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HOW EVENT TECH IS CHANGING THE
WORLD WE LIVE IN

Hybrid Meetings: Are They Worth it?

While the hybrid meeting format has been a hot topic in the events industry for quite some time, arguably, the Covid pandemic offered this format an opportunity to shine. Where physical attendance was very limited or downright impossible, many event organisers turned to hybrid or strictly online as a solution.

So, the question now is, do hybrid/online meetings work? Are they effective? To try to answer these questions, partners at the World PCO Alliance were asked their opinion. In this article, they share their experiences through two case studies.

Case Study #1: The 15th World Congress of the World Federation of Direct Selling Associations

CDM Thailand was the selected PCO for this congress, which had originally been confirmed for Bangkok in 2020, and then postponed twice. The event finally took place in October 2021 in an exclusively online format, with 1,300 registered attendees.

The congress adopted the following format:

- The length of the congress was compressed into two half-days.
- All speeches, sessions, and sponsor presentations were pre-recorded.
- The sessions were broadcast each day at a designated time to facilitate attendance from the time zones most represented: Asia Pacific, North America, and South America.
- For those attendees from other time zones or for those who, for one reason or another, could not attend a live session, recordings were available on-demand for two months following the congress.
- The congress offered live simultaneous translation in Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Thai through separate channels.
- There was a virtual exhibition featuring online shopping with special promotions.

Despite the online format, the congress wanted to optimise opportunities for interaction. To accomplish this, the following interactive features were implemented:

- The congress hosted a musical performance by Song Division, who composed a special song for the congress.
- Exhibitors could host live appointments with attendees.
- Live chats were enabled with panellists appearing during broadcasts of their sessions, a feature that worked very well, as delegates were able to reconnect, share ideas and maintain contact after Covid.
- There was an online “lucky draw” each day.

Looking back, **Patranuch Sudasna of CDM Thailand** points out the major benefit of the congress’s online format: due to a lower registration fee, the congress attracted more delegates, which also enriched the congress programme by delivering the key takeaways of each session to a broader audience.

Some areas that could have been improved include the lack of a live Q&A with the panellists. Due to the shorter duration of the congress, the programme was very packed, and while event participants were indeed able to have “live chats” with the speakers, due to time limitations, no further interaction, such as that offered in a typical Q&A, was possible. Appointments made at the virtual exhibit also fell short of expectations.

Overall, Sudasna maintains that hybrid is a good added value element for an international event, while still focusing on creating unique and memorable experiences for in-person attendees. For any congress considering a virtual/hybrid format, CDM Thailand recommends that organisers focus on tactics/solutions to maximize attendance, facilitate different time zones, and offer perks that will attract sponsors.

Case Study #2: The 7th World One Health Congress

Ace:Daytons Direct was the appointed PCO for the 7th World One Health Congress, held at the **Sands Expo and Convention Centre**, Singapore, in November 2022. The hybrid event spanned five days, featuring seven parallel sessions and adopting a fully hybrid format. Hailing from 76 countries, attendees totalled over 1,500 in-person participants and over 1,000 virtual attendees.

Particular features of the online portion of the congress included:

- All virtual speakers recorded their presentations as a backup; however, many also opted to attend as virtual presenters, engaging in Q&A sessions.
- The congress featured an E-poster Gallery, where posters were uploaded onto the virtual platform for viewing and interaction between delegates and presenters.
- All sessions across different rooms were streamed live to the virtual audience.
- All recorded content was accessible to all participants for one month after the congress.

To optimise opportunities for interaction, the congress offered the following:

- All attendees, in-person and virtual, could schedule appointments with exhibitors and fellow participants.
- The “virtual lobby” led to the exhibition hall with interactive virtual booths, accessible to both in-person and virtual attendees.
- Exhibitors were able to interact with participants via chat, 1:1 video conferencing calls, digital name cards and material downloads.
- All attendees could engage in interactive networking video conferencing calls, connect at the virtual “coffee corner,” and socialise via 1:1 video conferencing.
- The virtual environment facilitated chat interactions between virtual and in-person attendees, speakers, and exhibitors.

