20 TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL VIRTUAL CONFERENCES

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There are two simple truths about virtual conferences. Virtual conferences are like other conferences. Virtual conferences are not like other conferences. We've divided our tips for successful virtual conferences accordingly.

Like Other Conferences

Virtual conferences require good planning, marketing, and execution.

1. **Be clear on the business issue you're trying to address—and make sure a virtual conference can help.**
   Are you looking to cut costs? Make money? Reach new audiences? Reduce wear and tear on the environment? Respond to member demand for more education? Whatever it is, clearly state the business issue, so you can determine whether a virtual conference is an appropriate solution—even if virtual conferences are usually cheaper than place-based conferences, they aren't cheap, and you don't want to undertake one lightly. If, for example, you're looking to reach the international members who've only made it to your past U.S.-based conferences in small numbers, but much of that demographic has if-y Internet access, then a virtual conference might not be the best solution.

2. **Make sure everyone is ready.**
   Once you determine the business issue and decide a virtual conference can help, make sure the stakeholders—board, executives, staff, prospective attendees, sponsors, vendors, etc.—are ready. You might need to do some legwork to figure that out. Poll potential attendees on their interest and likelihood to participate. Pre-sell sponsors and exhibitors. If stakeholders are receptive, tasks down the road will be easier. If enough stakeholders oppose the idea or are uninterested, you may need to shelve the idea—until you can educate them and convince them of the value.

3. **Promotion is critical.**
   You can have the most relevant content, the best-known speakers, the slickest platform and avatars, but if folks don't know about the virtual conference and understand its value for them, it doesn't matter. Plan to promote early and often with a significant push as the event draws closer—it's easier for prospective attendees to make a last-minute decision about a virtual event, since no travel is involved.

4. **Devote adequate resources.**

It's so easy to underestimate what's involved. Don't think only in terms of money, but also in terms of staff time. Expect to spend as much staff time on a virtual conference as you would on a similar place-based conference—in fact, if it'll be your first virtual conference, expect to spend more time, as the staff will need to come up to speed on the technology themselves and educate other stakeholders. Minutely define roles and responsibilities to ensure nothing falls through the cracks. Facilitation and customer service are arguably more for virtual than place-based conferences.

5. **Don't scrimp on the timeline.**

Twelve weeks is a recommended minimum timeline for producing a virtual conference, and six months may be a better bet for most organizations. Although you don't have to book the venue months, even years, in advance as you might for a place-based conference, you still need time to market the event, solicit sponsors and exhibitors, vet speakers, and sign up attendees.

6. **Pick metrics and set targets.**

What will success look like for your virtual conference? Decide on your metrics (registration, revenue from sponsors, number of vendors, overall attendance, session attendance, etc.), and then set targets. You might use data from your place-based events to set your targets, or you might find out how organizations similar to yours have fared with virtual conferences and benchmark against them.

7. **Keep sessions short and build in sufficient breaks.**

Shorter is often better for sessions. Don't forget to build in breaks—attendees will appreciate 15 minutes to check voicemail and e-mail and address other needs (even in the virtual world, people have to go to the bathroom), and you can also use breaks to push attendees to sponsors' and vendors' virtual displays.

8. **Build a microsite.**

Drive prospective attendees to a microsite or landing page that makes the value of the virtual conference clear. Be sure to use testimonials from previous attendees—or, if this is your first virtual conference, praise from members who have been given a tour of the virtual platform can help to win over doubtful prospects. Video can be particularly appealing both for testimonials and for showcasing content, so consider adding one here—it doesn't have to be a high-end production. How to register should be obvious. Keep the registration as short and simple as possible—long registration forms can scare people off, and you'll have chances later to gather more information.

9. **Incentivize the behavior you want.**

   Incentivize desired behavior, just as you would for a place-based conference. Offer discounts for early bird registration, do a drawing during a particular session to drive attendance, or offer a give-away for visiting all the vendor booths.

Not Like Other Conferences

As much as virtual conferences share in common with other conferences, they're still a different breed.

10. **Know what you're getting in to.**

    If you're new to virtual conferences, attend some offered by other organizations; note what they do well—and not so well. (Hint: Pay attention to vendor Web sites—many of them offer access to free virtual events.) Once you have one, thoroughly explore your virtual environment platform so you understand its capabilities and options.

