COVID-19 had an immediate impact on the events industry with conferences and exhibitions cancelled due to global travel restrictions and social distancing measures. After the initial shock to the industry, event organizers quickly turned to digital solutions and created virtual events to keep the momentum going. Business and professional online events increased 1,100% in April 2020 compared to April 2019.

It is likely that the digital shift will change the events industry forever to ultimately develop into a hybrid model post COVID-19. According to recent research, the global cloud based event management market is expected to grow from USD 3,823.91 Million in 2019 to USD 8,253.02 Million by the end of 2025 at a Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 13.68%.
A virtual event refers to a web-based event that involves individuals interacting in a virtual space through smartphones, laptops, desktop computers and tablets. It consists of breakout sessions, video and web conferencing, virtual collaboration, and networking. The participants are not physically present but are connected in a common environment through the internet. When done right, virtual events offer a personalized branded experience, are highly cost-effective and enhance the audience reach of an organization. This is why the concept has seen extensive adoption across many sectors, including corporate, healthcare, education, hospitality, technology and banking, financial services, and insurance (BFSI).

Transitioning from physical to digital can be a difficult choice, but unlike live events, virtual events allow you to accommodate audiences who otherwise would not have been able to attend due to budget or travel limitations. Transportation costs, time spent traveling, and hotel costs are all limitations that many attendees have when considering whether or not to attend a live event. Going virtual eliminates these barriers, opening up your content to more people and a wider geography.

The value of face-to-face interaction will never go away, but in the current times going virtual must be a necessary part of your event programme. So how do you turn a multi-day conference, filled with networking opportunities, educational sessions, and the attendee insights they generate into a virtual one? Hosting a virtual event requires the same care and attention as an in-person event. You need to effectively promote the event, engage your attendees, make memorable moments, and prove event success.
understand how to create value-adding, engagement-driven virtual conference experiences, having produced major regional and international industry events in various sectors. Most recently, managed the entire communications platform (PR & Social Media) of two leading technology events covering the entire region.

The team was able to overcome the challenges through creating a holistic platform online with the media or the targeted audience. This allowed us through PR and social media capitalize on the fact that it is an online event to target the entire region as opposed to see limitations of the online platforms.

Here sets out the 7 key steps to creating a successful virtual event in the COVID-19 era and beyond:

1. **Event Planning & Program**

   Always make sure you give yourself enough lead time to plan and produce the event. The creation of the event itself is not the time-consuming part of the process. Instead, the pre-production process and content creation takes up the most amount of time. Make sure you create a narrative with your content and understand its purpose, as you want attendees to find it valuable. Only once you have established your key objectives and have a general outline of your content, can you start creating your event.

   When creating your event schedule, incorporate additional breaks into your program or break up sessions into smaller chunks to account for your audience’s needs. People working from home have a lot more distractions, so diversify your program with a variety of content to keep your audience engaged and save them from overload. Think about engagement with all your target audiences, including the media, from the early planning stages and throughout your event.

   Define the overall objectives of your virtual event, such as audience engagement, revenue generation, lead generation, brand building, industry exposure, and establishment of thought-leadership. Your objectives should drive all decisions about marketing, budget, content, delivery, technology, sponsorships, and media relations.
Whether a one-off event or a multi-day conference, the most critical decision you can make is choosing which platform you use to host it on. The best virtual event platforms include advanced features that enable you to make your gathering as multi-faceted, immersive, and effective as a physical equivalent. You need the technology for small groups, break-out sessions and networking that are somewhat akin to in-person conferences. This includes virtual lobbies, exhibitor halls, and meeting spaces.

Virtual event platforms offer the ability to interact with your audience on a much more personal level. Smart platforms create an engaging journey that collects data and allows event organizers to manage more personalised content delivery that is relevant and specific to the user. A high percentage of data collected at trade shows goes cold by the time it is processed. In the new virtual world, the response is immediate and the data richer than a live trade show or conference environment. This can mean a more qualified connection and a more productive live experience.
When it comes to your online event, consistent branding is more important than ever. One of the many benefits of hosting a virtual event are the many branding opportunities along the journey, as online events are customisable to suit your needs and your brand. Virtual events give you the perfect opportunity to make your brand excel. You can promote brand awareness, improve brand recognition and customer loyalty.

Maximize Online Registration with a Beautiful Landing Page. A great virtual conference begins with an eye-catching, effective landing page to fit your event, key message, and audience. The objective is to generate interest in what attendees can expect and safely capture registrations. Today’s virtual conference platforms enable you to create stunning branded virtual lobbies to land a winning first impression.

