
2021

VIRTUAL
EVENT
SUCCESS

 HIGHLIGHT™



ABOUT HIGHLIGHT

We know the way to serve agency customers. And we know how to deliver customized solutions that produce positive outcomes . . . for our country and the more than 20 U.S. federal government agencies we serve.

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SUMMARY

The pandemic has redefined event management forever. Businesses and government agencies now consider online events as critical to reaching customers and citizens.

A successful virtual event requires much more than simply posting program content on the Internet. Virtual event standards are very different from the established standards for in-person events. This white paper provides a playbook – a set of rules, steps, and reminders to ensure your virtual event is professional, well-planned, and properly managed.



WHY GO VIRTUAL?

Virtual events can accommodate audiences both large and small. Virtual events provide many advantages as well as some new challenges. But using only a laptop and an Internet connection, you have the power to host a content-rich global conference, seminar, training workshop, and many other events.

As with in-person events, virtual events should be managed by an experienced event planner who oversees logistics, technology, and execution.

In 2020, it is estimated that the number of virtual events more than doubled. [1] The adoption of virtual and hybrid events will continue in 2021 and beyond.

VIRTUAL EVENT ADVANTAGES

- Lower cost for agencies and participants
- Higher attendance
- Greater audience diversity
- Easier recruitment of high-quality speakers
- Enhanced data and analytics
- Eco-friendly and sustainable
- Real-time scalability
- Convenience
- Accessibility

DEFINING GOALS



When planning your virtual event, make event goals specific and measurable. Carefully established goals and milestones should define the agency's important strategic objectives and the steps you need to take to achieve the event's mission.

Make goals SMART: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-based.

QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN PLANNING A VIRTUAL EVENT

- **What is the primary goal of your event?** Identify the main takeaways you want participants to walk away with.
- **Who is your target audience and stakeholders?** Every decision – content, marketing, networking options and participant engagement – should be driven by audience needs.
- **What is the anticipated size of your online audience?** Virtual events offer tremendous scalability since there are no physical limitations. You can expect no-shows to be in the 30% to 40% range.[2]

80%

of people join virtual events for educational purposes, closely followed by networking.[3]

- **What are the best dates and times?** Wednesday is considered to be one of the best days of the week for participants.[3] But any day can work if you understand your audience, their schedules, and needs.
- **How many days and hours should the event run?** Keep in mind that online participants have many distractions. A half day or less is recommended and, if multiple days are planned, three days is a good target. Keep presentations to 30 minutes or less with Q&A to follow.
- **What is your budget?** Budgets for virtual events are smaller than for in-person events. However, you will need to consider technology, hosting platforms, licensing fees, marketing, and related expenses.
- **What kind of marketing should I use?** Understand what channels your audience prefers and what has been successful in the past.





35%

is the average percentage of no shows to expect.[4]

- **What are the best content formats to use?** Your event may be a simple webinar or a large summit with exhibitors and sponsors. Choose a mixture of content types to keep your audience engaged. Mix keynotes and breakout sessions with video, chat features, Q&As, booths, etc.
- **What key performance indicators (KPIs) should I measure?** Most virtual hosting platforms provide a dashboard of analytics such as registrations, attendee visits, session logins, exhibit booth traffic, time spent per session, attendee survey results, and much more.
- **What should I do after the event?** Consider a platform to host your content and videos on-demand after your event is over. Most platforms will host for a fee. Or create a YouTube channel and line from your agency's website. Use post-event surveys to measure participant satisfaction and to help you plan for future events.

SELECTING A PLATFORM



With so many choices and price points available, it is critical to select a virtual platform that's easy to use, is right for your event, and has the features you need to meet the agency goals.

Are you looking to "wow" your attendees with a 3-D experience that mirrors real life? Is gamification essential? Or will a 2-D design be sufficient? What types of training and support are provided?

Here are the critical considerations to think about when choosing a virtual platform:

BRANDING & CUSTOMIZATION

In addition to serving as the backbone to facilitate your event, the virtual platform you choose should promote awareness of your organization and its brand. Be mindful of vendors that use their own logos throughout the platform instead of yours. This is confusing to attendees and it robs you of the chance to promote your agency.

TRAINING & SOPs

Does the platform vendor provide documentation and training to ensure you can comfortably use the software? Documented SOPs are also essential.

SERVICE & TROUBLESHOOTING

A dedicated tech support team, available during the event, can be a saving grace, especially if you are new to using a virtual event platform. Ideally, your provider should provide 24/7 tech support. Ask if support is provided by phone, email, and chat.

VIDEO HOSTING

Video is the star of most successful virtual events. Know whether your video content will run directly on the vendor's platform or on a third-party platform such as Zoom or YouTube. If third-party, be sure to understand any licensing fees required. Know the ins and outs of the video player, as well.

ON-DEMAND VS. LIVE

Your virtual event platform should support both prerecorded and live content. Live broadcasts are preferred since they offer more audience interactivity. Prerecorded videos provide more control. Ask how your vendor can make recording available for playback after the event is over.

