

THE VIRTUAL WORLD OF CONFERENCES: WHAT WE ARE HEARING FROM ASSOCIATIONS AND COMPANIES



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The era of big conferences is on hold as a result of Covid-19. Starting in March 2020 associations cancelled or postponed their face to face meetings to address health and safety concerns and accommodate attendees who could not travel. As of September 2020, this trend has continued with almost all the tracked education and ed tech conferences pivoting to a virtual format through December 31, 2020.

The extent of this change is wide reaching and its impact enormous. As industry analyst [Frank Catalano](#) notes “Of in-person events scheduled March onward, 87% have changed plans. This is not fun math or happy math. Some of these canceled industry or association events... are not coming back. ”

[NextChapter Consulting LLC](#) conducted a non-statistical survey between July 24 and August 12, 2020 to gain additional insight into this major shift and to understand how education and ed tech associations and companies are dealing with the new reality. (See Appendix 1) At this point in time, associations are still determining the best approach to ensure the value of their virtual events and identifying the most effective platform to use. Companies are also in flux, trying to decide which association events will provide them with the desired benefits.

Key findings:

- All the associations surveyed have shifted to the virtual conference format at least through January 2021.
- The registration and exhibitor/sponsorship costs charged by associations are less for a virtual conference.
- Though companies prefer face to face conferences, they will continue to support virtual events.
- Associations are working to provide companies participating in their virtual events with value add benefits.
- Robust networking and interaction with attendees are key elements that companies seek in the virtual format.
- This coming school year, companies plan to participate in fewer conferences.
- The world of virtual conferences brings both opportunities and challenges to associations and companies.

The Virtual World of Conferences: What We Are Hearing from Associations and Companies was independently researched and produced by [NextChapter Consulting, LLC](#). I am grateful to Ellen Bialo ([IESD, Inc.](#)), Lisa Schmucki ([edWeb](#)) and Charlene Blohm ([CBlohm Associates](#)) for help in disseminating the survey and to Linda Winter ([The Winter Group](#)) for her review and advice .

I hope that this survey will be good baseline information as we continue to follow future developments. Happy to answer questions and work with you on navigating the current environment.

Irene K. Spero CEO, [NextChapter Consulting, LLC](#) ispero@erols.com September 2020

FINDINGS

Making the pivot: The shift to the virtual conference format (at least through January 2021) is complete

All the associations surveyed have switched to a virtual format for conferences taking place before January 1. In addition, 30 other education and edtech associations were tracked to determine their plans. Again, they all will be convening virtual conferences, instead of in person events, during this time period.

Many of the conferences scheduled after January 2021 are still moving ahead with the face to face format. However, planners indicate that they will incorporate virtual elements – presumably to make it easier if a more complete switch is necessary later and to encourage attendance by those unable to travel. (See Appendix 2)

A changing financial model: Associations are lowering the registration and exhibiting costs for virtual conferences

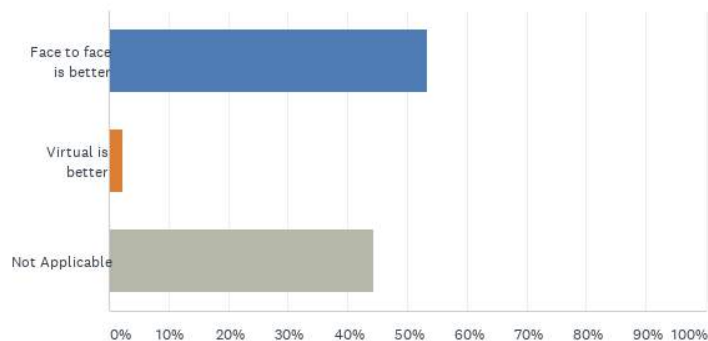
Though there are considerable costs associated with holding a virtual conference, these costs are quite different from those involved with an in-person event. Facility charges, food and beverage, exhibit hall logistics and AV needs are largely absent or minimized in the virtual environment. As a result, associations are making the decision to charge attendees less for registration and reducing the exhibiting and sponsorship costs for companies.



