Frequently Asked Questions: Virtual Events 2021

Top Issues for SHRM Affiliates

As of April 2021

Sponsors:

Question: How to acquire and drive value for sponsors? What's their ROI?

Answer: To drive value for event sponsors, it is important to create authentic opportunities for them to engage with attendees. Consider featuring sponsors in the programming via exclusive content, interactive elements, a pre-show loop, branded sessions, round table discussions or breakouts. Also try to think outside of the box for how to drive traffic and interaction in the virtual booths. Suggest giving away a prize drawing and adding a gamification feature for awarding attendees for the different actions they take at the booth. The added benefit of digital sponsorship is that these opportunities can happen before, during, or after an event, and oftentimes the ROI can be measured by the virtual event platform.

Attendee Engagement:

Question: Folks are "Zoom tired." What are suggestions to keep attendees engaged these days?

Answer: Zoom fatigue is an inherent challenge to virtual events, but steps can be taken to alleviate this in attendees. Follow a concise schedule with high impact sessions that include a mix of live programming and on-demand options that allow attendees to access content that is most relevant to them at their convenience. Use breakouts to facilitate interactivity and be sure to include breaks every 60-90 minutes to keep attendees refreshed. Get creative with activities-make them fun and entertaining and get attendees to participate so it's more of an active group experience rather than a passive one.

General Planning/Logistics:

Question: On the day of the event - are there special roles that you should have covered to ensure a good event?

Answer: Ensure that you have adequate production and helpdesk technical support the day of the event. Important roles to consider when staffing include a dynamic host, live tech support, and knowledgeable chat moderators and facilitators to encourage attendee engagement and to answer any questions.

Question: What do I do if the internet goes down for one of my speakers?

Answer: In this virtual world, down time can feel much longer than when it happens in live events. If a speaker is experiencing technical difficulties, notify your producer and virtual event platform tech support immediately and be ready to insert back-up content to fill the time. Communicate to your attendees that the team is aware of the issue and is working to address it in a timely manner; keep them updated on the status. If possible, place

a technical difficulties message or slide within your virtual event platform to let attendees know you are fully aware and are trying to fix the issue.

Question: Any guidance in selecting a platform and knowing what to ask for in terms of services provided leading up to and during the event? The costs are rising as there is more demand.

Answer: When researching virtual event platforms, consider your event goals and objectives, platform budget, and the level of project management support needed. If you are thinking of hosting more than one virtual event, consider bundling events to maximize savings. Additionally, conduct demos with VEPs and include all relevant stakeholders to best understand the benefits and limitations of each platform. Be sure to not be oversold on an event platform. Your event goals should determine how intricate of a platform you have. While Zoom fatigue IS real, it may be best, sometimes, to utilize an affordable option like this.

Question: Live vs. pre-record: How do you figure out what sessions are better pre-recorded with possibly a live Q&A or live chat?

Answer: While attendees generally prefer a fully live experience, this may not be feasible due to speaker availability or production constraints. With that in mind, design a program that includes live sessions with real time Q&A and high-quality, on brand, pre-recorded components to create a streamlined event experience. Be sure to capture all attendee questions posed in the chat and follow up with speakers and attendees as needed.

Question: Are there recommended ways to handle swag bags, giveaways, welcome packets?

Answer: Sending attendees swag bags is a great way to create a memorable and personal at-home attendee experience. However, putting together a curated shipment does require a bit more logistical planning including sourcing items, collecting attendee addresses, packaging, and tracking shipments. Consider your budget and bandwidth for this project. When sending virtual welcomes packets include the program schedule, FAQs and helpful tips and tricks on how to navigate the event platform. This could also be an opportunity for sponsors to participate as well by contributing swag and/or sponsoring the box.

Question: Keeping costs down - when to splurge and when to save?

Answer: Putting together a budget for a virtual event requires you to consider your virtual event platform capabilities and needs of your staff and online attendees. Reach out to your event stakeholders early on to understand their priorities and event goals and objectives. When producing a high-quality virtual event, consider investing in the virtual event platform and supporting technology and save on additional "nice to have" event features. Remember that the cost of a virtual platform may sometimes be more or comparable to the costs of an in-person event, and it's important for stakeholders to be aware of this as well.

Hybrid Events (events with both in-person and virtual attendees at the same event):

Question: How can we manage the increased workload and budget concerns?

Answer: Hybrid events are the *new* normal, and they must deliver a high impact online experience that is consistent in quality and interaction as an in-person event. When planning a hybrid event, consider what is your budget for these experiences, what are you trying to achieve and what is your team's bandwidth? Focus on aligning your goals and objectives with your event audience and virtual event platform, and don't be afraid to reimagine the event experience. There will be some aspects of the event that are available to only the in-person or virtual audience, while some experiences can be created simultaneously for both of those audiences.

Question: How can we plan/pivot with a hybrid event? For example, you plan for 200 in-person and 300 live and then it shifts: How do you plan budgets in the unknown environment?

Answer: Pivoting to a hybrid event with short notice requires flexibility, patience, and consistent communication. Be sure to engage with your stakeholders early and often to keep them updated as the event changes and to incorporate their feedback. Look to historical events that your team has produced that are comparable in size and scope to use as a baseline for budget and past reference materials for guidance. In general, though, outside of the virtual event platform, speaker or entertainment fees, there are often little 'surprise' costs in the virtual world. Some platforms may charge a nominal user fee if you've exceeded your contracted attendee allotment, but this fee is much less than added fees for feeding your guests at the in-person experience.

Question: How can we handle and plan for physical distance - allowing for extra space with expo and breakout rooms?

Answer: You will find that attendees might experience different levels of comfort when it comes to being in a room together. As such, you should consider having varying levels of distancing available for your attendees. You might consider providing color-coded badges that signify an attendees' comfort level with interaction and/or spacing out your attendees within your physical meeting space. When designing safe in-person meetings, you might consider creating socially distant areas that are clearly marked (3 feet apart), routinely sanitized, and within maximum occupancy guidelines. Consider using custom dividers, which add an extra layer of physical protection (and visual interest) and play with furnishings and décor such as mixing high and low tables and strategically placed plants and installations. Create personalized workstations in breakout rooms to keep physical interaction to a minimum. Check with the local state and county guidelines to make sure your event is in compliance with CDC and OSHA standards.

Question: Many conference leaders are checking on the capabilities of venues to help them with a hybrid event. They are looking at the cost of the virtual component as a deciding factor. For example, some states are considering the use of an outside vendor for the virtual component or separating a virtual event from an in-person event based upon cost factors. Any guidance?

Answer: When planning a hybrid event, first determine your budget, program structure, and target audience. (For small events with minimal technology needs and sessions, consider hosting these internally). If a venue has been selected, assess whether they are able to fulfill all production needs; if the venue cannot, determine if your team has the bandwidth and skillset to manage the virtual component, or if you need to source additional vendors for supplemental support. As with any event, identify your event goals and objectives with

your stakeholders early in the planning process and track your progress. It may be possible that your event does not make sense in the hybrid model and that you should decide to host it 100% in-person or 100% virtually.

Additional questions? Contact Meredith Nethercutt, SHRM's Manager of Member Engagement, at Meredith.nethercutt@shrm.org.