Is Your Association Ready for a Virtual Meeting?

With planning and the right technology vendor, taking a tradeshow virtual is a lot less painful than we think.

By Nikki Golden, CAE

The Tech-Savvy Tradeshow

Because of its base of technology-savvy IT associates, VMware User Group, or VMUG, was in a prime position to start offering events that re-imagined the tradeshow experience in a virtual space. VMUG, which is managed by Innovatis Group, is a global, customer-led organization that brings together VMware customers and providers of solutions that use VMware’s technology, to share knowledge through education, training and collaboration.

Nearly five years ago, VMUG created its first virtual event to extend the reach of this interaction to members who were not located in a major city. VMUG has 120,000+ members worldwide, so there were members who were unable to attend in person but also wanted to feel connected to the community, according to Candice Davis, virtual programs manager for VMUG.

Being in the IT industry, the expectations are high when doing anything virtual-related. It’s crucial to create an experience where attendees want to come back. She went to work educating herself on the virtual platform options available to run a virtual tradeshow. The group already offered online education in the form of webcasts, and Davis knew this virtual tradeshow had to have a different look and feel from those.

From the execution side, a virtual event is time-consuming and involves a lot of thought around the design and marketing of the experience. VMUG used the platform On24 for three years before changing this year to vFairs, which includes a design team to create the event as part of its all-inclusive package. Introduced this year on the new platform is a gamification element in the form of an image scavenger hunt, which is something that VMUG members really enjoy.

When a user logs into the VMUG virtual events, they can upload a profile picture as their avatar. From the log-in page, they are placed into a 3D lobby, which looks similar to the experience of walking into an actual convention center lobby. There are virtual people standing in groups, and you can click on to see what sessions are happening and theater-style seating, again populated by virtual people. The sessions are pre-recorded with live Q&A, and some include video of the person speaking with a PowerPoint; others are more the static PowerPoint of a webinar.

The lounge area is set up for attendees to interact with each other, the way they would onsite. There’s a Meet the Experts area, where attendees can read the bios of the selected experts and then launch a chat with them. There is also a Meet the Community tab, where attendees can interact through a chat function. This is also where VMUG houses the links to its social media sites, including Twitter and its Facebook group.

VMUG was not only able to attract new attendees because of the virtual experience; it was also able to attract new sponsors. Davis attributes this to the cost-savings since it removes the additional dollars attached to travel and sending representatives to a physical booth. Since VMUG’s membership tends to be of an introverted nature, it’s often more comfortable for attendees to connect on a deeper level with sponsors and other attendees.

The educational content of these virtual events is decided

Change is hard. But nowhere is change harder than when it comes to re-imagining the tradeshow experience as a digital one. There is uncertainty about the technology to make this happen in a way that doesn’t dilute the value that a face-to-face event brings to exhibitors. There is fear that a virtual event will siphon attendees from any in-person offerings. But for associations that have offered virtual events, whether by design or being forced to by the hand of unforeseen circumstances, the reward has been engagement from groups that might not otherwise have participated with the organization.
by a task force that includes both VMware employees and customers. Each virtual event—one quarterly—are planned three months ahead of time, with a staff that includes Davis and another person to help manage the planning and execution, while the task force handles the specifics of the content portion.

Davis’ advice for associations considering the virtual space is to ask yourself, “Who are your members and what is your why?” You need to know “why this would take your membership to the next level,” she says. “Is your industry ready for a virtual event?”

**Conference by Crowdsourcing**

AssociationSuccess.org began as a digital publication and online community for association professionals. When the company originally created its online communities, they thought those would be built around discussing the content in the digital publication. Instead, the online communities were driving problem-solving—an association professional would pose an issue and the group would workshop solutions, says Arianna Rehak, director at AssociationSuccess.org.

“There was a lot of value to be captured beyond that one room and space,” she says. And from that, SURGE was born. SURGE is a three-day virtual conference that harnesses the collective knowledge that sessions themselves foster through attendee chats, which then add value to the conference, like the meaningful conversations that take place at the table you choose to sit at within the confines of an in-person conference. Except that conversations can be shared with more than just the five people at your table. At the end of SURGE, AssociationSuccess.org staff comb through the attendee chats for each session and pull the insights into e-books.

“We are co-creating a body of knowledge in real time,” Rehak says. Each session features between three and five speakers and are pre-recorded as a video chat among four colleagues centered around one topic, which solves a lot of the potential technology issues of a virtual event. It also allows the presenters to interact with attendees during the session. “Each session is more discussion rather than lecture, which turns out to be hard to find.”

