointments for virtual demos and chats.”

Addressing the Right Options for Your Association

Deciding whether and how to provide a trade show component to your live event will probably hinge upon resources and the capacity to make it work. But even if you have those, is it worth it? Can you offer more value and an (continued on page 9)
experience beyond what a buyer could get from the vendor’s website? Are you offering the vendors and sellers something their typical marketing can’t?

One of the critical components to exhibitions is access to building relationships. It’s the camaraderie. It’s the ability to close deals. When contemplating a virtual proxy of your trade show, consider whether you can provide what attendees really want and let this guide your strategy.

Make sure your event can deliver something exclusive and special – that it’s not just an attempt to ride on the bandwagon or to salvage sunk costs from lost events. Interactive elements, such as polls or scavenger hunts, can help facilitate this.

Without the resources or capacity to pull off a quality virtual trade show, other options still exist. Smaller concepts, such as a series of “demo days,” for instance. In one example, the California Society of Association Executives (CalSAE) developed a “Demo Day” in which four selected LMS providers were invited to a singular online event. Each was given 15 minutes to demonstrate its products and services and answer questions. For associations in the market to buy an LMS platform, it was a unique and valuable opportunity to do comparison shopping in the course of one hour.

Ultimately, pulling off a virtual trade show that recreates the live, real deal is all but impossible. That said, there are reasons to explore how your organization might be able to connect buyers and sellers in a way that benefits all three of you. It may not be something that even remotely resembles our current vision of what an exhibition looks like, but it might be something that has a utility of its own even if live exhibitions return as we’ve known them.

If there’s one aspect of live events that can never fully translate into a virtual format, it might be networking. That said, it’s also a critical piece of participation for many attendees who register for your events. As a result, it’s important to have some networking options for the socially inclined. Here are a few ideas to get your brain working, but don’t shy away from getting creative with your own concepts for connecting people.

1. **Shifting Breakout Rooms** – Create pre-assigned breakout rooms with a handful of participants in each. Give the group 10-15 minutes before shifting the members into other groups.

2. **Common Cocktails** – Let users sign up for networking “tables” (groups) based on a certain drink. Have attendees show up to that meeting ready to show off their version of that drink.

3. **Local Flavor Mixer** – Each virtual attendee provides a look at their favorite local beer (or spirit).

4. **BYOHDO** – (Bring your own hors d’oeuvre.) Have each person show up with their homemade hors d’oeuvre as an ice breaker.

5. **Hopin** – An online platform with various options for engaging remote audiences.

6. **Remo** – An online platform where attendees can join different virtual tables with others.

7. **Targeted Connections** – An online platform that matches up attendees through an analytical algorithm.
As the novelty of virtual and hybrid events wears off, one thing that will also mature is the monetization models that will keep them effective over the long term. Some revenue generators translate fairly well to the digital space, while others will need to develop.

One element of promoting and profiting from events that does translate well to into the virtual environment is retargeting. If you’ve been using retargeting for in-person events, the concepts are essentially the same. If you haven’t been using retargeting, now is the time to consider employing it for your virtual events, as well as your future live events as the exhibition industry comes back online.

For the uninitiated, retargeting is using internet data to target your advertising at people who have demonstrated interest in your product or service (or, in this case, event). You’re no doubt familiar with it from a consumer perspective. If you shop for a new pair of shoes, but don’t complete the purchase, you’ll likely notice those shoes start to follow you around the internet, popping up on your favorite sites reminding you of your interest.

A majority of the people who visit your event page won’t convert (purchase registration) immediately. Perhaps a handful of your loyal, repeat customers will, but generally people will look for details and then check schedules and contemplate the investment, putting off purchase until later.

With retargeting, you ensure those people don’t forget about your event. As they continue to use the internet, both personally and professionally, they’ll see advertising that reminds them of the event and that they need to register.
There are also variations of retargeting not necessarily based on a visit to the event page. List-based retargeting, for example, can put ads in front of past participants or certain groups of members you think might be interested in your event. (i.e. a list of targets you have.)

Search retargeting takes advantage of contextual behavior. It recognizes when people use search terms related to your event and provides them advertising promoting the event in hopes that interest turns into participation.

Retargeting is great for stoking registrations, but it also has a role to play in sponsorship and non-dues revenue. That’s because your audience isn’t just valuable to you, but to vendors and suppliers. The same programmatic technology that promotes your event can put your sponsors in front of their targeted prospects.

In a process sometimes referred to as audience extension, paid sponsors of your event can gain access to the participants following the event to provide relevant follow up advertising or offers. Audience extension can be offered as a valuable (and lucrative) add-on for sponsorship packages.

Taking advantage of retargeting technology sounds like a great idea, and it is – if you can effectively execute it. In an Associations Now blog post, partner for association and advertiser relations at Association Media Group Jim Blakey advised associations to ask two important questions when considering use of retargeting: “Do they have a sales staff that can sell digital advertising? If they do, then the next question would be, do they have the expertise to share best practices with advertisers and guide them?”

If there’s any doubt in answering these questions, it might be best to incorporate a partner, such as MultiView, with capabilities already in place to successfully implement retargeting technology.

Virtual events will likely play a greater role in association learning and networking going forward, and one exciting aspect of this is that many organizations have already witnessed growth in new audiences and participation that wasn’t involved in live, in-person events. That new audience is important and valuable to you and your sponsor partners, so don’t allow it to go untapped.
If you're in any way involved in membership organizations, you know one thing to come from the shutdowns and subsequent unfamiliar business landscapes is content – a LOT of content. From advice on dealing with uncertainty to reports to all the webinars and virtual meetings. Most organizations find themselves producing more content than ever before. That content has value, of course. Some of it you may give away for free, like blog posts. But your webinars and virtual events can also be packaged as paid content and a source of non-dues revenue.

With so much content being produced, it’s important as an organization to carefully think through how you want to provide access to it. This could be dictated in part by your membership structure, which might include all-access tiers, for example, whereby you’re simply adding more value to your membership benefits package.

However you decide to approach offering your content, it will need to be organized in a way that you can manage it, present it and deliver it. Members must be able to easily find and obtain it. The more content you have, the more you probably need a robust platform for dealing with it.

There are a lot of learning management systems (LMS) out there. For example, MultiView offers its Live Learning Centers, a unique web-based portal where members can access content anytime, any day, on-demand. There are SaaS versions, hosted LMS systems. Some are open source. There’s definitely no shortage of options.

Not only are associations producing more content, but with many members working at home and not attending industry events, compounded with their insecurities about proceeding in uncertain times, there’s an increased appetite for helpful content. So make sure you invest wisely in how you provide this to your members.
ABOUT MULTIVIEW

MultiView Inc. is the leader in digital publishing solutions for associations and
digital marketing solutions for B2B marketers. The company operates in a
digital ecosystem wrapped around trade and professional associations,
unmatched data monitoring, and arguably the largest monitored whitelist site
compilation in the industry - providing the safest places on the web for your
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