A Definitive Guide to Hosting Online Events



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The world has been experiencing drastic changes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. With over 116 million cases reported by the World Health Organization as of March 2021, nationwide lockdowns and social distancing rules are in full effect in several nations. This has correspondingly forced businesses to find new ways of operating remotely to avoid being shut down.

One of the sectors most affected by the pandemic has been the events industry. Most events, from local pop-ups and conferences, to large-scale international events like the Olympics and the World Cup have been either canceled or postponed, with no clear picture as to when they will be able

to resume.

While the in-person events industry has taken a hit, the pandemic has brought about new opportunities for organizations to adapt and host online events to keep business going.

In fact, over the past year, online events have been increasing in popularity. A study by Grand View Research, for example, estimates that the global virtual event industry will grow almost tenfold from $78 billion to $774 billion by 2030.

So how can businesses get better at hosting engaging and successful online events? Here is a handy guide that explains it all!

What are online events and their benefits?

An online event is simply an event that takes place virtually at a specific date and time. Attendees meet through a digitally enabled platform rather than physically meeting up in person at a particular venue.

Apart from the health and safety aspect of hosting online events, some key advantages of these types of virtual events are:

1. They are **more cost-effective for attendees as well as the host**.
2. They provide the opportunity to **reach a wider list of attendees (as well as speakers)** since they are not confined to a physical location.
3. They allow hosts to **effectively track participation,** lead generation and engagement, among other metrics.
4. They are relatively **easier in terms of logistics** and planning.
5. They can be **promoted across a wide variety of digital channels**.

Related: **How to Strategically Take Your Event Online**

What are the types of online events?

In today's digital age, practically most types of events can be held online! From meetings to webinars, concerts and even large-scale events like conferences and trade shows – the pandemic has proven that technology can be used to host any type of event.

Some common types of online events are:

- Conferences and trade shows
- Webinars
- Educational workshops
- Community Meetups
- Question and Answer Events
- Concerts
- Seminars

Related: **What Makes Events Like Apple's So Effective?**

What are the steps to planning a successful online event?

Planning an event can be divided into three main phases: the pre-event phase, during the event, and the post-event phase.

It is important to have a detailed plan that includes all the necessary steps to ensuring a smooth and successful event. To give you an idea of how this may look, the table below summarizes some of the most important steps required to plan out a good event.

Pre-Event

- Define Goals
- Plan Budget
- Decide on a platform to host an event
- Decide event format, theme and concept
- Start talking to potential speakers
- Define the event audience
- Promote event
- Find sponsors

During Event

- Make sure people have the necessary access
- Collect audience contact details
- Encourage engagement through interactive tools
- Ensure to have a good backup plan in case of technological issues

Post Event

- Collect feedback from attendees
- Send out recorded event links
- Have a follow-up plan for regular communication with audience attendees

Which platform is the best for online events?

Planning an online event is similar to an offline event. However, finding the right platform to host the event is not easy. There are multiple considerations to finding the right hosting platform, which can be decided by answering a few questions like:

- How many sessions does your event entail?
- Are the sessions going to be held live, on-demand, or a mix of both?

- What are the objectives of the event while it is live and after it has ended?
- What customer experience does the event want to bring?
- What is the event budget?

The cost of each platform can differ widely depending on factors such as event scale, number of attendees, and the ultimate event objective. Some solutions can cost as low as $500 for the entire event to $40,000 for more expensive solutions.

Related: 10 Tips for Hosting a Wildly Successful Event on a Tame Budget

What are the different platforms online events can be held on?

When it comes to hosting online events, each platform has its pros and cons, with some more suited for certain types of events than others. Some of the best platforms for hosting online events are:

GoToWebinar

GoToWebinar is a popular platform to host larger-scale webinars of more than 500 attendees. Its variety of engagement features make it one of the best online event hosting platforms for large-scale events.

Advantages

- Customizable webinar templates
- Cost-effective for larger webinars
- Analytic tools and downloadable reports
- Variety of engagement tools

Drawbacks

- Not very user-friendly

- Reports cannot be customized
- Poor email marketing capabilities
- Difficult to promote an event on the platform

HeySummit

HeySummit is a lesser-known but good platform that is ideal for hosting smaller trade show events and networking events. It is a more basic platform with fewer technological features, but it gets the job done for basic events that need to be planned over a shorter period.

