

Virtual Events 2.0

A next-generation guide to virtual & hybrid events
for association leaders and meeting planners



ASSOCIATION
HEADQUARTERS

current events

Key stats driving association events this year

6 weeks

the average promotion time for large virtual conferences

3.5 weeks

the average promotion time for small virtual events

76% of marketers

cite **email** as the single most effective way to drive registrations

\$8,456

the average sponsorship package for a virtual event

event PROMOTIONS



of registrants who don't participate in the live event attend on-demand



of registrants attend live



the number of people who join virtual events for educational purposes



the average no-show percentage of virtual events

CONNECTIONS

- ▶ The biggest annoyance of virtual events: a bad connection
- ▶ The most critical element for a successful event: a good microphone
- ▶ The largest challenge of virtual events: audience engagement
- ▶ The next biggest challenge: interaction

60-90 minutes

the ideal time for a virtual round table discussion

20

average number of sessions per virtual event

hybrid, virtual, in-person... *oh my!*

84%

of organizations who had already run a virtual event in 2020 reported that they spent less money on virtual events than in-person events

**virtual events
HELPED ASSOCIATIONS
SAVE MONEY...**

**making
hybrid events
PROMISING OPTIONS
FOR THE FUTURE...**

47%

of event organizers say that hybrid events are a solution in connecting internationally dispersed audiences

34%

of event organizers expect to invest more in hybrid events in the next few years

65%

of hybrid event organizers did not see any change in future in-person attendance

57%

of event attendees say they would rather attend an in-person version of a hybrid event than the virtual version

70%

of hybrid attendees indicated they planned to attend in person in the future

59%

of meeting and event planners project a strong return to in-person events.

**but in-person
events reign
SUPREME**

SOURCES

<https://www.iccaworld.org/knowledge/benefit.cfm?benefitid=5241>

<https://www.markletic.com/blog/virtual-event-statistics/>

https://insight.intrado.com/2020-Benchmark-Report?utm_source=GlobeNewswire&utm_medium=PressRelease&utm_campaign=2019BenchmarkReport

<https://www.sensov.com/question/will-hybrid-events-cannibalize-face-to-face/#:~:text=When%20asked%20if%20the%20hybrid,attendance%20in%20the%20long%20term.>

<https://www.mpi.org/docs/default-source/meetings-outlook/meetings-outlook-spring-2021.pdf>

<https://www.eventmanagerblog.com/event-statistics>

<https://www.bizbash.com/production-strategy/strategy/article/13230620/12-insights-from-mpis-research-on-hybrid-meetings>

Section 1

Introduction

The last year has offered many lessons to association leaders and those working to plan association meetings and events. Beyond discovering that the multifaceted and complex in-person events that memberships have come to know and love over many years can, in fact, occur virtually—with actual demand and leading-edge programming—there have also been lessons about what does and doesn't work in these new forums.

When Association Headquarters launched its first *Virtual Events* planning guide last year in response to associations' dire need for guidance, the response was incredible. Not only did association leaders and meeting and event planners alike download and use the guide, they responded with gratitude for a resource designed to address such an urgent need.

Nearly a year later, this new edition of *Virtual Events* takes a critical look at the lessons learned in that first wave of virtual events and the enduring elements that have changed association events forever, not just from an attendee perspective, but for planners, sponsors, exhibitors, marketers, presenters, and association leaders. It also explores the next wave of association events and the role of hybrid events as a potential solution to capacity limits on in-person gatherings or way to engage global audiences, and touches on the return to in-person events.

Three Pillars

In the wake of 2020's virtual events, three common themes emerged that continue to inform and shape association events and that this guide has been designed around: data, strategy, and experience.

DATA

While data is nothing new for association events—meeting and event planners have deployed attendee surveys and analyzed

registrant data to understand their audiences and gather feedback on events for as long as there have been association events—the depth of data available following a virtual event proved to be a game-changer for many associations. Not only have association leaders and event planners alike been able to better analyze the appeal of their programs and audience behavior, they're able to leverage that data to provide customized marketing, communication, and even programming to engage audiences in new ways. In addition, the data gleaned from these events allows association leaders to provide sponsors and exhibitors, with their ever-increasing data-driven approach to investing, a clearer vision of the return on their investment in the association and refining sponsorship strategies to align with more targeted goals. This data revolution has elevated associations' ability to be strategic partners, educators, marketers, and advocates for their industries and missions.

STRATEGY

A series of focus groups were held to help determine and shape how this edition should be different from the first *Virtual Events* planning guide. One concept resonated through every point: strategy. 2020's virtual events were conducted in response to COVID-19 closures, but today's virtual, hybrid, or even in-person events are driven by strategic goals. Everything from event format to technology and even budget are determined by the event strategy—that is, the overall goal of the event and the larger organizational goals to which the event relates and supports. These goals vary wildly depending on organization, culture, industry, and audience, and inform everything from budget to content, program, and format. Strategy is the key element that association leaders and meeting and event planners consider when making the most critical decisions about their events, so it's fitting that strategy is a pillar of this guide and a concept around which much of the content is formed.

EXPERIENCE

While strategic and data-informed planning will shape much of 2021's association events, the attendee experience remains an evolving component of virtual events. Many lessons have been learned about how to better engage everyone from attendees to speakers and even exhibitors, making this a critical pillar of this guide. One thing is clear, though: the initial approach to virtual events of recreating an in-person event online has proven ineffective. Attendees demand an experience, something different from a webinar and more thoughtful than an attempt to recreate an in-person event online. Similarly, speakers seek guidance and help with engaging audiences, bringing professionally moderated forums to the forefront of virtual event planning. Finally, event sponsors seek partnerships that allow them to engage in new ways beyond virtual booths. With virtual events helping associations reach larger audiences than ever before, the overall experience proves to be the gateway that leads those attendees to a long engagement with the organization through attendance at future in-person events and even membership. Indeed,

it pays to invest in creating an experience for the forum and audience—if the event strategy supports it, that is.

Setting the Stage for Events Now and Going Forward

Whether you're looking at the road back to in-person events, weighing whether a hybrid approach is right for your association, or planning for another strong year of virtual event programming, this guide is designed to walk association leaders and event planners through the key considerations of all components that might affect their events and the decisions made about them.

Please note that this guide is meant to be used as a resource to supplement your own experience and is not exhaustive in its planning guidance. You may find that engaging professionals in various aspects of association events—from sponsorship sales to event marketing and, of course, meeting and event planning—will help you realize the full vision and potential of your event.



scorecard

- ✓ Virtual events going forward are proactively planning, learning from the lessons of the reactive events of 2020.
- ✓ Have a plan for data: virtual events provide richer opportunities to understand attendee behavior and create events that will engage them.
- ✓ It starts with strategy. What's the goal of your event?
- ✓ The experience is a key consideration for events of all types, including virtual and hybrid.
- ✓ Engage professionals to help you realize the full vision and potential of your event.

Section 2

Strategy

Before engaging in conversations about what form the event might take—Will it be virtual, hybrid, or in-person? Will there be poster presentations? How many? Will it be live or on-demand? Will there be moderated panels or pre-recorded speaker presentations? Will there be an expo hall?—the event’s strategy must be established. This strategy provides broad guidance from which the rest of the event can be built.

To do this, you need to answer two essential questions:

- What is the *purpose* of this event? In other words, what will attendees, presenters, and sponsors gain from participating?
- What does the event offer that no other event offers?

The answers will provide the foundation for what shape the event should take (i.e., “Our association is the only one of its kind for this particular niche. The event will provide specialized education and networking opportunities to professionals in this field and allow sponsors and industry partners to directly connect with those who have a need for their services and products.”). These answers, and the resulting foundation, informs the decisions made about all aspects of the meeting.

