



sidecar

What the Pandemic Taught Us About Event Management





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One of the first things that happened in the COVID-19 pandemic response was the swift and immediate erasure of our social calendars. Events were optimistically postponed before their ultimate cancellations or transitions to new formats. Everything we knew about events was flipped on its head — we can't host crowds, shake hands or hug, stand closer than 6 feet to one another, or see each other's smiles beneath our masks.

While we've learned that nothing can replace the experience of gathering together in the real world, countless moments of connection, ingenuity, innovation, and humanity have thrived along the way.

In this ebook, we'll cover how associations and membership-based organizations should respond to changes in event management, what it takes to run an unforgettable virtual event, what the future holds for events, and the overarching lessons we learned from the pandemic on event management.

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Taking a step back: Is an event the right solution?

Marcy Karpowitz is the founder of [MKMCreative](#), an experiential marketing agency based in San Francisco. According to Karpowitz, before association leaders make the decision to replace their in-person event with a virtual one, cancel all marketing efforts, or employ none presently, they should take a step back and evaluate what the event or initiative is intended to accomplish.

Zoom out, and ask the following questions:

1. What is the goal of your initiative?
2. What problem is the effort solving?
3. Is hosting an event the only way to accomplish that goal?
4. Why do you host a conference every year? Is to establish your brand? Is it to connect like-minded professionals? Is it to position your organization as an industry leader?

Before making any quick decisions, go back to the basics and candidly evaluate why you host the events that you do. You might be surprised to discover the underlying reasons for doing so may have different solutions than a traditional event.

As a membership-based organization, you want to stay connected to your members, internal team, and reach new potential members. But an event isn't the only way to do that — connection is about more than a virtual happy hour. And after long days of teleconferencing and remote work, screen fatigue is a common sentiment among workforces. Karpowitz says a gesture as simple and thoughtful as a curated parcel is one example of how associations can engage with their constituencies, drive meaningful connections, and stay top-of-mind in a way that is not a traditional event.

An important lesson we learned from the pandemic is to think about the experience you are trying to create, not just the event.

However, if you determine holding an event and making it a virtual experience is the best choice for your organization and goals, there's a lot to consider! Let's dive in.

Virtual events

The pandemic created an environment where event locations transitioned from offices and convention centers to URL links.

With virtual events, we had to learn how to fundamentally change what we're used to, flexibly and innovatively. Planning virtual events isn't as easy as wrangling a handful of presenters and recording a video conference.

Though a virtual event isn't an exact substitution for the in-person experience, it's more than just a series of webinars. Event management professionals say that what remains unchanged between virtual and traditional events is how they approach the planning process.

Karpowitz of MKMCreative said even though her team and partners shifted to a remote work environment, the way they run events largely remained the same.

"You can get the same camaraderie and joy that you do from a real world event," Karpowitz said.

Karin Beswick is an events manager for the marketing agency [Yes&](#), located in the Washington, D.C. metro area. She said, "Aside from the obvious aspect of shifting from physical to virtual, event management now is very similar to what we're normally doing — coordinating speakers and sponsors, and considering the sponsor and attendee experience."

What it takes to pull off a successful virtual event

While the event planning process pre-pandemic and current-day is largely the same, it might be surprising for association leaders to learn that orchestrating virtual events, in many ways, is more difficult than organizing their typical in-person conference.

To be clear, there are multiple levels and scales to virtual events. In some situations, a webinar hosted on Zoom or Microsoft Teams is just fine. But for a full-scale conference, a simple virtual meeting is not going to cut it.

While costs do certainly depend on the scope of the virtual event you're hosting, organizations planning virtual events should be prepared to foot a bill that doesn't look much different from the cost of planning and hosting an in-person event.

"At the beginning of the pandemic, everyone assumed virtual events were going to be cheaper, easier, and a game-changer in terms of technology," Beswick said. "We learned very quickly that wasn't the case. It became more apparent that you have to spend money to get the real experience you want out of the event."

In some cases, the cost of hosting a virtual event may be even higher than the cost of hosting an event in a physical space.

Scott Brown, vice president of marketing at Sapphire Ventures, [wrote in a blog post](#) after partnering with Karpowitz to run a virtual summit, "When we started working on the CIO Summit, I was stunned at the initial cost estimates. I knew we would need to pull down a whole new technology stack, but I thought for sure that would still be a fraction of what a comparable, in-person event would look like.

Then, after receiving almost identical bids from several production agencies, I realized we were thinking about it all wrong."