Advantages

- Customizable landing page templates
- Live and pre-recorded sessions
- Easy self-service dashboards
- Detailed event analytics

Drawbacks

- Requires integration with platforms such as Zoom or BigMarker
- No email marketing capabilities
- Difficult to use for large-scale events
- Not value for money in terms of features available

Zoom

Zoom has gained immense popularity as the number one choice for video conferencing, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although it is better for smaller team meetings and gatherings, it can also be used for larger events if the event needs to be planned in a hurry.

Advantages

- Easy to use and features are easy to understand
- Live screen sharing features for webinars

- Extremely secure and data is not shared
- Users can avail of a limited free plan

Drawbacks

- The premium plans are more expensive
- Unpredictable video and audio quality
- Difficult to use for large-scale events
- Features for premium and free plans are similar

BigMarker

BigMarker is considered one of the best platforms to use for web summits, online conferences, and webinars. It is easy to use and has many features such as interactive landing pages, video streaming, social media integration, and email marketing.

Advantages

- Access to standard engagement features like screen sharing, polls and surveys.
- Attendees can interact without the host’s moderation
- Social media streaming features
- Customizable templates for event promotion
- Email marketing features

Drawbacks

- A browser-based software that cannot be downloaded
- Poor audio and video quality
- Depends on a good internet connection
- Multiple complicated features that beginners cannot understand
- It is more expensive than other platforms

Microsoft Teams

Microsoft Teams is more of a project management software that also has video conferencing capabilities. It allows for

smaller teams to meet and collaborate and update each other on how their tasks are progressing.

Advantages

- The user interface is easy to understand for beginners
- Good video and audio quality
- Users do not need to download the application and can access it from their browsers
- Increased productivity and no limit on users in the meeting

Drawbacks

- The file structures for sharing can be confusing
- It is not good for larger events, and it is more for project management
- Little to no flexibility when it comes to forming the team
- No automated email marketing features

Google Meet

Another good video conferencing software is Google Meet. The best part is that anyone with a Google account can use this feature and connect with others through the platform. It is easy to use and best used for informal events such as community meetups.

Advantages

- The user experience is smooth and has minimal glitches
- Easy sign-up process, and it is free to use
- It does not require time to set up and email invites can be sent by email
- Video conferencing is more interactive through the chat feature

Drawbacks

- User experience depends on a good internet connection
- It is browser-based so users cannot download the application
- Poor video quality at times
- The unreliable desktop plugin feature that does not work

How to promote an online event?

Promoting events online is the best way to create awareness and get more attendees. There are several channels for promoting online events, from social media to websites to email marketing and more. Promotion creates a buzz among your target audience, making them more likely to attend the event. Some common ways of promoting an online event are:

Event Websites

Whether you choose to create a full website or a simple landing page – having an event website is crucial, as it serves as a hub of information for your attendees. Some things to keep in mind while building an event website are:

- The site should be easy to understand and easier to navigate
- There should be multiple touchpoints for users to find important information about the event
- The site should use company branding and logos prominently, including those of your sponsors
- The homepage should have a clear call to action button so that users can sign up for the event easily
- The site should be optimized for mobile use since the majority of internet users use mobile devices to access websites

Email Marketing

It is just as important to reach customers who already engage with your brand as getting new attendees for your event. An

effective method for this is email marketing. Software applications like HubSpot and Mailchimp can create quick email templates and help you send them out to the right people. Some tips for creating good emailers are:

- The date and time of the event should be clear and easy to find
- Link a prominent call to action to the email
- A text-only email version should be created to ensure that users with different mailbox settings can view the event information properly
- Including an interactive countdown image can create a sense of urgency and excitement around your event
- Instead of sending the same email multiple times, have a series of communications that build up to the event, covering various aspects that might prompt different users to sign up

Podcasts

A few years ago, podcasting was an alien concept to many. However, today, it is estimated that by 2022 there will be more than 132 million podcast users. Here's how you can use podcasts as a tool to promote your event:

- Recruit industry experts as guests on your podcast to talk about the event and related subject matter
- Promote your podcast on social media so that users get notified about new episodes
- Include content like special event-related giveaways and contests that will encourage attendance and participation
- Ensure that the podcast is available to listen to before, during, and after the event

