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By Communique (<https://www.virtualtradeshowhosting.com/author/curtis/>) | February 28, 2020

Organizations operate in a world that gets more challenging each year. Pandemics, fires, weather and other public safety disturbances impact travel and limit the ability of employees, partners, clients, or prospects to attend in-person events.

Now we have the COVID-19 virus, commonly known as Coronavirus. Several high-profile events have been canceled as a result of the outbreak. For example, the 100,000-attendee Mobile World Congress planned for late February in Barcelona, Spain; Facebook's 4,000-attendee Global Marketing Summit planned for San Francisco in early March; and the 8,500-attendee Cisco Live conference in Melbourne, Australia, also in early March, to name a few.

Just 15 days ahead of its 2020 World Tour Sydney event in Australia that was expected to draw more than 20,000 attendees from across the Asia-Pacific region, cloud-based CRM software firm Salesforce announced that the conference will still take place on March 4 but in an online-only format (<http://www.itnews.com.au/news/salesforce-makes-its-sydney-conference-an-online-only-affair-amidst-coronavirus-fears-538223>) (<https://www.itnews.com.au/news/salesforce-makes-its-sydney-conference-an-online-only-affair-amidst-coronavirus-fears-538223>) to alleviate participant fears of Coronavirus. The company released a statement saying the format change was made "after careful consideration of our stakeholders and reflection upon our values."

Key findings from a just-released Global Business Travel Association poll shows that 65 percent of companies have canceled at least "a few" of their planned meetings and events due to the virus, and 18 percent have canceled "many." View the entire poll results here ([https://www.gbta.org/Portals/0/Documents/PR/Coronavirus\\_poll\\_results\\_022520.pdf](https://www.gbta.org/Portals/0/Documents/PR/Coronavirus_poll_results_022520.pdf)).

The Events Council posted a resource page (<https://www.eventscouncil.org/Industry-Insights/About-coronavirus>) for event planners in response to the Coronavirus pandemic.

How can your events strategy protect itself against these types of challenges? And how can you quickly pivot to keep existing event plans in place?

Choose the right virtual conference platform provider and plan properly so that the virtual conference is not viewed as an after thought or add-on.

# The Answer: Change the venue to a Virtual Conference

Event organizers are increasingly changing the conference venue from a physical location to a virtual or online trade show. A virtual conference platform (<https://www.virtualtradeshowhosting.com>) provides a highly customizable, engaging, and secure environment in which you can successfully bring your audience together, without risking health and safety (travel).

During a crisis, the well-being of employees, clients, or prospects are, of course, the main priority. Giving your audiences the ability to attend a virtual conference via their computer or mobile device removes any bricks-and-mortar conference risks. Another option is taking a hybrid approach. Hosting both a physical conference and a virtual version for those that cannot travel.

## What is involved with changing to a virtual conference?

Most of the work that goes into planning and executing a bricks-and-mortar conference is the same with hosting a virtual conference. The goals, speakers/topics, sponsors, registration, and attendee promoting activities are essentially the same. The difference is the venue to deliver the event (online vs. a hotel or other physical space).

## How long does it take to set up a virtual conference?

The answer depends on the complexity of the event. A simple, single-room environment with links to webinar presentations and downloadable resources can be set up in a week. Event organizers that want a full-scale online trade show with multiple locations such as a welcome lobby, exhibit hall with booths, theater, networking lounge, resource center, etc. typically take four weeks or more to set up. If your virtual event includes external booth sponsors, they will need time to gather their digital assets internally (documents, video's, links to webpages) to include in their virtual booth. Canceling altogether is better than rushing a poorly thought out virtual conference experience for your attendees and sponsors.

## What are the benefits of changing to a virtual conference that we can communicate to attendees and sponsors?

### Attendees:

- The first and most obvious benefit of a virtual conference vs. physical is that no travel is required which saves money and time.
- The reduced cost of virtual exhibiting allows many more exhibitors to participate and increases the value of the trade show on the whole to the attendee.

- Access to upper management – In many cases upper management typically do not attend physical trade shows because of the time commitment and too much exposure. However, with a virtual trade show, upper management can easily, and discreetly, make themselves available to clients or partners. For example, this could be through a scheduled moderated chat session.
- The event “lives on”. If an attendee missed something, the virtual conference will be available on-demand for 30, 60, 90 days (or however long is desired) so that attendees can continue to access booths, consume content, view presentations, etc.
- Virtual trade shows are interactive – Just because someone isn’t there in person doesn’t mean they don’t interact with others. Virtual trade shows allow attendees to visit booths, chat with booth reps, attend seminars and keynote speeches, and even chat, network or talk live to other attendees. Attendees can swap electronic business cards with a keystroke and save that data instantly in a database.