Understanding company preferences: Companies choose face to face events

Over half of the companies (53%) surveyed preferred face to face events. It is important to note that 40% of the companies questioned had not yet participated in a virtual event at the time of the survey and, therefore, could not respond based on experience.

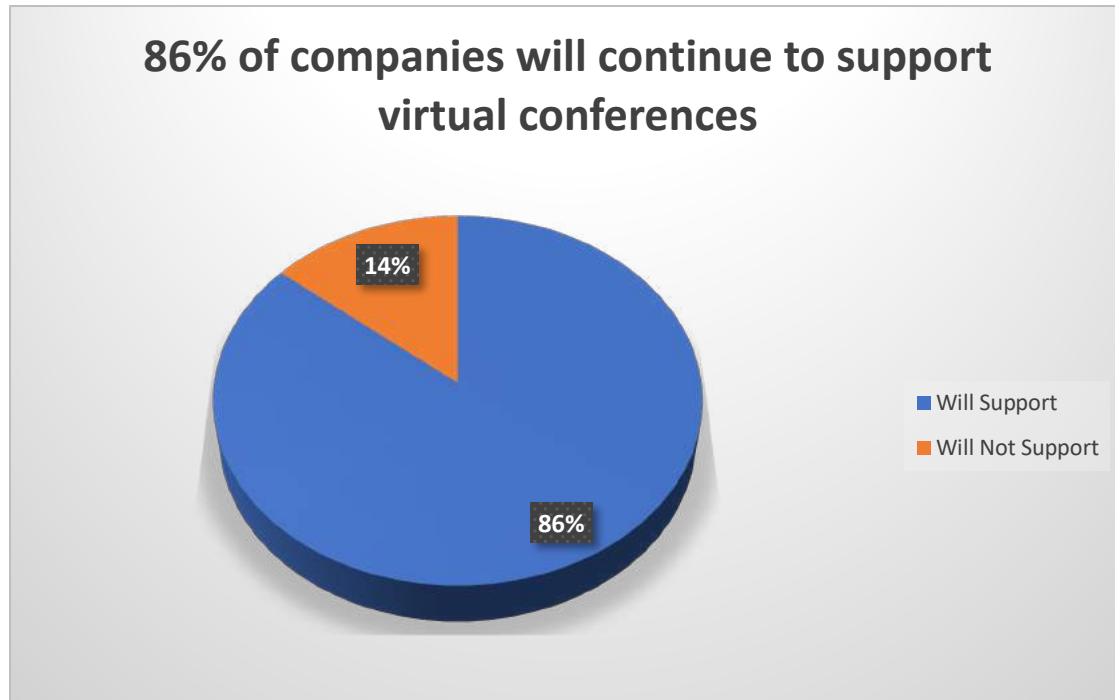
Q8 If your company has sponsored or exhibited at both virtual and face-to-face conferences, how would you compare the two experiences?



In time this preference might change as companies participate in more virtual events and have an opportunity to compare the two formats. .

Continuing support: Companies plan to keep on participating in virtual conferences

Despite their preferences, almost 90% of the companies surveyed plan to continue supporting events that are virtual in format. In the absence of another alternative, exhibiting, attending and sponsoring these conferences remain an important opportunity for companies to provide necessary support for their association partners.



Providing value: Associations are working to offer companies benefits

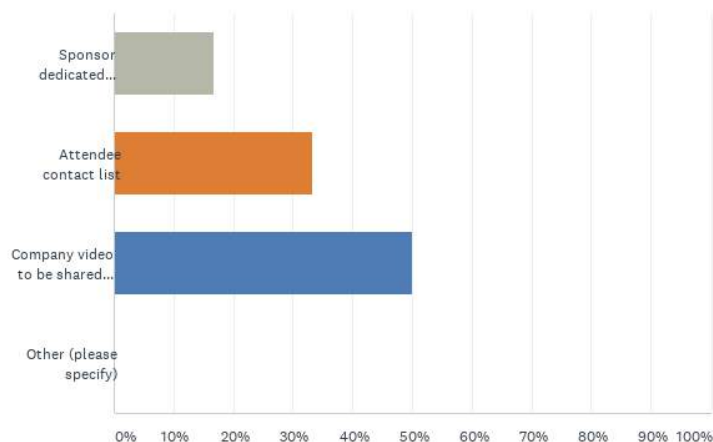
In the world of face to face conferences, companies view attendance and involvement as an opportunity to meet with existing customers, cultivate new business relationships, gain visibility for their products and services, learn about the latest ed tech trends and network with each other.