This is because virtual events require multiple tools and solutions to be integrated into a single event. Whereas at an in-person event, many costs are covered by a single vendor, in virtual events, you need different technologies for streaming sessions, networking, offering on-demand content, and more. There's no all-in-one solution.

Costs to budget for include:

- Pre-production marketing, design, video footage and editing, etc.
- Platform and technology infrastructure
- Equipment for speakers (microphones, webcams, ring lights)
- Team support for training speakers and sponsors
- Technical team support for attendees
- Content creation for materials before, during, and after the event
- Plus additional elements, depending on the type of experience you want to create.

Visualize the experience you want to create

What kind of experience do you want your attendees, speakers, and sponsors to have?

It's important to educate your attendees on the front-end of a virtual event, as well as the speakers. Let them know (and of course, follow through) that this is not just another Zoom meeting. However, at the same time, a [virtual event](#) shouldn't be a mirror image of an in-person event. The programming needs to be tailored to the virtual experience.

If you're planning a virtual conference with 36 speakers, Karpowitz says organizers should look at the overarching event as 36 micro-events to organize and orchestrate. There is a tremendous amount of teamwork and expertise required to pull off a seamless virtual experience.

In planning your event, you should also be prepared for the unique obstacles that come with the virtual territory. For example, you're competing with countless distractions at home — children distance learning from home, pets, chores that need to be done, and so much more. Another is the prevalence of [Zoom fatigue](#).

Zoom fatigue is a real (and unexpected) consequence of our now-remotely connected global workplace. It causes us to feel more tired and exhausted after our virtual meetings than we did following in-person meetings. Engaging with colleagues through a screen and staring at ourselves on camera can severely zap our energy levels. This poses some challenges when it comes to planning virtual events.

Because your members and staffers are worn out by the constant webcam, we need to get more creative in finding ways to connect and stimulate them. There needs to be a better way to engage virtually that's less exhausting, and more "real."

"Attendees don't just want a Zoom meeting," Beswick said. "They want organizers to put more thought into it."

Be sure to consider ways to accommodate distractions and fatigue while thinking about the experience you want to create in your virtual event. Put the same energy and thoughtfulness (if not more) into planning your virtual event as you would an in-person event.



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Choose the right platform

Choosing the right platform and getting the proper technological infrastructure in place is critical for a smooth virtual event. These platforms can be costly, depending on the size of your event, the experience you want to impart, and the features you want your platform to provide.

You should look at the virtual event platform as your venue. Just as you'd vet locations, you should also closely evaluate your platform options. Some of the features you may want to look for are:

- Different types of rooms and spaces
- Breakout rooms for networking
- Live broadcasting
- Pre-recorded video uploads
- Custom branding
- Interactivity features, like Q&A, live polling, and messaging
- Space for banner ads
- Mobile application
- Reporting and analytics

These are just a few capabilities to look for!

Once you've got your event goals and ideal experience in mind, determine what your must-have features are. You'll also want to ensure the capabilities will work for your sponsors, as they are an important audience to consider while designing an ideal experience. Keep in mind that you may even need multiple tech tools to accomplish all of your goals.

Prep attendees

Your audience is going to have a lot of questions. To create the best experience possible for attendees, stay in touch with them leading up to the event and inform them of what to expect.

1. Focus portions of your marketing and advertising budget on targeting registered attendees with educational messaging prior to heading into the event.
2. Explain how the conference will work.
3. Share blogs and emails introducing them to the conference.
4. Educate them on how to navigate their way through the experience.
5. Provide resources for technical support.

Prep speakers

If this isn't a speaker's first time presenting to a virtual audience, it may very well be their first time using your platform. Help your speakers get comfortable before it's time to face an audience they can't physically see.

1. Introduce speakers to the platform you're using and its capabilities. Allow speakers to test out the technology beforehand. They should feel comfortable with the gear and platform before the show.
2. Check their sound, background, and lighting.
3. Send speakers a headset and camera, and other technology they may need for a successful presentation.
4. Create virtual backgrounds if you want a cohesive, branded look.
5. Similarly, if you are offering virtual booths to sponsors, make sure they are properly educated on the technology and how it works prior to the conference.

Organize an engaging agenda

To combat fatigue, Beswick recommends holding 15-20-minute keynote addresses rather than the typical 45-minute to hour-long sessions. Add short, 5-minute breaks between sessions instead of half-hour breaks.