Social Media Marketing

Social media marketing is one of the strongest tools that can help with increasing event attendance. With so many platform

options, event planners can use Facebook pages, Instagram accounts, and hashtags on Twitter and much more to maximize the benefits of their marketing efforts. Some pointers for using social media in event marketing are:

- Create a dedicated event page on which you can keep your audience engaged
- You can promote the page via targeted ads for the event – consider audience interests and demographics rather than location as targeting criteria since online events can be attended from anywhere.
- Use live streaming features and regular updates on the event pages to ensure a steady stream of content
- Generate a mixture of static and video content on your pages, but try to maintain consistency in your branding and layout
- Always include a call to action!
- Create opportunities for the creation of user-generated content, which helps to keep audiences engaged. Reshare and promote this content as well.
- Choose your promotion platform carefully. For example, a business networking event is better promoted through LinkedIn as opposed to Twitter which is better for events like concerts and meetups.
- Create a unique hashtag for the event and ask users to use it in their posts so that event-related content is easy to find.
- Share content like behind the scenes content through videos and snippets on your social media platforms

Press Releases

A press release is an official announcement or recording sent out to the news media. Press releases have been popular methods of promotion for decades and can be promoted through online marketing and social media channels so that event organizers can effectively get a larger audience for their events. The components of a good press release are:

- A well-written headline that catches the user's attention
- Dates and other relevant information that makes it easy to promote the event
- A statement from either your speakers or a key organizer
- A boilerplate statement that talks about your company, what you do, key executives, etc.
- Contact information for anyone who can be contacted for further information regarding the event

Paid Advertising

Paid marketing is often used as a blanket term for social media marketing. Although they are related, paid advertising is not limited to only Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other social media channels. It also includes Google and other search engines on which event organizers can create campaigns and ads to promote their event. To succeed at paid advertising, event organizers should ensure that:

- The correct audience is being targeted. A good way to do this is to create audience personas and lookalike audiences from the data you have from previous event attendees.
- A time schedule is created for the ads to run so that different types of ads can run at different times. This also helps to avoid cannibalization of your ad budget.
- For search ads, make use of extensions and site links to promote more event-related information
- Use interactive elements such as countdown timers or number of tickets sold in your creative to create a sense of urgency
- Use registrations or conversions as an ad objective, to maximize signup/attendance
- Remember to set an end date for your ad campaigns after the event has ended.

What are the best ways to engage an audience during an event?

One of the biggest challenges in hosting an online event is keeping users engaged. Online events create more opportunities for distraction, and it can be easy to lose attendees' attention. However, this can be reduced by creating opportunities for them to engage and interact with your speakers. Some good ways to keep the user's attention during an online event are:

a. Live Polling

Many platforms allow speakers to engage the audience through live polling and short surveys throughout the session. Live polls also give event planners data on how well users are engaging during the event.

b. Live Question and Answer Sessions

A live question and answer session can help build a rapport between the speakers and attendees and also create opportunities for users to have their questions answered.

c. Networking Opportunities

Instead of connecting people individually after the event, it is possible to use a networking application to connect attendees with similar interests during and after the event. By segmenting attendees based on common interests, it is possible to create online private rooms so that they can make valuable connections during the online event. Icebreakers can help to ease the initial awkwardness of breakout groups!

d. On-Demand Content

Users who are forced to sit through long sessions without a break are more likely to get distracted. However, by accessing the content at their own pace, they are more likely to

continue attending. If there is a specific event agenda, then it should also account for a short break time for users to take a breather.

e. **Gamification**

Not all events need to be serious all the time. In fact, by creating an element of fun, attendees will be much better engaged. It is possible to create mini-games on the mobile event application so that users can interact with your brand and gain incentives to attend the event by completing simple challenges and winning prizes.

f. Mindfulness exercises

A good interlude that can be included in any online event is wellness and exercise. Sitting in one place for extended periods can have bad repercussions for the body, which is why many more event planners include a short workout class during the sessions of the event.

The future of online events

If there is one thing we can learn from 2020, it is that online events are here to stay and will only increase in popularity.

Hosting an event online has multiple advantages such as lower costs, higher attendance, and event analytics. On the other hand, they may not create the same level of personalization as in-person events, but many software can assist with networking and engagement.

With more people warming up to the idea of attending remote events, it is predicted that the many changes brought about by COVID-19 will possibly outlive the pandemic, so it’s best to

get comfortable with the idea of online events sooner rather than later!

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