



6CONNEX

The Best Laid Plans are Long-Term Plans

Why virtual events are here to stay

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused an unprecedented blow to corporate events calendars worldwide,

creating uncertainty regarding the impact and duration of its shockwaves. In an April [PCMA survey](#), 87% of business events professionals stated they had canceled in-person events between March and June, 66% acknowledged they had postponed events, and some respondents disclosed they were taking a hard look at events scheduled as late as November and December. When you consider the [2018 Global Economic Significance of Business Events study](#) reported 1.5 billion people worldwide participate in business events annually, and this participation results in \$2.5 trillion (USD) in direct and indirect spending, it's no wonder concerns regarding the future and format of business events continue to grow.

But quantifying the severity of the situation only scratches the surface when it comes to estimating business events' value. These are the spaces where thought leaders come together to educate and debate. It's where networks are created and careers are built. Events connect professionals and introduce them to opportunities in a direct, user-friendly way. From registration to the closing keynote, they yield distinct benefits.

So if events are invaluable, where do we go from here? What are some best practices for managing an extensive disruption like this? And in a time of great uncertainty, how can we best prepare for a new landscape post COVID-19? We must consider what changes may occur, and what opportunities lie within them.

Focus on Long-Term Planning

In the first three to four weeks following the COVID-19 outbreak, many companies scrambled to take their business events virtual. Admittedly in panic mode, these organizations were simply looking to implement tools and technology to quickly enable a global employee base to successfully work on a remote basis. There was a temporary

quality to planning and decisions, as if companies were applying a band-aid to a surface wound. Many IT teams were stretched. And some employees and managers were uncomfortable, using new solutions or unwilling to turn cameras on and present a "less than perfect" version of themselves, with kids, dogs, and kitchen tables on full display for their peers.

Fast forward a few weeks, however, and the majority of organizations are now acknowledging that social distancing and other precautions aren't a temporary state of being, but really a new normal. As a result, events planners, marketers, and business leaders are re-thinking their entire events strategy, and it's a much longer-term discussion. They're no longer seeking band-aids, they're building business continuity plans. They're asking the question, "How can I create a state of readiness, wherein



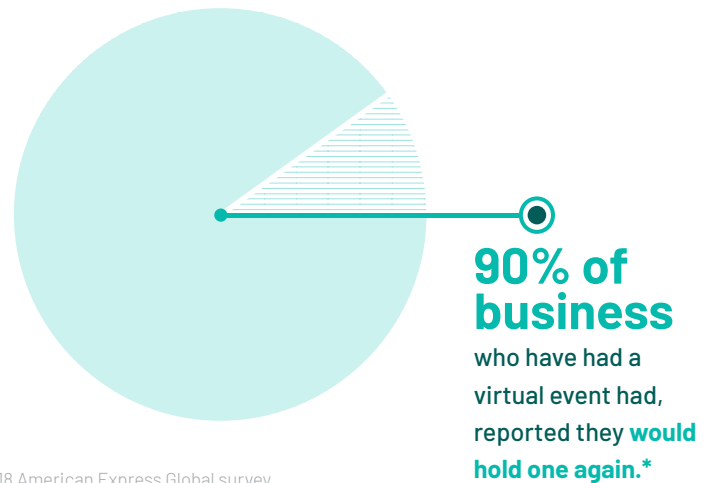
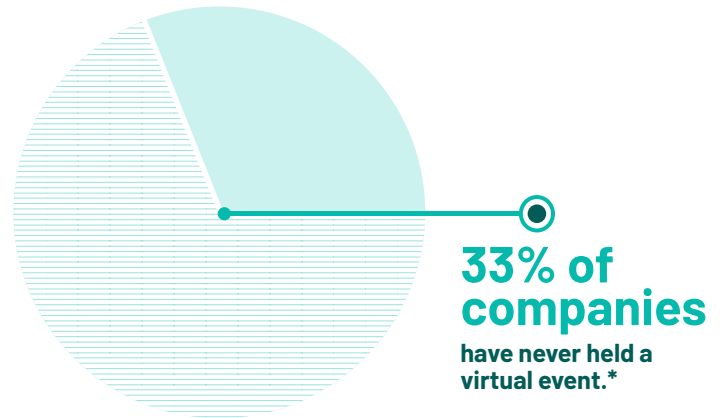
I can hold my events as planned and make them even better than they would have been in-person?"

