

The future of conference: Will events remain virtual after lockdowns?

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Keith Townsend spent six weeks planning his first company conference. More than 200 people showed up to watch 25 expert speakers, but not a single hand was shaken or business card was given.

As most of America continues to follow social distancing guidelines, trade events have followed the path of work meetings and pivoted to virtual platforms.

Townsend's [company](#), The CTO Advisor, launched its IT-focused event through the virtual conferencing platform vFairs.

On April 21, with a combination of pre-recorded and live content, over 280 people attended the company conference with the opportunity to direct message the expert speakers.

"You lose the intimidating factor of walking up to someone," Townsend told U.S. TODAY. "The semi-anonymous nature of the internet is a great equalizer," he added.

Virtual conferences have seen a steady increase as companies are turning to [online resources](#) in replacement of florescent lighting, carpeted floors and chair rows of trade events, usually held in hotels and convention centers.

Although America is still months away from going back to mass gatherings, companies and organizations are focusing on how to benefit from the virtual trend even as lockdowns are lifted.

On March, concerns over cancellations shook the event planning industry as companies lost thousands of dollars in revenue and faced the challenge of bringing their businesses back up.

Companies have had to reinvent themselves when it comes to hosting events. For example, Facebook announced on April it would shift its Oculus Connect 7 to a digital format later this year. Workday, the management software company, also cancelled its annual internal sales conference and shifted towards organizing it virtually.

Business and professional online events increased 1,100% in April compared to April of last year, according to Eventbrite.

"Our data is showing a significant rise in demand for online events and it's been inspiring to see the innovative ways event creators are leveraging our platform," said Crystal Valentine, chief data strategy officer at Eventbrite. "We expect online events will continue to play a big role in events post-pandemic."

And consumers are spending money to attend online events—about \$29 per attendee, according to the event management and ticketing website.

Pumping the trend

Live streamed events were already seeing an increase in engagement before the coronavirus outbreak. More than 67% of consumers globally have streamed live video content, with 47% of consumers globally saying they have increased their live streaming since the previous year, a 2018 Interactive Advertising Bureau report says.

The video broadcasting tool Socialive got an early start by partnering with Facebook and LinkedIn when it first launched in 2016, but little did it know the company's revenue was going to skyrocket four years later.

"When COVID-19 hit, we just saw an inundation of requests," said David Moricca, CEO of Socialive. "We've grown our customer base by 90% since the beginning of March and our revenue has grown 146%."

Although companies such as Socialive are seeing a huge increase due to the lack of in-person events, will virtual events become the normal even after states decide to lift their lockdown restrictions?

"Every organization hosting events will be thinking about their physical

experience, as well as their digital and virtual experience" says Moricca. "Authentic style video can show a human element of your organization."

Hybrid events are more likely

Marketing agencies such as Impact XM are already developing strategies for companies planning to host large conferences in the third and fourth quarter of the year.

"Between now and two years from now, we think there will be some bridge strategies," John Capano, senior vice president of client development at Impact XM told U.S. TODAY.

Capano explained some of the models companies and event planners could take into consideration to combine virtual and in-person experiences.

These hybrid events would host its main event in one location, but have satellite events in other locations to avoid having thousands of people conglomerate in one space at a time. As people gather for in-person events, Capano explained that companies should also focus on providing a virtual event hub for virtual attendees.

Until people can return to meeting face-to face, some sectors still have to face the waiting game when it comes to bringing back their scheduled events.

When it comes to networking, Capano explained that this might be one of the factors a company might have to dial down on their virtual event.

"You can still do live chats, create chat rooms and virtual lounges," Capano says. "Your'e just not doing it as easily as before."

For Townsend's event, networking was limited by the person's inability to have a visual representation of their products.

"You lose the randomness of in-person events," Townsend said. "You don't have the natural human experience."

Socialive's CEO believes that companies are already taking it upon themselves to satisfy the networking factor through chat boxes and creating a level of intimacy by amplifying a brand across different social media platforms.

"You can still create a fully-branded experience virtually that will shine the right light in your organization and brand," Moricca said.

Domino effect on hotels

Marriott International had to postpone all the events being held in March, April and May.

"They've all been moved to the third and fourth quarter, and some in the 2021," says Brian King, global officer of digital, distribution, revenue strategy and global sales at Marriott International. "We've seen a lot of rebookings versus outright cancellations."

As states start reopening businesses, Marriott is getting ready to implement new protocols for their large conferences. Some of these include cleaning highly touched areas every hour, switching food buffets for packaged meals, removing pens and pads from tables unless requested by a planner, adjusting meeting rooms with social distancing guidelines and establishing caps in each room.

King also explained that hotel staff will also control how people move from one meeting to another. Instead of having a large conglomerate of

people flock at once, hotel staff will start gating certain areas to prevent a large influx of people entering a room.

"We're rethinking and retooling the entire event experience," King told U.S. TODAY.

Marriott also sees this as an opportunity for hotels with large, outdoor spaces or in mountainous areas to see an increase in event activity.

"There may be smaller meetings occurring in locations that have not been in top of mind," says King.

The Marriott executive is hopeful business will come back once it's safe to convene in mass gatherings again.

"When the time passes, there's going to be this pent-up demand to socialize," King speculates. "That physical sense of being with people and being part of a community can't be replaced by technology."

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