

5 Virtual Lessons for Association Chapters



COVID-19 may have shut down most in-person events, but it hasn't kept association chapters from bringing together members and guests virtually. So many chapters have found creative ways to connect with their association chapter members and guests. A number of lessons have come from this abundance of virtual programming, and we wanted to share a few with you.



The “hook” of a virtual event is different from in-person ones. It's a matter of content versus networking, according to Kara Ullman, programming chair for AAF Baltimore. Though the overall goal of “getting people together to talk collaboratively about topics we're all passionate about,” is the same, Kara says, people attend virtual meetings for the topics, content and speakers, while people attending in-person events come mostly for the networking. It's much easier to tap someone on the shoulder and ask what they thought of the speaker, than trying to make that connection with someone in a virtual meeting. “You don't have that opportunity,” in virtual meetings, Kara says, “for that organic networking.”

Marketing can continue till just before the start of a virtual event. “In-person meetings don't allow you to attract those last-minute attendees,” says Kara. “There's no physical barrier to attendance,” for virtual events she adds. With that flexibility, association chapters can continue to market to and remind people about their event until just before it starts, which can often pull in a few more people, who sign up and log on just as the event starts.



For increased engagement, keep virtual events simple. And short. How many virtual events do you attend in a day? Remember how exhausted you feel at the end of one of those days and that those attending your virtual events probably feel the same. When AAF Baltimore holds events, they aim, Kara says, to keep the presentation piece of the meeting to about 20 minutes, plus a few minutes at the beginning for an opening and 5-10 minutes at the end for questions.

Virtual events provide significant value, in the moment and after. Virtual events allow you to find the right speaker for your exact needs. And since there are no geographic restrictions with virtual events, that person or your panel can be from outside your local area. Topics can be wider ranging and the association chapter technology can allow for in-depth discussions via chat and breakout rooms. Virtual events can also provide more value in the longer term; upload the recordings to the members-only section of your association chapter website for review by those who were there as well as those who were unable to attend.

Volunteers can accomplish a lot from home. In addition to helping you hold effective, engaging events, today's communication platforms like Zoom, WebEx and Microsoft Teams allow your boards, committees and other volunteers to work remotely to accomplish more and pull together a strong event. They don't need to leave home to meet, research, manage events, register event attendees, etc., and you can draw on your association chapter volunteers' increased availability, since they're not traveling to meet in person.

If you're part of the group of chapters still not holding any events, listen up. We've seen a number of chapters close or merge with other chapters, because they're not engaging with members and guests at all or giving members opportunities to engage with each other. Virtual events can be easy to set up and manage, often easier than in-person events. And they offer a lot more flexibility to attendees who can listen from anywhere. Kara has been known to attend virtual AAF Baltimore webinars while driving (eyes on the road of course!). The bottom line is that virtual events are an uncomplicated way to connect with members before you lose them.

