

# THE ONLINE AND HYBRID MEETING LANDSCAPE

**When it comes to technology, a few years is an eternity. Not long ago, online and hybrid meetings were considered as bleeding-edge services - high-risk and unreliable. Those who ventured into these online offerings were often considered black sheep in the conference planning flock. Now, however, offering online services in tandem to traditional in-person events is becoming much more prevalent. The below offers a snapshot of the online and hybrid meeting landscape.**

## WHAT ENCOMPASSES ONLINE AND HYBRID MEETINGS?

What is it that online offerings can provide that a traditional conference cannot? Access - for all. The Internet represents the democracy of access to knowledge and sharing. Geographic and cost barriers that limits in-person meetings are shattered by offering online methods of connecting.

For the sake of a common definition, let us consider a hybrid meeting a 'live' in-person event coupled with a 'virtual' online component. This could include elements such as utilising e-posters, smartphone apps, webinars, live streaming and the use of an electronic/virtual library to host captured content.

While hybrid conferences offer both an in-person and virtual/online component, purely online offerings are also possible, in the form of an online conference, webinars, virtual libraries or online education materials that are available only online. In fact, there are currently several international conferences which now exist solely online. They provide a series of live and/or pre-recorded webinars to attendees who can track their ongoing process, engage with speakers and colleagues and download accredited certificates upon completion.

The virtual conference format is appropriate for professionals who have limited time and/or budgets, and who want to remain close to their workplace and clients. Online conferences are affordable and accessible to everyone with access to a computer.



Due to the ease of use, wide variety of topics, low cost, and no need to travel, we expect to see the adoption of online learning as a standard.

## THE VIRTUAL OPPORTUNITY

Rather than considering online and hybrid solutions as frivolous or risky, suppliers and associations are now viewing them as an integral part of their events. In particular, associations are watching as Millennials push into the workforce and demand more time-responsive, interactive, and task-based forms of learning. In response, traditional in-person conferences are having to pivot in order to capture the interest of the next generation, and online and hybrid events have been a key means for them to do so.

Furthermore, factors such as increasingly tight budgets, more reliable and customisable technology, as well as audiences' higher comfort level with different modes of learning and networking, means

that it is becoming much more commonplace for meeting planners to include virtual offerings to clients.

Here, a few compelling reasons to begin working with online and hybrid events:

1. Digital natives expect value, interaction and convenience as never before;
2. Risk barriers to entry for associations are low;
3. Onsite presentation recordings can be quickly repackaged for an online audience.

Traditional meetings can be enhanced using virtual service elements via:

- Advance promotion (pre-conference webinars and speakers' interviews)
- Accessibility to previously untapped demographics (offering language translations)
- Interaction (building an online community with moderated forums)



- Novel revenue streams (sponsorship opportunities, additional registrations post-meeting)
- Extended content lifespan (access to a virtual library to watch concurrent sessions missed).

In parallel to conferences, virtual services can expand into exclusively online learning offerings. The benefits of online learning include:

- Accommodation of individualised learning
- Increased access to educational material
- Increased information dissemination amongst colleagues
- Reduced costs for both the host and attendees.

Further, it allows planners to provide quality education at a scale beyond a traditional ballroom, and adds a variety of material aimed at specific audiences all while considering their individual skill levels and career needs. For example, a typical career cycle might include these four stages:

- Student
- Exam Prep
- Certification
- Recertification Cycle

Individuals can be engaged at any stage of this process and then be encouraged towards loyalty to the brand moving forward.

### CHALLENGES OF THE ONLINE WORLD

Clearly, there are tantalising benefits of incorporating virtual offerings. All that was outlined above might seem rather straight-forward with regard to implementing an online programme. However, with regard to e-learning, it is not as simple as posting recordings and handouts on the internet. Recordings might need to be repackaged and/or updated to

Rather than considering online and hybrid solutions as frivolous or risky, suppliers and associations are now viewing them as an integral part of their events

remain current, and post-learning questionnaires and follow-up surveys are required to satisfy certain accreditation requirements. Another challenge is ensuring the integrity of online education. Speakers need training and their content needs to be vetted closely for its relevance and quality.

For hybrid meetings there might be these challenges:

- Meeting planners might not have the technical capacity to attempt these new services - so either they will need to be trained, or outside help may need to be sought.
- There is a large amount of co-ordination required with audio visual personnel and venue staff who might be unaccustomed to your goals and requests.
- Speakers will need coaching - they need to consider the impact of their talk on an online audience - and how their talk can both include them and remain relevant days and months following their presentation.
- Delegates will have high expectations for both the speed and ease of use of your new offerings. Subsequently, they require a high level of attention as they become accustomed to these new services.
- While Internet access is almost global, the quality of its access differs widely amongst users. At the same time, those users will all expect the same high quality of access.

### NEXT STEPS TO CONSIDER FOR ADDING VIRTUAL COMPONENTS TO YOUR OFFERING

Communicating the value of online and hybrid events to stakeholders typically falls into three groups - clients, supporters (such as sponsors) and delegates. With your clients you might find yourself arguing for the ongoing revenue opportunities these initiatives provide. With sponsors, they will be eager to hear about the detailed statistics you will be able to provide as delegates engage with your digital systems. Finally delegates, either behind a computer or in person, will continue to expect more value for their registration. In an attempt to grow an association audience, we must focus on providing content that is informative, convenient and affordable to them. Online and hybrid events currently offer the best means to accomplish those three promises while providing an individually tailored experience to your attendees. 

### CASE STUDY THE GOLD ONLINE LACTATION CONFERENCE

The GOLD Online Lactation Conference is entering its 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference and for all of its existence has been an online Conference. Since its inception, it has grown to become the largest Breastfeeding Conference in the world, reaching 2,800 delegates representing 65+ countries. In recent years, GOLD has replicated this successful online conference model by creating two more completely virtual conferences: Midwifery and Perinatal.

Success factors of the GOLD Online Conference Model includes its integration of technologies in the back end, which make it seamless and easy for its online delegates. Throughout the years, it has leveraged social media as a means of further connecting its online audience. Many delegates are repeat attendees and, much of the time, word of the conference spreads by mouth - perhaps ironic given its online context, but definitely an indicator that the online is increasingly as real and valued as an in-person conference. GOLD has also expanded its offerings into an online library, which is a collection of its past conferences and other webinars.

More information: [www.goldlearning.com](http://www.goldlearning.com).



*This article was provided by the International Association of Professional Congress Organisers, author Andrew Dergousoff, Director of Online Solutions, International Conference Services Ltd, Vancouver. IAPCO represents today 117 professional organisers, meeting planners and managers of international and national congresses, conventions and special events from 41 countries.*  
[info@iapco.org](mailto:info@iapco.org) / [www.iapco.org](http://www.iapco.org)