

Should Virtual-First be the New Normal for Your Chapter?



The pandemic drove us indoors and forced association chapters to reimagine how to best support their members. Many chapters shifted to holding virtual and hybrid events and focused on improving and increasing their online presence, while they put their in-person events on hold.



As association chapters continue to look for ways to uphold and even increase their member engagement, some have begun meeting in person again. And as they make this shift, they're exploring the role virtual events will play in their chapter's member engagement strategy going forward.

Recently, we asked over 1200 of our association clients how they feel about holding in-person and virtual events in our current environment, and how they're responding to members' changing needs. Interestingly, as we review their responses, we haven't yet seen a trend. Responses to the "will you continue to provide programming in virtual format?" question range from "no, we won't," to "absolutely, it's a must."

No, we won't hold virtual programming. For those who say they haven't provided any virtual programming or won't continue to offer it, many believe their content isn't suitable for virtual. And others say their association chapter members want and need to return to in-person programming to better connect to other members.

Absolutely, virtual programs are a must for our association chapter. For those considering keeping some of their programming virtual, their reasons have included the following:

- “Virtual events enable participation from a wider geographic area, despite child-care, illness, or other deterrents”
- “Virtual attendance is much higher than in-person.”

Where could virtual programming fit in your chapter’s future?

Virtual association chapter events can be complex to put on. But the truth is, they can also be a chance for chapters to cast a wider net, engage a larger audience and offer more opportunities to members.

To get an idea of where virtual programming could fit in your chapter’s future, explore the virtual programming you’ve held so far, for a sense of how it’s been going. Many chapters have commented that their educational programming was well-received when it was virtual. It’s been easier for chapters to secure speakers, as they no longer have to worry about finding speakers locally or paying for travel. Speakers can be outside the chapter’s region and be streamed to a central location or to association chapter members watching from separate locations. And members appreciate the convenience of learning from home instead of driving to spend hours sitting in a sterile classroom.

Perhaps moving forward, your association chapter’s educational programming remains virtual. Maybe your virtual roster could also include monthly chapter meetings, board meetings and/or some committee meetings, to make these meetings easier to schedule and allow larger groups of people to attend and attend from anywhere. But perhaps other events, like association chapter networking, are better suited for members in person. And what about hybrid? Maybe some of your association chapter events could be a mixture of virtual and in-person. Consider your yearly conference. Could it be virtual, with some sessions pre-recorded and others live with in-person VIP options, or an in-person debrief experiences as follow ups to the conference as or to a specific session?

Before you start making changes, it’s important to know the effects of the virtual events you’ve held. Were there some virtual events that flowed seamlessly, with good attendance and member engagement, but there were others that didn’t work so well? Could any problems be easily resolved with a new technology, additional help or a process change? What do your board and your members think about successful your virtual programming has been and what it should look like going forward?



Will virtual be your new baseline?

Based on what we're hearing from survey respondents, and we look forward to sharing more of what we heard with you, the answer to whether or not association chapters will still consider virtual programming as part of their overall chapter management strategy, seems to be "maybe." Before you rush to change, this is a must-have conversation, with your board and your members, as you continue to look for ways to meet your members where they want to be.

