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NEWS

Groups quickly transform big meetings into virtual events

Remote-working staff scramble to train speakers on effective online presentations and to help exhibitors create virtual exhibits

March 27, 2020

By [Kathryn Walson](#)

Some associations are finding that all is not lost after canceling meetings they may have spent years planning. With participants hungry for information, business opportunities, and discussions, nimble groups are fulfilling a need by moving meetings and educational content online.

The American College of Cardiology had less than three weeks to convert its canceled conference to a virtual experience on the same three days the in-person event would have been held. The group announced March 9 that its Annual Scientific Session, along with the World Heart Federation's World Congress of Cardiology, would not be held in Chicago March 28-30. About 18,000 people typically attend ACC's annual meeting; 30% are international participants from more than 100 countries.

Instead, ACC is presenting 23 live education sessions on three channels, along with video, slides and abstracts on demand beginning March 28. The group kept its meeting dates the same because people had already carved out time in their calendars.

However, for doctors who are currently in the throes of the pandemic, ACC will keep the conference up on its website for 90 days. Many people are expected to tune in for presentations on clinical trials.

"As horrible as the situation is right now and as much focus as our members need to put on the care of their patients, we can't stop the science from moving forward," said Janice Sibley, executive vice president, education and publishing.

ACC's virtual conference is free and "open to the entire world," with no registration fee to participate, Sibley said.

"This was a mission-based decision," she said, adding that like other groups that canceled in-person events, ACC lost revenue by offering refunds for all registration, sponsorship and exhibitor fees.

Some associations routinely deliver small-scale online offerings such as webinars. But they find themselves in uncharted waters as they figure out how to transform a large, days-long event into a 100% virtual experience—often in a matter of weeks. Remote working raises its own challenges; staff can no longer gather in a conference room to plan the event.

"Many organizations ... are under pressure to quickly pivot from in-person events to online delivery," said consultant Celisa Steele in a recent webinar. She is co-founder and managing director of Tagoras, a Carrboro, N.C.-based company that advises organizations on providing online learning.

Establish “guiding principles”

Large meetings typically consist of simultaneous sessions, keynote speakers, training and educational workshops, discussion areas, social networking and an exhibit area for vendors. Groups that decide to take their events online must choose which elements to offer, and they need to define the value proposition for participants, said Jeff Cobb, who is the other co-founder and managing director of Tagoras.

Groups should focus their time on training speakers to deliver effective online presentations. They also need to decide how much to charge for registration and come up with a marketing plan, Steele said.

An association hosting a large virtual conference for the first time should consider paying a company that has the tools, experience and staff to manage the technology. Then after the group gets a few virtual meetings under its belt, it can consider the DIY approach, Steele said.

ACC hired a virtual events firm to make sure the three-day online meeting can accommodate thousands of participants around the world. Participation in the virtual meeting could be high in countries that have not yet been hit hard by the pandemic, Sibley said.

ACC was selective in moving certain activities online. Soon after deciding to launch a virtual meeting, the group established “guiding principles” for the event: It should satisfy participants’ intellectual needs with scientific research and education; their business needs with exhibitors’ virtual presentations; and their social/emotional needs with an opening ceremony and convocation of newly installed fellows. ACC also provides wellness resources for doctors who are suffering from pandemic-related stress.

Seventy ACC staffers are planning the virtual meeting. One group is preparing faculty to make online presentations; another is helping exhibitors to launch virtual exhibits; and the communications teams is promoting the event.

In some areas, virtual meetings fall short of in-person gatherings. Groups said they will try to recreate a sense of community by providing live chats and other areas where participants can interact with each other. ACC asked more than 20 of its largest exhibitors to move their exhibits online; only half said they could put together a virtual exhibit in just over two weeks.

If other groups are considering making large meetings virtual, Sibley offers the following advice: “You cannot over-communicate both internally and externally.” She said ACC instituted a daily briefing at 9 a.m. to allow staff leaders to meet virtually and solve problems quickly.

Sibley also recommends that groups establish guiding principles and “decide what it is they are going after. Are they trying to be mission-based? Are they trying to recover revenue?”

All hands on deck

The Household & Commercial Products Association’s mid-year meeting in Washington was expected to draw more than 400 participants on April 22-24. Once HCPA decided on March 17 to make the meeting virtual, the trade association had just over a month to make the transition. The group will conduct a dry run prior to the event, and it has asked participants to be patient with any glitches, said CEO Stephen Caldeira.

Staff, presenters and attendees are “going to have to get up to speed with the technology very quickly,” he said.

HCPA’s virtual meeting will provide “timely and relevant content” on legislative, regulatory and supply-chain issues, Caldeira said. The trade association represents companies that are “on the front lines” of the pandemic and have ramped up production of cleaning products such as disinfecting wipes, he said.

Members who had registered for HCPA’s mid-year meeting could apply their registration fee to the annual meeting in December or receive a refund. While the working committee sessions on April 22-24 will be free to participants, Caldeira hopes the trade group can recuperate some revenue through a series of webinars offered in April, May and June.

Making a large meeting virtual in a short time frame has required “all hands on deck,” he said.

“Every staff member in some way is dedicating some of their time to support ... the transition from a physical meeting to a virtual meeting. It touches every team,” he said.

NIGP: The Institute for Public Procurement in Herndon, Va., recently announced it will offer a virtual conference June 3-4 featuring nine speakers to prepare the way for its large annual gathering scheduled for Aug. 23-26 in Chicago. The group also quickly converted more than half of its 100 in-person classes scheduled for March through May around the country into virtual classes. Many of its members are involved with purchasing supplies for hospitals amid the pandemic.

“We are nimble enough to quickly convert any of our in-person education to a virtual offering,” Laura Shelters, director of content research and development, said.

However, making its large August meeting entirely virtual would pose a unique challenge, she said. NIGP has until April or May to determine whether the pandemic will force them to move it online. The group would need to train speakers on engaging with their audience over a computer screen. Facilitators and moderators would play an important role in handling any technical glitches, she said. The biggest financial impact would likely come from a loss of exhibitors, who pay to participate.

“The exhibitors thrive off that face-to-face communication,” she said.

The pandemic caused one association to cancel not only its in-person event, but its virtual event. The San Francisco-based American Association for Pediatric Ophthalmology and Strabismus planned to make its annual meeting virtual and to locate a ‘command center’—staffed by a team of audiovisual experts—at the Fairmont Hotel in Austin, Texas. The hotel provided the necessary bandwidth, according to the group’s website. Pediatric ophthalmologists in Texas had volunteered to monitor the virtual sessions. AAPOS staff was ready to travel to Austin to assist them.

Then COVID-19 cases were reported in Austin, and so the AAPOS board canceled the virtual meeting as well.