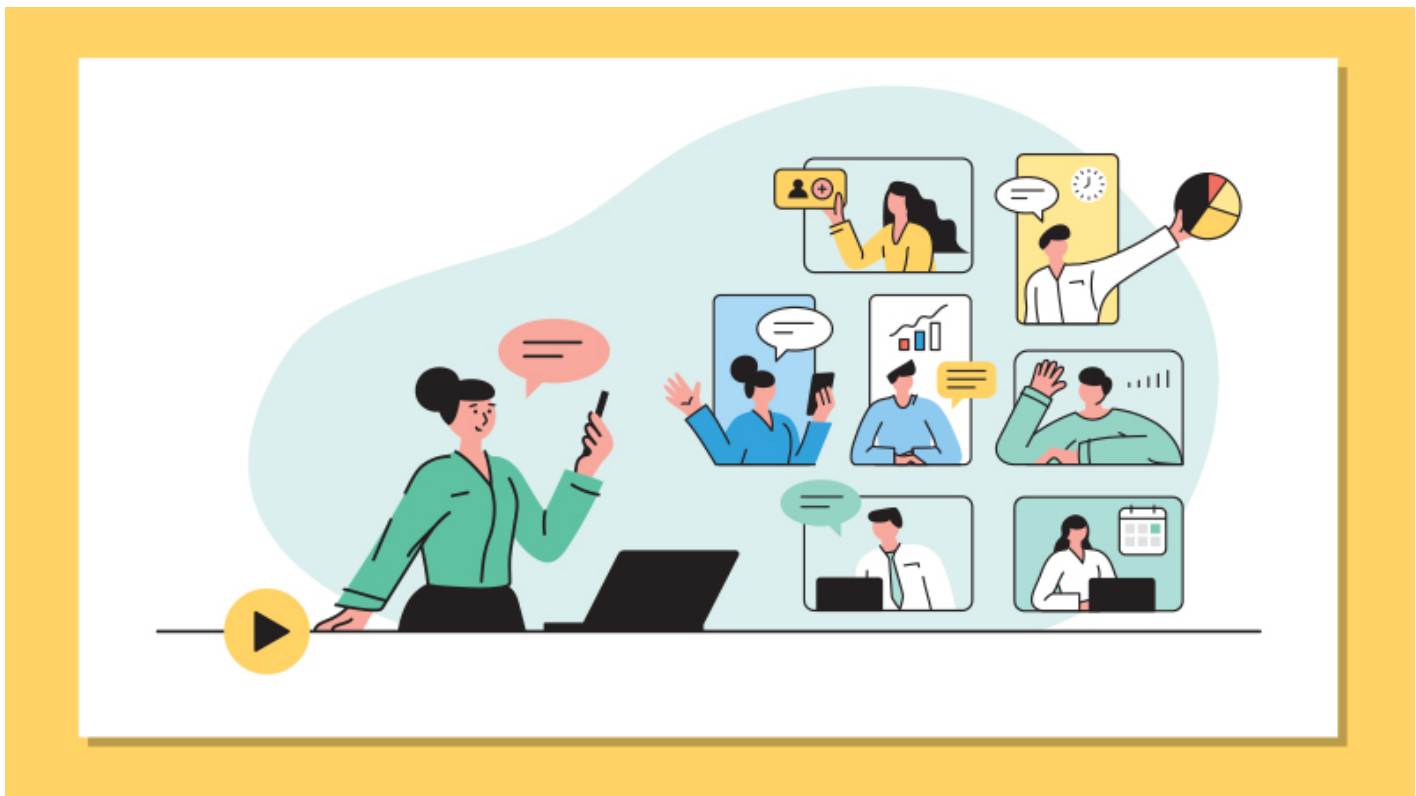


# The Trade Show Must Go On

As a result of the pandemic, B2B marketers are rushing to convert their in-person events into live virtual experiences

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By **Michele Meyer**



miakiev/Getty Images

**T**he coronavirus has exacted a staggering price on the events business. Canceled trade shows and exhibitions led to a \$145 billion loss in contracts through the end of 2020's second quarter, **according to the Global Association of the Exhibition Industry**. Lost economic output exceeded \$88.2 billion, with a \$31 billion hit in North America alone. And the long-term outlook for the events field is not encouraging.

"The idea of traveling and getting into crowded arenas really won't be a possibility for at least the next 12 to 24 months," says Gerard Gibbons, president of SMB and U.S. Marketing at UPS, which has had to nix many of its events in the wake of the virus.

But as the coronavirus shuts down live events, the virtual future of the business beckons — and a lot faster than most B2B marketers may have envisioned.

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**B2B marketers are rushing to convert their in-person events into live virtual experiences. Here's how it's worked for some of the industry's biggest players.**



"With digital events, I know how long [attendees] watched, who downloaded content, who asked questions, and I am able to put out a lot more content in front of the audience than I could physically," says Mark Bornstein, VP of marketing at ON24, a digital marketing experiences company whose clients include Athenahealth, Fitbit, and Salesforce. "All that data will convert into much more valuable lead conversion and, like physical events such as Salesforce's Dreamforce, digital events can have lots of personality."