Virtual conferences can never provide the same level of benefits that occur in the face to face environment.

"If exhibitors are unable to get the true face-to-face time that is so valuable at an in person event, then we want to ensure they still have access to the 2nd most valuable offering – leads," Heidi Ellis, Senior Director, Membership and Partnership Strategy, ISTE, notes. "Ensuring that our exhibitors can track who visits their virtual booth and giving many opportunities for attendees to provide lead tracking information allows exhibitors to follow up and interact after the event.... And maintain the same level of engagement that they would have had in person. "

Associations are working hard to make the virtual experience of value and benefit to companies. The most common benefits are sponsor dedicated gallery page with company logos, descriptions and contact information, company video to be shared with conference attendees and attendee contact list for post event follow up.

Q9 What “value add” options are you considering for virtual sponsors?



Other strategies being implemented by associations include:

- Virtual exhibit halls
- Session and speaker recordings to be accessed after the event
- Break out rooms, virtual focus groups, virtual sponsor rooms and virtual social events to promote engagement
- Sponsor promotions via e mail and social media prior to the conference
- Sponsorship opportunities for visibility and involvement throughout the year, not just at the event
- Extra promotional time at the event with a “Shark Tank” approach
- Video chat features to connect attendees with company representatives
- Virtual sponsor rooms where companies can host content for the duration of the meeting

Because the pivot to virtual conferences was sudden last March and new for the groups surveyed, associations are still working to implement an approach that will give companies the benefits they want. These benefits are so new -- and it is very much a work in progress unproven in terms of effectiveness and value to companies.

Improving the virtual conference experience: Networking and interaction with attendees are the missing ingredients

Virtual conferences cannot replicate the in-person experience. Long established and familiar practices need to be adapted to the changing environment.

Companies have clear ideas about what is missing and how the experience can be improved. In the survey and subsequent interviews, companies shared wide ranging recommendations for associations to consider as they plan future virtual events.

- Expanded **interaction** with better ways to connect with all attendees, but particularly one on one opportunities with those who are most relevant to the company's products and services.
Joyce Whitby, President, Innovations4Education hoped that associations *"will make it their job to help connect educators with the solution providers. That means providing ample opportunities for publishers and solution providers to meet and network with educators. Nobody is benefitted by a logo placement, or banner ad, it is a waste of precious marketing dollars. Solution selling is all about relationships, and ideally these associations need to create opportunities for face to face discussions, presentations, networking and more."*
- **Full participation** with more opportunities for companies to take part in all aspects of the event, including a chance to present. Offer additional networking. facilitated small group interactions and just in time responding. Give attendees incentives to visit exhibitors
- Increased **visibility** with better promotion prior to the event and recognition on the website. Showcase products and services with sponsor slides, exhibit hall and acknowledgement during the conference by speakers.
- Improved **event platform** that will be interactive, engaging and generate excitement.
- **Better scheduling** that considers pacing and screen fatigue with shorter sessions and days and scheduling during the week, rather than on a weekend. Balance the amount of presentation time with networking time so that there are opportunities to connect with customers and participate in the exhibits.

