**Going Virtual: AFP ICON Virtual Case Study**

5/6/2020 12:00- 1:00 pm

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As COVID-19's impact grew leading up to AFP ICON, AFP staff wanted to:

* Ensure the health and safety of participants, sponsors, and exhibitors- 1st priority
* Best serve constituency- address what they want
* Consider financial wellbeing
* Be attentive to PR component

AFP ICON (in-person) was cancelled 2.5 weeks prior to the event with Virtual being an option prior to that. Safeguards for the in-person conference were discussed regularly with membership, sponsors, and exhibitors. In designing AFP Virtual after the conference was officially cancelled, they questioned whether to have a 1-3 day experience to mimic the traditional experience. Ultimately, for 2020 they organized single track programming for 3 days to mirror the traditional experience. However, participants had the option to register for a single day as well.

The consultant and technology support were incredibly important. AFP budgeted $80,000 to cover Blue Sky, an education software that they also use to manage other webinars. Blue Sky handled registrations and streaming of the virtual conference. Technology support came from a company called Freeman. Freeman provided AV and other tech support leading up to and throughout the conference. Lastly, a company called Double Dutch drove networking during the event. Due to the many inputs and feeds involved in production, having vendors who can properly manage that is a worthwhile investment. Do your research on vendors; ensure they have the right expertise, know which questions to ask and how to answer them, budgets your organization to come out ahead, and you trust them.

To avoid Virtual feeling like a series of webinars, AFP incorporated commercials, interviews, and spotlights of award winners between programs. This year there was only one track for programs; roughly 15 speakers were identified from the initial 100 plus presenters for the in-person ICON. The transition to an online platform allowed for an increase in the diversity of attendees, including many who have not been able to attend in the past due to time and budget constraints. An emcee facilitated the programs which was key in tying everything together. She was familiar with AFP, the conference, and knew most of the speakers. Familiarity kept things moving smoothly. The emcee also filtered questions for the presenters.

In another attempt to mimic the in-person experience, a conference app was developed to encourage networking amongst participants. Not only did it allow for folks to share lessons learned or their favorite quotes from speakers, it also increased access and visibility for sponsors and exhibitors. Based on sponsorship levels, companies could benefit from a range of publicity (e.g. commercials, logos, slides). Like an in-person conference, however, it is still the responsibility of an individual to talk to another person. Facebook Live events were also organized to continue conversations and provide additional networking (e.g. each day’s takeaways, happy hours, and morning coffee chats).

Critical to ICON Virtual was speaker preparation. Included in the cost with Freeman, AFP provided professional mics and web cams to each presenter. AFP then shared lighting and background tips for presenters. AFP also hosted a final webinar with all speakers to ensure functionality and allow time for the presenters to ask questions prior to the event. Overall, a high level of communication and adaptability is required- frequent and regular check-ins with staff and presenters. Speakers also developed pre-recorded sessions in case of an emergency.

AFP staff were “worked into the ground” 4-6 weeks before the conference started. Most of that stress came from planning 2 conferences (virtual and in-person). When possible, it’s most beneficial to make the decision ASAP. In the future, AFP will keep the virtual conference as an option. And, based on this experience, they will also decrease the number of days for virtual to 2, keeping in mind that participants declined after 4 hours of programming. They will also offer multiple tracks which will increase their budget. In addition to the emcee, enabling speakers to see questions as they come in is also a goal.

Takeaways:

* 4 hour “sweet spot”- people fell off after that
* Virtual events increase accessibility
* Still providing valuable product, so price accordingly to come out ahead
* Live interaction is important
  + Ability to ask and answer questions
  + Networking
  + Share experiences, pictures
  + Discussions and surveys
  + Sponsor and exhibitor visibility
* Work with vendors you trust to assist with planning and production
  + Cheaper options out there depending on the number of attendees and needs
  + Double check contracts- especially cancellation dates