Cue: virtual and hybrid events.

Whether In-Person or Virtual, Event Fundamentals Remain the Same

With virtual events now playing a critical role in business continuity plans, virtual event providers are suddenly in high demand. And they're spending a great deal of time upfront educating their new customers on the benefits a virtual event platform can provide. In fact, leaders from virtual events providers [6Connex](#) and [PGi](#) recently shared during a webcast that one of the biggest obstacles they face when helping companies pivot to a virtual events strategy is the mindset of the event planner. Both companies agree one of the most frequently asked questions from planners new to the virtual event space is, "What can I get out of a virtual event that I can't get out of a physical one?"

The answer: plenty. According to a [2018 American Express Global survey](#), while 33% of companies had never held a virtual event, 90% of those that had, reported they would hold one



*2018 American Express Global survey

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again. The key, according to 6Connex and PGi, is not to lose sight of the fundamentals. Whether an event is in-person or virtual, the fundamentals are the same: build an attractive agenda with compelling content; launch a personalized, multi-channel audience generation campaign. Once these two building blocks are set, then consider the tools you have at your disposal in a virtual format to surprise your audience. Ideas include:

- ▶ **Pre-event:** Invite attendees to experience the virtual event platform before the event takes place. Allow them to familiarize themselves with the format ahead of time so that they have an understanding of how to navigate the platform and take advantage of different experiences. Event planners and marketers may even want to offer some virtual content prior to the event itself to increase the likelihood registrants will attend and encourage colleagues to join.
- ▶ **In-event:** Build social and "non-business" activities into the agenda. Events are usually a big part of the corporate social calendar. Whether it's a chance to



socialize off site with peers, explore a new city, or participate in a unique activity, events offer more than “on message” content. Therefore, it’s important to satisfy the audience’s desire to socialize and explore with in-event activities. And without physical constraints to limit the size or nature of these activities, virtual events have a lot to offer. For example, event planners and marketers can include guided meditation sessions, a kickboxing lesson, or a Netflix party on the agenda.

- **Post-event:** Create an “evergreen” virtual event platform, where the event and the content is accessible year-round, and hence the value of the event extends beyond the last presentation or break-out session. Organizations may want to consider creating a virtual conference center, where attendees can access multiple events and their respective content at any time and from any location. One benefit to this approach is of course the ability to monetize the content over the long-term. In fact, many organizations have found their content can be an additional revenue stream, off-setting the cost of the virtual event completely.

Putting Content within Reach

The truth is, event planners and marketers have long wanted to increase audience engagement beyond a two- or three-day event. Prior to COVID-19, they were using mobile apps as a means to this end, but with limited success. Fortunately, a virtual event platform has always been a gateway to long-term content engagement, and as event planners and marketers use this time to become more familiar with the format and fine-tune their strategies, it’s likely that beyond the pandemic, the format will be a standard tool in every event planner’s and marketer’s toolkit.

The pandemic will likely change organizations’ attitudes toward event attendance as well. Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, companies would send a handful of employees to an event, where employees would digest event content in a finite amount of time and then return to work—often to full inboxes and calendars. In most cases, the employees’ attention would quickly revert back to the job at hand and the event content was never shared beyond the attendee group. The benefits of the content were therefore limited. With a virtual event platform, however, content sharing is no longer dependent on the event attendees. Instead, the content is readily accessible to any number of employees at any time, increasing the likelihood the larger organization will benefit.

In addition, common barriers to widespread event attendance are removed. While budget is the most frequently cited obstacle to large scale event attendance in the United States and Europe, in South America and Asia, obstacles include long travel times, security, political instability, and economics. For example, for companies in Indonesia, which is comprised of more than 17,000 islands, traveling is complex. Many employees prefer not to travel under these circumstances, and companies are unwilling to ask their employees to do so. A virtual event removes these barriers and makes event attendance possible for everyone, everywhere.

