

# Why You Should Consider Hybrid Events as a Part of Your Continuing Education Strategy

Contrary to what some might think, virtual/hybrid conferences were not recently created in reaction to the global pandemic. Organizations have been hosting these events for years. The pandemic did, however, turn them into a lifeline for many organizations struggling to keep their events, and the revenue generated by them, largely intact.

The disruption caused by COVID-19 provided more than a subtle nudge many organizations needed to seriously consider virtual event technology as a key component for their educational events. For some organizations that meant stepping out of their comfort zones and into the virtual technology world for the first time.

## PRE-PANDEMIC + PANDEMIC ERA

For **Dr. Robert Schwartz, PsyD, DCEP**, the Executive Director of the [Association for Comprehensive Energy Psychology \(ACEP\)](#), the adoption of virtual events made sense for his association well before anyone had ever heard of COVID-19.

“I was advised a year before (the pandemic) that we really had to do a live stream of our event,” Dr. Schwartz said. “At the time the big concern for us was the potential cannibalization of our live event. That has not happened. I have been told by people who do virtual events regularly that those that want to come to a live event will come, and those people that prefer to attend virtual events will continue to do so. They really are separate audiences and, in fact, you will not cannibalize your live event by making it hybrid. Although COVID changed how we did some things, so far, the data has held up that hybrid events work.”

“When we decided to hold our international conference as a hybrid event, it ended up being our largest attended conference to date,” Dr. Schwartz added. “We had more people attend the live conference and we had people attending the live stream as well. Overall, there was higher participation and it added more to the bottom line for the event. I feel like that’s going to be the future anyway because even after the pandemic there will be people who will still want to attend virtually.”

## THE NEXT NORMAL

Those sentiments fall in line with what association CEO coach and facilitator **Mary Byers, CAE, CSP**, is hearing from association executives. Byers is the author of *Race for Relevance: 5 Radical Changes for Associations* and *Road to Relevance: 5 Strategies for Competitive Associations*.

“Many association professionals have told me that their virtual meetings have increased their reach and enabled them to include new audiences,” Byers said. “This is good news! (Post-pandemic) the pull to go back to ‘the way we’ve always done it’ will be strong. We shouldn’t let the challenges of the pandemic be wasted. The pandemic has been an invitation to refresh tired meetings, to retire ones that were no longer profitable or were on the decline, and to rethink the concept of hybrid meetings. They aren’t the same as solely ‘virtual’ and the way you approach them should reflect this understanding.”

“Human behavior will ultimately drive the direction organizations will need to take,” she added. “The reality is that in many cases we are reaching a larger audience than ever before; but there is a subset of the membership who always will prefer in-person. This, of course, creates complexity for associations. Financial resources will also drive decisions as will the differing needs of the virtual and in-person audiences.”

Byers calls the environment we have moved into the Next Normal in lieu of ‘new normal.’ “The new normal is what happens to us,” she remarked. “The Next Normal is what we proactively create as a result!”

From CE21’s perspective, we experienced a 1500 percent increase in the virtual and hybrid conferences we hosted during the first year of the pandemic alone. The most common feedback we’ve received from our customers is that they experienced an overall increase in attendance at their virtual events. When people could not travel, they were able to attend an event from the comfort and safety of their homes. This change brought with it new concerns and opportunities as we have all had to learn how to operate successfully in this new virtual world.

Dean West, FASAE, President of Association Laboratory, found through his company’s research that associations experienced disruptive change during the pandemic that will impact their organizations far into the future.

“When we studied the implications of Covid-19 for our Looking Forward environmental scan,” West said, “we found there wasn’t going to be a (quick) return to what we were used to prior to early 2020. Industries and professions have undergone dramatic change, and that change is going to go on for some time. The innovations that COVID-19 has driven within the association sector are not going away, and that represents a tremendous opportunity for associations to engage their members like never before.”

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## THE WORLD LEADING UP TO THE PANDEMIC

A common trend CE21 saw while helping organizations convert their events from in-person to virtual or hybrid, was the missed opportunities to grow the overall reach of these events by adhering to an in-person only format. This often meant potentially leaving significant revenue on the table by not providing a virtual component. Here are snapshots of three associations for consideration.