11. **Educate, educate, educate.**

    Because so many stakeholders may be new to virtual conferences, plan to spend significant time explaining what one is and holding hands. Give staff, potential sponsors and vendors, presenters, even attendees access ahead of time, so they can see the platform and get comfortable with it. Folks will be more likely to pay—whether for a big-ticket sponsorship or a simple registration—if they can see for themselves what the virtual conference will be like. Provide training and create videos and demos to show attendees, speakers, and sponsors how to navigate and get the most out of the event. (Hint: There are plenty of relatively low-cost screen-casting tools like Snagit (https://www.leadinglearning.com/goto/snagit) that can be used for creating a simple video tour of your conference.) Spell out the benefits of going virtual to sponsors—for example, they can get information about even casual booth visitors who would likely remain anonymous at a "real" event.

12. **Practice, practice, practice.**

    Again, because virtual conferences may be new to so many stakeholders, plan to practice even more than you would for a place-based conference. You'll need to provide technology training for speakers to make sure they're ready. If speakers will be delivering live, do a rehearsal that mimics the live event as much as possible (same computers, same Internet connections, even the same time of day) about a week before the event. Make sure staff are fully briefed on how to deal with customer service issues, monitor Q&A, facilitate sessions, and so on.

13. **Mine the data.**

    Mining the data is always important, but odds are you'll have much more data available about virtual conferences (time in sessions, files downloaded, etc.) than you have for place-based conferences. So make

good use of the data as you follow up with attendees and sponsors and debrief with staff and speakers.

14. **It's not over when it's over.**

Just because the live portion of a virtual conference is over, that doesn't mean the virtual conference is over. Keep the platform up and open, and keep marketing it. Depending on the nature of your content, you may even be able to still register new attendees only for the archived sessions. And don't forget to keep updating the virtual conference site and materials. A landing page pointing to a defunct registration page months (or years!) later makes visitors think there's nothing of use on the site. If there is ongoing value to be garnered from the site, make that clear by posting relevant revisions.

15. **Take advantage of going virtual.**

Try to benefit from the unique opportunities offered by going virtual. Can you get that keynoter you couldn't get before because she didn't want to come to Chicago in January but who just might agree if she can deliver from her own desk? Can you target content to segments (young professionals, non-native English speakers, etc.) who can't or don't come to your live conferences? Can you provide more polished sessions and cut down on stress by simulating live delivery (i.e., pre-recording sessions but offering live Q&A)? Can you rebroadcast sessions for different geographies and time zones with live Q&A for each?

16. **Pick a platform that supports your essential needs.**

By and large, most virtual conference platforms will have the same core features and functionalities even if they differ significantly in their overall look and feel. When choosing a vendor, focus on your most essential needs (for example, offering continuing education or supporting the use of Robert's Rules of Order), and make sure the platform can support those needs.

17. **Use your platform provider as an advisor.**

Once you pick a platform, use the provider as an advisor—the provider has done this before and has valuable expertise. Review the provider's Web site, white papers, and other resources. Ask questions of your representative. (Hint: Don't forget about providers other than the one you have selected—nearly all providers have valuable resources and tips on their Web sites and blogs.)

18. **Remind registrants to show up.**

Without the need to book flights and hotels or, at a minimum, arrange to be out of the office for a few hours, it's easier for virtual attendees to forget about a conference—especially if it's free. Send reminders, negotiating that difficult line between sufficient notice and nagging. At least three reminders are usually recommended: one a week before the start of the

conference, a second the day before, and a third the day of. Remember to include how to access the conference and who to go to for questions and issues. Even after the live portion of the virtual conference is over, continue to drive attendance for the on-demand offerings.

19. **Start with a bang.**

Attendance at a virtual conference is usually highest on the first day, so schedule your biggest, most important sessions accordingly. And plan to get right to things—time the opening of the conference with the keynote, so folks logging on initially know exactly where they should go. They'll have time to explore later—this is your chance to engage them right away. Since you aren't all in the same place, keep various time zones in mind when choosing a start time.

20. **Make business decisions—not technology decisions.**

Don't get too caught up in the platform and what it can and can't do—you don't want a case of technology wagging the conference. Just because the platform provides a feature doesn't mean you need to use it. If bandwidth is an issue for your users, multi-point Web cams might not be a wise choice. Remember technology is only a means to an end.

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