Once the broad event strategy is established, data can further support and inform your event planning decisions, but it must be collected first.

Data

IMPLEMENTING A COLLECTION STRATEGY

Information, or data, is important in any planning process. To save time and apply it effectively, it’s essential to collect the data that will be most helpful to what you want your event to achieve.

For example, you are probably used to collecting the number of attendees at your past in-person events, in order to estimate what size venue you will need for the next one. Or, you may analyze

the foot traffic in an exhibit hall to determine the ROI for sponsors and exhibitors.

However, before you begin to think about any new data you may need to collect to adapt to virtual and hybrid events going forward, it’s important to clean up the data you already have on hand. Make sure your membership lists are current, accurate, and include the basic information you may need, such as:

- Valid mailing and email addresses
- The length of time they have been a member
- Membership status
- Employer, specialty, or position
- Professional tenure information (i.e., when they received degree, were licensed to practice, etc.)
- When and what events they have attended previously
- When and what educational offerings they have engaged with from the association
- How they prefer to communicate (email, text, chat, phone, etc.)

After verifying the accuracy of the data you already have, determine what other data you might need in relation to your overall guiding strategy that will also help you plan specifics. The goal is to understand your target audience and what their needs are to help you accomplish the event’s purpose.

Worth noting is that too much data may not be useful, but actually hinder the efficacy of your data collection and strategy. Setting your data goals as they relate to the event strategy and implementing a method to collect just that key data will help you remain focused on your foundational event goals and strategy. While additional data may be useful down the line, don’t allow it to become a distraction from the initial strategy.

Consider collecting data on the following (note that you may have your own data points to add that are unique to your organization and event’s purpose):

- **Leadership positions held:** to possibly recruit as a speaker, event volunteer, or to engage in networking opportunities at the event
- **Employer:** Flagging member's employers may lead to potential sponsorships and other value-add partnership opportunities
- **Engagement data:** Gain insights on how attendees interact to refine your communication efforts for their audience segment and inform future programming and platform decisions

Utilizing a retargeting pixel (also known as a remarketing or tracking pixel) on your organization's and/or the event's website to track who visited each page, and aggregate that information into lists. This is particularly valuable, as you can collect information on both members and nonmembers who are interested in the association or event.

Streamline data collection across both new member registration and event registration processes to collect similar data across all association functions, which can be used to inform and tweak your post-event strategy (see [Section 6: Post-Event Strategy](#)).

USING DATA TO INFORM EVENT STRATEGY

Now that you have the information you need, it's time to use it as a tool that will aid you in constructing a solid plan. It's important to note that you will also need to hone, scale, and polish your event plan within the boundaries of your association's audience and culture, measurable goals, preestablished key performance indicators (KPIs), and budget (see [page 11](#)).

Data may be used to plan various aspects of your event, such as:

- What format your event may take (see [Section 3: Event Format](#))
- How to create bigger return on investment (ROI) for sponsors and exhibitors (see [Section 4: Sponsorship](#))
- How to develop new education products from the event recordings (see [Section 6: Post-Event Strategy](#))
- The overall messaging and marketing of your event, membership, or other resources (see [Section 5: Marketing](#))
- How to reach new markets for your event (see [Section 5: Marketing](#))

Strategy

Event strategy is where the event planning process begins. After identifying the data that will be used to help establish your event goals, and implementing a data collection strategy going forward to further support and refine those and future goals, you'll want to weigh other organizational considerations against your set strategy, and adjust as needed.

ORGANIZATION/AUDIENCE CULTURE

As legendary management consultant and writer Peter Drucker once said, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast." You must know the culture of your organization (using data to support it) in order to best determine how to implement your goals.

For example, Association A, Association B, and Association C all have events where the main goal is to allow members to network. With no other information, a basic assumption might be that both in-person and hybrid formats would be effective for these events. But what if the data showed that Association A is an international membership that engages heavily with webinars and communicates on message boards and via social media, and turnout for in-person events is small? Or that Association B has high in-person events attendance and low engagement in online events? Based on this cultural data, even planners' choices and decision making would most likely change.

Don't rely on just assumptions about your organization's membership; gather and analyze data to paint a picture of the culture and how members interact with content and each other

to help form a better understanding of what approach might work best with your audience.

BUDGET

Too many event planning discussions start here, when budget is just one consideration to weigh in relation to many factors of an event.

Plan based on your needs first, then scale down, if needed, based on your budget. If you have asked and answered the questions on [page 9](#), this should be easy to do.

If budget still presents significant challenges that are preventing your association from realizing its goals for the event, consider other ways of offsetting costs, such as novel sponsorship opportunities (see [Section 4: Sponsorship](#)) or by planning to monetize repurposed educational content from the event (see [Section 6: Post-Event Strategy](#)), extending the useful life and earning potential of content long after the event.

Associations hoping to engage a hybrid event format that are concerned about the duality of planning and staffing may find that their team, or highly engaged volunteers, have skills that can be applied to a hybrid event in new ways. For example, a marketing coordinator might be able to manage a technology component of the hybrid event while a volunteer leader is able to moderate the chat function of a virtual presentation.

If existing staff and volunteers aren't an option, professional event production companies have expanded into virtual and hybrid event production, making it easier than ever to execute a once-complicated event. Explore your options with your trusted vendors; you may be surprised at how their services have evolved to meet market demands brought on by the pandemic, and often with pricing structures for a range of budgets.

Meeting Professionals International notes that, for hybrid events, streaming and production are likely to be the largest expense, “amounting to more than 50% of total budget.” ^[1]

PROGRAMMING DECISIONS

Your data-informed, overall strategy can now inform the actual program and offerings that make up the event itself. Consider:

- **How can you explore the freedom of the virtual world to make changes and innovate at your event?** Virtual events present a relatively low-risk opportunity to try new things and sunset activities that are no longer widely engaging.
- **What important elements from your live meeting can transition to virtual?** Even if your past in-person events were successful, cutting and pasting them into a virtual format may not be successful. Instead, treat them as if they need to be “translated” into a new format and environment.
- **If you're exploring hybrid events and concerned about making too much of the event available online—thus rendering in-person attendance unnecessary—consider livestreaming the in-person meeting events out of only one room.** Other rooms can be recorded to create education products to sell later or to offer as incentives for membership renewal (see [Section 6: Post-Event Strategy](#)).
- **If you've identified members (or prospects) who only attend or engage for a sub-specialty topic, consider scheduling those sessions all on one day.** People located near the event may be enticed to buy a one-day pass to attend in person, and those farther away may be strongly interested in attending virtually on that one day. You might also be able to develop specialized education products just for them and build them into an incentive for membership signup. (Also see [Section 5: Marketing](#) for more information on this idea.)

See Section 3: Event Format for more considerations about hybrid, virtual, and in-person events.

CONTRACT NEGOTIATIONS

While the main strategy of negotiating contracts for any event is minimizing costs and getting the most services for your money, there are some things to be aware of that might save you time and money:

- **Conference venues are open to negotiating better terms on future in-person events.** Considering that near-term in-person events may require additional meet-safe requirements, venues are more open to working with organizations on either providing those requirements or making concessions to allow for the association to cover the added cost of additional personnel, servers, etc. In addition, venues are working harder to prevent cancelations, extending better terms for food and beverage minimums, rescheduling, and other items. If an in-person event, or hybrid event with an in-person component, is on the horizon for your association, be ready to work with your venue on a contract that allows for some flexibility and meets the reality of a potentially unsure situation.
- **Because of the pandemic, many traditional, in-person meeting venues, especially in large cities or convention centers, are now eager to welcome hybrid events to make up for lost revenue due canceled in-person events.** Many have educated themselves and now offer hybrid event deals such as—discounted internet or video services. Part of your contract negotiation strategy should be looking for those deals, and for venues that will lessen the workload for your team and the expense to your organization.
- **Negotiate with your longtime, trusted vendors to see what they can offer.** Another example of expanded offerings includes AV companies that may also want to produce your livestream and can offer you a deal as a longstanding customer. It's

essential to ask, as they may be used to you coming to them for only one thing and may not think to mention what they are capable of now.