“Chats in other platforms were not designed for good conversation,” Rehak said. “They were small boxes, with small fonts.” Another concern was the robustness to stream, bandwidth-wise, since the company didn’t have any idea how many people would be online at the same time during the first SURGE.

The platform they chose to partner with is CE21, and SURGE is a bit like user testing for the company. “Their philosophy is if we need it, others probably would as well,” so they add it into the platform. Because of the unique format of SURGE, it was difficult at first to explain the value to potential sponsors, partially because in a virtual conference, you don’t get the instant gratification and visual feedback you get from talking face-to-face. However, now that they have a few of these events under their belt, it’s easier for Rehak and her team to suggest different strategies, such as using dynamic video to get more feedback. For example, SURGE now pairs a sponsor video with a pop-up that comes on screen, where participants can choose to connect with that sponsor. This also gives AssociationSuccess.org analytics on conversion rates, and sponsors are walking away with those leads.

To put on an event such as SURGE, AssociationSuccess.org dedicates four full-time employees and one part-timer. The skillsets encompassed by this team include online community management, developer/designer, video editing, digital marketing expertise and content expertise. The team also has access to relevant expertise on the association side through its online community. In addition, the team arms its speakers with the tools it needs to help promote the SURGE event to their own communities.

For all its success, there were some lessons learned. “Virtual events take a surprising amount of effort and investment to do right,” Rehak said. “But when things don’t always go as expected, people are very understanding with new initiatives.”

**Meeting Diverted Online for Weather**

Sometimes unforeseen circumstances force you to take your in-person event virtual. Such was the case for the Water Quality Association, which had its Mid-Year Leadership Conference scheduled for September in Hilton Head, S.C.—directly in the path of Hurricane Florence. This yearly event brings together 150 industry leaders for approximately 30 meetings over two-and-a-half days, plus several fund-raising events for WQA’s foundation.

Part of the reason to take this meeting virtual rather than cancel it all together was that the business of the association still had to get done, said LyNae Schiley, CMP, WQA’s meeting services director. The staff looked at the schedule and highlighted 19 meetings that needed to take place during the
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two days. These meetings fell into three categories: Board meetings, which were closed to those not invited, committee meetings, which would be open to all the registered attendees of the Mid-Year Leadership Conference, and then the staff took the opportunity to create four open meetings that were open to all WQA members.

“There were two of these open meetings each day, which gave us a good test market for the future,” Schleyer said. WQA made the decision to go virtual the Sunday before the event was supposed to take place, leaving the staff Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday to execute on this event. The receptionist and all committee leaders were provided with full information, including sign-in codes and phone numbers, to answer any questions that came in once the announcement was made. Four conference rooms were each assigned one of the 19 meetings that would be taking place.

WQA chose to use GoToMeeting and GoToTraining platforms, since staff was already accustomed to this software. Still, there was a lot of rehearsal for the internal staff liaisons and a lot of calls with GoToMeeting support to make sure everything went smoothly.

The association’s four IT staff played a large role now that the meeting was virtual. IT took the lead on creating logins for each meeting, and each was assigned a conference room for the days of the event, testing visuals and staying until the meeting launched. In addition, staff tested signing in from elsewhere to ensure the user experience was a good one.

For the open meetings, they originally had planned to have open phone lines until during a rehearsal, they realized that the background noise had the potential to be deafening. Instead, they went to a chat function, which Schleyer said, changed the possible dynamics of the conversation. Staff, therefore, had staged questions ready to start the conversation.

The best part was that 30 staff gathered to observe that meeting from another conference room, rather than hearing about it at a post-event update during a staff meeting after the event.

Making the Decision

Virtual events were once looked at as a way for an association to save money, which will not happen upfront but might once the initial investment is made in the technology and design of the event. However, the more important metric to use when deciding on taking an event virtual is the possible engagement from segments of your membership or industry that didn’t participate with the group previously.

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Schleyer points out that members were more forgiving of this change because of the hurricane and staff had a lot of support for making this decision. She added that this meeting, going forward, probably needs the face-to-face aspect because there was a lot of the camaraderie lost even though the business got done. However, the experience did demonstrate to the association that its members are ready for more virtual meetings, and she echoes what Davis said, that for members who are not comfortable participating at in-person events, they had an avenue to participate with questions and comments during the virtual event. In fact, of the 151 unique attendees, there were 76 new virtual attendees who had not registered to attend the live in-person meeting.

Teamwork is a key to putting on a successful virtual event, Schleyer said, just as it is for an in-person event. And for WQA, “there was a lot of pride in making this work and demonstrating to our members what we were capable of,” she said.

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