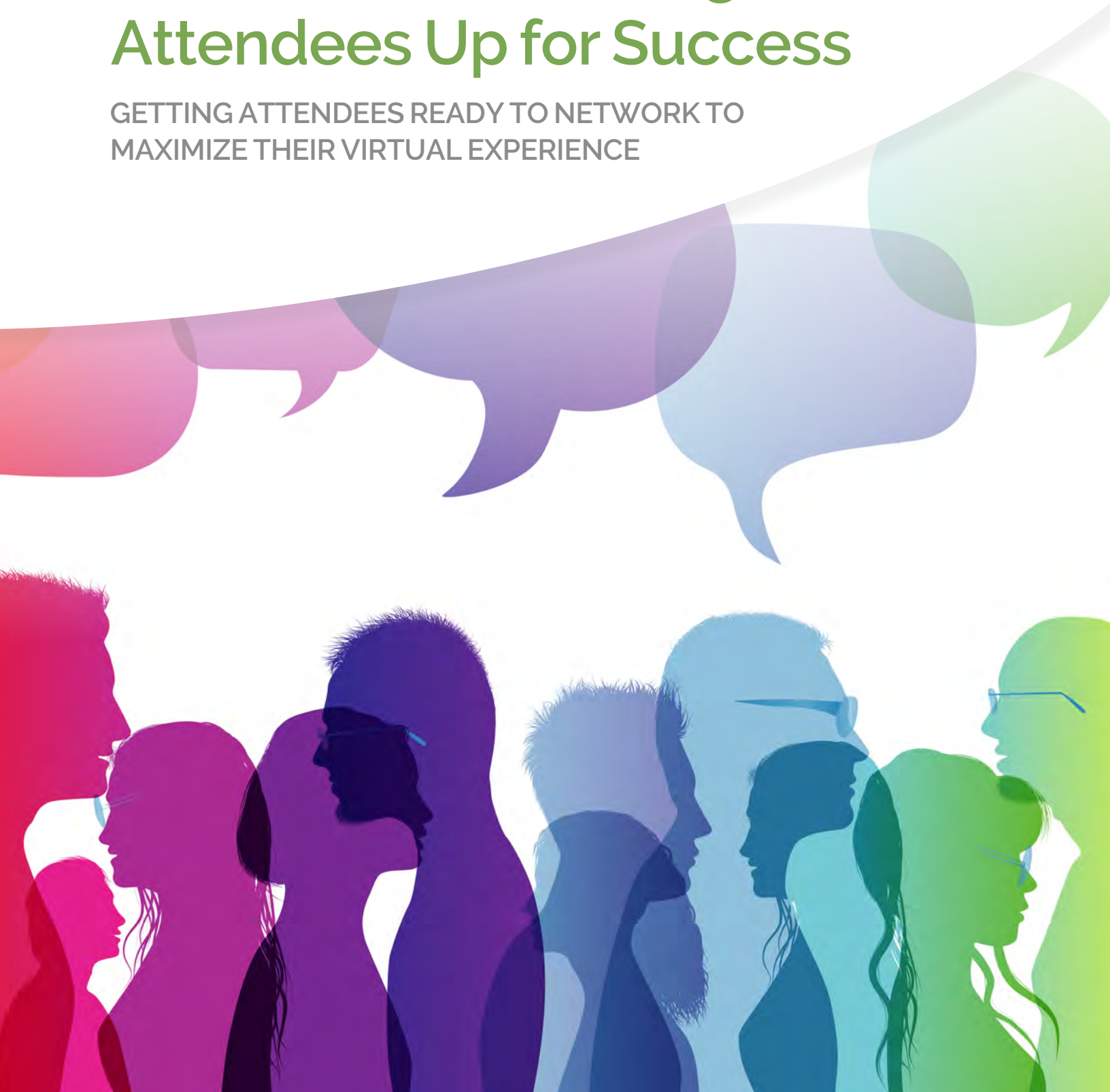# Virtual Events: Setting Attendees Up for Success

GETTING ATTENDEES READY TO NETWORK TO MAXIMIZE THEIR VIRTUAL EXPERIENCE

Introduction

In the first weeks of the COVID-19 crisis, associations struggled with decisions about whether to hold, postpone, or cancel conferences and other events. But soon enough, your options were limited by social distancing rules.

Canceling an event not only negatively impacts your ability to drive non-dues revenue, it also takes away an opportunity for you to connect and engage with your constituents. Here is where virtual events come in.

Even though hosting virtual events is unknown territory for many organizations and pose new challenges, it is a clear solution during these uncertain times. However, just focusing on how to offer keynotes and sessions online is not enough, as attendees normally travel across the country not only to listen to presentations but to see their friends and meet new people. How do you replicate that experience?

It's hard to imagine creating the conditions for the planned and serendipitous conversations that happen at an in-person conference, but it is definitely possible.

Read on to learn how to get attendees ready to network at your virtual event and provide that human connection we seek from in-person events

Share Information & Onboarding Materials

You can't assume attendees will know what to do when they arrive for your virtual conference. Start by developing a plan for educating them on using the features of your event app and virtual solution for conversations and networking.

Conversation Cheat Sheet. Create a cheat sheet so they have something to refer to before and during the event. Email it to registrants and keep it posted on your event website and in the event app.

FAQs. Talk to frontline staff and develop an FAQ for your website. You can even do an internal test with your coworkers to get insights on what was confusing and what you need to provide more guidance on.

Event App. Remind registrants to download your event app. Encourage them to complete their profile. Show them how features like private messaging and public discussion forums can come in handy for different scenarios—and give them examples that can serve as behavioral prompts.

Video Tutorials. Create a video orientation tutorial about your app and virtual venue. Keep it light and fun to watch as you demonstrate behavior, such as creating an avatar and using different screen controls.

