REIMAGINING EVENTS
FOR THE **VIRTUAL WORLD**

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INTRODUCTION:

Never underestimate the power of a well planned event.

Annual conferences, trade shows, and meetings are great ways for organizations and associations to create engagement between customers and members, build brand awareness, and bring people together to network and share ideas.

But in the spring of 2020, the ability to host in-person events came to an abrupt halt. Virtual is now the new normal, and there's been a rapid rise in the demand for virtual events as many organizations have discovered that they can experience the same benefits, if not better, by moving their events online.

When planning your virtual event, you'll have to think outside the box. Virtual is not the same as in-person, so plan your event to take full advantage of the benefits the virtual format offers. This is the smartest way to create a worthwhile and memorable experience for your attendees and exhibitors.

PLANNING YOUR VIRTUAL EVENT:
WHAT YOU NEED TO CONSIDER

There is growing evidence that virtual conferences are here to stay well beyond the pandemic. So, are you ready to plan your own?

In this white paper, we'll go over 7 aspects to consider to make sure your organization reaps all the benefits a virtual event has to offer.

SPEAKERS & TOPICS:

Content is king — especially in a virtual event.

When you're finalizing your topics and speakers, remember that your goal is to entertain and engage, so your content should be shorter than it would be in person. (More on that in the next section.)

Another important point: Typically, presenters draw some of their energy from their live audience and feed it back. Virtual presentations are a different ballgame. As you consider different speakers, presenters, and emcees, choose people who have experience presenting online and, if they're new to the virtual game, be prepared to work with them to hone their style to better suit a virtual audience.

Another thing you'll need to consider: live vs. on-demand content.

In general, the more high profile or central presentations (announcements, keynotes, etc.) should be presented live whenever possible. If they are recorded, they should be played at a scheduled time during the event.

Of course, if your audience is global, it may be difficult to find a time that's convenient for everyone. In these cases, you can make presentations available for viewing as videos-on-demand for a certain period after they stream live.

CONTENT:

When planning a successful virtual event, attendee experience should be priority #1.

At an in-person event, just being in the room — being part of a live audience and listening to a compelling speaker — can be an engaging, invigorating experience. View that same presentation on a screen from your home computer, and the experience runs the risk of feeling low-energy, disconnected — even boring.

To avoid this scenario:

• Keep sessions shorter. When determining content length, consider your audience's interest level in the topic and how much variety you can incorporate into the presentation to hold their attention.

• Mix things up. Even the best online speaker can run on after an hour of speaking straight into the camera, so add bonus footage or concise, professional-level slides. This will create visual variety and emphasize specific points in the presentation.

• Add engagement sessions. Break up your content by adding a panel discussion and Q&A session at the end of presentations. Your audience will be more likely to stick around if they know there will be additional opportunities for engagement.

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Before the Event

Unlike in-person events where people register weeks (or even months) in advance, virtual registration typically hits its peak one to two weeks before the event.

Schedule content to be released prior to the start of your event to lay the groundwork and help your audience prepare. Similarly, you can trickle out content after the event has wrapped, to sustain interest and keep engagement high.

During the Event

To avoid "screen fatigue," make sure your event schedule covers a wide variety of topics — and deliver content in bite-size portions.

By keeping virtual conferences concise (translation: not spanning an entire day from 9am – 5pm like an in-person event), more people can attend despite their time zone.

Attendance for a virtual conference is usually highest the first day, so you'll want to present the best content early in the schedule. From there, think about the schedule as if you were an attendee: Which days and times would work best for you? How much time would you be willing to invest in attending a virtual conference? Answering these questions or posing them to a small focus group will help you develop a schedule that's more likely to appeal to a variety of registrants.

ENGAGEMENT:

At a virtual event, the more participation you have, the better. Period.

An easy avenue to boost engagement: Q&A sessions.