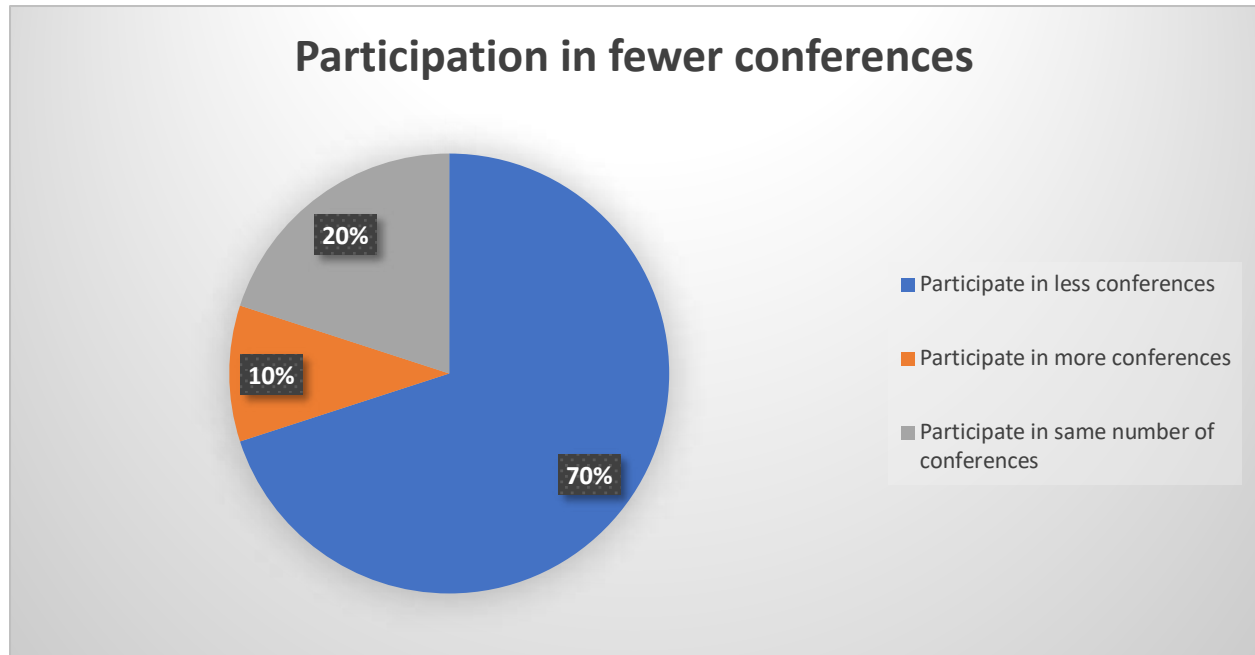
Sarah Segrest, Director of Business Development, The Douglas Stewart Company stressed that is essential to *"think about a virtual event differently; don't just cut and paste what you've done before with traditional in-person events."*

Danielle Alcaraz, Senior Director of National Partnerships, DreamBox Learning Inc. called for *"Short, interactive, relevant presentations led by enthusiastic, engaging presenters ... If people are not hooked right away, we risk them logging off and not coming back."*

Planning for the future: Companies will be participating in fewer conferences this coming year

Virtual events are here to stay – at least for the short term. When – or if – we will ever return to the days in which our calendars were filled with travel to large conference is unclear. In this interim and somewhat uncertain time, companies will continue to support virtual conferences, but to a lesser degree.

Companies plan to take part in fewer conferences this coming year, with 70% indicating their plans to cut back on participation, 20% planning the same number of events, and only 10% saying they will take part in more conferences.



Opportunities and challenges ... and room for innovation

The impact of COVID-19 on meetings and events was sudden and dramatic. By necessity, the immediate reaction to these unprecedented and unexpected changes was reactive. Organizations are now moving beyond the defensive mode and beginning to assume a more proactive approach.

"This is a pivotal moment where educators, associations and companies must rethink and reimagine how we do our work and connect with each other. "Keith Krueger, CEO, CoSN, observes, "Given the pandemic, this will be done virtually for the coming months and perhaps longer. That requires more than converting traditional f2f to be online. CoSN is working hard to lead on innovation and imagine engaging virtual benefits for our members and partners."

The current environment provides **opportunities**

Reaching a wider audience

Association leaders see virtual conferences as a way of reaching more attendees.

"Virtual events are not constrained by place and time - content can be made on demand for viewing later, individuals who couldn't afford to travel to the in person event can now tune in from their home, and the ability to reach worldwide increases as the only barrier is access to internet, translates into opportunity ' according to Heidi Ellis, Senior Director, Membership and Partnership Strategy, ISTE.

