

What every association should know about delivering virtual events

Tips and insights for online event success.



Introduction

Studies from Community Brands show that in-person annual conferences top the list of ways members have engaged with their organization. But findings also suggest that members prefer to learn through multiple modes versus relying on a one-time per year event as the only source of training and continuing education.

That's one reason why virtual events are gaining in popularity. They offer a convenient option that many members seek. They also allow organizations to expand their reach to members who do not attend in-person events. And, they can be a great source of additional revenue for associations.

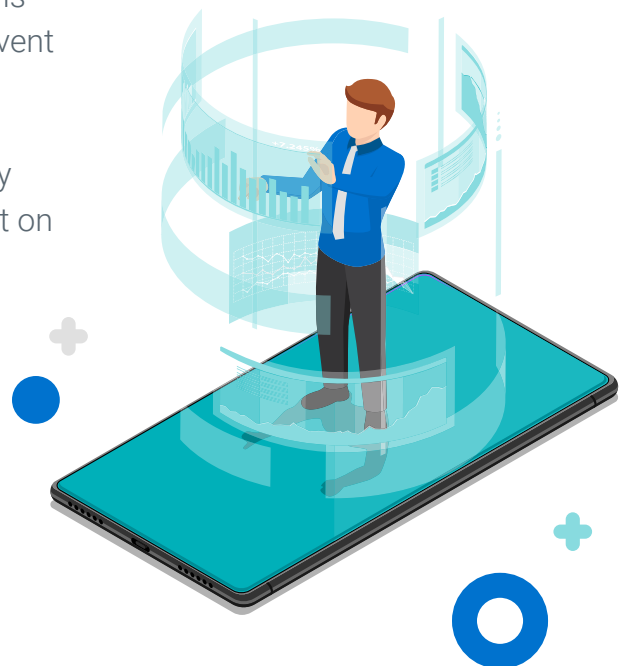
Studies from Community Brands show that newer learning formats – such as short videos and webcasts, on-demand learning courses, and mobile learning opportunities are growing in popularity among members.

So, what are virtual events all about? How are organizations using them today, and what can you do to ensure online event success?

The Virtual Events Report¹, based on a study conducted by Tagoras and sponsored by Community Brands, sheds light on these topics.

Here are some of the key findings from the report as well as tips and strategies to ensure the success of your virtual events.

This paper is based on content developed by Jeff Cobb and Celisa Steele of Tagoras, a valued Community Brands partner.



What is a virtual event?

The Virtual Events Report defines virtual events as web-based events that replicate aspects of traditional in-person conferences, membership meetings, or trade shows. They may be stand-alone or held in conjunction with an in-person conference. They include multiple sessions (versus only a single webinar or webcast). And they may be held live or on-demand.

Today's virtual events use three core components to create and deliver the event:

ONE

Webinar and/or webcast tools to deliver audio and video content

TWO

Communication tools to create an interactive experience

THREE

Document and resource sharing to provide additional information

Adoption of virtual events

Findings from The Virtual Events Report show that use of virtual events is on the rise with associations. Of the 200-plus respondents to the survey, which includes those who work at professional trade associations and nonprofit organizations, nearly 44 percent say they have previously offered a virtual event. Almost 25 percent say they have not, but plan to in the next 12 months. Comparing the study data with previous similar studies shows nearly 42 percent of associations use virtual events compared with 19 percent in 2010 and nearly 32 percent in 2014.

The top reason organizations decide to offer a virtual event is to expand their reach. Nearly 82 percent of the study's respondents offer a virtual event to reach members or customers who would not otherwise attend an in-person event.

Some members are unable to attend in-person events due to schedule, budget, learning preferences, and other factors. Offering virtual events allows you to reach those members and bring in revenue you otherwise wouldn't capture. Virtual events have the added benefit of making members feel more included, demonstrating to them that they are a valued member of your organization, whether or not they attend on-site events.

Tips for virtual events success

As you add virtual events to your offerings for continuing education, consider these tips.



1 Think “strategy”

Of survey respondents from The Virtual Events Report, nearly 49 percent say they have no formal, documented strategy for their online events. Another 13 percent aren't sure if they have one. This is a huge opportunity for improvement.

There are many decisions that go into a virtual event: how long it is, how it will be priced, what sponsorships will be offered. Developing a strategy helps guide these decisions and makes your virtual event more likely to meet your goals.

Here are some steps for creating a strategy:

- **Develop a clear goal for your virtual event.** For example, your goal might be to reach the members who never attend your annual event. Or, it might be to drive revenue from new sources. Or, maybe to diversify the learning options you offer your members. While you may have multiple goals for your virtual events, narrow your list to one primary goal to guide your decisions.
- **Determine what elements to take online from the in-person experience.** What makes your existing event unique, and how can it be translated virtually? What requirements must be met?
- **Describe the “feel” of the online experience.** Focus on the experience you want to offer. Come up with a list of words to describe it: interactive, user-friendly, intuitive, flexible, and so on.
- **Build a wish list.** For each word you used to describe your online experience, list the ways in which you can bring that “feel” to life for your members. For example, how could you make the online learning experience interactive? Perhaps you can offer ways for online attendees of livestream events to ask questions and provide comments.
- **Get feedback.** Your members are the audience for your learning courses, so be sure to ask for their input. Why do they like coming to your in-person events? For those who haven't attended an in-person event, why haven't they, and what elements of an online experience would give them the experience they seek?