Experience

All of your planning and decision making—from topics and schedules to platforms and venues—is all in the service of creating the best experience for the attendees, speakers, exhibitors, and sponsors. Also remember that they are looking to you to lead them within the virtual space as well as the in-person space.

The following are a few things to consider for all your stakeholders (for a more detailed discussion, see [Section 3: Event Format](#)).

ATTENDEES

Discussed previously, having and gathering data on attendees and registrants will allow you to focus on the details that will create the best experience for them. However, a few considerations should be universal:

- **Engagement and entertainment are the keys to the event's success.** If they are bored, disengaged, or don't see value in the event, they won't attend your next event (or worse, won't renew their membership).
- **Less is more.** Don't try to pack your program just because you can. Curate options, and provide smaller, digestible chunks of programming. Otherwise, attendees may get overwhelmed and disengage.
- **Make sure they know what to expect!** Virtual and hybrid events are still fairly new to most people, and unlike the in-person component, a virtual attendee is often on their own. Take the time to plan regular communications, emails, and even how-to videos leading up to the event, including the basics such as how to login, view the schedule, access sessions, etc. [2] If they don't have to struggle to attend, it will add to an overall positive experience.

SPEAKERS

Making sure your speakers have a good experience is the difference between having mediocre content and great content at your event. Here are a few tips on how to “coach” them:

- **Discuss the platform/venue with them.** Schedule a short briefing call and go over particulars such as if they will be able to see the attendees, if can they present and view questions at the same time, how to upload or change content they may want to provide, and the format should their slides be in (to fit the screen being used).
- **Clarify presentation timing.** Speakers need to be prepared as to how long they have to speak, answer questions, or discuss attendee poll results.
- **What will your speaker get out of this?** Some speakers accept out of the goodness of their hearts, but some may be looking to network, promote their brand or the type of research they are working on, etc. Create a win-win situation by involving them in pre-recorded event promos or post-session interviews—content they can share and that helps promote your organization or event.
- **Schedule a rehearsal.** Everyone is more comfortable when they’ve been able to practice first.

EXHIBITORS AND SPONSORS

- **Co-design packages for them.** Talk with potential sponsors and exhibitors about their marketing goals, then get creative and offer them something that brings value tailored to their needs. Some ideas to include are sponsored Q&As with speakers, sponsored happy hours with a special guest, or sponsored polls.
- **Show them how to get maximum ROI from your event, especially online.** Prepare a guidebook or a series of email

blasts outlining best practices for building relationships, advertising, promotions, and booth content. Discuss ideas with them such as tip sheets and checklists, linked blog posts/case studies, or a short demo video.

References

- [1] https://www.mpi.org/docs/default-source/covid-19/hybridmeeting_howto.pdf?sfvrsn=e903c050_2
- [2] <https://www.mpi.org/blog/article/the-virtual-rules-of-engagement>

Lessons Learned

TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING

In 2020, like many organizations, the American Neurological Association (ANA) suddenly needed to make the decision to pivot from an in-person annual meeting to an all-virtual format.

“They had already set up their program, so they decided to use that virtually,” said Kira Jones, ANA’s Marketing Manager, “but also decided that, because it was virtual, they would add a lot of extra sessions.”

The result was an online meeting that lasted eight full days with concurrent sessions—an impressive program, but daunting for an attendee to sit through entirely. Understanding that most attendees would not likely attend or remember every session, ANA’s events team repackaged the massive amount of content into incentives and specialized education products.

Recordings were made available for those who had registered and packaged into membership renewal incentives for members who hadn’t registered for the meeting—when you renewed your ANA membership, you got all the recordings as a bonus.

There were also numerous special interest area sessions on topics such as headaches or multiple sclerosis that were made into standalone education series that could be offered throughout the year.

While the influx of content proved useful for ANA in many ways, the keyword for ANA’s 2021 virtual event is *curation*. “Now that we see what it looks like when you add on everything you ever wanted in a meeting, there was almost too much to come out of it,” said Jones. “This year’s meeting will be a much more curated approach, though we were thankful for the value that came out of the 2020 event.”



scorecard

- ✓ Answer two essential questions to get to the core of your event strategy:
 - What is the purpose of this event? In other words, what will attendees, presenters, and sponsors gain from participating?
 - What does the event offer that no other event offers?
- ✓ Verify the accuracy of data you already have, then determine what other data you might need in relation to your overall guiding strategy that will also help you plan specifics.
- ✓ Set your data goals as they relate to the event strategy and implement a method to collect just that key data to remain focused on your foundational event goals and strategy.
- ✓ Plan the event based on your needs first, then scale down, if needed, based on your budget. Don't start with the budget.
- ✓ Associations hoping to engage a hybrid event that are concerned about the duality of planning and staffing may find that their team, or highly engaged volunteers, have skills that can be applied to a hybrid event in new ways.
- ✓ Virtual events present a relatively low-risk opportunity to try new things and sunset activities that are no longer widely engaging.
- ✓ If you've identified members (or interested nonmembers) who only attend or engage for a sub-specialty topic, consider scheduling those sessions all on one day.
- ✓ If your meeting includes an in-person component, venues are working harder to prevent cancellations and have educated themselves to offer hybrid event deals that may include discounted internet, video services, etc., to the benefit of the association.
- ✓ Engagement and entertainment are the keys to the event's success. Provide a curated program that doesn't overwhelm attendees.
- ✓ Devote time to training and previewing the platform with speakers and exhibitors to ensure smooth sailing on the day of the event.

Section 3

Event Format

After undertaking the exploration of just what motivates your association's event—whether it's education, networking, or any other variety of factors—and establishing the foundational strategy that will guide the event planning decisions, determining your event's format is the next mountain to climb.

For many meeting and event planners, this might mean choosing between a virtual, hybrid, or in-person event. However, there are many forms that each of these can take, often driven by the desire to engage and delight attendees in a new way. And, as described previously, the culture of your association and audience, in addition to your event strategy, will play a key role in determining what event format may prove effective.

Data

As noted in [Section 2: Event Strategy](#), data plays a key role in developing today's association events. While attendee and registrant data may provide insight into the audience and who is attending the event, thus answering some nuts-and-bolts questions such as programming or potential demand for continuing education credits, data can also be used to assist with setting the format of your event.

One way to determine the best format for your association is to conduct a member survey asking exactly what members want from the

event. Members may specifically request for moderated, live sessions or a specific type of exhibitor experience based on their past virtual or hybrid event attendance, helping your association make more informed decisions about how to structure the event.

Similarly, responses to last year's attendee surveys may provide valuable insight into what attendees appreciated or didn't like about the event. One association received negative feedback in their post-event survey about the inability for attendees to submit questions to speakers in real time. After seeing that feedback raised by enough attendees, the event planners knew that the next event's virtual platform needed to incorporate more interactive features.

While data can be sophisticated and provide deep audience insights, even basic data like survey responses can provide the basis for an event format that proves to be a success.

Strategy

2020 forced many associations' hands in introducing digital components of meetings—something they may have rejected had it not been for the potential of having *no* event. Exploring this new venue for events helped many associations discover that there are components of virtual events that have staying power far beyond COVID-19.

