

Dos & Don'ts: For Virtual Conferences



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Virtual conference planning is a beast of an undertaking. The very things that make a virtual conference flexible - it can happen at any time and involve anyone from anywhere talking about anything at all - are the very things that can turn it into an unfocused mess. It's also not the kind of event where you can just take your old agenda and sit everyone in front of their laptop.

Before designing a virtual conference meeting planners are rethinking what a conference can—and can not—do virtually. Everything from connectivity to interactivity and even length of the conference itself are up for discussion. No choice is without a potential downside.

The potential upside for virtual conferences are not to be dismissed. Virtual events can democratize the experience, particularly in fields like hospitality and food services where time and money are limited. By dropping costs and going online, individuals who normally couldn't take the time or spend the money to attend can do both.

In addition, your content from a virtual conference becomes a resource you can tap for years to come. Presentations are branded, searchable, and a new way to create connection. It also opens the door to a wider range of content - love that speaker from Peru? She's probably available for a virtual presentation and more affordable for your budget now that you don't have to work in travel costs.

So going virtual is definitely worth it. The fundamental question becomes: How can you take what's most powerful about the virtual conference capabilities and avoid the pitfalls?

Remember the 3 Ps:

Pacing, Polish, & Purpose

1. Pacing: Screens, Content, & Conversation

An all-screen-time, all-the-time conference means your audience has a limited tolerance for what could be back-to-back presentations. Anyone who has had a day stacked with zoom meetings knows that after a while, staring at the screen becomes the opposite of engaging. It begins to feel like you're being held prisoner by someone on the other side of a screen. "Zoom fatigue," as coined by numerous business publications, is a real problem.

Screen fatigue has real ramifications for virtual conference pacing. Rather than planning your virtual conference to mirror a full eight to twelve hour day of activities and presentations, think about taking either a "shorter is sweeter approach" for the conference overall, or a "stretch pace" to allow participants to join the conference for only part of their workday. The latter makes attendance an easier sell for many time strapped guests who are faced with needing to do more in organizations that have had lay-offs or other downsizing.



Short is Sweet

Pacing is also a consideration for each presentation. The head of content at Hootsuite, James Mulvey, recently observed that the change from in-person to virtual makes getting to the point of a presentation much more important. “Unlike a real event where you are locked in a room and can’t leave, it’s easy to skip and hard to watch an hour of content. So being concise and thinking of how to get speakers get to their points as fast as possible is important.”

So as challenging as it can be, review presentations and determine if the bulk of what is useful in the presentation is only in the last 15 minutes or the five slides. The fact is, much of what is often in a conference presentation is built to fit the time, and online the time is restrained by video attention spans. Online presentations that work up to their point can lose their audience before even getting to the point. Consider setting presentations for 30 minutes instead of the typical 50 - 60 minutes.

Another reason for keeping presentations shorter is screen lag. Even with the most careful IT planning (more on that shortly), presenters should anticipate adding between a minute to two minutes for lag time, especially for questions. There is nothing worse than cutting off questions when some of your audience is still proofreading theirs in the chat box.

Interactivity

To that point, one thing that can help all virtual presentations be more successful online is a strong feedback loop. “Virtual events need to be more interactive or user-led to draw the participant into the screen and the event,” says Hanna Peltonen, a CSR executive interviewed recently in Forbes. “That’s why successful virtual events draw a large number of comments, part of which keeps the entertainment going and draws people in. The immediate feedback loop for the organizers is also crucial and useful.”



Be sure to maximize all the time you have with attendees. Early birds on a virtual conference can be engaged in conversation by simply asking one question, or posting one on screen, that is related to the meeting topic. You can suggest people take part via the chat, essentially warming the audience up to interact with the speaker and the subject matter.

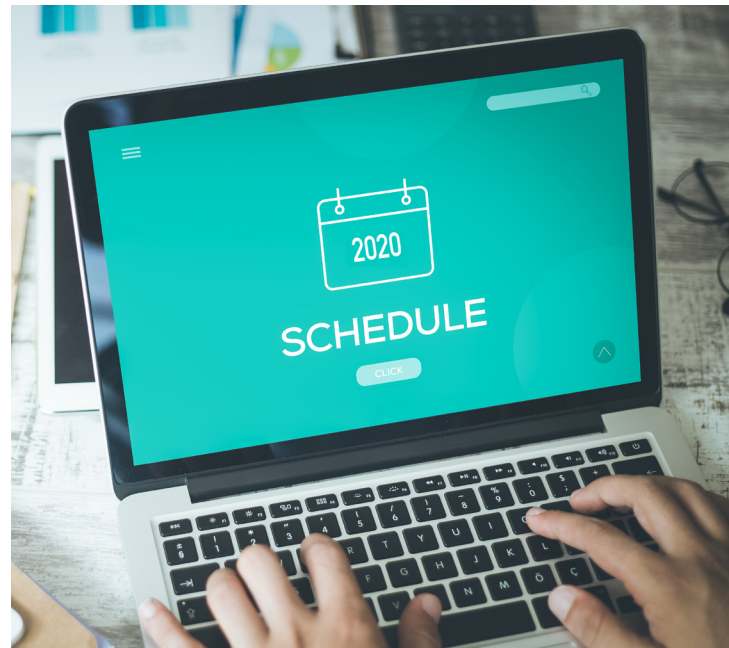
2. Polish every aspect

It goes without saying that technology is at the heart of your virtual conference. The challenge is that it's not strictly in your hands. You'll have to contend with your organization's technology, that of your presenters, and even your attendees. You'll need to determine how much of your conference will have live events, and how many will be pre-recorded. Having breakouts or training sessions adds a whole different layer of complexity as does working in networking opportunities.