In a traditional conference or event, there's interaction between speakers, attendees, and exhibitors. You can recreate that sensation by building interactive elements like polls and trivia into the sessions.

Arianna Rehak created Sidecar's own flagship event, [SURGE](#), which was designed as a virtual conference in 2017, well before the pandemic. She recommends structuring an event experience that caters to the different reasons that drive people to register and attend events. She wrote, "People want different things out of virtual events, so it is really important to design for different levels of desired engagement. For example, some actively crave the virtual networking component. Others are simply looking to receive their continuing education credits. Our recommendation is to offer different session formats that satisfy different levels of engagement."

Your virtual event should be designed for the at-home experience, while providing options for the different kinds of guests who attend.

Don't forget about networking

Networking with industry colleagues and meeting potential leads is a major reason attendees register for conferences. But is that experience lost when we make the shift to virtual?

Industry experts say that's not the case — networking is still possible in virtual events! There are a few ways you can handle this.

In addition to having a "general session" style experience with keynotes for all attendees, Karpowitz recommends integrating moderated networking sessions and small breakout rooms, limiting the number of people per room, and organizing sessions by topic.

Consider platforms that offer options for these networking sessions, and offer structure around their use. Conversations can be based on a particular topic or kept loose, and allow attendees to move from virtual room to room — just like they would do in a physical environment.



Your virtual event should be designed for the at-home experience, while providing options for the different kinds of guests who attend.

Rehak said in an email that she found tremendous results from the virtual networking experience: “I was getting these reports of profound experiences from attendees of the conference, and I was trying to figure out what made ours so different for people. When I started to dig deeper by analyzing the data and having conversations with attendees, what I learned was that people were successfully meeting others that they wanted to continue a relationship with. There were all these micro interactions taking place in the chat, and I learned it was often enough to spark a next step. I heard stories of people who got hired from these attendee chats, of people who reached out after and the shared experience was enough to initiate a conversation, etc. This was definitely the most unexpected positive outcome, as traditionally virtual events are not considered to be hubs of networking.”

Unexpected benefits of virtual events

While no one could have anticipated a global shift to virtual, there have been several benefits of holding virtual events. These are some of the benefits of virtual events:

1. **Diverse attendees and speakers** - Virtual events allow associations to book speakers from all over the country (and the world), when they normally wouldn't have been able to participate in the past. Similarly, attendees who previously couldn't fly to attend a conference can now participate directly from their home. Travel costs are completely eliminated in virtual events.
2. **Data** - Virtual events enable organizers to collect vast amounts of data that aren't possible from an in-person experience. With virtual, we're able to see how engaged attendees are during particular sessions, who visited which sponsored virtual booth and how many times, and more. These insights are significantly more telling than a simple post-show survey.
3. **Team development** - The shift to virtual has forced teams to learn new skills and grow their knowledge bases together. In the pandemic's pandemonium, there was a sense of cohesion and camaraderie as entire teams learned together.
4. **More access to interesting sessions** - In real-life conferences, attendees often have to choose between concurrent sessions. However, in virtual events, attendees have access to recorded sessions and content whenever they are ready to consume it.
5. **Your content goes further** - Having high-quality recorded content on demand creates a massive opportunity to reuse and upcycle it in your marketing.
6. **Group registration** - Virtual events can be more scalable, which encourages multiple registrants from the same organization. Rehak said, “One amazing finding: this increases the likelihood of organizations sending their young professionals. This means that you have an opportunity to engage the up-and-coming generation!”
7. **Sponsor value** - In some cases, sponsors are able to purchase packages that may bring even more value. (See more in the sponsorship section below!)

Sponsorships in virtual events

Just because you are hosting a virtual event doesn't mean sponsorships are irrelevant. In fact, there's potentially an even greater opportunity to spotlight sponsors in virtual settings than in real-life events.

There are numerous creative ways for brands to sponsor virtual events. Here are a few ideas:

- Play a sizzle reel or commercial before speakers start.
- Send an appreciation gift or accompaniment.
- Include their branding on emails and other content sent before, during, and after the event.
- Invite your sponsors and exhibitors to host networking or breakout sessions so they have direct contact with attendees.
- Include sponsor logos in the branded virtual backgrounds, if you're using them.
- Sell ad space on your streaming platform.
- Offer branding opportunities in breakout rooms and waiting rooms.



You can even bring sponsorship creativity to the next level!