Signage. From displaying the agenda to showing quick tips, leverage signage and boards within your virtual solution to guide attendees during the event.

Alerts. Use in-app push notifications, sms text messages, or broadcast messages within the virtual solution to guide attendees throughout their experience and keep them informed.
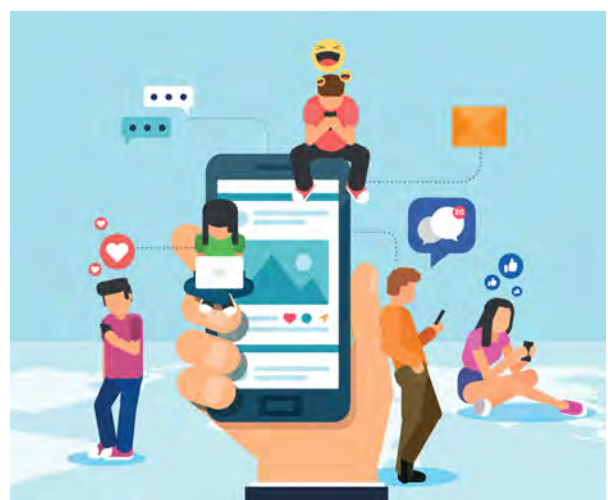
Host Pre-Event Orientations

Encourage attendees to attend a pre-event virtual meetup where they can meet fellow attendees, get comfortable with the virtual environment, troubleshoot any issues, and learn about networking options.

Orientation sessions are also a virtual volunteering opportunity. Train a group of volunteer guides ahead of time and let them practice using all the features of your app and virtual venue. As a thanks, you could reward them with a promo credit for a future event.

The goal of these orientation meetups and sessions is to show attendees how easy it is to virtually experience the different types of conversations and meetups that normally take place at an in-person event. Plan small group or team activities that give them practice in communicating and meeting with each other as well as moving around the virtual venue.

One way to do this during the pre-event meetup is by using a solution, like the Event Farm Engagement App to randomly split up everyone who checks in into teams of four. Then, send attendees a text telling them to go find their team members, grab a volunteer, and kick off an orientation activity.

On the day of the event, provide orientation sessions near the welcome area, but also display communication and navigation tips on screens in the welcome area and elsewhere around campus for attendees who are "too cool" to attend an official orientation session.

You could also assign event buddies to any new member or attendee who requests help—another virtual volunteering opportunity. These pairs can meet ahead of time on campus for an individual orientation session or on the day of the event.

Show Attendees How to Arrange Meetups

Think about the types of meetups that attendees arrange at an in-person conference. For example, they make plans to meet a friend, acquaintance, or client outside room B-201 or by the exhibit hall doors. During your pre-event virtual meetups, show attendees how to:

- Use the event app to message with another attendee.

- Send a private chat message on your virtual event solution.

- Search for someone in the directory and go (teleport) to their location.

Take attendees around the virtual campus on a "volunteer hunt" by having them search for the volunteer's name and go to their location. At each location, a volunteer shows the group how to use an event app or virtual venue feature. During this tour, volunteers can also preview special programs or attractions too.

Show attendees how to find an empty meeting room during your event—if you are making those rooms available—and how to lock the door. You may wish to provide a few meeting rooms on a first-come-first-serve basis and reserve the rest for sponsors and other planned meetups.

Explain How to Be Available for Serendipitous Meetups

Some of the best conference experiences are unexpected, like those conversations and relationships that begin while waiting in a buffet line or sitting around a table waiting for a session to start.

Let attendees experience some of these possibilities during your pre-event virtual meetups. They'll see how easy it is to introduce themselves to a person sitting near them in an auditorium or outside at a table.

For example, with The Echo (a virtual event experiences solution), you could tell one group to go meet a volunteer at a table within sight. Once they get there, explain how the blue outlines on the floor work for blocking out ambient noise and allowing private conversations within the circle. Demonstrate the venue's private and public chat functions.

Show them how, during the event, they might overhear a conversation when standing or walking by a group of people. Let them see how, when they arrive at a location, they might see a name they recognize and can walk up to them and start a conversation. The best thing ever about a virtual conference is you don't have to worry about forgetting someone's name because it's always displayed above their avatar's head—not flipped around on their name badge dangling below their chest.

Preview Facilitated Networking Opportunities

Demonstrate how session "table" discussions will work at your virtual conference. For example, at virtual events using The Echo, different rooms offer the option of creating private conversation areas around rows of seating or tables.

Tell attendees about the other networking opportunities you're arranging during the event, for example:

- Breaks for meals and snacks.

- Discussion roundtables based on topics, positions/specialties ("birds of a feather"), or region.

You can also share some of the comments we've experienced about the advantages of networking in a virtual setting:

- ·You can easily talk with people you don't know.

- You can actually find someone you know in a crowd.

- You can figure out where someone is and "accidentally" run into them.

- You don't have to worry about forgetting someone's name.

- You can take notes while talking to someone and they never know.

End the meetup with everyone getting back together for a discussion—you could send an announcement through the app or the virtual venue. Ask everyone to meet in an area that's good for both public and private conversations or an area of campus they haven't seen yet.

The beach and soccer field are popular picks at networking events hosted on The Echo.

CONCLUSION:

As we host more virtual experiences, we've learned that many people find virtual interactions easier than in-person ones. However, just like in real life, some people might take a little longer to warm up, but once they break the ice, most people feel extremely comfortable in the virtual setting.

That's why having a plan to onboard attendees, show them how to network, and set them up for success will be critical to:

- *Differentiate your virtual event from a traditional webinar*
- *Provide that human connection that we seek from in-person events*

Looking for a virtual solution that offers attendees the ability to truly connect and interact? Contact us to learn more.

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