Scheduling

Start with clear, easy to peruse scheduling information that all your attendees can access. It should have clear information about how they can test their own connections well ahead of time. It can also be helpful to utilize social media to allow for individuals to use platforms they are familiar with to interact. A group on LinkedIn, for example, can allow meeting participants to stay in touch well after the conference has ended.

Encourage attendees on the schedule to sign in 10 - 15 minutes early to ensure they enter the room without missing any information. It's easy in a work remote environment to lose track of time and miss events.



Polish the Presenter

When working with presenters, do everything you can to level the presentation playing field. Make sure they have both the equipment and location to avoid distractions like being back lit due to sitting in front of a window, or a spotty connection that causes their audio to drop. In most conferences, presenters are well set with their message, but in the new virtual world, there are new skills needed. Ideally, presenters will have two crucial aspects covered: high quality sound and video. Still, consider asking any new presenters to attend a live streaming class to ensure they are prepared. They should know—or commit to learning—some of the live streaming basics, like not wearing busy patterns which break up and look distracting on camera, and understand the issue of echoing sound in a large, empty room.



Ask presenters to also consider if their presentations visuals need to undergo a revamp for a virtual conference. Nothing is worse than having an online presenter read every slide, or present something on the screen that is impossible to understand.

Captivating an audience isn't just about perfect lighting and sound, though. In this new world where kids interrupt conference calls and the dog barks at the door, we have a new patience for these challenges. Sometimes the most compelling moments are the human ones. Henk Campher, VP of Corporate Marketing at Hootsuite "It's OK – more than OK, actually – to "break the 4th wall" and have a human moment with the audience. In the past, the expectation was a smooth, curated experience. But now you can and should be much more human and spontaneous."

Plan B

Every meeting planner knows the importance of having a plan B—or perhaps plans B through L. One key consideration is to include pre-recorded content in your mix for your conference. While it lacks interactivity, recorded presentations can be carefully choreographed for entertainment purposes. If the content follows the four components that all presentations should (relevance, engagement, consistency, and actionability), then a good pre-recorded presentation can be just as effective as a live broadcast.

Don't forget to test absolutely everything. Repeatedly. Test your stream—not in a space with only one or two people joining, but with dozens. Make sure you know what your upload speed is by testing your connections at a website like [speedtest.net](https://www.speedtest.net). Make sure you have back up computers, web cams, mics, and even presenters. Murphy's law is in effect at every conference, and you have to be prepared for how to handle the inevitable things that go wrong.

3. Purpose is Vital

Lee E. Miller, influencing trainer and author of *UP: Influence, Power and the U Perspective: The Art of Getting What You Want*, notes “The biggest mistake people make is assuming that influencing when you are meeting face to face is the same as influencing when you are interacting virtually. It’s not. The rules are different because people respond differently when they are interacting virtually.”

With that point in mind, consider the purpose of your conference and maximize it in the virtual world. For every conference, content remains king: Yann Gourvennec, CEO at Visionary Marketing put it best: “Is it events that are boring or those who facilitate them? I’ve seen people captivate audiences with a piece of written text ... I’ve also seen a lot of technological gizmos that are utterly tedious. Most conferences fail because the gist of the content that underpins them is weak, uninteresting and uninspiring.”

Expand your pool of speakers

Of course a virtual conference means your choice of speakers greatly expand, enabling you to better hone in on the theme of your conference. But great content is only half the equation. Many people value the networking aspect almost as highly, if not more than, the content of the conference. Creating online environments can include virtual lounges and social media groups can help, but just like in a real conference, planned activities and random pairings can help.

Yes You CAN Build in Networking

Everything from setting up social media groups in advance of the conference to real time messaging and even virtual events can help. Also make sure you have a team of ambassadors that help encourage attendees to learn something about their fellow attendees. Planners can even consider investing in a “match making” tool to auto-connect individuals with like interests or needs.

Planners should also build in “white space,” giving attendees a chance to connect between presentations. But keep it simple. Many virtual attendees report challenging tech barriers to entering those networking lounges. Instead of a proprietary system, consider setting up Google Hangouts or Zoom rooms, or use a platform like Hopin.

After the conference is over encourage attendees in groups to follow up with one another to keep the conversation going.



Swag

Lastly, don't forget to offer some digital swag. Downloadable wallpaper, zoom backgrounds, buttons or frames for social media, or even certificates can all add to the feeling for your attendees of being part of something special and worth attending.

Your virtual conference can be a gateway to a whole new level of engagement with your target audience. Even after people get back to meeting in person, chances are you'll find a few elements of virtual conferencing that you'll want to hold on to.

The 8 Do's of Video Conferencing Etiquette

- Do be courteous to other participants
- Do speak clearly
- Do keep body movements minimal
- Do move and gesture slowly and naturally
- Do maintain eye contact by looking into the camera
- Do dress appropriately
- Do make the session animated
- Do be yourself and have fun!

The 7 Dont's of Video Conferencing Etiquette

- Don't make distracting sounds
- Don't shout
- Don't make distracting movements
- Don't interrupt other speakers
- Don't carry on side conversations
- Don't wear "noisy" jewelry
- Don't cover the microphone

Source: St. Leo University Office of Information Technology