Take a look at how Procter & Gamble built a virtual world, [LifeLab](#), for the 2021 CES event. They built a Sims-like digital environment where attendees personalized their own avatars and explored a digital space showcasing P&G's products in a way that was an immersive and game-like experience. [According to Forbes](#), P&G said LifeLab had 4,000 visitors with each spending an average of 20 minutes in the experience.

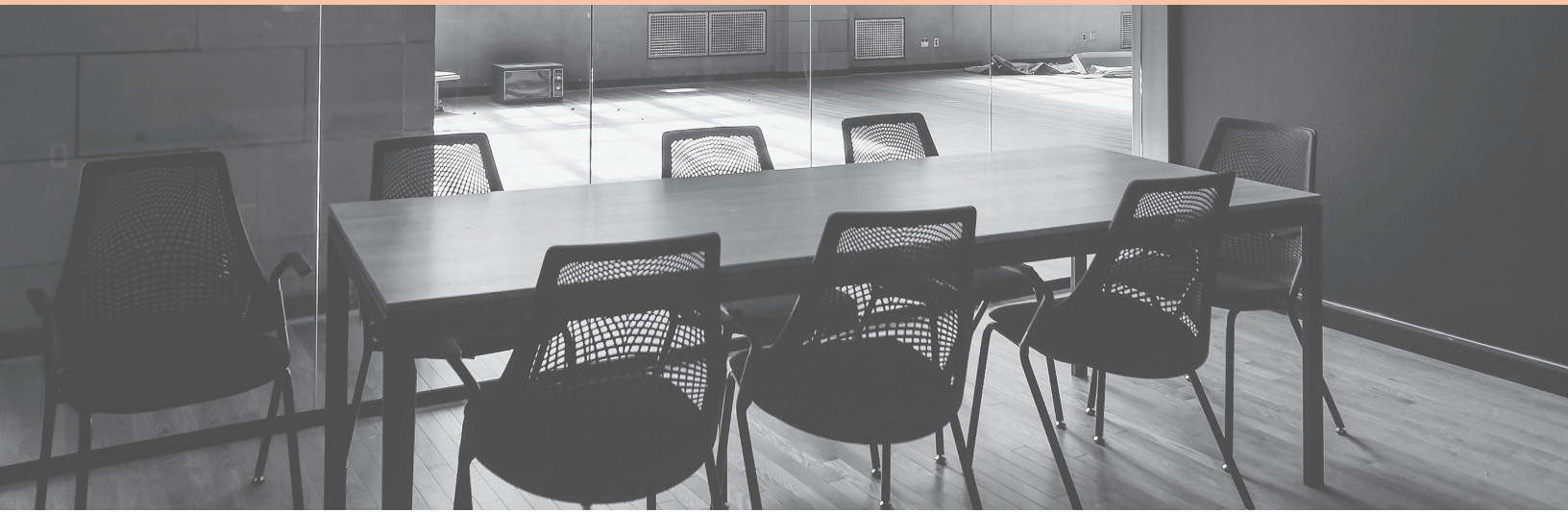
We'll repeat: **an average of 20 minutes**. Can you imagine that kind of engagement from a typical exhibitor or sponsorship setting?

What's more is the ability to track this data. At your industry's typical trade show, do you have a clear record of attendee engagement? In a virtual event, you have direct access to this intel.

Now is still a great time to market and obtain sponsors. After all, organizations have a highly captive audience right now. Your target audience is at home, bored, and looking for engagement. This is the perfect time to reach them and connect.

"What's the difference between targeting people at an event versus in their homes?" Karpowitz asked.

Be sure to visit our blog for more details on [how to land sponsorships](#) for your virtual events.



The future of events

While elements of virtual events are surely here to stay for the immediate future, it's difficult to imagine what events will look like in a post-COVID-19 world.

"We learned valuable lessons from hosting and planning virtual events," Karpowitz said, "but they can't replace the real world experience."

Moving forward, it's likely we will continue to see elements of virtual events stick around. For example, Beswick said associations can take advantage of virtual events post-pandemic for small-scale events, like luncheons and meetings. Hosting virtual workshops or webinars instead of in-person sessions is much more cost-effective.

Today's elevated hygiene standards likely aren't going anywhere, either. It won't be surprising to continue seeing hand sanitizer stations, limited physical contact, and some form of social distancing in the future.

Beswick said hybrid events will be the way of the future for professional associations. She said she anticipates seeing events with virtual and in-person registration options, making hybrid events the new normal of the future.

Hybrid events

A hybrid event takes place partially in-person and live, and partially online. They require both physical planning and virtual. It's almost like planning two events, because you need to ensure the infrastructures you build and provide for both the in-person and online elements are sound, safe, and effective.

