

Event Marketing Amid COVID-19 Pandemic: Can Events Survive?

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Billions of dollars are spent on B2B and B2C events each year and 2020 dawned no differently with the Consumer Electronics Show kicking off the year and drawing more than 175,000 attendees. Just this week, we saw the cancellation of SXSW on the heels of a petition signed by more than 50,000 calling for the festival's postponement and brands like Twitter, Apple, Netflix, LinkedIn and more pulling out of appearances. We have also seen the cancellation or reconfiguration of live to virtual events from Facebook, Adobe, the Game Developers conference, the Geneva Auto Show and the list goes on. This morning, the Vatican announced that the Pope's weekly addresses will be livestreamed.

With the outbreak of novel coronavirus sweeping the globe, increasing numbers of conference and festival organizers and host city governments are canceling events in the name of stemming the spread, despite the business impact it will cause. The effects are reaching all industries from technology and sports to music and fashion as well as cultural events. And to protect employees and ensure business continuity, companies are banning international, and in some cases, domestic travel, and placing restrictions on attending and hosting large scale gatherings.

As [marketers](#), we tap into live brand experiences, conferences and tradeshows and intimate media, customer and influencer events to reach target audiences. For many businesses, especially sales teams, in-person interaction is the life blood of their strategy. Today's events encompass a rich mix of traditional conferences and expos, gatherings of influencers and their fans, global developer conferences and

really any type of live experience you can imagine.

Listen early and often. What's the industry saying? Your colleagues? Attendees? Host city and venue? Health officials? Understanding the sentiment climate and communicating effectively in real time response to core audiences is a critical element to handling this type of global climate of fear.

Negotiate strategically. When planning and working on contracts with venues, hospitality and production providers, discuss real options for flexibility. For example, build in contingency for the possibility that a certain percentage of attendees may not be able to join. What options are there to change your headcount guarantee?

Create scalable experiences. Experiences vary in size and scale. Lean into the ability to customize experiences. For example, a large regional customer event could become a series of stops on a road tour with executives dropping in on clients for more intimate, 1:1 interactions. For consumer events, be prepared to limit attendance, postpone and/or provide rainchecks or refunds.

Lean into technology. When it's not possible to host a live event, tap into technology and social platforms to still deliver for consumers or fans. For example, turn a concert or performance into a series of live streaming or virtual reality "events" by shipping ticket holders branded Google cardboards to access a VR experience that will feel just like the real thing. In a business setting, use Google Hangouts, Microsoft Teams and other conference platforms to allow for "live" interaction without the risk. Prior to the meeting, send a package of materials and a branded giveaway – whatever an attendee would receive upon arrival at the meeting.

Reassure your guests. Communicate event health and safety protocols including asking any who may have been exposed or

are not well to stay home. Assure guests that proper cleaning measures are in place before their arrival and during the event and offer plenty of handwashing stations and sanitizer. In addition, allow for flexibility in registration and cancellations.

Finally, as marketers, we are resilient and resourceful with the ability to deliver in challenging environments. This too shall pass.



About the Author: *With more than 19 years of industry experience, I work closely with Peppercomm's fully integrated management team to drive a high performing culture as well as client service, operational excellence and growth. My passion for service and creative thinking drive strategic solutions for clients. As part of my role at the agency, I spearhead events and experiential strategy for both B2B and B2C brands.*

Before rejoining Peppercomm in 2018, I was at MWWPR, where I worked with clients including Red Lobster and The Hershey Company. Prior to that, I spent more than 13 years at Peppercomm, specializing in building integrated communications strategies for consumer lifestyle brands including Whirlpool and its family of brands, MINI, The Capital Grille, TGI Fridays, TJMaxx and Marshalls, among others.

A Fordham University graduate, I live in Westchester with my husband, identical twin daughters and two rescue dogs.