

# How to make your online event work



Professional events host **David Lee** reflects on what he learned about online events in 2020.

into the very obvious category, and apologies if so – but I have certainly found online posts, blogs and chats useful in mapping my way through the maelstrom of 2020 and beyond.

When lockdown No 1 arrived, I'd chaired about 250 events – none of them online. I wasn't exactly well-qualified for the virtual event world, but after a short period of terror about the future, I got stuck in and tried to learn. I applied what I thought was common to live and online events, and sought to identify major differences. I thought about how the audience would see the event, and how to make their

experience better.

Between April and December 2020, I hosted 35 online events, including four Confor webinars, and four meetings of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Forestry and Tree Planting.

As we adjust our thinking (again) about 2021 and accept online events are very much here to stay, I've scribbled down a few thoughts on what makes an event work (see *panel*). Some might fall

## Staying online?

So what does 2021 hold? Plenty more online events, for sure – with those events that focus on preparation, high quality and pace emerging successfully from the pack while others fade away. By the time we can hold in-person events in a meaningful way again (probably not before the summer), many organisations will have concluded some events will stay online for



## 10 tips for better online events

### 1 Be clear why you are doing an event

There are far too many online events. If you are just doing it to replicate what you did in person before – and struggling to find an audience – think again. Either your events are rubbish or you need to engage with people differently.

### 2 Appreciate that drop-off rates will be high

We all sign up for events we have little intention of attending, especially free ones. As an event organiser/host, it can be soul-destroying when 500+ people (or 100 people, or 50 people) sign up and only half actually tune in. Drop-off is inevitable, but help yourself by engaging with delegates who sign up early by offering relevant, quality content and blogs by speakers at regular intervals in the run-up to the event. Don't just bombard them with constant reminders and nothing else. Add value.

### 3 Think about what happens when someone signs in on the day

When attending an event, you need to know you've got the right link and haven't clicked into another event on next week. Ensure your event home screen has clear information, including the start time. Unless you have a good reason for doing so, don't have participants chatting idly as people join. Too often, smaller events are messy at the start and this is a real turn-off (literally).

### 4 Online events are much harder to get right

Lots of people thought they would be easier; they are actually much more difficult. Advance briefings and technical run-throughs are vital. We've all seen examples of avoidable tech-fail; the worst I saw (forestry event) was a guy who took about five minutes to share his screen of dreary slides. For at least two minutes, we saw his home screen with a picture of him and his kids on top of a hill. I didn't stick around.

### 5 Keep the pace fast and the contributions short and sharp

If an event lasts an hour or so, ensure the voices change regularly and maintain a fast pace. Long presentations with complex, tedious slides are as awful (and often far worse) online as they are in person. However, some presenters can hold an audience's attention



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good - because it makes no sense in terms of cost or time to drag people from multiple locations when the tech is good enough to hold the event virtually. We'll probably see more hybrid events, where some people gather together (when allowed) and others join virtually.

A final word; it seems obvious, but always see the event - at every stage - through your audience's eyes. Too many people forget that.

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for much longer. I shuddered when I saw one guy was down to present for 45 minutes, but he was brilliant – engaging, funny, and full of short and interesting points.

**6 Your attendance is not limited by geography**

I've been involved for several years with the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Forestry and Tree Planting. It has been challenging to engage with politicians, civil servants and key audiences when meeting in Westminster committee rooms that needed a map and compass to find. Online has been much better; in general, we've had higher-quality speakers, larger audiences and more of the people we want to be there.

**7 Longer events benefit from professional help**

Complex agendas which move between presentations and panel discussions benefit from a professional company doing the tech briefings, and ensuring all speakers and panellists are briefed and ready to come in at the right points. As a host, speaker or delegate, a seamless event experience really matters.

**8 Be clear about the chat function**

I've hosted events on many platforms, all perfectly decent. However, one challenge in hosting is ensuring questions about the tech or

running order don't get mixed in with subject matter questions for panellists. At one rural affairs event, we agreed to split admin questions (chat box) and questions for speakers (Q&A box). I explained this clearly, but the audience did what they pleased. The first session speaker was excellent and there were more than 40 questions and comments posted - evenly split between the chat and the Q&A box!

**9 Online networking is more difficult**

Small-talk chat or hard-edged business conversations are a big part of in-person events. Online, I've not seen anyone really crack it. Break-out rooms can work very well (or very badly) and there has certainly been more sharing of business cards, links and information online as the months have ticked by. Yet it's just not quite the same and I expect to see more creative solutions in this area in 2021.

**10 A bad virtual backdrop is worse than no backdrop**

We all had fun with backdrops in 2020, whether standard templates (of a tropical beach or a snowy peak) or our own images. But remember, if you are using a virtual backdrop, sit still and make sure the wall behind you is plain (for me, this meant rearranging my office slightly). If you don't do this, your ears and hair WILL disappear and being scalped or ear-less on screen is not a professional look.