**Sponsors:** Keep your sponsorship pricing the same (no need to reduce) if your event moves to a virtual format. The benefits to sponsors are:

- Reduce costs and boost ROI: A virtual conference means you eliminate all of costs associated with physical events such as travel, lodging, promotional items, and other costly expenses typically associated with physical trade shows.
- Skip Logistical Hassles: Physical events come with numerous logistical hassles. Setting up the venue and arranging equipment are a few of the issues.
- Exposure to more attendees: Virtual conferences result in higher attendance since no travel is required. This means that sponsors will be able to engage with more attendees vs. a physical event. For example, Ace Hardware recently added a virtual conference in between their two annual physical conferences. 40% of the virtual conference attendees had never attended the physical events that they had been hosting for years.
- Exhibitors will get far more data than they ever would at a physical event. Imagine someone walking next to each attendee and writing down everything they do, every booth they stopped at, every bit of booth content they viewed, every conference session they attended, and for how long they did it. While face-to-face contact will always be necessary, the kind of data a virtual event can capture is incredibly helpful for both exhibitors and the meeting host to further their relationship with each attendee.
- Leads: Yes, sponsors will get leads from a physical conference just like a physical conference. Their booth can include one-click calls-to-action such as demo request, information request, newsletter sign up, etc. Also, booth reps can engage with attendees via chat and video.
- The event lives on. A physical conference lasts for the one or two days, then it is done. A virtual conference can be available on-demand for 30, 60, 90 days (however long you’d like) so that attendees can continue to access sponsor booths, view presentations, etc.

## **What is the process to switch a physical event to a virtual conference?**

1. Choose a virtual conference provider: Just because your event is online does not mean that it cannot encounter major issues. Some example include attendees having problems

connecting, an entire platform can experience an outage, the virtual conference provider can go insolvent, webinars or videos do not play properly, functionality such as chat does not work, difficult navigation, the provider shares your attendee data or has a data breach, poor set up support, etc.

Make sure to spend the same amount of effort, if not more, when choosing a virtual conference provider as choosing a physical venue supplier. Choosing a hotel venue is easier because the property can be visited to see first-hand the condition of the property, how many employees are available to help you and your attendees, the quality of the construction, the quality of the amenities, food, etc. Choosing the right virtual conference provider is much more difficult because its hosted software that is typically only viewed via a one-hour web demonstration. You cannot see where the platform is hosted, how it is hosted, how much redundancy is in place, bandwidth capacity, how attendee data is secured, and how much staff are employed to support the host and attendees. Therefore, it's necessary to ask a lot of questions. Click here

(<https://www.virtualtradeshowhosting.com/10-questions-to-ask-your-virtual-conference-provider/>) for a handy checklist for choosing a virtual conference provider.

2. With attendees joining from the European Union (EU GDPR) and/or California (CCPA) (<https://www.virtualtradeshowhosting.com/ccpa-impacts-on-virtual-conference-organizers/>), be sure to comply with data privacy laws. Also, make sure you have a Data Processing Agreement (DPA) in place with the virtual conference provider. Not having a clear understanding of a virtual conference provider's data protection systems and processes and not having a DPO in place is akin to not buying insurance for a physical event.
3. Assemble a virtual conference team ([https://www.virtualtradeshowhosting.com/wp-content/uploads/Communique\\_Virtual-Conference-Assemble-Your-Team.pdf](https://www.virtualtradeshowhosting.com/wp-content/uploads/Communique_Virtual-Conference-Assemble-Your-Team.pdf)) with defined roles and responsibilities.
4. Decide who needs administrator access to the virtual environment. This includes someone that is a super admin, someone with reporting-only access and whether access is given to booth sponsors to allow them to make changes to their booth content on their own.
5. Decide if all attendees should have the same experience or if role-based access ([https://www.virtualtradeshowhosting.com/wp-content/uploads/Communique\\_Virtual-Conference-Role-Based-Access.pdf](https://www.virtualtradeshowhosting.com/wp-content/uploads/Communique_Virtual-Conference-Role-Based-Access.pdf)) to rooms or content is preferred.
6. Adjust the agenda and components to work better for a virtual format with attendees joining online. Click here (<https://www.virtualtradeshowhosting.com/virtual-conference-2019-benchmark-report/>) to view our 2019 Virtual Conference benchmark report for best practices.
  1. Attendees joining from their computer will have a much shorter attention span compared to a physical conference. For example, if a physical conference is usually an 8-hour day, break it up over two days (4 live hours per day) for a virtual conference.
  2. Since the attendees are not traveling, they will not all be in the same time zone. Find out where your attendees are located (country and time zone) and adjust your timing accordingly. It can be difficult to host live webinar presentations for a North America audience and include EMEA and APAC countries. If most of the attendees are located in North America, then host the live webinars when it's most convenient for Eastern

