6 Things to Think About When Creating a Virtual Conference

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Key insights:

Adobe was slated to host around 23,000 people at the Adobe Summit, its annual flagship conference in Las Vegas, from March 29-April 2. But the outbreak of COVID-19 forced the software company, along with countless other brands, to cancel or postpone their in-person gatherings and rethink how they could safely deliver an alternative event.

Alex Amado, vp of experience marketing for Adobe, said the brand started to reconsider hosting its Las Vegas conference a few months ago, when COVID-19 began spreading across the globe. His team's plan B was to scale the event down to a broadcast from the brand's San Jose headquarters, which would involve shorter keynotes delivered to a 200-person audience.

But when that became no longer possible due to safety issues and government stay-at-home orders, the brand realized a digital-only event was the only option to deliver consumers content initially planned for the physical conference. The company launched a free digital version of the experience on a custom landing page on March 31.

"We segued to plan C, and we had to rethink our format," Amado said. "It involved what is now commonplace—people communicating from home."

It's hard to predict when it will be safe to hold physical events again—and what the comeback will look like—so going

digital is the only option companies have if they're looking to host conferences in the near future. Some brands, including Microsoft and Facebook, have already taken long-term precautions by canceling all large company events through the middle of 2021.

So what do brand marketers and event producers need to consider when creating a virtual event? Amado, along with other pros who produced digital conferences under tight timelines in March, discussed what to keep in mind when packaging and delivering content, deciding whether to have speakers go live or pre-record and interacting with isolated attendees in real time.

Consider your audience's location when rethinking content delivery

The goal of the Adobe Summit is to offer best practices around customer experience management through keynotes from company executives, presentations from product experts and technology demos. Adobe delivered the virtual event through a "choose your own adventure"-style landing page on the brand's website, letting attendees choose to watch sessions covering six content areas.

When Adobe launched the digital experience with more than 100 sessions, attendees could decide to go straight to the keynotes or skip to see tech in action with videos of product demos. The brand is still adding sessions to the summit, with visits from more than 400,000 people from 199 countries.

"We decided the best way to do the storytelling was to allow a lot of user choice and not keep them captive," Amado said. "We felt 'choose your own adventure' was the best way for the audience to get more value out of it. When you're online there are distractions, so we had to play to the situation as best we could."

Vince Belizario, svp and group account director of brand

experience agency Jack Morton Worldwide, was involved helping a major tech company turn an internal global marketing conference—which normally draws around 6,000 attendees—digital within three weeks of canceling the event. The pivot resulted in a virtual experience that rolled out content to attendees over two days in separate programming blocks. After the rollout, the event was available as an on-demand package for employees to watch.

"It was a matter of rethinking the content and what we were trying to pull off with the physical event and figure out how that would be delivered as a virtual one. The entire creative intent and production value needed to be up-leveled," Belizario said. "We knew our audience wouldn't be in the same mindframe, let alone in the same time zones. The content needed to be delivered in a way that was complementary to the current situation."

The shorter the content, the better—depending on the event scale

The Adobe Summit would have initially offered more than 400 sessions, but cut down the number of sessions based on who could still participate—Amado noted certain presenters had to drop out to focus their business impacted by the pandemic—and which sessions initially had the most registrants. The company had each speaker scale their presentations back to be eight minutes long. Amado said so far, a majority of attendees have watched around five to 10 of the eight-minute videos so far.

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