Lessons Learned

INSTALLMENTS

Fearing burnout with massive programs, some virtual events experimented with installment formats. However, the success of installment formats depends largely on the content and the audience. "Installments for a corporate audience may not read as an event," said Beth Mauro, AH's Senior Director of Client Services and past Chair of AH's Leadership Forum. "You'll need a plan to keep busy professionals engaged. It's easy to skip sessions when they fall in the middle of a busy work week." In addition, an installment format may end up increasing costs over the course of the event. "Live may actually be less time consuming. It can be more expensive to have a production team two hours a day over eight days over the course of four months instead of over two or three full, consecutive days," said Mauro.

Lessons Learned

THE VIRTUAL WAKE-UP CALL

The annual meeting of the American Society of Hand Therapists (ASHT) had long-been a treasured event not just for colleagues from across the country to gather and connect but also because of its high-value educational sessions unique to the event. One particular session, a cadaver lab during which a hand surgeon dissects and explores human anatomy relevant to the specialty of hand therapists, was celebrated for its value to attendees. ASHT launched their virtual event in 2020 with incredible success. “As much as ASHT is celebrating the success of 2020’s event, it was a wake-up call,” said Gene Terry, CAE, IOM, ASHT’s Executive Director. “We had heard for years that people wished they could attend ASHT’s events but couldn’t because they couldn’t travel. There was demand, we just hadn’t provided it until now.”

Read more about ASHT’s event.

The most significant decision in planning an association event in the current environment, when so many options are available, is whether your event strategy calls for a virtual, in-person, or hybrid event.

See [Section 2: Event Strategy](#), for more in-depth discussion about setting your event strategy.

Experience

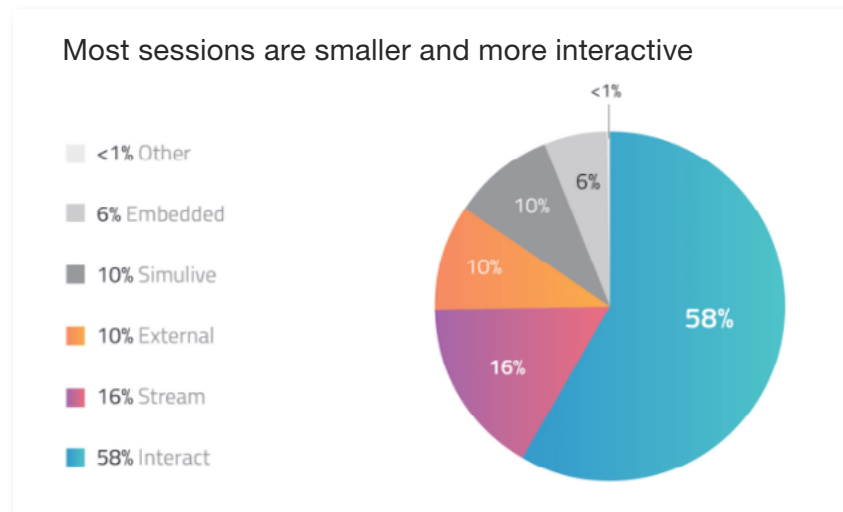
The “2021 Global Meetings and Events Forecast” by Amex reported that 54% of meeting and event planners were spending more time and attention on audience engagement than on logistics. [1] This notable increase isn’t surprising, given that 80% of organizations measure “attendee engagement and satisfaction” as a key performance indicator (KPI) of event success.

With the emphasis on the overall event experience increasing, much of the event format will be determined by what kind of experience you want attendees, speakers, exhibitors, and moderators to have.

To start, consult your event strategy again. If the goal of your event is to provide education, what kind of event format provides the richest educational experience? What elements must be present for attendees to get the most out of that educational experience? You may find that live interaction with speakers and poster presenters

is a critical component for a successful event, while live interaction during an association town hall meeting or keynote presentation is less vital. Shape the attendee experience around the goal of the meeting—the strategy—and develop an event format that provides that experience.

Also important is the size of the event—research has found that the larger the session, the less engaged the audience. An increasing number of virtual events (58%) are producing smaller, interactive sessions aimed to engage attendees in various ways. Larger keynote streaming sessions represent the next largest, but a significantly smaller, portion of events (16%). In short, if audience engagement is a KPI for your event, smaller may be the way to go.



Source: <https://blog.bizzabo.com/virtual-event-benchmarks>

ACCOMMODATING DIVERSE POPULATIONS

An additional consideration for virtual events of all sizes is accessibility for users with disabilities and for those with limited access to high-speed internet, affecting their ability to fully engage and participate in a virtual event.

Event planners seeking to create inclusive experiences for attendees with vision, hearing, and learning disabilities may:

- Promote accommodations with disability access symbols, available free from the [Graphic Artists Guild](#)
- Proactively include live captioning throughout the event, or provide the date by which captioned sessions will be available for streaming
- Prepare the virtual event platform with alternative text (alt text) for images to ensure that the event site is fully prepared for attendees who are blind or who have low vision and using screen-reading software
- Provide large-text versions of slide decks upon request
- Include contact information on the event registration website for access accommodation requests

Ensuring the accessibility of your event includes considering users who may not have the ability to connect and engage as intended. This may be a critical point for associations and non-profits with audiences in regions with limited access to high-speed internet access. Providing alternative means to access event content—for example, the ability to call to purchase or receive a USB drive of event recordings or printed materials—may help bridge the divide for users who can't reliably access the event online.

THE HYBRID EXPERIENCE

Research points to an expectation that associations will provide more hybrid events going forward. [2] In fact, 56% of respondents to an industry survey by UK-based production

agency, Identity, reported that hybrid events are “the future of events.” [3]

For many event planners, just the suggestion of an event being “hybrid” makes them gasp with the idea they will be planning not just one, but two separate events—simultaneously!

You can breathe easy, however. The truth is, a true hybrid event is about planning two different experiences for the same event, in a scalable manner. Yes, there will be some extra effort involved. But by concentrating those efforts in the planning and strategy stage, you can save yourself and your association a significant amount of time, stress, and money.

A hybrid approach might be best-suited for a high-demand event grappling with a low in-person capacity limit. Or, it may be ideal for associations that have discovered pent-up demand for digital components of their in-person events and finally found a mechanism to allow them to offer the same education to a virtual audience. Regardless of what precipitates the discussion of a hybrid approach to your event, your event strategy will provide the guidance you need to further determine whether the event and the audience warrant the hybrid model.

Lessons Learned *THE STAYING POWER OF VIRTUAL*

When the Controlled Release Society (CRS) went virtual in 2020, the event was a surprise success. “We reached such a wide market that we never dreamed of reaching,” said Gabrielle Copperwheat, CRS Executive Director. “Because of the accessibility that was put forth, those scientists from around the world are now part of our universe.” Going back to strictly in-person events and eliminating the virtual format that allowed CRS to engage such a large, vital audience isn't an option for the society going forward. “It's not just what are we doing in 2021 or 2022, we're redefining our meetings entirely,” said Copperwheat.

A RETURN TO IN-PERSON

In-person meetings remain the gold standard of association events for their superior networking opportunities and overall experience. And, industry research shows that attendees are just as excited for the return to in-person events as associations are; 90% of respondents to an events industry research survey ages 18 to 50 report being willing to attend an in-person meeting in 2021, while those age 64 and older are slightly less likely to attend an in-person event this year. [4] As planning heats up and demand increases for in-person events, be aware of varying guidelines and restrictions between city, county, and state governments that may make planning difficult. The in-person event experience is expected to be different—subject to social distancing and other safety measures—well into 2022, and requires additional communication to attendees, sponsors, and speakers in preparation both to manage expectations and to manage safety.

