3 Ways to Curb Chaos and Pull Off Last-Minute Virtual Events

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The past few months of life during the coronavirus pandemic have been a whirlwind of last-minute activity and decisions. Countless employees were suddenly thrust into remote work, changing their calendars on a dime, and many companies had to move in-person gatherings and conferences to virtual meetings.

For instance, the United Nations — known for its formal meetings and conferences — began teleconferencing with mixed results, according to Devex reporting from late April 2020. Not accustomed to working virtually, U.N. employees had to pivot to recover after initial hiccups with online meetings.

A June 2020 *Harvard Business Review* piece outlines a similar situation for Adobe. The brand had to cancel its annual Nevada convention abruptly in light of the pandemic. Rather than lose the chance to bring everyone together in one physical location, though, Adobe moved its conference online — and more than quintupled the guest list.

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Making online miracles out of

potential mayhem

Your company might not be as well-known as the U.N. or Adobe, but you've likely experienced the need for unplanned, urgent virtual meetings to deal with time-sensitive information during COVID-19. That won't stop anytime soon.

You'll continue to be bombarded by all kinds of unexpected information. Budgets will be lost and, in some cases, found. Markets will shift. The government could release regulations affecting your operations. These shifting sands mean you can expect to arrange and execute plenty of last-minute meetings. That can be a tall order, but it's not too tall if you're prepared.

Salesforce, as an example, had to switch its March 2020 World Tour Sydney event from an in-person gathering to an online experience with two weeks' notice. Their leaders stepped up to the challenge and moved everything to a livestream format. The result? The company surpassed the expectations with a record 80,000 participants.

Handling last-minute meetings with confidence

To be sure, Salesforce's event planning was mostly done. The company could leverage talk tracks, sessions and content, making the move to a virtual stage slightly less arduous. Organizers didn't need to start from scratch – they just needed to reframe a live experience to fit a digital format.

You might not be as lucky or well-equipped with resources the next time you face an urgent situation that requires immediate communication and collaboration through virtual channels. And that's OK. You can still successfully host meetings and events online by practicing the three techniques below.

1. Map out a fluff-free agenda and guidelines.

You just realized you need to set up an online gathering. Don’t panic. Instead, channel your nervous energy into creating and disseminating an airtight agenda. Having a set schedule ensures all topics remain relevant to attendees. Plus, you can distribute the agenda ahead of time to encourage ordinarily quiet people to participate more fully by giving them time to think.

While working on the agenda, consider the overall length of your meeting to ensure it doesn’t spin out of control or devolve into endless segments. Thirty minutes is a good baseline. Remember: virtual-meet fatigue is real — real enough to warrant coverage by the BBC. Keep sessions tight, allowing only priority items to make the final cut. It’s easier to schedule a follow-up meeting than force people to stare at their screens for hours.

As a final note, craft meeting guidelines surrounding expected protocol, such as when participants should unmute themselves or whether everyone is required to appear on video. Mention whether you’re archiving and recording the communication to share with anyone who is unable to attend. If you’re worried about this, you can hire a digital producer to facilitate the production aspects and leave you to focus on the content.

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2. Divvy up assignments and take a practice run.

Have you ever sat in a meeting without clear leadership or purpose? It’s frustrating and often disastrous. Even if you’re pressed for time, determine who needs to be present and who needs to speak. Figure out who will handle the technical aspects and who will be front and center. Even if you’re planning a seemingly straightforward meeting, outline everyone’s role to prevent missing anything important.

After fleshing out an event management document that includes specific assignments, share it. The more prepared everyone is, the better the event will flow. Oh, and make sure to practice everything from screen-sharing to using touchscreen interactive software. Videos don't always look flawless when played over teleconferencing platforms. Slide decks can freeze and screens can become pixelated. Technology is designed to make your meetings productive and compelling, but it's always prudent to give everything a trial run before going live.

3. Answer questions candidly and with empathy.

If you've asked attendees for questions in advance, distribute them to every presenter to make Q&A sessions efficient. If you haven't requested audience questions, try to anticipate the questions participants might ask. Once you have a good idea of what people might want to know, you can consider your responses and write down bullet points. When you're leading the meeting, answer into the camera with conviction and honesty.

When Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg faced 25,000 unhappy workers via a video call in June 2020, he could have prepared and delivered a clear answer in response to concerns about the controversy swirling around the president's "shoot and loot" posts. He didn't, according to Vox's coverage. Instead, he talked about trust with employees, using language that made him seem less like their boss and more like an equally concerned colleague. His words weren't eloquent, but they spoke volumes because they were authentic. Even though your job is to plan for your last-minute meetings, don't plan so much that you sound robotic.

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It's tough to pull together an award-winning show without much notice, but it certainly can be done. The next time you're

faced with whipping up an online meeting, take a deep breath and apply the aforementioned best practices. Over time, you'll get a reputation for hosting every impromptu event just as well as you would have in-person.

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