Bornstein was in the middle of a two-month-long lunch-and-learn tour when he saw that the spread of the virus was getting worse. His customers noticed, too. ON24 canceled its last session scheduled for March 11 in Los Angeles and

transformed the event into to a virtual program within 48 hours.

Combining virtual and in-person events, Bornstein says, makes sense because live events are susceptible to all kinds of unforeseen challenges, not just a pandemic. "Having a digital component future-proofs your event strategies," he adds.

Kathleen Marran, VP of diverse customer segments and marketing at UPS, says she picked up on a lot of valuable information attending **the virtual Million Dollar Women Summit**. The show, which UPS sponsors, was originally scheduled as a two-day live event, April 23–24, in New York — which Marran planned to attend — but was quickly converted into a virtual program for the same dates.

"We were able to network and react to speakers and, thanks to gamification, it felt immersive and live," she says, adding that break-out rooms in Zoom provided for an intimate feel while a chat feature spurred participants to ask questions and give feedback. "It was convivial, professional, and fun. We even toasted at the end. I learned a digital conference could be flexible."

Carolyn Ladd, VP of strategy at B2B ad agency gyro adds: "Companies have a love-hate relationship with B2B events, so realizing there were no physical events to go to caused cheer and panic. Cheer because they don't have to spend all that money, and panic because so many companies look to events as the place to get leads — and now we have to connect with customers in a new, yet meaningful, way."

## Moving with Urgency

The implosion of live B2B events and the accelerating shift to a virtual model will require marketers to be both fast and nimble when crafting their online conferences.

"You have to ... do things quickly and cross boundaries between organizations," Ladd says. "That requires stripping away the layers of approval. You can get paralyzed by so many people weighing in that nothing gets put out."

Salesforce teams worked around the clock starting in late February to convert the company's World Tour Sydney from a live B2B conference into a virtual one without changing the original date (March 4). **World Tour Sydney Reimagined** featured many of the same speakers who had been lined up originally. A key difference was the number of attendees; while the annual event previously attracted around 10,000 attendees, the virtual event drew an audience of 13,000 registered attendees and 80,000 Salesforce Live views.

While causing a great deal of dislocation throughout the marketing industry, COVID-19 has also rattled the cage when it comes to marketers' overreliance on live events. "Physical events had become our default setting," says Nicola Kastner, VP and head of global event strategy at SAP.

The next step will be more personalized digital experiences, says Scott Kellner, VP of marketing at George P. Johnson Experience Marketing, which creates events for such companies as Cisco, IBM, and Salesforce. "We call it moving to the 'adult table' of the marketing mix — melding tools like advertising, digital marketing, and public relations. Digital events are easier to integrate, which in the long run will continue to elevate their efficacy," he says.

"The challenge, creatively, is to produce that same sense of wonder and connection to a brand without being there in person," Kellner adds. "Regardless of how quickly society emerges from this, digital will be of prime importance going forward."

## Akin to Cable TV

To capitalize on the new normal, B2B marketers need to know their buyers' pain points and create event content that will appeal to them.

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Building virtual programming requires marketers to shift their mindset from creating live events. They have to ditch the PowerPoint — a staple of live events — and instead adopt some of the characteristics of cable and network TV (and even nightclubs) to create virtual content. This type of content ranges from game shows, one-on-one interviews, online polls, and DJ-hosted after-parties.

Take SAP's **SAPPHIRE NOW Unplugged**, an online video series featuring interviews with corporate executives, thought leaders, and best-selling authors discussing the

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future of business and the world. "We designed a completely different experience to reach not only the intended audience of 23,000 would-be SAPPHIRE NOW 2020 attendees in Orlando, but a much broader one: SAP's 440,000 customers, or anyone globally," Kastner says.

UPS, which sponsors several events, is helping some of its partners reconfigure their event marketing strategy. "We sponsor a twice yearly Bronner Bros. **International Beauty Show**, with 20,000 attendees in Atlanta, and are trying to figure out how to do it safely," Marran says

Trade shows for cosmetics "depend on people touching, tasting, and demonstrating their products, a challenge in a socially distant world," she adds. "How do we build trust when we cannot see someone eye-to-eye or hug, shake hands, or clap for someone receiving an award?"

## Hybrid Model

Post-pandemic, live events will be far less frequent. And when marketers finally do return they'll probably do so with a new appreciation for the marketing channel. "I'll capture the physical value maybe even more than I have in the past," Marran says. "I will absolutely appreciate and not take for granted the ability to be that close to people again, to connect on a real human level."

Trade shows went through a period of consolidation when the industry tightened its belt following the financial meltdown in 2008 — and that is likely to reoccur as companies recalibrate how many events they attend, hold, and/or sponsor, gyro's Ladd says.

"The pandemic has equalized us in many ways," she says. "The entire world has had a collective experience that connects us now."

SAP's Kastner adds that the pandemic presents an opportunity for marketers to think differently about their events portfolio and how to distribute the pie. "I don't see us going back to the model we had before," she says. "In the future, physical and digital will coexist harmoniously. It's broadened our reach."

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