A Call-Back to Purpose

The most important element through all considerations when it comes to even format and what ultimately is right for your association at this time is the guiding strategy you previously established. Polling membership and analyzing feedback from previous years' events will all provide valuable insights into what members want from association events this year. Must-haves may vary by audience and most certainly will vary by association, so gaining insight into your association's unique audience and their expectations is key for successful event design.

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Lessons Learned

AN IN-PERSON EVENT PIONEER

The National Air Duct Cleaners Association (NADCA) annual meetings are known and celebrated for their camaraderie—an experience NADCA leaders knew they would forfeit in a virtual setting. After surveying membership and considering all potential avenues, the NADCA board of directors decided to move forward with an in-person event in March 2021 in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. “They considered the members’ desires, first and foremost, and the importance of an in-person meeting,” said Ashton Hald, CMP, DES, NADCA’s Meeting Manager. “The board understood that the meeting would be different from years past, but the decision to move forward was a must.”

Hald and the NADCA staff took over from that point, ensuring that the vision for the in-person event was executed safely. They quickly learned that there was no centralized point for safety guidance, so Hald and the team developed their own approach that was a combination of recommendations from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention along with local requirements and even their own experiences engaging in society. Safety measures included daily self-certification health questionnaires and temperature checks required for entry, sanctuary seating, travel zones, and contactless food and beverage service, in addition to mask and social distancing requirements for all in attendance.

While the event was capped at just 250 attendees, it was an overwhelming success for NADCA and provided members and the board the in-person event they were so looking forward to having, while maintaining the safety of attendees as a top priority.

[Read more about NADCA's annual meeting.](#)



scorecard

- ✓ The culture of your association and audience, in addition to your event strategy, will play a key role in determining what event format may prove effective.
- ✓ Shape the attendee experience around the goal of the meeting—the strategy—and develop an event format that provides that experience.
- ✓ Conduct a member survey to gather insights on what they want from the event and what options they would like in the event's format.
- ✓ Some formats, such as installments, which require engaging and deploying resources over a period of weeks or months, may actually be more expensive than a single multi-day event.
- ✓ Events must consider the accessibility of all attendees; provide contact information for access accommodation requests on the event registration website and make provisions for users who can't access the event online.
- ✓ A true hybrid event is about planning two different experiences for the same event, in a scalable manner.
- ✓ As planning heats up and demand increases for in-person events, be aware of varying guidelines and restrictions between city, county, and state governments that may make planning difficult.

Section 4

Virtual Event Sponsorships

When association events quickly pivoted from in-person events to all-virtual events in 2020, the general approach was to offer sponsors and exhibitors the best alternative to the in-person meeting. Some associations worked to provide a comprehensive approach to sponsorship that provided long-term, maximum exposure on a range of available channels with the association, while others worked to replicate the exhibit hall experience with pop-in meetings and impressive virtual exhibit hall experiences. Despite everyone's best efforts, though, the secret to a winning virtual event sponsorship approach is still evolving, largely dependent on the association, event, and attendees.

The legacy of 2020's virtual events is primarily this: that virtual event sponsorships must be thought of as a digital marketing campaign. Sponsors need to develop strategic materials and campaigns around the event, will look for data to show the ROI of the event, and want to be engaged in the overall event experience.

Data

Virtual events provide an incredible depth of data that allows associations to demonstrate new levels of engagement, interaction, and value of sponsoring their event. However, determining what data to provide, and making the promise of that data part of your sell, is a critical component of planning your event.

DATA AND ANALYTICS FOR SPONSORS AND EXHIBITORS

The role of data and analytics is key when working with sponsors. Data from past virtual events may help show sponsors why they should spend their money in a virtual or hybrid event.

In a survey released by the Partnership Professionals Network (PPN) [1] in June 2019, associations are not collecting enough data about their sponsorship programs. PPN's research shows that most associations primarily

track "...revenue and payments received from partners and sponsors..." and "...whether the benefits promised to the sponsors were delivered." [2]

As part of your planning process, consider how you'll collect and analyze data for sponsors and exhibitors (see "Implementing a Collection Strategy" in Section 2: Event Strategy). Just registrant data, if you're capturing enough information about your attendees, can be invaluable to sponsors as they formulate their own plan on what they want their virtual appearance to be.

With virtual dominating the events landscape for most associations, the opportunity to collect data has never been better. Virtual event platforms can collect information not just on clicks and views, but also heat maps on where attendees hovered on pages, what interactions were made during an event, whether they shared on social media, and more. Sponsors can see who downloaded their materials or visited their virtual booth, and collect information from attendees interested in their product or service with a single click.

However, delivering the data to a sponsor is one thing, but helping it tell a story is another. Once the events team has all the data from the vendor, they should spend time to analyze it and measure it against specific key performance indicators (KPIs) set for the entire event, helping sponsors see how they performed.

This data interpretation is vital to helping sponsors understand the context of the information. For example, a sponsored hybrid session that draws 20 in-person attendees may not be considered a win until the virtual data is added to the mix, which may account for exponentially more views. Similarly, a live sponsored event may only draw a certain number of views during the live stream, but, if made available on-demand after the event, the extended life of that investment and subsequent

on-demand views over the available period may increase the ROI significantly.

Interpreting the data for the sponsor can shape future sponsor discussions, demonstrate the value of the partnership, and help refine the sponsor strategy and anticipate attendee behavior in the future. [3] If data is underwhelming, include thoughts on what might be done differently going forward to address the issue.

Strategy

Virtual and hybrid events demand a new level of strategy from sponsors and exhibitors. Gone are the lively exhibit halls with branded swag and new discoveries at every turn. Virtual sponsorships require a new level of innovation and engagement from sponsors akin to a full-scale digital marketing campaign, complete with a range of branded graphics, video, and interactive content. And, hybrid events demand a multi-platform approach that translates for both in-person and virtual audiences.

Get sponsors and exhibitors involved during the early stages of planning. Allow them to offer suggestions and give honest feedback. This can allow all parties to share lessons and give solutions before an association goes forward with more concrete plans for an event. [4]

While a virtual or hybrid event might have hundreds of attendees, think small when it comes to virtual spaces. Once attendees leave a virtual session, have them “walk” through a curated virtual vendor hall.

Use different digital tools like email marketing campaigns; live social media on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram; sponsored chat messages during livestreams; or ads that run between virtual sessions to help sponsors get their message out to attendees. [5]

Look for unique opportunities for sponsorships during in-person or hybrid events, including:

- Logos and/or names on masks
- Social distancing floor decal “dots”
- Personal trashcans at their own assigned seating
- Wayfinding signage
- Hygiene kit branding

Experience

Discussed previously, virtual and hybrid events demand a new level of digital marketing prowess that sponsors and exhibitors may not possess. It comes as no surprise, then, that sponsors need guidance when it comes to the

Lessons Learned

“ZOOM ROOMS” DISRUPTIVE TO SPONSORS AND EXHIBITORS

The American Transplant Congress (ATC) connected with their bigger sponsors to find out what they wanted from their interactions and to get feedback on what worked for them and what did not work.

They received feedback from sponsors that informal chat spaces were disruptive when an attendee would spontaneously join a Zoom session where a conversation between a sponsor and another attendee had already been underway. While sponsors were happy to welcome a new participant to the conversation, they would have to pause the existing conversation to bring the new participant up to speed.

In response, ATC eliminated the chat spaces, instead creating 30-minute sponsored presentations during which sponsors could engage with attendees during a structured program. This new content-focused approach was directly in response to the feedback received from sponsors about what they would prefer from the meeting.

virtual/hybrid event format. Without it, sponsors may be overwhelmed to a point that they decide they can't successfully partner with your event and forgo sponsoring altogether.

