

New Challenges Going Virtual

Nils Molly, Digital Business & Innovation, INTERPLAN Congress, Meeting & Event Management AG, reflects on how virtual meetings can help boost learning and engagement, perhaps before the next best thing; hybrid events.



Over the last few months the event industry has been turned upside down. The event design, as we knew it until this year – at least for the moment – is invalid. Bringing people together and the exchange of knowledge remain the main topics – just the ‘how-to’ has changed 100%. Due to the emergency braking in mid-February the entire industry was digitised by force. The only alternatives in the beginning seemed to be cancellation or postponement. Then the virtual meeting came along.

While a full blown virtual meeting never was an alternative to a live event due to lacking social interaction, it was suddenly the only cure for an industry that came to a sudden halt.

Event Design has a lot to do with empathy and interpersonal relations, something that is very tough to replicate in a virtual environment. While many discover videoconferencing for the first time and explore the possibilities that are available from the various providers – this by far should not be the only way to transfer a conference into a virtual meeting.

Couple of options

Let’s take a brief look at a couple of options an organiser has:

While virtual-only interactions start and stop with logging in and logging out, the focus of the event design should be mainly on the customer journey across the virtual platform – so it is mostly technical.

Never forget to communicate with your audience. Email, push notifications, a simple ticker. As always – communication is key – keep everyone informed, what is happening on the platform, when the session will start, or when it is late or postponed. It will be highly appreciated.

Try adding simple ‘human‘ interactions such as e.g. online exercises during breaks, this will bring a relief to the audience – getting a break from sitting straight a long time following a live stream. Employ a networking software, a text based one, or with one-on-one videoconferencing.

This article was provided by the International Association of Professional Congress Organisers, author Nils Molly, Digital Business & Innovation, INTERPLAN Congress, Meeting & Event Management AG, Germany. Founded in 1969 in Munich, INTERPLAN has organised almost 3000 national and international congresses and meetings, mainly in the scientific and medical fields. www.interplan.de IAPCO represents today 140 companies comprised of over 9900 professional congress organisers, meeting planners and managers of international and national congresses, conventions and special events from 40 countries. www.iapco.org

Integrating other meeting formats into a virtual meeting can be quite challenging and depend on the technical implementation but of course as well on the moderation by the accompanying chair. Even more than during face-to-face meetings, the moderator of a meeting has to engage with the online participants. Only if explained well and encouraged by a chair, interaction will take place – through polling, Q&A and, if available, live exchange via video calls. Interactivity must be an integral part of any virtual meeting.

Another big challenge is the question of how to get the participants to interact with sponsors/ partners/ industry, as they mainly visit the virtual event because of its (scientific) content. At a face-to-face event there are ‘coffee and pretzels’, online there are no obvious enticements that can persuade a guest to visit the exhibition. This can be remedied by skillful presentation and linking of the exhibition to the rest of the platform. Gamification can be another possibility – but keep your participant in mind!

The more options that are available to move around the platform, the more likely it is that the participant will be overloaded with gimmicks and will end up not knowing how to use the platform to its full extent. At worst they will leave with a bad experience. The first results from virtual exhibitions show that the contacts between exhibitors and participants are much more intensive virtually because there is a deliberate, direct approach – rather than at a live exhibition stand, where random contacts are more frequent.

What’s next

While we are in the midst of a virtual congress hightime and probably all of us experience a steep learning curve, start thinking about what is next – next are hybrid conferences and this will open up more possibilities again for event design as it used to be.

Hybrid events will help to transport more of the onsite feeling into the virtual part. In summary, it can be said that the new framework conditions must be part of every concept – virtual and hybrid events will accompany us in future. The range is from the right customer journey on a virtual platform to an onsite hygiene concept to a reduced exhibitor stand that extends into a virtual space.