### Example 1: State Level Association

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- 1300+ members
- Two-day annual event always held in the same host city.
- Usual live attendee mix: 82% from the host city, 18% from other parts of the state.
- At the beginning of the pandemic, they were mandated to hold their event virtually due to Covid restrictions.
- That year they experienced a 30% increase in the overall reach of attendees.
- There was a significant increase in participation from members outside of the host city and from out-of-state participants.
- The following year they returned to an in-person only event – attendance & revenue dipped below pre-pandemic numbers.



### Example 2: Small State Level Association

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- 650 members
- Operated by an association management company (AMC)
- Single staff resource allocated to run their annual conference.
- Required a full year to plan and organize.
- The expense to hold the event in-person totaled \$15K.
- Only 50 members (7.67%) attended.
- Cost to the association per attendee - \$300
- **Over 92% of the association's members did not attend.**

### Example 3: Large State Level Association

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- 2200 members
- 4 full-time staff
- Required a full year to plan and organize their annual conference.
- Only 540 (25%) members attended.
- 75% of members did not participate.

## THE HYBRID SOLUTION

Hybrid events have become a proven solution that has positively impacted how the meetings are being designed. They provide flexibility that eliminates the exclusion of potential attendees due to time, distance, travel costs and health concerns. Hybrid events can also potentially help with the rapidly escalating costs associated with hosting in-person events. Adding a virtual component to a conference can help reduce the size of the facility typically needed, as well as food and beverage expenses. From the attendee perspective, the sharp rise in travel costs makes attending in-person events increasingly difficult for some people. Companies that traditionally covered the cost of sending employees to in-person events are increasingly taking a hard look at the overall cost of continuing that practice.

In addition, hybrid events can play an important role in effectively addressing the generational shifts many organizations are experiencing. As Millennials and GenY become the highest percentage of members, the challenge to meet the changing needs and expectations of these groups will continue to grow. According to a report from Meeting Professionals International, 53% of GenY event attendees are OK with experiencing a conference online. Change is very much on the horizon.

As we officially exit the pandemic era, there are real signs of hope to grasp onto along with reasons to remain cautious. People want to connect, to be together in the same space. It is, after all, human nature. But there are those who will continue to prefer to attend events remotely. They are ready and willing to engage with your organization if provided the avenue to do so. After years of canceling, rescheduling, and adapting on the fly, organizations are now working to determine what is the "new normal?" While the answer is not certain, the need to learn and adapt remains a priority. There is no simple, one-size-fits-all answer to the question of virtual vs face-to-face events. Some version of a hybrid event appears to be the solution many groups are beginning to lean into.

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**Mary Byers, CAE, CSP**  
Mary Byers, Inc.

As Mary Byers alluded to, human behavior remains a key ingredient in the formula or recipe for creating a successful event – virtual, face-to-face, or hybrid. The best way to come up with an actionable solution may be to simply ask your members/customers their preference for attending events. Asking them when, where, and how they prefer to meet can help eliminate a lot of wasted effort and frustration. Creating a poll that covers multiple potential scenarios can reveal the "right" solution for your organization today. One thing is for certain, it's never been more important to remain agile in determining how your organization should move forward.

Regardless of the direction you choose to pursue, CE21 has the tools and expertise to help you host the event that makes the most sense for your organization. Is it face-to-face, virtual, or hybrid? No matter the choice, we absolutely can create a plan for you!



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**Dr. Robert Schwartz, PdyD, DCEP**  
Executive Director of ACEP



**Rick Rutherford**  
VP of Industry Outreach

Rick works with association leaders to introduce them to CE21, and he uses his 35 years of association experience to help them determine how best to serve their members.

The needs around delivering continued education and membership management can change radically from one organization to the next. CE21's technology platform has been created from the ground up to be incredibly adjustable and flexible, allowing organizations to spend less time dwelling on “the how” and more time serving their clientele by reliably delivering high-quality content. With over **42M hours of streaming content on our platform**, CE21 has the extensive expertise to understand what makes a successful event and can help you design the right meeting environment for your organization.

## Did you know about CE21's diverse product line?



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