A key element of your sponsor materials should include a sponsorship toolkit that walks sponsors through what they need to do to get the most out of their virtual event experience.

This guidance may include:

- Speaking points
- Technical help
- Platform education
- Tips to get attendees to participate
- Promotional exposure

Attendees need to be ushered into going to virtual spaces with sponsors and exhibitors, attendees are not going to click and chat with a sponsor.

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Lessons Learned

EXHIBITOR SUPPORT

In preparation for its all-virtual meeting, the American Transplant Congress (ATC) opened up access for sponsors early, allowing them to access the platform and experiment with the different functions ahead of time. This also helped ATC better allocate staff resources, as they were able to troubleshoot sponsor questions at that point rather than when the event was live and staff was handling other event-related tasks. The early access also allows sponsors an opportunity to see if they neglected to provide any components for their exhibit area, if relevant, and fully utilize their space.



scorecard

- ✓ The sponsorship for virtual events in 2021 is akin to a digital marketing campaign.
- ✓ Sponsors need to develop strategic materials and campaigns around the event, will look for data to show the ROI of the event, and want to be engaged in the overall event experience.
- ✓ The depth of data available from virtual events is a valuable deliverable for sponsors and exhibitors. Work with them to determine what data is most important to them.
- ✓ Once all the event data is available, spend time to analyze it and measure it against specific key performance indicators (KPIs) set for the entire event, helping sponsors see how they performed.
- ✓ While a virtual or hybrid event might have hundreds of attendees, think small when it comes to virtual spaces.
- ✓ Look for unique opportunities for sponsorships during in-person or hybrid events, including logos or names on masks, social distancing floor decal “dots,” wayfinding signage, and more.
- ✓ Develop a sponsorship toolkit that walks sponsors through what they need to do to get the most out of their virtual event experience.

Section 5

Marketing

In 2020, most events (due to the pandemic) were marketed as an all-or-nothing affair—if it wasn't canceled outright, it involved messaging to convince members to pivot to an all-virtual format, or assure their personal safety at an in-person-only event.

This year, there's an air of familiarity as attendees gear up to revisit a familiar virtual format, prepare for a cautious, yet optimistic, return to in-person, or the best of both worlds being made available in a hybrid event, asking "Which experience works best for you?"

The previous steps you've taken in the preceding Sections have allowed you to use data and strategy to build an event experience tailored to *your* attendees' needs. Now, it's time to communicate that to them.

Data

DATA-INFORMED MARKETING

Before you can craft the messaging, there are analytics you'll need to have on hand to make sure you effectively target the right people with the right message, and make the value of the offer crystal clear. These were discussed in "[Implementing a Data Collection Strategy](#)" in Section 2, and should be collected and interpreted before beginning your marketing strategy. Your association's analytics will differ from another's, but here are some things to consider (note that many of these can be collected from lists generated by tracking pixels placed on your website):

- A list of general (or new) topic preferences within your membership
- Specialty topics/niches and who is gravitating toward them
- Geographic location of prospects to determine how many will be near the in-person component of a hybrid event
- Which members (or website visitors) have job titles that are *not* typical for your

audience (e.g., your audience typically consists of nurses in a specialized area, but there are also physicians, physical therapists, or social workers who have engaged on your website or attended past events)

- The demographics and location of international prospects
- What broader analytics about the event you can leverage for marketing (e.g., "featuring over 100 abstracts, 30 speakers, 50 potential CE credits, and 25 exhibitors!")

Don't forget to interpret data you've collected that you can apply to your post-event messaging. Although this will also be discussed in [Section 6: Post-Events Strategy](#), it's important to plan ahead for your post-event marketing. Some things to compile are:

- Who attended but isn't and has never been a member?
- Who attended but their membership lapsed or is about to lapse?
- Which members have signed up for education courses in the past?

Strategy

Now that you've assembled your data toolbox, it's time to review the purpose of your event marketing (which you've hopefully established in [Section 2: Event Strategy](#)), and what specific goals you want to accomplish. You should establish your own unique, data-informed goals, but here are some ideas to get you started:

- Do you want them to know that you cover topics no one else does?
- Do you want them to attend next year?
- Do you want them to know it's fun?
- Do you want them to renew their membership?
- Are there new "markets" (members/regular attendees) you want to cultivate? (i.e., international attendees who couldn't get to

the traditional in-person event, nonmembers interested in specialized topics)

- Do you want your sponsors to see your event as a “must” on their list of valuable marketing events?

COMMUNICATING VALUE

It’s essential to remember that any and all event marketing messaging (be it in-person, virtual, or hybrid) needs to answer one question for your target audience: *what will they be getting for the money they will pay and the time they will invest?* In order to be motivated to attend or sponsor your event or act on any post-event offers that result, you must clearly communicate the value it holds for them. The following are categories of prospects that you may want to consider, though your own data may point you to other categories not listed here.

Members.

Many of your members may already see the value, especially if they have attended events before. However, there are a few additional points to add to your value messaging for virtual and hybrid events, such as:

- The convenience and time saved by attending virtually
- The cost-effectiveness of attending virtually (i.e., money saved on food, lodging, and airfare, but having access to the same valuable content)
- The additional benefits to networking online and connecting with more people than might be possible in-person (For example, if your event has traditionally had limited hours to view poster presentations, highlight how these posters will now be available 24/7, and how topics can be sorted and found more easily by those who are interested)

You might also want to offer a discount or free CE opportunities to attendees who renew their membership, and in your messaging list year-round benefits that only *your* organization can offer.

Attracting New Audiences.

With nonmembers, it’s nearly impossible to determine the most effective message without some type of data collected, most likely from tracking them on your website (see the data collection section in [Section 2: Event Strategy](#)). Here are a few points to keep in mind:

- Not everyone who visits your website will be interested in something at every event. Once you have captured their information, it’s important to keep them engaged, perhaps by serving them ads on relevant social media platforms. However, the idea is not to *bombard* them, but to groom them. By nurturing prospects, you have a better chance at attracting them with the right fit at the right time.
- If you have people on your list (both members and nonmembers) that have never attended an event, or only attended sporadically, look at their data and ask yourself, why? Are they international? Were past in-person meeting locations too far for them to travel? Does the nature of their profession (i.e., an on-call nurse or physician) or their demographic (parents of young children) prevent them from traveling to in-person events? Are the costs of registration and travel to in-person events being paid by employers or are they paid out of pocket? With the virtual component, create a new market by targeting this group. Your messaging can emphasize the elimination of this barrier (“Attend in the convenience of your own home!”).
- Depending on what your analytics uncover, you can identify and cultivate engaged groups of nonmembers interested in only one or two niche topics within your industry. As discussed in the section on programming decisions in [Section 2: Event Strategy](#), perhaps you’ve decided to place the sessions on those topics together on one day and are offering a one-day attendance option. The value of this should be easy to communicate to these groups.

For hybrid events, you may send a postcard to local prospects that emphasizes the in-person portion of the meeting, while sending an email highlighting the virtual component to those who are not local to the in-person event location. After the event, revisit your attendance lists to see who from these groups did not attend. You can package recordings from these niche sessions as an online education series that can be purchased, and create messaging around them as convenient, on-demand content.

Marketing to Potential Sponsors/Exhibitors

This is covered more in-depth in [Section 4: Sponsorships](#), but here are a few things to consider in your messaging:

- The potential of reaching more people at one time (24-hour virtual “booths” that offer demo videos and the ability to communicate with leads directly online at the lead’s convenience)
- Digital interaction (such as downloads of a sponsor’s/exhibitor’s materials or providing a list of names and unanswered questions posted in a chat at a session) can now be tracked and individual follow ups can be done with leads that have proven interest, enhancing the overall ROI of the event

COMMUNICATING SAFETY FOR THE IN-PERSON COMPONENT

While association meeting and event planners, and especially event marketers, have extensive experience marketing in-person events, the return to in-person gatherings in 2021 and 2022 will be a unique marketing endeavor with delicate messaging considerations.