- and Pacific time zones. The Europe and Asia attendees can view them on-demand.
3. Shorten the presentations: Again, attendees are at a computer or mobile device so their attention span is going to be shorter than an in-person event. 30-minute webinar presentations plus Q&A is the best practice for a virtual conference. If your issuing CE credits, 45 minutes is the minimum presentation length.
  4. Add engagement opportunities during webcast presentations such as fun polls. The goal is to get the remote attendee to touch their keyboard every 3-4 minutes.
  5. Consider adding a 15-minute break in between presentations to allow attendees to explore the exhibit hall and sponsor booths.
  7. Communicate the change of format to all attendees, speakers and sponsors
  8. Change the registration page and confirmation emails to direct attendees to the virtual conference URL.
  9. Work with the virtual conference provider to design the virtual environment for the event.
    1. Choose what rooms to include (lobby, theater, exhibit hall, networking lounge, resource center, etc.) in the virtual environment.
    2. Pick from design templates and choose customization (colors, branding, navigation signs, banners, scenery, etc.)
    3. Collect digital content to include throughout the environment
    4. Work with sponsors to collect and upload digital content for their booth
    5. Create event surveys (for feedback) and downloadable agenda
    6. Set up scrolling tool bar promotions
    7. Set up gamification ([https://www.virtualtradeshowhosting.com/wp-content/uploads/Communique\\_Virtual-Conference-Gamification.pdf](https://www.virtualtradeshowhosting.com/wp-content/uploads/Communique_Virtual-Conference-Gamification.pdf)) and prizes – Choose point values for activities, prizes and terms & conditions
  10. Presentations: these will move to a webinar/webcast format. Decide how presentations will be delivered:
    1. Slides with audio or do you also want to include video (webcam or high-end camera feed). If you decide to go the hybrid route some or all of the presentations from the physical venue can be streamed live via a live video webcast (<https://www.communiqueconferencing.com/live-video-webcasting.asp>).
    2. Live, simulive or on-demand:
      - Live: The speaker(s) will login to a host admin panel via their computer at the specified day/time of their presentation to deliver the presentation(s) live. These presentations can be recorded so that attendees can view them on-demand.
      - Simulive: Simulive webcasts appear “live” to the audience but are recorded in advance. When the pre-recorded presentations go live, the attendees can still type in questions through a Q&A panel. At the end, the webinar “rolls-to-live” so the presenters can respond to questions via Q&A or chat panel in real-time or respond via live audio. This option is helpful if the speakers have a busy schedule. Also, since the speakers may not be on the same time zone since they are not traveling to a physical conference, doing all of your presentations “live” might be difficult to accomplish. Finally, Simulive webinars also take a lot of stress off the live day because they are already recorded and edited in advance. Click here (<https://vimeo.com/393600051>) to a video with instructions for

speakers to pre-record a slide presentation on their computer.

- On-demand – Post links to pre-recorded presentations so attendees can view anytime on-demand.

11. Prepare for the live day:

1. Review the entire environment to make sure all the links to content, etc. are correct.
2. Set up training for the virtual conference administrators as well as the booth chat representatives.
3. Plan the live day broadcast messages ([https://www.virtualtradeshowhosting.com/wp-content/uploads/Communique\\_Virtual-Conference-Broadcast-Message.pdf](https://www.virtualtradeshowhosting.com/wp-content/uploads/Communique_Virtual-Conference-Broadcast-Message.pdf)) to help attendees take actions.
4. Plan the help desk staffing (chat)

Virtual Events are not just a reactive solution. With greater frequency, organizations are choosing virtual conferences over in-person events to reduce travel costs and carbon footprints. They have also grown in use due to their global capability and the abundance of data they provide to event hosts and sponsors, often times providing much more detailed data metrics than in-person trade shows.

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