

HYBRID EVENTS:

Can physical and virtual congress formats work in tandem?



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A global leap to virtual congresses

The COVID-19 pandemic thwarted face-to-face contact overnight. For events in healthcare and pharmaceuticals, this resulted in an unprecedentedly rapid transition from in-person to virtual congresses. Organisers navigated this steep learning curve with impressive speed, assembling digital hosting suites and venues, switching to remote presenter briefings and digitalising content for online engagement.

Amid uncertainty around the easing of restrictions, the expectation for physical events is slowly returning. As we enter 2022, we're reaching an interesting crossroads: is there still a necessity for virtual events? Can physical and virtual events work in tandem?

Both sides of the coin

Our experience has taught us that there are advantages and disadvantages to each type of format. Physical events enable face-to-face networking (e.g. at a poster board or conversations over dinner), provide natural breaks for mental headspace between sessions (read 'caffeine-facilitated recovery'!) and may help attendees who find it easier to focus on presentations in person. Another key advantage

of a physical meeting is the presence of industry-sponsored booths, where many healthcare professionals (HCPs) may establish or maintain working relationships with related industries (although 'virtual booths' have been developed, their attendances have been notably lower than their physical equivalent).¹

On the flip side, physical events are inherently limited by size and location; not everyone can attend, either due to venue capacity limits or physical location. The added accessibility of virtual events could be an attractive prospect for those limited by health, language barriers or cost.² Furthermore, the environmental impact of 'fly-in' physical events cannot be discounted.³

Virtual events can deliver unprecedented global accessibility, whether it be from posters accompanied by explanatory audio or talking-head videos, or even facilities to provide instant translations of presentations. Virtual events can also provide the opportunity for attendees to interact via real-time chat, submit questions in advance and send follow-up emails to presenters.⁴

Such facilities can greatly bolster a virtual experience; for example, on switching to a virtual, free-to-attend event, the 2020 annual meeting of the European Society of Cardiology (ESC) reported not only a dramatic increase in the number of



attendees but also a notable change in their attending demographic compared with the 2019 annual meeting; a greater proportion of the participants were younger or female.⁵ Many were first-time participants or hailed from a wider range of countries.⁵

The ESC was so impressed by the impact of this that they have decided to retain a digital element for future ESC meetings.⁵ However, others have reported difficulty in hosting live presentations due to differing time zones and have sorely missed networking opportunities.⁶ Additional concerns include technical glitches, inaccessibility for those working in hospitals and difficulties for presenters who can't see their audience's reaction or read their body language.

The best of both worlds?

A hybrid approach provides a valuable opportunity to apply the advantages of both physical and virtual congresses into a single-event format. Such events feature a physical, 'on-site' element (i.e. a venue with in-person attendees) working synergistically alongside virtual elements (these may include the ability for remote attendees to view live presentations and submit questions).

A unique selling point is the potential to reach a far wider audience while also providing meaningful networking opportunities for all attendees.

Currently, there are conflicting reports regarding HCP preferences for physical or virtual congresses: one study found that 55% of HCPs would prefer to attend future events in person.⁷ Conversely, a separate study found that up to 87% of HCPs would prefer entirely virtual events or a mixture of virtual and physical events.⁸ Other reports cite

people being able to attend virtual events without compromising workloads or responsibilities as parents or carers.⁹


Furthermore, there are those who either cannot (or would prefer not to) attend in person, due to scheduling issues or an inability or reluctance to travel. Virtual congresses have the ability to expand and democratise access, reaching participants in developing countries and a wider range of professions in healthcare. By encouraging physical as well as virtual attendance, the flexibility offered by hybrid events can cater to all needs and preferences. This niche has been recognised by the European Society for Medical Oncology, who have launched free, live, monthly virtual plenaries, all recorded to allow for timely dissemination of key data throughout the year.¹⁰

The key ingredients for a successful hybrid event

Ultimately, any healthcare event must ensure that it can provide educational information to all attendees. This is especially pertinent for hybrid events as the ability to provide a myriad of materials can help satisfy the learning preferences of all attendees, from those who like to pore over details (e.g. scientific posters) to those who are more likely to skim through material (e.g. short videos and infographics).

Even the presentation formats themselves are evolving; organisers have recognised the desire for shorter, 'bite-sized', mobile-friendly presentations

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that permit a greater number of presentation slots and lend themselves to repurposing after the event has concluded, in the forms of post-event repositories, updates and follow-up materials. A key insight is that attendees now expect to be able to access presentation slides or a recording of the presentations themselves. Clearly, durability through post-event resourcing is a crucial consideration.

“ There is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ hybrid event. ”

While presentations may include questions submitted by virtual attendees, further thought must be given to resolving any potential gap in networking between physical and virtual attendees – after all, it is imperative that there should be as little divide as possible between those who are on-site and those who are present on-screen.

One innovative solution is the implementation of virtual reality, where physical attendees can interact with those online via virtual reality headsets, which also allow for applications such as immersive medical demonstrations and unique branded experiences by augmented reality.¹¹

An essential consideration is the necessity to tailor hybrid events to the requirements and desires of target attendees – there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ hybrid event. By customising each hybrid event, it is possible to meet the expectations not only of attendees but also of industry sponsors who want meaningful engagement with the attendees. It also meets the expectations of the organisers themselves, who want to reach as many people as possible.

What next for hybrid events in healthcare?

The changing perceptions and expectations that HCPs have toward events mean that there will always be many potential attendees who prefer being on-site and many who prefer to remain remote. In this capacity, hybrid healthcare events will likely remain an ideal option to bridge the gaps between physical and virtual congresses. Hybrid events, however, should not be viewed as a compromise; by combining the best aspects of physical and virtual congresses, they have the potential to provide exciting and innovative experiences.

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