

IDEAS LABS

ENGAGING, INFORMATIVE PEER TO PEER LEARNING

Evolving the Meetings & Events Experience

Industry Topic Specialist

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Specialist Highlights

Key things Encana did that were important to their success over the last year:

- Designated a team member as the COVID Specialist. This person became the subject matter expert on new and changing COVID guidelines, developed safety plans and could advise clients who wanted to plan a meeting/event.
- Conducted an inventory of all assets (physical and staff) related to their virtual capabilities and identified what they needed to obtain or upgrade to deliver virtual meetings/events.
- Changed perspective from “if we cannot do it this way, we cannot do it” to “What if?”
- Brainstormed and shared lessons learned with colleagues in other countries. Learned from others about what did and did not work at different stages of lockdown allowed them to better plan. Continual changes in regulations taught them to be nimble and make changes quickly.
- Communicated to the community and clients they were open for business, to counter the assumption they were closed.
- Invested in things they are likely to continue to do post-COVID.

Discussion Ideas & Tips

A range of ideas from industry pertaining to how businesses can address the impacts of COVID-19 and evolve the meetings and events experience were generated through two Ideas Labs held in January with 20 tourism operators/professionals.

Key Takeaway

Meeting and Event (M&E) planners and venues have pivoted to provide conferences and events online, and are leveraging their infrastructure, service capabilities and human resources in new, innovative ways. While the future of the industry is unknown, COVID-19 has required businesses to think in new ways and is forcing the evolution of business models, revenue generation opportunities, technology investments, partnerships and more.

There have been positive aspects to the changes brought on by COVID-19, including increased numbers of people able to attend virtual events and no travel costs associated with attending them. However, views are mixed regarding how such events will be offered in the future. Some believe the industry will continue to incorporate an online option and that business events especially will take on a hybrid format with in person and online attendance, especially if the technology used continues to improve and become less expensive. In such cases, strong content is key as networking is no longer a strong draw in the online environment. In contrast, others believe the desire to personally connect will result in many events returning to an in-person format, though likely not before 2022.

Successfully delivering an online event requires strong technical capabilities and high production quality, in order to create value. While some are addressing these needs through increased technology investments and re-education/training, others are aligning themselves with new partners with these capabilities. In both situations the goal is to build capacity to deliver events in the digital and live environments.

Many larger performance venues have noticed that hybrid and online meetings/conferences have extended their reach and are drawing people from around the world rather than down the block. Smaller arts and culture organizations with smaller budgets seem to be finding this more difficult. Overall, there is a need to find ways to monetize the online component of a meeting/conference/performance as a means to generating new revenues.

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New Approaches

M&E venues are exploring a variety of new revenue sources:

- Shifting to virtual meetings with a view to offering blended meetings (a combination of online and in-person) in the future once permitted.
- Pivoting to deliver virtual meetings has required investments in new equipment, upgraded Internet capacity and human resources training & skills development.
- Repurposing assets in new ways – e.g. instead of using the Zamboni to clean the ice for hockey/skating events, a new experience was created for guests to learn to drive a Zamboni.
- Retooling catering, food & beverage services to support the local community – e.g. creating new ‘to go’ meal options, themed meals and featuring the businesses chef (especially if known in the market).
- Finding new ways to use promotional spaces – e.g., using a digital marquee as a personal message board for Valentines messages rather than as a tool that promotes (non-existent) events.
- Finding new, non-traditional partners for the development and delivery of online events – e.g., working with providers of virtual events (such as [Mills Entertainment](#)) to present new product and keep the website and ticketing platforms busy.
- Providing sales platforms (web or app based) to allow small businesses that traditionally sold product at community fairs/markets to more easily sell online
- Attracting locals to the Visitor Centre (VC) by offering space to local artisans for pop-up shops created a win for the artisan, the local community and the VC.

M&E professionals are applying their event planning experience to reimagine virtual products to replace traditional experiences now and post COVID. Examples cited by session participants:

- Moving community business awards ceremonies online required organizers to re-create the excitement of a live event – e.g., inviting people to dress up as if they were attending the live gala event, video taping the finalists in advance to introduce them (and as if they had won) and engaging with attendees using chat functionality.

- Taking the traditional Visit with Santa experience virtual. Instead of sitting on Santa’s lap (in person), offering a virtual Zoom call with Santa in the North Pole. The experience included a picture taken on the call & a copy of the video clip that was sent along with a personalized letter from Santa to the child after. This new experience will continue and is seen as a way to access new markets and extend reach beyond the local community.
- Communities that have traditionally brought in international artists (e.g., Fort St. John’s [High on Ice winter festival](#)) are now working with local/ Canadian artists and restructuring to present a live, socially distanced event.
- Incorporating special / exclusive experiences to gain additional revenues – e.g. access to intimate talks with presentations by the artists, providing free online content with a donate button.
- Developing ‘Parties in a Box’ for organizations to use that provide all the key elements of a great Christmas party, delivered virtually or at the client’s venue, rather than at the M&E venue. It opens up a market for smaller parties that would not necessarily book a large venue.

Sponsorships are a key revenue source for many large events and venues. Approaches to working with sponsors at this time and providing them with value included:

- Providing ongoing, honest and transparent communications in order to maintain/grow trust and the relationship.
- Turning the tables – e.g., instead of asking sponsors for something, event planners offered to support their sponsors by helping them to maintain and build industry connections.
- Offering multi-year contracts where 2020/21 is treated as a ‘bonus’ year – e.g., if events are cancelled, provide sponsors with exposure through any online communications with registrants.
- Identifying and using the many digital opportunities such as: exposure in general marketing and push notifications, in app videos, speaker introductions.

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New Directions

- Some DMOs are taking this opportunity to revisit their meetings and events strategy to determine if they should focus on attracting events to their region, hosting events, and/or supporting the events provided by others in the community.
- Chambers of Commerce are looking at new ways to support local tourism businesses in particular – e.g., developing virtual tours that will entice potential visitors to visit once the area opens up.
- Crowd funding for community events that fund community organizations serving local residents (e.g., Parksville Beach Festival). Crowd funding could also be leveraged with a local sponsor to provide matching funds.
- An investment in technology is required by many during this transition period to address immediate needs. Once the investment is made, new opportunities to leverage and generate revenue through virtual and hybrid opportunities should be further explored – e.g., for venues in smaller markets, there may be an opportunity to commercialize offering businesses access to more professional AV equipment for special occasions when their internal equipment is not sufficient.

Investing in New Tools

- When making investments in technology for virtual meetings/events the following are key components to consider having: a 4k camera, bird dog camera components, green screen and good audio and lighting.
- Platforms that came up as worth looking into for those interested in virtual event programs included: (note prices vary wildly)
 - Cvent <https://www.cvent.com/>
 - Whova <https://whova.com/>
 - Pheedloop (Canadian) <https://pheedloop.com/>
 - Aventri <https://www.aventri.com/>
 - Remo. <https://remo.co/>
 - Virtual Venues <https://virtualvenues.com/>
- Grants are sometimes available from community organizations to upgrade technology.

Additional Helpful Links

[BC Government Order of the Provincial Health Minister on Gatherings and Events \(pdf\)](#)

[BC Government Assistance for Artists](#) (article with link to funding program)

[Ascend Fundraising Solutions](#) – a offers a platform for 50/50 tickets and sweepstakes programs

Virtual Tour apps such as [On This Spot](#)

Professional Resources from PCMA: <https://www.pcma.org/engage/learning-products/>

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