Beswick said hybrid events are still evolving and being figured out, but they may entail an online conference for most, with a physical conference for some. The online attendees have access to streamed content from the live conference. There is significant opportunity for ingenuity when planning this type of event.

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Karpowitz explained a creative case study in hybrid event management, which involved a four-person live show, an online audience, and a tangible output. The goal: create a lighthearted final touchpoint separate from the business aspect of the event that facilitated two-way engagement between the virtual and live participants. The project came to life by holding a masterclass in macaron-making.

Prior to the event, all guests received a macaron masterclass kit that included everything they needed to create their own customized macarons. The kits were shipped to their homes, and they were told to set the kits aside until the scheduled time.

Guests clicked into the virtual portion of the show to find a team of four in a simple studio with all elements from the kit in front of them. The team guided the at-home audience through the process of making macarons and invited the attendees' family members and housemates to join. Following the live team's instructions, the online attendees made their own macarons, asked questions, and made comments that were responded to by the live team.

The event brought high praise, positive engagement, and achieved togetherness in a nontraditional format. "We felt truly together and engaged all at once in a delightful and delicious group activity," Karpowitz said.

Hosting safe in-person events

As audiences grow more comfortable and more members of the public get vaccinated, there will be a transition to safe, in-person events. To keep in-person events safe, event organizers should:

- Follow the [CDC's guidelines for gatherings](#).
- Use only larger table sizes and limit the number of chairs at each table.
- Set up hand sanitizer stations throughout the event space.
- Require masks.
- Serve pre-packaged food and drinks.
- Provide color-coded wristbands or lanyards that signal individuals' comfort levels with different kinds of interactions.
- Utilize as many contactless touchpoints as possible.
- Establish and prominently publish health and safety rules and protocols.

Event management lessons from the pandemic

After diving into the heart of why we host events, the ins and outs of virtual events, and a look at the future of events, these are the **key event management lessons we learned from the pandemic**.

1. Flexibility and patience are required.

Have patience and grace every step of the way. If this is your first time planning a virtual event, keep in mind that this might be your speaker's first time presenting at a virtual event as well. Be patient, empathetic, kind, and flexible throughout the process.

2. Never stop marketing.

"Lots of businesses assumed they can't market right now, but that's not true. Right now, you have the most captive crowd you will ever have," Karpowitz said.

Marketing is key for the success of any event — in person or virtual. If you are marketing a virtual event, be sure to stress aspects that you are taking into consideration that your audience is wondering about, like the platform, networking sections, Q&As, and more.

3. Be creative.

A virtual event isn't the only answer. There are so many clever ways to engage with your constituencies. From appreciation gifts to drive-in concerts and COVID-safe in-person events, it just takes a little creativity to pull off a unique and fun experience. And, if you do choose the virtual route, there are endless creative touches you can integrate to reach and delight attendees and sponsors alike.

4. Prepare your virtual events with ample time.

Tasks that you may have been able to do the week of the event can take a month to prepare, Beswick said. Virtual events require a significant amount of pre-production content, marketing, organization, and planning. Don't underestimate the time investment that's necessary for virtual event planning.

5. Get help.

Both Beswick and Karpowitz stressed the importance of finding a partner to help run your association's event. Agencies and consultants have already been through and learned from the experience of hosting virtual, hybrid, and safe in-person events. They can help you through it so you don't have to take it on alone.



Have patience and grace every step of the way. If this is your first time planning a virtual event, keep in mind that this might be your speaker's first time presenting at a virtual event as well.

Thank you for reading our ebook on event management lessons from the pandemic! We wish you the best of luck in creating meaningful experiences to engage with your audiences.

Have you implemented any novel approaches in your virtual events? What event management lessons have you learned from the pandemic? We want to hear from you!



About Sidecar

At Sidecar, we create the professional development tools a leader needs to grow their career and their purpose-driven membership organization. From interactive workshops to step-by-step courses, being a part of our community drives innovation and empowers you to be a change-maker wherever your career takes you.



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Sidecar members have access to educational and inspirational resources that'll help you grow yourself and your organization, with step-by-step courses on topics like leadership, content development, AI, business analytics and marketing, plus more than 100 videos featuring expert interviews, panel discussions and session replays from SURGE and digitalNow. Membership benefits are being added all the time, so don't wait: Join Sidecar now!

If you want to go, go. But if you want to go far, go with Sidecar.



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