- There was interactive polling, Q&A sessions, and virtual name card exchanges.

Additional considerations to accommodate the hybrid format included:

Managing the costs of a hybrid congress: combining the virtual components, including the required technical equipment and platforms as well as the additional personnel to exclusively manage the virtual component of the event added significant costs to the event. To ensure a seamless experience for both in-person and virtual participants, Ace:Daytons Direct created three distinct teams that functioned as one cohesive unit: a virtual team, a physical team, and a team on-site comprised of members from the virtual platform team as well as digital event strategists. This facilitated the smooth transmission of the physical and virtual components of the congress to its virtual attendees. The administrative aspect of running a hybrid event proved paramount to the event’s success.

Having the right technical equipment: to host a successful hybrid event, you need to have all the necessary tools. For the World One Health Congress, the following equipment was implemented:

- The vMix platform allowed the integration of multiple elements, such as cameras, videos, and NDI (Network Device Interface) sources.
- vMix call functionality enabled speaker engagement and interaction.
- Zoom was used as a backup solution in case speakers had problems logging into the vMix platform.
- Multi-camera set-up on-site was deployed to capture multiple angles and perspectives.

Providing a proper “welcome” and thorough instructions to virtual speakers and exhibitors: Hybrid event organisers must ensure that all virtual participants are properly briefed on the technical implications of their participation. In the case of the World One Health Congress, virtual speakers were briefed through the following:

- Comprehensive instructions for platform access and the feature navigations on the virtual platform.
- Following the technical briefing, virtual speakers received a “Get Ready for the Virtual Congress”

email, including instructions for uploading their presentation, a PowerPoint template, tips for a successful virtual appearance, and guidelines for recording their session.

- A unique access link was emailed to each speaker four days before the congress.

Virtual exhibitors were provided with the following:

- Comprehensive instructions were given to virtual exhibitors on uploading materials, booth set-up and usage, maximising outreach, and communicating with delegates.

Despite the thorough preparation, the congress did experience some challenges, namely:

An unstable Wi-Fi system: Some speakers experienced access issues due to their Wi-Fi problems, thus forcing the congress to play back their recorded presentations.

Last-minute speaker emergencies: Because speakers were not on-site, some of them had to step away for emergencies, forcing the congress to play their pre-recorded video.

Presentation materials submitted through multiple channels: In addition to uploading their video recordings and PowerPoint files, some speakers also sent their material through other links and even to the organisers. Ace:Daytons Direct had to invest the time to ensure that

the correct videos and PowerPoints were used for each speaker's session.

This being said, the congress reaped some benefits from opting for the hybrid format:

- Through the use of on-demand videos, all participants were able to watch the sessions they missed, thus optimising the reach of the congress's content.
- The congress was more inclusive, allowing the presence of participants from developing nations who did not necessarily have the resources to attend the congress in-person.

So, at the end of the day, did the hybrid format work for the World One Health Congress? Yes, says **Nancy Tan** from **Ace:Daytons Direct**. Hybrid is an excellent format given the opportunities that the format affords, namely having a wider reach in terms of participation and attracting participants who may have never otherwise attended the congress in person. Yet, there is no denying the additional costs of hosting a hybrid event, and conferences must keep their eye on the bottom line since it still represents an important income stream for many associations. If there's room in the event budget, Tan strongly encourages events to explore the possibilities a partial or full hybrid event offers. With meticulous and strategic planning, hybrid events possess the capacity to elevate excellence, inclusivity, and to have a lasting impact on attendees.

The final verdict? Based on our two case studies, a strong argument can be made for the added value of integrating a hybrid/virtual component to any congress, particularly international ones. The extended reach to delegates that otherwise would not attend is alone a major benefit. It is worth mentioning that the purpose of any conference is to serve its professional community, and the in-person

attendee experience must be top-notch and unique, so as to incite more people to attend the event on-site as opposed to online.

That being said, if planned appropriately and strategically, hybrid events can reinforce their programmes' quality, accessibility and memorability.



WORLDPCO.ORG

 WPCOALLIANCE@CONGRE.CO.JP



World PCO Alliance