Maria Armstrong, Executive Director, ALAS notes that *"A virtual conference is recorded and available to be viewed by the participant at their leisure. In-person conferences only allow attendance to a handful of workshops. So in essence, you can gain the information of the entire conference."*

The hope is that the larger attendance of new registrants at a virtual conference will lead “the first timers ..to like it enough to register when we are back in person,” Todd Mann, Executive Director ,Magnet Schools of America observes.

Reinventing and transforming the conference experience

Companies are using the changed environment as an opportunity to re-evaluate and re-invent the how and why of conferences.

This shift, according to Sarah Segrest, Director of Business Development, The Douglas Stewart Company, is chance *“to look at a component of a conference (e.g. networking) and think about how we can replicate the best parts of that (e.g. meeting new people you didn’t plan on meeting, and discovering new opportunities as a result) in new and interesting ways with the technology we have access to.”*

Expanded outreach

The virtual format makes it possible to harness the technology for widespread outreach across the nation and around the world.

“People can attend from anywhere either synchronously or asynchronously to learn content, collaborate on solutions, and gain ideas for meeting constituent needs. Travel costs and time away from work are no longer as necessary in the virtual conference setting”, notes Danielle Alcaraz, Senior Director of National Partnerships, DreamBox Learning Inc.

But there are also real **challenges**

Overcoming the Technical Issues

The technical challenge is real.

“For in-person meetings, our staff is well-schooled on handling most things. Not so for virtuals” according to Todd Mann, Executive Director, Magnet Schools of America.

There is also the challenge of combining and integrating a vast number of different tools to cover all aspects of the meeting, according to Heidi Ellis, Senior Director, Membership and Partnership Strategy. *“One tool/platform doesn’t do it all and it has been a challenge to figure out which tools we need to combine to get our desired user experience. Figuring out how our streaming service can be support by a more robust Q&A application integration, how our customer service chat will sync with our networking video/chat feature, and deciding which session will be webinar format vs. meeting format are just a few example. Then adding the layer of making sure your attendees and presenters understand the technology you have put together.... It’s all uncharted territory. “*

Reaching Customers

Companies are trying to determine the best way to be heard in the “overwhelming digital environment. Customers, existing and new, are saturated with digital communications, which means branding is more important than ever. SEO optimization is critical because prospects need to be able to find you. Consistency in messaging and market differentiation is key, and that means your website must be better

than ever. It should contain everything your customers need -- intuitive navigation, excellent product information and relevant resources that can be used immediately. “Kathy Hurley, CEO, Kathy Hurley Consulting LLC observes.

It is also difficult to find a way of communicating that works well for everyone and navigates the sensitivity around when and why customers do and do not want to hear from companies.

Sarah Segrest, Director of Business Development, The Douglas Stewart Company notes that *“We’re dealing with this by overlaying multiple channels of communication in (hopefully) new and interesting ways that are convenient and useful for the audience. Also we’re being mindful of the current needs of our customers, and are trying to align communications around those needs (meaning not pitching them a new product that doesn’t make sense for them right now).”*

Building Relationships

The challenge of building relationships between educators and solution providers is complicated in a digital world.

Danielle Alcaraz, Senior Director of National Partnerships, DreamBox Learning Inc. noted that *“The screen can be a barrier to authentic connections. Having that awareness is really important as well as acknowledging it upfront with clients. So much of our work is relationship driven and we need to continue to pursue that in the online environment. I would mix it up by holding some meetings via zoom, some over the phone, and some by email. A multi-pronged approach to account for different styles and personality types will likely improve the outcomes for reaching a variety of customers.”*

Some further thoughts

There is still a great deal of uncertainty about the future of conferences – how and when they will take place and what organizational structures will be used. Against this background of uncertainty, companies are trying to plan their marketing and events budgets for the school year. Associations are making the pivot to virtual conferences as they try to adjust to this new reality and deliver events that will meet the needs of their members and satisfy exhibitors and sponsors.

The survey results raise several questions that are important for future exploration and understanding.