Send an email to registrants before your event to encourage them to send in any questions they have about your industry, or allow them to submit them through your event's social media pages. When you announce breakout sessions or special panel discussions on your website, Facebook, and LinkedIn pages, suggest that questions be left in the comments or shared with you via direct message or email.

During a live event, it's often too distracting for a presenter to keep track of real-time questions. To help your speakers, assign a moderator to read and filter the questions that come in.

Another simple way to facilitate networking and engagement is to make room for it in your programming. Create virtual meeting spaces, happy hours, and breakout sessions — even a virtual lobby or lounge where people can "go" between sessions.

Do your best to avoid scheduling keynote speakers, exhibitions, and tutorials back to back. With room to breathe, participants can chat and connect with one another during your virtual event just like they would at an in-person event.

SPONSORS & EXHIBITORS

Exhibitors and sponsors are vital to your event — and they shouldn't go away just because you're moving to a virtual format. In fact, quite the opposite.

Increased Attendee Interaction

In a virtual setting, your exhibitors and sponsors have the opportunity to be in front of attendees the instant the site is live. Their dedicated pages should include downloadable materials, videos, and contact information, and encourage networking through comment boards, live chat, or virtual networking rooms. Even after your event is over, the event portal can be used for continued exposure for weeks or months — or however long as you choose to keep it open and available.

Less Staff, More Reach

At a virtual event with recorded content, there's more structure — meaning your sponsors will receive the bulk of their traffic during specific windows of time throughout the day. They won't always need virtual staff on hand, which is a benefit that saves them time, and oftentimes, money.

Innovative Sponsorship Opportunities

You can also offer unique sponsorship opportunities and "experiences" designed specifically for online events. Some examples include sponsored sessions, contests, virtual happy hours, email marketing campaigns, professionally recorded video content, and hosted networking events.

Sponsor & Exhibitor Coaching

To help them make the most of the virtual-event experience, coach your sponsors and exhibitors on how to engage virtually with attendees. Provide them with tips for making their virtual booths or exhibits more attractive and entertaining, and work with them to encourage engagement through chat, polling questions, story sharing, or testimonials.
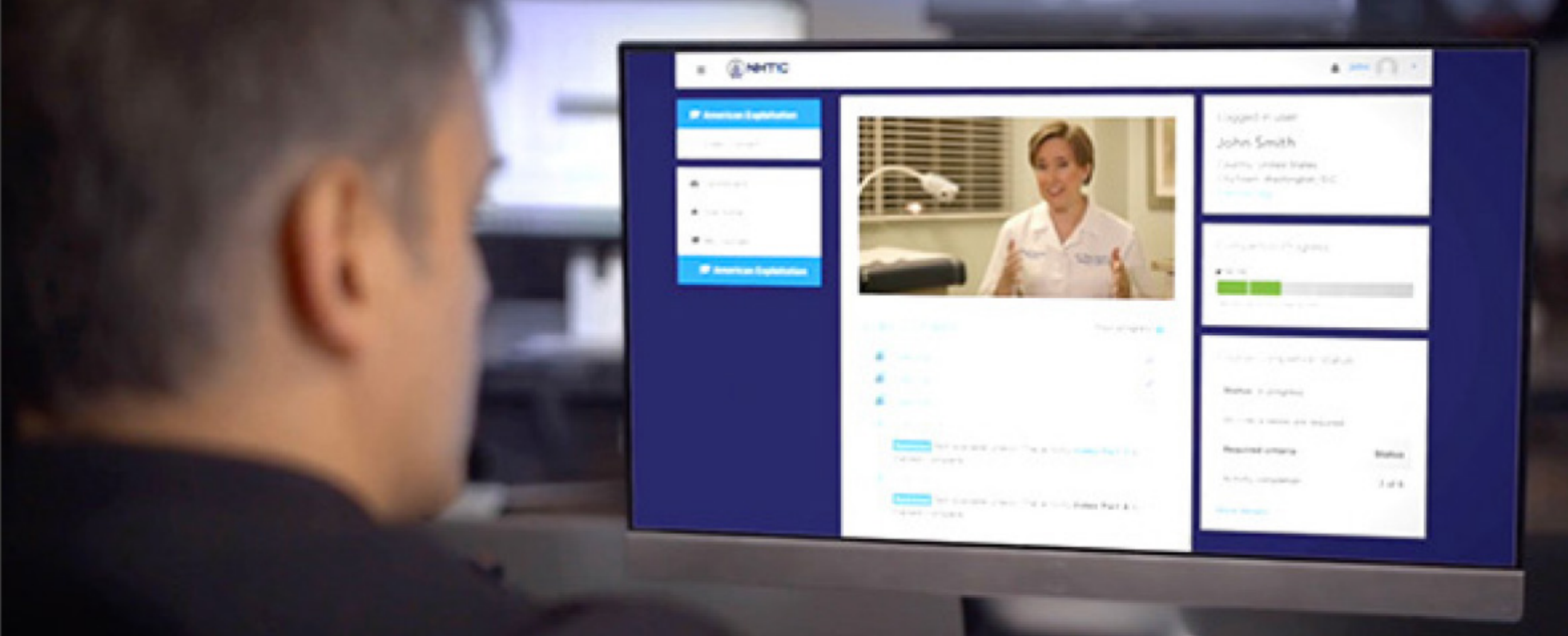
MARKETING EVENT ATTENDEES, SPONSORS & EXHIBITORS