2 Drive revenue

The Virtual Events Report shows that more than 88 percent of respondents aim for their virtual events to at least pay for themselves or be profitable. As one means to achieve this goal, most respondents (more than 69 percent) charge registrants a fee for the virtual event.

But despite the goal to make virtual events at least self-sustaining, nearly 60 percent of respondents charge less for their virtual events than for their in-person events. And nearly 73 percent of respondents do not generate revenue from sponsor or exhibitor fees.

To meet your financial goals for virtual events, consider pricing your registration fee closer to that of your in-person events. Think about the cost per person for attending the on-site event and what costs you're saving (food, venue, etc.) by a person attending via livestream or on-demand.

You may want to offer online content at a reduced price based on your hard costs compared with your on-site event, but be sure not to undervalue it. The content is useful, whether it's provided in-person or online, and you've made an investment in a learning management system (LMS) and staff time to provide a great online experience. Be sure to reflect these considerations in your online pricing.

[For more tips, read the ebook, *Setting the Pricing Strategy for Your Association's Educational Products*.](#)

Also, incorporate sponsors and exhibitors into the online experience – via online session sponsorships, sponsor logos, and a virtual exhibit hall – to generate additional revenue.

Some ideas:

- Offer online session sponsorships and add sponsor logos and links to session screens.
- Provide a virtual exhibit hall through a tab in your online environment where online learners can view a list of exhibitors and click to visit websites and learn more.
- Stream sponsor interviews (and allow attendees to send in questions via chat) or offer recorded vendor demos during breaks between sessions.

3 Don't let technology be a barrier

The survey for The Virtual Events Report asked organizations that have not offered a virtual event about their biggest concerns. Technology tops the list. More than 76 percent said they're concerned about the complexity of the technology.



Investing in new technology can seem complicated and intimidating, but it doesn't have to be. Here are five key things to look for in a learning management system to support your virtual events:

- **Flexibility** – Look for a system that allows you to grow your online learning program over time to meet your members' needs. For example, you may want to offer only on-demand learning now, but as your program evolves, you may want to offer livestreaming of in-person events. Some capabilities to think about:
 - Live and on-demand delivery
 - Personalized learning paths
 - Assessment and testing
 - Continuing education tracking and certifications
 - Social learning community
 - Mobile-friendly interfaces
 - Ecommerce
 - Configurable reporting
- **Interactivity** – One of the key elements that makes your on-site events appealing is interactivity: talking with other attendees, asking questions, making comments. Interactivity can be brought to virtual experiences as well. Look for a system that supports networking and interaction opportunities in your online learning experience.
- **Ease of use** – Be sure the system you select streamlines and simplifies manual tasks to free your learning staff's time so they can focus more on delivering the right content to your members at the time they need it. At the same time, it's important to allow your members to easily find the content they need all along their career journey. Be sure your LMS allows your staff to easily tag and categorize content so your members can quickly find the specific content they're seeking.
- **Integration capabilities** – To create an easy, seamless, and complete experience for your learners and your team, your LMS should integrate with the system in which you manage your membership data, your association management system (AMS). Be sure to check that the LMS you are considering will integrate with your AMS. Ask the LMS vendor how the integration works, how much it costs, and how much time the integration will require from your team.
- **Support** – For livestream events, be sure your LMS vendor can offer phone and online tech support for your attendees while your staff is busy dealing with your on-site event needs.

Are you ready to deliver great virtual events?



This guide includes just some of the things to consider when delivering an online learning experience. Whether you're looking to livestream or re-broadcast a live event, or wanting to provide on-demand learning, a well-developed virtual events program can expand the reach of your learning program to more members, provide more value for your members, and generate more revenue for your organization.

Learn more about how to [Deliver the In-Person Experience Online](#).

Community Brands offers learning management systems that are part of their integrated software suite for associations:

crowdwisdom®

Flexible, industry-leading learning management platform designed specifically for growing and mature learning programs.

freestone®

The industry's leading tool for live-event capture, webinars, webcasts, and on-demand streaming.

About Tagoras

At Tagoras, we advise the learning businesses, service providers, and investment firms that serve the global market for adult lifelong learning, continuing education, and professional development. Through market assessment, market amplification, and advisory services, we help clients maximize their reach, revenue, and impact.

Created in 2007 by veteran edupreneurs Jeff Cobb and Celisa Steele, Tagoras leverages a unique blend of experience and expertise in marketing, technology, and education to help clients create, revitalize, and grow products and services. Learn more at <https://www.tagoras.com>.



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