Audiences Primed for Virtual Events

Just as technology has made business events more accessible to audiences, they've made audiences more amenable to virtual events. With so much of our day-to-day activity now taking place online, audiences have an unprecedented comfort level with virtual formats, and they're looking to connect. Cameras are turned on despite those kids, dogs, and messy kitchen tables, in favor of genuine human interaction. And virtual event experts applaud this shift, believing it's allowed organizations to move away from a "narrative" approach to content and keeps virtual events from feeling too over-produced or fake.

Another example of how comfortable we're becoming with virtual formats: C-level communication has gone from quarterly town hall meetings to weekly, virtual updates in many organizations. In fact, employees are hearing more now from their business leaders than they did when at the office, and for many organizations this connection is improving corporate culture to the extent where there's no desire to decrease the communication frequency once the pandemic subsides.

Take sales, for example. For years, sales departments across industries have heavily relied on in-person meetings. From internal sales kick-off events to on-site product demos, sales activities have largely been conducted face-to-face. Now, however, sales has moved online. Sales war rooms are virtual. Product demos take place virtually. And stakeholders see first-hand just how much can be accom-

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plished—and just how much money can be saved—by shifting sales activity online. Many organizations can't imagine reverting back to pre-pandemic approaches.

Choosing the Right Event Platform

Not only have comfort levels with virtual events increased in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak, but so too have the number of virtual event solution providers in the marketplace. Unfortunately, this can make it difficult for event planners and marketers to know how to choose between opposing platforms. The experts at 6Connex and PGI have some advice:

1. The right virtual event platform will support both virtual and hybrid events. Even as quarantine restrictions ease, how they ease will differ from one region to the next. Also, different people will have different feelings about attending events in-person. There may be a prolonged hesitancy to re-join large gatherings of people. And at the risk of sounding pessimistic, remember that



event disruptions can come in any form and at any time. Today, we're experiencing a pandemic. Twelve months from now it could be a weather event. Three years from now it could be an economic event. Event planners and marketers need to have a long-term event strategy that accommodates different scenarios and investing in a platform that hosts both virtual and hybrid events will be critical.

2. Choose a virtual event platform provider that isn't just providing technology, but also providing consulting on how to plan events. It's important to know what the possibilities are with a virtual or hybrid event, and the right provider will have real ideas on how to optimize the technology's features and functionality to meet an organization's goals.
3. Platform flexibility and scalability will generate a bigger ROI over the long-term. The right virtual event platform will allow event planners and marketers to hold more events, more frequently, and to respond quickly when necessary.

The experts also suggest talking to your original event provider. Many event providers have reacted quickly to the COVID-19 outbreak and are "up-skilled" on virtual event tools and technologies. They can make some recommendations, if they don't already have a platform in place for their clients to leverage. And event providers are still well-versed in those event fundamentals: audience generation and engaging content creation, so they're a great resource for event planners and marketers looking to answer that question, "What can I get out of a virtual event that I can't get out of a physical one?"

In fact, many event providers have long been looking for ways to allocate a bigger percentage of event budgets towards content, but the reality of increasing costs for fixed costs like space and travel have put this goal just outside of reach. Now, virtual events have made it possible for event providers to partner with a platform provider on the technology and increase their own emphasis on content. And it's a good marriage.

Prepare Today for a New Normal Tomorrow

As we emerge from the pandemic, it's likely we'll emerge into a new normal. There's no better time to rethink your long-term event strategy, and smart organizations will build an "evergreen" virtual event or conference center to continuously engage audiences and deliver compelling content.

Contact 6Connex today to request a demo and see how 6Connex's virtual events platform can help you connect with your community and transform big ideas into real-world results, no matter what form the real world takes in the months and years to come.

About 6Connex

6Connex is the leading provider of virtual event solutions. Our secure, cloud-based platform expands audience reach and drives in-depth content engagement for marketing, sales, recruitment, training, and HR communities.

Our product portfolio includes virtual environments, learning management, and webinars.

**For more information
visit www.6connex.com,
or call 1-800-395-4702.**