As we stated earlier, your marketing and promotional efforts don't have to span as long as they would for an in-person event, but they do have to be effective.

First, determine the key selling points your event has to offer, focusing on key speakers, exhibitor information, and opportunities for networking. That value proposition — especially when you're promoting a type of event many have not experienced — is critical. Set up a web page for your event, share the schedule, and highlight event details using email and social media.

Rely on your speakers to get the word out as well. Presenters often double as influencers, so provide them with the details they need to become event ambassadors and share with their own personal networks. Also create an event hashtag for people to use before and during the event to encourage communication and information sharing.

AFTER THE EVENT

After your event has wrapped, you still have the opportunity to promote engagement and, ultimately, bring in revenue.

Consider leaving your networking channels open after the event. This allows attendees to catch up on any missed keynote speakers, virtual demonstrations, and networking opportunities.

You can even take this opportunity a step further and use your ongoing community to create buzz for future events — ask them what they liked best about a previous event, what they want to see in the future, what formats interest them most, and what speakers will get them to sign up.

Any content created during the event — videos, presentations, demonstrations — can also be used to further promote the event once it's over. Let that content "live" on your webpage moving forward (and promote it from time to time via social media or email), and you'll continue to drive traffic to your site and promote engagement.

THE CREATIVE VIRTUAL EXPERIENCE

At ISG Solutions, we believe your virtual events should be engaging, entertaining, and productive.

Our full-service offering delivers:

The best of both worlds by combining premium video content with live, real-time user engagement and Q&As.

Increased engagement. We populate your event website with session previews, exhibitor teasers, and sponsor showcases — all on the day you announce your event. During your event, attendees can engage with sponsors and exhibitors through Q&As, small group sessions, educational seminars, and virtual meetups.

Viral networking at its best. Attendees start connecting with one another as soon as they register. We can help you create virtual social experiences (think live wine tastings, contests, and video demos) that are memorable and have lasting impressions.

A streamlined attendee experience. Our user-friendly platform is designed to deliver an experience similar to the most popular streaming services and social networks.

Long-term monetization. By measuring engagement and recommending expanded viewing schedules for your participants, we can monetize your event long after it's over. We'll also go on-demand with certain segments of your content after your "live event" dates.

Certification from home. We track user activity that can be used to issue CEUs for certification programs. We're not an LMS, but we can feed data into yours.

