

The (re)birth of the virtual meeting

Authored by Dan Hunt (updated: Sep 8, 2023)

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Nearly two years have passed since the WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. As marketers, we're still getting our heads around the new 'norm' and how best to communicate with our audiences. We've been so impressed by how marketing teams have remained resilient, and pushed on, even though the pressures of work are mounting and sometimes have felt overwhelming.

The organizers of our conferences, seminars, and events have employed creative ingenuity to react to life in a pandemic. Around the world, talented teams of marketers, planners, organizers and speakers have shown the agility to change the way the industry works, literally overnight.

In this blog, we:

- **examine the changes forced upon our events industry**
- **explore the technology and how it has changed the way we meet**
- **reflect on how some of the key industry events of 2020 and 2021 have coped**
- **consider how the events industry has changed, both in the short and long term.**

Virtual meetings: the early days

When the pandemic was declared, most events were postponed or cancelled. To keep marketing and event planning jobs alive, albeit, in hibernation, job retention and furlough schemes were quickly implemented.

Remote events may have been relatively commonplace pre-COVID-19 pandemic, but no one could have predicted the rapid growth of the web hosting industry and the necessity to bring about new virtual ways of meeting others. The technology used for virtual meetings has not always been designed with mass attendance in mind. 2020 and 2021 have forced the technology industry to develop and improve tools at breakneck speeds to allow industry events to continue, through online webinars, interactive events and large-scale virtual conferences.

[BBC News](#) reported that Zoom as an example:

- The firm, which charges businesses for its remote meeting software in addition to more limited free use for the general public, saw sales soar 326% to \$2.6bn in 2020. Profits jumped from just \$21.7m in 2019 to \$671.5m.
- The firm's sales in the last three months of 2020 were up 370% compared to the same period in 2019, hitting \$882.5m.
- The video conferencing company expects sales to rise more than 40% this year [2021], reaching more than \$3.7bn (£2.66bn).

The transition

With delegates staying at home and events going virtual, the need to hire rooms vanished and so did the income for those venues with it.

The UFI, the Global Association of the Exhibition Industry reported a loss of \$15.6 billion by March 2020 for the events industry.

Live streaming started as a relatively cheap option. But with some seriously low-tech presentations and talks recorded in the early days of the pandemic, and more and more virtual events being hosted, delegates and audiences rightly became more discerning as to the content they chose to engage with. This has led to the rapid expansion of companies offering high-quality live streaming for large-scale events.

The development of new virtual meeting technology in academic publishing

Pre-COVID-19, **Morressier** provided institutions with video and pre-recorded sessions. In 2020 they developed a fully-fledged end-to-end conference solution. COVID-19 opened up a whole new world of live streaming for Morressier.

Founder and managing director Sami Benchekroun:

Due to Covid-19 and the changing needs of our customers, whether large scholarly societies or conference organisers, we were quickly asked if could organise complete conferences on our platform. It made a lot of sense as, for many organisations, we were already hosting the content, so why not elevate the offering and promote live streaming, Q&A sessions, exhibitions, sponsoring, advertising and so on?

Research Information, January 2021

Cadmore Media is another technology business that developed new industry-specific technology through 2020. The company's mission was to transform the way that video and audio content in the scholarly and professional world was distributed through cutting-edge technology. Cadmore has made its' services more sector-specific to academic publishing.

(Cadmore) provide extensive metadata, persistent IDs, full-text search, subject tagging and segmentation.

Tim Gillett, Research Information, December 2020

Underline Virtual Conferencing (www.conferences.underline.io) host scalable virtual events and work closely with the academic and scientific sectors. Their offering is essentially a pick and mix of services so, depending on event or conference size you can host as many keynotes, lectures or technical sessions as you wish. Their technology also allows your sponsors to host virtual events simultaneously. Attendees can add calendar reminders so they never miss a keynote speech, wherever they are. There's a virtual reception so you can greet delegates personally; they even provide a virtual lounge so those 'corridor conversations' can continue even remotely.

How do the costs of taking your events online stack up?

In February 2021, Mark Carden, Director of the Researcher to Reader Conference (R2R), wrote an article exploring the economics of conferences. He investigated the costs, value, prices and profit.

Physical

The 'how long is a piece of string' question. Mark talked about the massive variation in costs depending on the choice of venue, travel and accommodation options for keynote speakers, room hire rates, administration...and cigars!

Much of the appeal of a physical event was the 'being there' aspect: the feeling part of something special. The networking. Sponsors see real value too in investing in industry-specific conferences as attendance rates tend to be around 99% of all tickets sold. The sponsors also provide a bedrock of funding before ticket sales, thus allowing the event to take shape.

Online

With cheaper webinar platforms now widely available, the sometimes heady costs of hiring a venue appear to have disappeared entirely. They are now, in effect, free! Many companies offer free low-volume functionality, but when it comes to creating a memorable all-singing, all-dancing event, costs soon ramp up.

R2R will be spending very nearly as much on the online tech and people for 2021 as we spent on the physical venue and food in 2020, around £20,000-25,000

What Should A Conference Cost? The Scholarly Kitchen, February 2021

Costs for attending a virtual event vary widely: cheaper tickets and people may see your event as having less value than another. Attendance for inexpensive online events is often erratic with participation ranging from between 20% - 80% on the day.