Safety has become the unique aspect of in-person events that must be addressed in order to be successful. In [Section 2, “Strategy and the Event Experience,”](#) it was mentioned that engagement and entertainment are the keys to

your event’s success. If in-person attendees are worried or uncomfortable, will they be engaged?

While this is a required aspect in planning your in-person component (see [Section 3: Event Format](#)), it is essential to *communicate* this safety to those who would prefer to attend in-person. Depending on the strategy of your event format, you may want to consider including these points in your messaging to instill confidence and comfort in the minds of your in-person attendees:

- What things have you implemented to give attendees control over their own space?
- Setting up expectations is important. What can attendees expect as far as rules and restrictions? (For example, some events in the past have had on-site rapid COVID-19 testing; if anyone tested positive, they were immediately required to go into quarantine if they were far from home, and sent home at once if local.)

Experience

The experience of an event begins long before an attendee arrives at the venue or logs on to their first virtual session. Your initial messaging may have netted you attendees, sponsors, and exhibitors, but it shouldn’t stop there. Your next

Lessons Learned

COMMUNICATING SAFETY CONSISTENTLY

When the National Air Duct Cleaners Association (NADCA) returned to an in-person event in March 2021, NADCA’s meeting manager, Ashton Hald, CMP, DES, found that attendee communication was a vital component to building trust with the event and organization. “We had put out our safety measures and requirements for the event, and people registered with those measures and requirements in place,” Hald said. As government restrictions eased and guidance changed, questions swirled about whether NADCA’s safety requirements would change for attendees. Hald’s answer: a staunch “no.” “If we changed our safety requirements after they had already been communicated, how would our attendees feel, who maybe felt comfortable enough to register because of those safety requirements?” said Hald. The takeaway: once you communicate your in-person event safety measures and requirements, consider yourself bound by them.

step is critical in your attendees' experience; as the saying goes, you never get a second chance to make a first impression.

EVENT PREPARATION

Make sure they know what to expect.

If attendees of a virtual event have a hard time accessing the event, it is not going to work toward creating a good experience for them. It's essential to provide everyone with easy-to-understand, detailed instructions and "training" on using and navigating the platform. Also, as mentioned earlier in the section on communicating safety, in-person attendees should know the details of safety rules and restrictions that they are expected to adhere to. Accomplish this by:

- Highlighting event features, schedules, and "how to's" in time-based email workflows.
- Allow virtual attendees a sneak peek or preview of the platform. Designate a time close to the event for them to practice logging in and exploring the virtual space before making the content available.

Create excitement and anticipation.

Attendee engagement starts here as well. Here are some ideas:

- A few weeks before, begin an online campaign via emails and social media with the intention of fostering conversations between attendees about the event or generating excitement. Use hashtags, post short interviews with speakers, or create simple contests or giveaways.
- Welcome your virtual attendees with something to make them feel a part of the event—perhaps sending them a welcome box or opening an online photo booth. Think beyond the obligatory tote bag: some event planners are arranging virtual wine tasting events and generate excitement by sending virtual attendees mini bottles of wine to be tasted together at the actual event.

DURING THE EVENT

Even after the event has launched, you can still generate messaging to influence the event experience. One example is to use Twitter or Facebook Live for live updates. This can be especially useful for hybrid events that are bringing together in-person and virtual audiences as they communicate and exchange comments under hashtags. You may even entice those who haven't registered to follow along online, which might lead to the purchase of the event recordings afterward or convince them to attend a future event.

MARKETING CHANNELS

There is a reason this section is last — because you should *never* start your marketing strategy here! A platform is merely another tool to target who you are trying to reach, *after* you have crafted your specialized messages and decided who should see them.

The following are various channels you may engage for your event marketing and what audience segments may be best reached with them. Remember: the platform must fit the message, not the other way around. Keep in mind this list isn't exhaustive, and marketers must choose which to use based on the unique data collected.

- **Email.** Utilize your lists and target different messages to different people, depending on their preferences.
- **Newsletter.** Include general messaging about the event, including program and featured speakers with links to explore different tracks.
- **Social Media.** One size does not fit all for social media marketing. You should have data to see which social media platforms are the most utilized, and by whom, in your target market.
 - » **LinkedIn.** This can be used to target people based on job title, and a budget can be assessed for sponsored

announcements to the people you want to reach.

- » **Twitter.** This is useful for segments that are very active online, especially professionally, in a similar way to LinkedIn. Use hashtags with targeted topics and sponsored tweets. Don't forget to use these during the event, too (see “[During the Event](#)” in this section).
- » **Instagram.** This tends to be a more personal platform. However, the Instagram Stories function (which has a limited shelf life before the post disappears) is very useful for announcements with a deadline to participate, such as educational offerings, webinars, podcasts, and award nominations. Note you can only use this function if your account has more than 10,000 followers.
- » **YouTube.** At a live event, many organizations arrange for videographers to not only record speakers but take “B roll” footage (attendee interviews or to communicate the overall atmosphere) to use later in promotions. One planner said they considered this video to be a “commercial” for the event. Since the virtual component can also be automatically recorded, this can give you a rich amount of video content to present on this platform (and share on other social media).
- **Podcasts and webinars.** Aside from any produced by your own organization, are there any that are relevant to topics that engage your members? Perhaps you can contact them and arrange to have a member be a featured guest or have an announcement made to “plug” your event.
- **Print publications and mailings.** Print ranks among the top-valued communication channels for associations [1] while nearly

75% of Americans report enjoying getting direct mail—as opposed to digital information—because they can read it when they want. [2] If print is in your budget, it may prove effective for reaching prospects about your event.

- **Enlist volunteers and committee members.** Don't forget to look internally! Harness the interest and excitement of your volunteers by preparing a “committee toolkit” to make it easy for them to share information with people in their field. Include sample emails and social posts, provide sharable images like brag badges, and outline promotional best practices.

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Lessons Learned

EXPANDING INTERNATIONAL REACH

For the American Neurological Association (ANA), a vital purpose of their annual meeting is to present new, groundbreaking research from around the world. This means soliciting as many meaningful abstract submissions as possible and making sure there is international representation.

Because so many international events were cancelled outright with no virtual substitute, ANA's events teams went to work courting international researchers to see if they would be interested in submitting abstracts and attending ANA's virtual event.

“We designed the message around the idea that we knew about the sudden cancelation of events they were scheduled to present at, and that we felt for them,” said Kira Jones, ANA's Marketing Manager.

“We had the president write a message offering ANA's virtual program as an alternative.”

The team then gathered their lists to send these targeted messages to their international members and to international organizations they had connections to. They also enlisted an outside PR agency to distribute press releases to relevant publications and professionals in other English-speaking countries.

The result was that ANA's event broke a record for its abstract submissions, as well as its attendance—with 46 countries represented.