Virtual events are here to stay. Let us help you get the most out of yours.
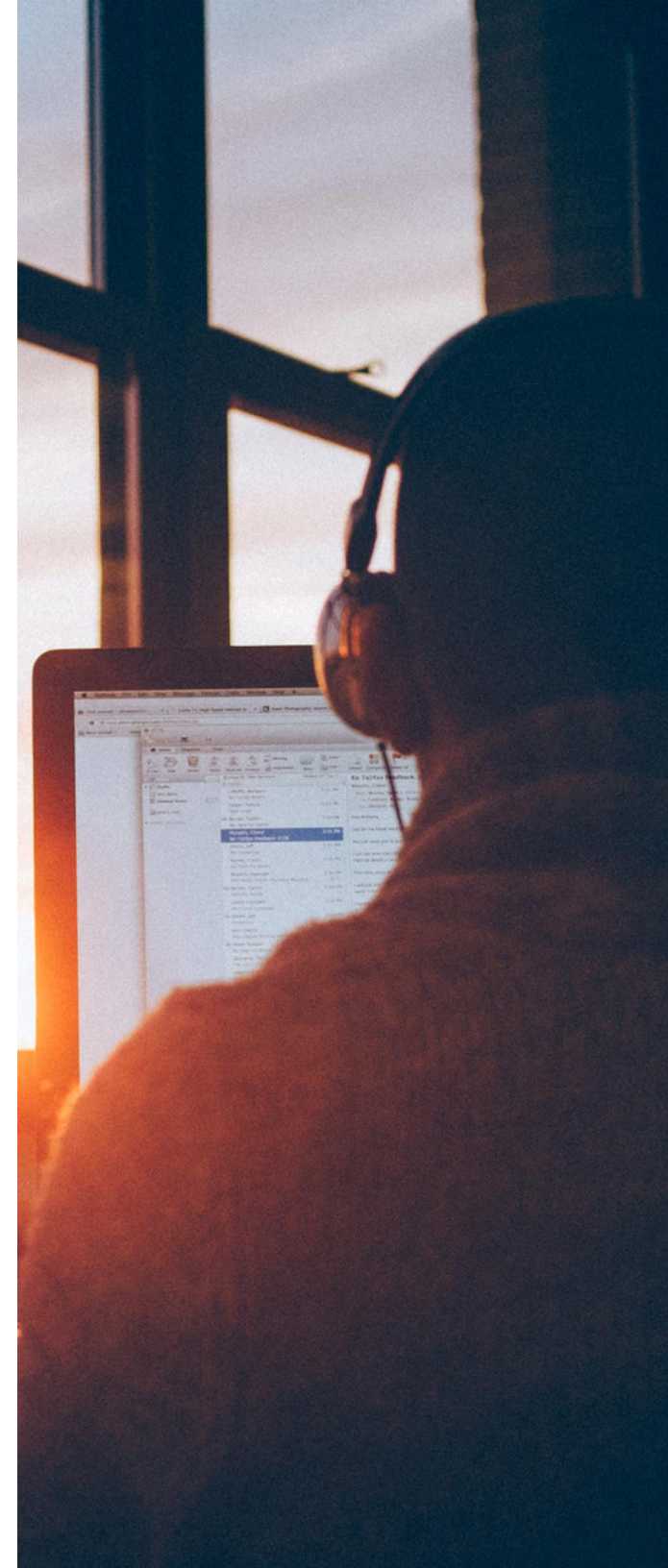
ABOUT US

ISG Solutions brings you the best in full-service events.

ISG Solutions is a software developer and solution provider that specializes in working with associations. For 30 years, ISG has delivered award-winning technology solutions customized to the needs of each association.

Our partner, Potomac Digital Group, works directly with speakers, sponsors, and your staff to provide video-based content so that attendees are on the front row of every session, demo, or networking event. PDG has produced marketing, interactive, and educational content for associations, government agencies, Fortune 500 CEOs, learning management systems, and startups for more than 30 years.

We welcome the opportunity to speak with you about your project, your goals, and your events.

To schedule a demo or receive more information, send us a message at mshankle@isgsolutions.com