Sponsors don't see the same value in a logo on a homepage: interaction with potential customers is a key metric to evaluate when it comes to return on investment (ROI), so they expect the technology used to encourage engagement. However, virtual attendees have plenty of freedom:

Speaking to [NatureTrusted Source](#), Julieta Gruszko — a researcher at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill who participated in the online American Physical Society April Meeting:

I was able to attend a wider variety of sessions than I normally would have, since switching between parallel sessions was far more seamless.

Hybrid

As you would expect, running a hybrid event incurs two sets of costs. Much as they may allow more people to attend, wherever they are in the world, you still need to balance two sets of costs: the use of the right technology plus the costs of travel and the venue. Will they add up to a profit?

Accessibility

Accessibility needs to be embedded in the planning of an event from the start in order to make it truly inclusive. Is a virtual conference more or less accessible? There is an insightful conversation '[Towards Accessible Conferences](#)' chaired by Ruth Wells (Founder and Innovator, Inventing Change) and Katy Alexander (Global Director of Marketing, Digital Science) which investigates the challenges for attendees with disabilities with Simon Holt, Mark Carden, Violaine Iglesias, and Erin Osborne-Martin.

In-Person Conferences

- Is the airport easy to navigate?
- How far from the hotel is it?
- Is the venue accessible to wheelchair users?
- How digestible is the content for people with different abilities?
- Is there space to sit down?
- What are the options for attendees unable to see the slides or hear the talk?

Online Conferences

- It is often difficult to work out who else is in the conference without excessive scrolling.
- The pace of the chat often moves very quickly.
- If using a screen reader, it can be impossible to follow the talk through conversational clutter.
- Quieter individuals sometimes struggle to be heard over the more extroverted.

Solutions suggested were:

- Attendee lists.
- Advance notification of special requirements.
- Interactive and voice-controlled maps.
- Networking bus stops to allow the meeting of new people willing to talk.
- Advance recordings, where possible, to allow for the generation of closed captions.

You can discover the conversation in full: [Towards Conference Accessibility](#), YouTube, February 2021

A snapshot: how did some key industry events respond during COVID-19?

ENAGO 'SEE THE FUTURE 2020'

ENAGO used Underline's services for their November 2020 SEE THE FUTURE event. The virtual gathering was presented across four days and in eight languages. The content included a wide selection of webinars, panel discussions and online presentations. There were also a series of interactive question and answer sessions with leading research, education and publishing professionals. The event became one of the largest author events of the year with over **20,000 registrations** worldwide.

Scientific and academic research is global in nature, and we were pleased to bring together some of the best minds in the world, and using our platform, break down geographical barriers to scientific advancement

Alex Lazinica, CEO of Underline Science.

Thanks to Underline's innovative platform, attendees at SEE THE FUTURE were able to hear the presentations in their local language, allowing full interactivity with the content.

CISPC 2020

CISPC 2020 was an entirely digital format with more than 120 delegates from around the world. Sessions were kept short and snappy at 20-minutes in duration. Host Tim Gillett said: 'Naturally, having never organised a digital event before, we were somewhat nervous about how the event would pan out. In fact, it worked an absolute treat and imagine we will consider delivering at least part of any future CISPC events digitally.'

Research Information, December 2020

The Institute of Physics (IOP): webinars

As with many leading scientific member organisations and societies, IOP has provided a webinar series 'on demand' to all their members. Although recorded, their programme of online talks and workshops are valued and trusted resources, which are now available for worldwide viewing.

With 10 events in one month alone, members can consume more content than ever before, without the carbon footprint previously required to travel to an event in person.

You may miss the corridor conversations. You may be overjoyed that you can now attend that conference without leaving your desk. Whatever your preference as we move forward in uncharted territory, there are some things we all have to learn.

One of these is **virtual conference etiquette**.

On Twitter, Dr. Jenae Cohn (Director of Academic Technology Sacramento State University, US) suggested:

6 things everyone could do to make mixed modality conversations work well

twitter.com/Jenae_Cohn

These being:

- **Learn:** swat up on the video-conferencing platform so you know how it works.
- **Lead:** do not say that online participants are people 'who are not here' - as they are here.
- **Ask:** get people to state their names before they speak so everyone attending knows who is speaking. This is good accessibility practice.

- **Explain:** let all attendees know how you plan to include everyone - suggest on-site participants have a device to access the shared online space.
- **Plan:** but don't over plan. Everything is likely to take longer in a hybrid environment.
- **Try:** you may be nervous about the tech or about looking incompetent. You won't. Just explain that you're learning too!

As Jenae gets across, virtual is happening whether we like it or not, so it's worth making it better.

Looking to the future

**Will a blend of in-person and virtual attendance be the key elements of conferences in the future? If costs for hybrid events are higher (than traditional or virtual events alone), is profit your key metric to evaluate its' success or failure?
Or do you put a higher value on attendance/sponsorship/networking/marketing?**

With all that in mind, how are you planning your events calendars for 2022 and beyond?

Key stats from 2020. A year like no other.

- **8.8% of global working hours were lost, roughly 255 million full-time jobs**
International Labour Organization, January 2021
- **An estimated \$11 trillion spent on the COVID-19 response**
weforum.org, October 2020
- **Global scheduled flights down 43% year-on-year**
Statista, data covers January 2020-January 2021
- **Airlines set to lose at least \$100 billion through 2021**
Reader's Digest, April 2021