A light gray illustration of a checklist with a pencil. The checklist has a circular icon with a checkmark at the top left, followed by several horizontal lines representing text. A pencil is positioned diagonally across the bottom right of the checklist.

scorecard

- ✓ Track analytics, like geographic and demographic data, of your audience to help formulate effective marketing messaging.
- ✓ Plan ahead for post-event messaging, gathering data on event attendees and creating segmented lists for future membership, education, and event marketing.
- ✓ For sponsors and exhibitors to be motivated to attend or sponsor your event or act on any post-event offers that result, you must clearly communicate the value it holds for them.
- ✓ Safety has become the unique aspect of in-person events that must be addressed in order to be successful. Messaging must specifically address safety measures being taken at in-person events.
- ✓ Once you communicate your in-person event safety measures and requirements, consider yourself bound by them.
- ✓ Provide easy-to-understand, detailed instructions and “training” on using and navigating the event platform as part of your marketing messaging and registration confirmation to reinforce a positive experience for attendees, speakers, sponsors, and exhibitors.
- ✓ Leverage social media to generate messaging during the event and influence both the event experience—especially for hybrid events bringing together in-person and virtual audiences—and interest in the event.
- ✓ Harness the interest and excitement of your volunteers by preparing a “committee toolkit” to make it easy for them to share information with people in their field. Include sample emails and social posts, provide sharable images, and outline promotional best practices.

Section 6

Post-Event Strategy

At the culmination of an event, the post-event work begins. However, this phase of the event is just as important as all other phases and should be included in the earliest event planning stages (see [Section 2: Event Strategy](#)).

The content that comes out of virtual events presents rich education and marketing opportunities for associations to leverage after an event, allowing events to continue generating revenue and value long after an event is over.

This section examines post-event strategies for leveraging data to drive post-event programming decisions, using event content to generate non-dues revenue, and considerations for post-event access.

Data

Most association leaders and meeting and event planners already employ post-event surveys to gather feedback from attendees. Beyond attendee surveys, data from virtual events can help associations evaluate the event format, components, and sessions to determine whether the approach was successful and inform future event decisions.

DATA AND FUTURE PROGRAMMING DECISIONS

After your event, analyze attendance data to see how many people viewed specific sessions, viewed pre-recorded presentations, or downloaded materials, to name a few examples of metrics you may analyze.

You may discover interesting engagement trends for your unique audiences, or find that certain types of resources are more appealing than others. And, much like the discussion in [Section 4: Sponsorships](#), interpreting the data to tell a story is vital; don't just report the numbers. Instead, look for trends that paint a bigger picture and can be useful for future planning. For example, if attendance at the keynote session was high but engagement was extremely low

while engagement was higher in smaller breakout sessions with attendees asking more questions in the chat feature, you might reason that the larger venue wasn't as engaging and therefore less effective than the smaller sessions. This might lead you to re-evaluate whether a keynote session is the right format for a future event.

Strategy

Virtual events provided more opportunities than ever before to extend the life of conference content and repackage it into products that generate non-dues revenue.

SHOWCASING EDUCATIONAL CONTENT

Explore post-event access options available on various virtual event platforms. Providing post-event content on the same platform as the event not only lessens the staff burden, but it streamlines the attendee experience, allowing attendees to use the same log-in information as they used for the live event.

If continuing to host event content on the event platform after the fact isn't an option, you may opt to export recorded sessions to your association's website. This may take the form of a microsite dedicated to the event and be available only to attendees or those who have paid for post-event access.

The least costly option, and therefore most possible for some associations, is to export everything to an already existing site or content library. ^[1] An added bonus to this method of hosting post-event content is that it aligns with continuing education (CE) programs and allows the association to monitor and issue CE credits seamlessly for members.

SELLING EVENT CONTENT

Most associations include post-event access for a period of time with the event registration. However, for those who didn't register for the event but want access after the fact, there are rich opportunities to generate non-dues revenue

with on-demand access and subscription fees for this content.

Paying for access for a single piece of content—to watch a single session or to download a single set of materials— isn't a new concept for associations, which have been offering on-demand learning via webinars and online courses for years. Set member and non-member pricing for these resources just as you would for any other educational offering.

However, subscriptions are a fairly new concept to the association industry. Much like a subscription to Netflix or Hulu, a member (or non-member) can pay a certain amount of money monthly or annually to have access to all of the educational content from an event. This may be particularly relevant for large events producing a high volume of content, especially things like recorded poster presentations and abstract presentations.

If you opt for the subscription model, stagger your release of content to justify the need for continued access, releasing new content monthly or quarterly, and publicizing new releases to promote the subscriptions. Key to this model, though, is to provide member and non-member pricing, much like event registrations, to continue to justify the value of membership.

RE-MARKETING PAST CONTENT

After the post-event access period is up, and after you've marketed access to event content, a novel marketing approach may be to leverage a small portion of the highest-rated content from your last event to market for your upcoming event.

Perhaps you shorten a session into social snippet videos and promote them on social media with a call to action to register for this year's event. Or, you provide a limited-time access code to last year's event content free with registration to this year's event.

Experience

The overall post-event experience—encompassing how attendees and on-demand viewers experience the event content—is also part of the post-event strategy and can be a key driver of interest and value.

DECIDING ON POST-EVENT CONTENT

A common misconception is that virtual and hybrid events produce more content than in-person meetings when in reality, what associations are dealing with is more access. Where previously there may have been one spoken presentation, there's now a video recording, podcast, webinar, PowerPoint presentation, and corresponding white paper, all derived from the same session. The important question to ask before covering all access points and inundating audiences with content is, "how does this audience want to consume this content?"

While some associations really will need a do-everything approach, nearly all others will benefit from a highly curated approach to delivering content after an event.

Start with the data; the top-attended sessions or those with the highest engagement may benefit from being made available in multiple formats.

Then, test your audience. If there is one type of content that performs better than others, use that as your guide for how to release similar content going forward.

LENGTH OF ACCESS

While establishing what registration for an event includes, consider who and how long post-event content will be available for event attendees.

Post-event access may be available for:

- One month
- One year
- Indefinitely

Giving a shorter timeframe (a few months or a year) can create an artificial need for those who have access to view available content or it can create a need for those who did not register for the event to pay a fee to access that content. It's important to note that someone who registered but ultimately was unable to attend should not be locked out of accessing post-event content. [2]

If you have chosen to implement a subscription model, give attendees an option to convert to the subscription model after a designated timeframe to continue experiencing the content.

References

[1] <https://associationheadquarters.com/blog/association-education-opportunities>

[2] <https://associationheadquarters.com/case-studies/virtual-program-driven-event-planning>

Lessons Learned

ON-DEMAND CONTENT

The American Transplant Congress (ATC) had successfully pivoted to a virtual event in 2020, but they were also looking to find ways for additional opportunities to maximize ATC's revenue.

While most associations offer a 30- to 90-day window of post-event access, ATC's team decided to create a yearlong library of educational content out of their virtual event. The library would offer three times as many CME credits than any past ATC in-person meeting.

They chose a portal that could host the content for a full year and that would also hold a special forum to foster conversation around the content from the event.

When the live broadcast of the event ended, ATC's event team saw an increase in the portal's views (accessing recorded live sessions, sponsor and abstract information, and education credit content).



scorecard

- ✓ The content that comes out of virtual events presents rich education and marketing opportunities for associations to leverage after an event.
- ✓ Analyze data from your virtual event to evaluate the event format, components, and sessions to determine whether the approach was successful and inform future event decisions.
- ✓ Providing post-event content on the same platform as the event not only lessens the staff burden, but it streamlines the attendee experience, allowing attendees to use the same log-in information as they used for the live event.
- ✓ Someone who registered but ultimately was unable to attend should not be locked out of accessing post-event content.
- ✓ Stagger the release of content to justify the need for continued access in subscription-based post-event access models, releasing new content monthly or quarterly, and publicizing new releases to promote the subscriptions.
- ✓ If you have chosen to implement a subscription model, give attendees an option to convert to the subscription model after a designated timeframe to continue experiencing the content.
- ✓ Use a small portion of the highest-rated content from your last event as promotional content when marketing an upcoming event.



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