CONTENT DOWNLOADS

Make sure you can provide links to handouts, presentation slides, and other materials.



NETWORKING FUNCTIONS

After learning, networking is the No. 2 benefit that attendees seek from a virtual event. How does the vendor support networking?

SOCIAL MEDIA INTEGRATION

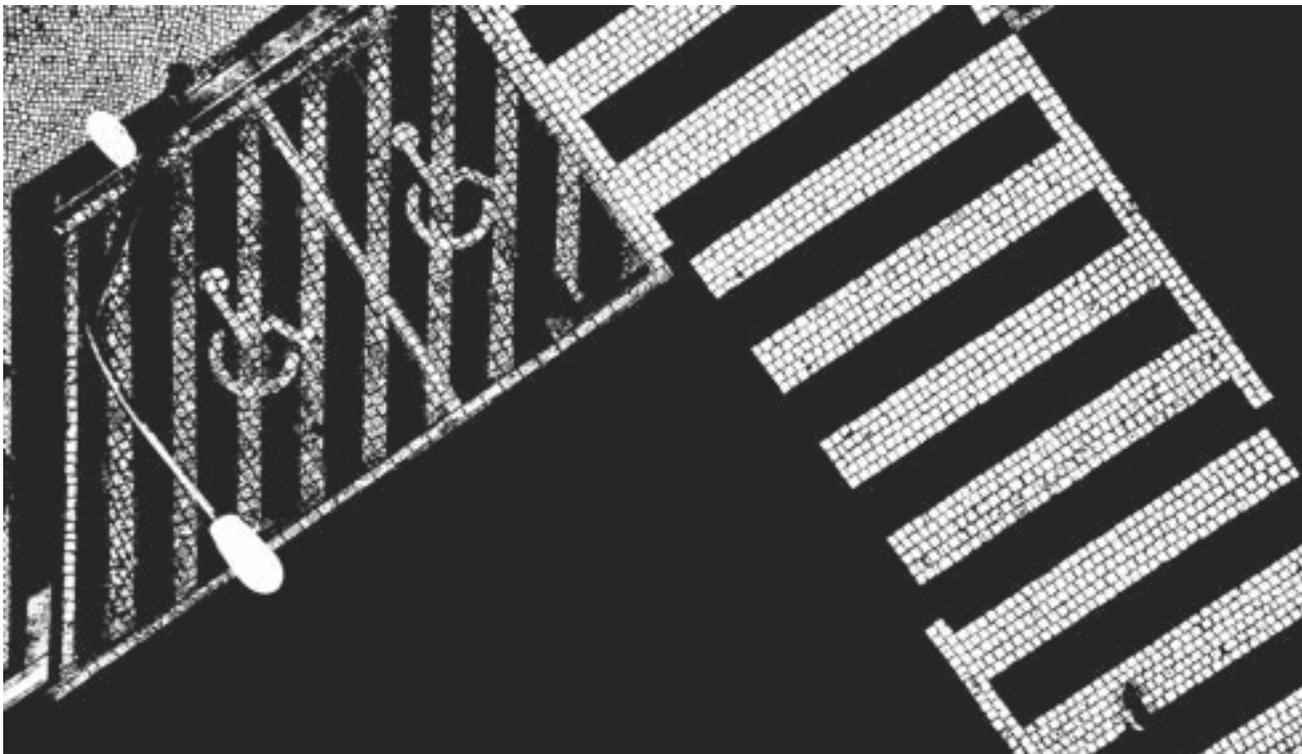
Ask whether the platforms can seamlessly integrate with your social media channels.

DATA & ANALYSIS

Know what types of data the platform can collect. How are reports generated? Good reporting tools will help you make future event improvements.

TRANSPARENT PRICING

There are platforms available for all budgets and needs. Be sure to note any hidden fees for additional services, licenses, participant capacity, and features such as gamification.



ACCESSIBILITY

Ensure Section 508 compliance by asking vendors to demonstrate accessibility tools such as screen readers, magnifiers, and closed captioning. Contrast is important, so make sure text and background colors are customizable.

IMPLEMENTATION TIME

Be sure to ask about the length of time it will take to get the platform up and running. Build in time for testing.

COMPANY LONGEVITY

How long has the company been in business? How many clients do they

have? How many virtual events have they successfully completed? Capterra provides platform ratings, pros and cons, and reviews from customers and users. Search Google for reputable news articles about the vendor.

REGISTRATION & OTHER NEEDS

A successful virtual event may require other applications. For example, does the platform have its own registration capabilities or do you need to integrate with a registration platform? If charging for registration, how will you collect payments? To market your event, you may need other email and marketing communications solutions.

WHICH IS RIGHT FOR YOU?

LIVE SESSIONS

Online events in real time. These events are interactive and tend to draw larger audiences.

SIMULIVE

Simulated live events provide prerecorded guest speakers but have the flexibility to host live Q&A or chat.

ON- DEMAND

Prerecorded sessions that are edited and posted on your virtual platform. Often used in conjunction with training materials.