- Companies are planning to participate in fewer conferences this coming year. Will companies find an alternative way to reach existing and potential customers in a world without in person gatherings? What are the options for companies?
- Associations are charging lower registration and exhibitor fees for virtual event, thus impacting an essential revenue stream for their organizations. How will associations be able to remain financially sound with virtual conferences providing less in revenue from registration fees, exhibiting and sponsorships? Will there be a new revenue model for virtual conference/?
- Associations pivoted to the virtual format out of necessity as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Will associations continue to hold virtual conferences once the pandemic is over and it is safe to convene in person events? Is the pivot to virtual conferences permanent?

Over the next several months [NextChapter Consulting](#) will continue to monitor conference trends in the ed tech space and identify key shifts and changes taking place. Let me know if you are interested in working together on gathering this information.

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Appendix 1

Survey for companies

1. Has your company participated in a face-to face conference as an exhibitor or sponsor in the last 3-6 months?
 - If yes, when was the last time you participated?
 - Which conference(s)?
2. Has your company participated in a virtual conference as an exhibitor or sponsor?
 - If not, why not?
 - If yes, which conference (s)?
3. How would you rate the value and over all experience of the virtual conference on a scale of 1 to 5 with 5 being the highest rating
4. If your company has sponsored or exhibited at both virtual and face-to-face conferences, how would you compare the two experiences?
 - Face to face is better
 - Virtual is better
 - Please explain your response (open ended response)
5. What can be done to improve the virtual conference experience for
 - exhibitors and sponsors?
 - attendees?
6. Will you continue to support virtual conferences?
7. Does a virtual option make it “more affordable” to sponsor and/or exhibit?
8. Will you support more/less/same number of conferences for the 2020-21 school year?

Survey for Associations

1. Are you planning a face to face conference or meetings?
 - in 2020
 - in 2021
2. If yes, will your conferences include virtual and/or streaming components?
3. If no, will your conference be completely virtual?
4. Will the registrations costs of participating in a virtual conference vs face to face be
 - Same as face to face
 - Less than face to face
5. Will the exhibitors/sponsorship costs of participating in a virtual conference vs face to face be
 - Same as face to face
 - Less than face to face
6. What tools will you use to promote attendee engagement?
7. What tools will you use to promote sponsor/exhibitor interaction?
8. What “value add” options are you considering for virtual sponsors?
 - sponsor dedicated gallery page
 - attendee contact list
 - company video to be shared with conference attendees
 - virtual exhibit hall
 - coffee session meeting rooms
 - dedicated sponsor session

Appendix 2

Selected Ed Tech conferences through June 30, 2021 /listed chronologically /current 9/10

association	website	date	virtual	in person
ERDI	https://www.erdus.org/	9/14-17/20	YES	
ASU+GSV Summit	https://www.asugsvsummit.com/	9/29-10/1/20 and 10/8/20	YES	
ALAS	https://www.alasedu.org/	10/9-10/20	YES	
CGCS	https://www.cgcs.org/	10/13-17/20	YES	
ASTD	https://events1.social27.com/atdvirtualconference/home	10/26-30/20	YES	
Educause	https://events.educause.edu/annual-conference	10/27-29/20	YES	
Aurora Institute (iNacol)	https://aurora-institute.org/	10/26-28/20	YES	
SETDA	www.setda.org	11/ 16-18/20		YES
ISTE	https://conference.iste.org/2020/	11/29-12/5/20	YES	
California IT in Education (CITE)	https://cite.org/	11/16-20/20	YES	
ACTE (Association for Career and Technical Education)	https://www.careertechvision.com/index.cfm	12/1-4/20	YES	
Learn Launch	https://learnlaunch.org/	1/28-1/29/21		YES
BETT	https://www.bettshow.com/new-for-bett-2021	1/ 20-1/22/21		YES
FETC	https://www.fetc.org/	1/26-29/21		YES
TCEA	https://convention.tcea.org/about/who/	2/1-5/21		YES
AASA	https://aasa.org/2021cfp.aspx	2/18-20/21	YES	
CoSN	www.cosn.org	3/1-4/21		YES
NSBA	https://www.nsba.org/Events	4/10-12/21		YES
ISTE	www.iste.org	6/27-30/21		YES