Do not wait until your event to share valuable information. Tease out compelling content through guest blogs, speaker videos, and social media posts, to give your audiences a taste of what is to come. In-person events can draw attendees with their destination and the promise of networking, whereas virtual events must rely on content. Engaging attendees through virtual meetings requires creativity and event technology like mobile event apps to make an impact.

To keep attendees engaged, your content needs to be top-notch. Supporting presentations, graphics, and videos will help keep audiences engaged throughout your virtual event.

The right speakers can elevate your online events into transformative experiences and will attract quality audiences. Schedule topic-driven live webinars throughout your virtual conference and encourage audience participation with expert Q&A sessions. Keynotes, while viewed individually, can employ live polling to engage attendees.

With messaging capabilities in a mobile app, attendees can meet each other virtually and set up one-on-one meetings. As always, social media is a great engagement tool to leverage. Utilising an event hashtag and having attendees post pictures of favourite takeaways from the day, office setups, and more can make attendees feel like they are part of a community. Empower your audience to follow along with your content or supplementary content. You may also want to provide materials for attendees to view at their own pace.
After your audience, sponsors are the backbone of events and that also applies to virtual events. Virtual events offer plenty of opportunities for sponsors to get involved and see a return. From sponsored sessions and networking breaks to polls and surveys – just about every element of your event has the potential to be included in your sponsorship packages. You can weave your sponsors into content and conversations throughout. Partner with your sponsors, speakers, and other ambassadors to promote the event as a way of elevating their exposure and helping you extend your reach.

Offer your sponsors the opportunity of a Keynote session and visibility on specific activities, such as surveys, polls, or targeted messages to your audience because you already know who is attending and have likely gathered information. Due to the fluidity of online events, package levels can be developed that come with different commitments and price points. Involve your sponsors in your PR and media relations programme by announcing their involvement.
Events are a prime opportunity to engage with journalists and play a crucial role in enabling you to build media relationships and generate positive coverage. In the current situation, you need to move away from the traditional tactic of setting up face-to-face interviews for key spokespeople and deploy alternative creative ways to interact with the media. Remote working has become common practice, and this also applies to journalists.

Arrange exclusive pre-briefings with key press via video conference or telephone to ensure the journalist is well prepared and can develop their story to publish around your event. You can host a virtual press conference live from the event, with an interactive media Q&A facilitated by a leading industry commentator, to provide real-time comment and reaction to generate immediate hype and coverage.

Providing the media with access to quality independent speakers gives a strong hook to attend your event and a greater pool of opinion for journalists to access. Set up a manned virtual press room on your event platform where you can schedule one-on-one interviews with key speakers and respond in real time to all media enquiries. See W7 WORLDWIDE’s more detailed Guide for Media Relations in COVID-19.
Always provide access to supporting information from your virtual event, link documents to your conference with a summary of the discussion, and some quotable highlights to further explain the information and use of the provided materials for future reference. Giving easily accessible information will make it easier for your content to be shared.

When it comes to measuring the success of your event, the virtual event platforms you use to promote, host, and engage during your online event are capable of providing you with valuable insights. Measure your performance against the original objectives and goals by analysing data including registration, webinar attendance, and app downloads. Evaluate poll responses, survey results, comments, and questions to understand how your audience engaged.

Ensure you provide value to your sponsors, by measuring how audiences engaged with them, attending sponsored sessions, clicks on sponsored messages, and downloads of sponsored content for a complete picture. To extend the life and brand exposure of the event, produce post event reports and press releases with key findings and industry knowledge for further media coverage.
Thanks to today’s technology, major industry events, conferences and exhibitions can continue to take place by pivoting to a virtual format. Treat your virtual event with the same thought and strategy that you apply to live events. While the means for achieving your goals may be different virtually, if you lead with strong content, facilitate engagement, and keep your audience in mind, you cannot go wrong.
Adding virtual events as a key digital strategy to your event programme during COVID-19 will be crucial in reaching a wider audience with the added benefit of helping to expand the brand reach of established annual industry events in the conference calendar. Events are an integral part of networking and learning for any industry. The rise of virtual events is not a new trend, and this has been accelerated against the backdrop of COVID-19 to provide a solution for continued industry engagement with its stakeholders.
WORLDWIDE is an independent communications consultancy based in Saudi Arabia. Our understanding of the local market converged with our global reach and knowledge enables us to bridge our clients with their audiences effectively. We are aligned by the objective of filling the gap in communication that exists in the local market. Therefore, our specialty lies in building bridges that sustain relationships and create brand reputation and value through innovative approaches. Our array of services includes, but is not limited to:

- Corporate Communications Strategy
- Stakeholder Mapping
- Crisis Management
- Corporate Social Responsibility
- Internal Communications
- Reputation Management
- Media Relations
- Public Relations
- Public Affairs
- Social Media
- Marketing & Brand Solutions
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