EARLY PREPARATIONS

Once you have selected a virtual event platform and the types of content your virtual event will include, it is time to prepare your event team, speakers, exhibitors, and sponsors.

BUILD A WINNING TEAM

Construct a dream team that includes managers and staff with oversight of registration, exhibitors, sponsors, audience engagement, speakers, technology, program, event moderation, and customer/technical support.

TRAINING

Provide staff and presenters with formal training on the virtual platform's tools. All should know how to use the software flawlessly. The event team should include "super users" who know all aspects of the software and can quickly solve problems.

SPEAKERS

Review speaker candidates and consider their fit with the objectives of the event. What do participants expect to hear? Are your speakers experienced? Dynamic? Do you have a budget for professional speakers? Choose dynamic moderators to facilitate conversations and Q&A.

EXHIBITORS & SPONSORS

Many virtual platforms support exhibitors and sponsors. Exhibit booths can host one-on-one meetings, handouts, brochures, and videos. Exhibitors can also receive a complete record of participants who visited their booths. Tiered sponsor pricing can attract various levels of support.



Tips for Presenters

- Keep your camera frame centered with a little head room.
- Use natural light or video conference lighting, if available.
- Simplify and be conscious of your background.
- Practice, practice, practice!





MARKETING & OUTREACH

A solid outreach and marketing plan is critical to virtual event success. Following are some essential components:

EVENT WEBSITE

An event website or landing page allows participants to register online and serves as the central hub for your virtual event. Include comprehensive event information about who should attend, why they should attend, event name, dates and times, and information about what is taking place. Include clear organization branding and appealing images that reflect the nature and purpose of the event.

93%

of event marketers plan to invest in virtual events moving forward.[5]

58%

of event marketers say they need to rethink virtual event strategies.[6]



80%

of event marketers have been able to reach a wider audience with virtual events.[7]

76%

of event marketers say that email is the single most effective way to drive registrations.[8]

60%

use social media to drive registrations.[9]

EVENT REGISTRATION

Event registration technology provides the link between marketing and the virtual event. Registration must be seamless, secure, intuitive, and user-friendly. Registration should include:

- Attendees' contact information
- Session sign-up
- A summary of what attendees have selected
- Payment page (if applicable)
- A survey of how registrants learned about the event (for future planning)

EMAIL CAMPAIGNS

Email is the single most effective way to drive event registrations. Each email should feature new content and highlight the benefits of participation. Maintain current contact data on your target audiences and tailor messages to target subsets as much as possible

OTHER OUTREACH IDEAS

- Social media channels
- Reminders and event updates
- Blogs, forums, and newsletters
- Speaker and partner promos
- Pre-conference surveys

THE VIRTUAL EVENT



When COVID-19 halted in-person events in 2020, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) worked with Highlight and, using the vFairs platform, attracted over 12,000 participants to the first-ever NIH Virtual Seminar on Program Funding and Grants Administration.

It's a Team Effort

On the day of your virtual event, it is time to put your aces in their places. Get your team together early on opening day. Make sure everyone understands roles and responsibilities during the event.

Be sure to have trained staff back-ups for critical roles. Create a staffing schedule so all team members are on the same page.

Keep the lines of communication open throughout the event. Questions and issues are sure to arise throughout the event.

It is also a good idea to have a process in place for internal communications. Many event planners use ZOOM or Slack channels to and keep lines of communication open throughout the event for staff exchanges.



80%

of virtual events are free.[10]

\$254

is the average price charged for a virtual event in June 2020.[11]

BE RESPONSIVE TO ATTENDEES

Before the event, prepare talking points to have responses available for anticipated FAQs. This will keep messaging consistent. Distribute your talking points to all team members.

Your customer support team should be on hand throughout the event to field questions and to keep an eye on chat rooms to fix problems and answer questions.

STICK TO THE SCHEDULE

Maintain proper time management to keep agenda items and planned activities on schedule. Keep in mind that participants, and staff, have scheduled their days around the event.

HAVE A PLAN B

Technical issues are bound to happen. Be sure to have backup equipment, presentations, and other content ready. Ask everyone to check battery levels and test microphones, cameras, and computers to ensure they are in working order.

ENGAGE, ENGAGE, ENGAGE

Encourage often-shy remote audiences to actively participate. Let them know that their interactions are met with enthusiasm from event organizers and other participants.

Polling is a great way to stimulate audience engagement. Get reactions to pre-event poll data as well.



AFTER-EVENT ACTIVITIES

SEND THANK-YOU NOTES

"Thank you" are not only nice, they are a great way to continue the relationships with a participants and promote other events or offerings.

SORRY WE MISSED YOU

Remember to communicate with those who could not attend. Use this opportunity to build interest in future events.

POST-EVENT SURVEY

Email your post-event survey in the days immediately following your event to get the freshest, most insightful feedback.

THANK THE TEAM

Express gratitude to the efforts of staff, speakers, volunteers and moderators.

MEASURE SUCCESS

Collect evaluation surveys and team feedback for improvements and new ideas. Analyze and report on key performance indicators.

SEEK TESTIMONIALS

Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook mentions are great resources for future event marketing.

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