GOING VIRTUAL WITH YOUR EVENT

AN INTERVIEW WITH INDUSTRY EXPERT EMMA KUHL PITTS

Virtual events present a great opportunity to reach those who can't gather in person, broaden your platform, and rethink the form and function of your meetings. But this is new territory for many meeting professionals. It's hard to know how to navigate this new space. So we've invited an industry expert to provide some guidance.

Emma Kuhl Pitts is founder, CEO and Creative Director of **PullSpark**, a strategic content agency in Atlanta. PullSpark creates fully immersive experiences through events, films and campaigns, helping clients thrive in virtual and live spaces. Emma and her team pride themselves in being expert memory makers.

What benefits and opportunities do virtual events provide?

Virtual events have become so prolific over the past few months. In fact, for most of the events industry, virtual has become the new normal. While some are resorting to the virtual world out of necessity - we see virtual as an *opportunity* to be seized. There are so many benefits to virtual events for your attendees, your messaging, and even revenue streams for your company. An immediate benefit of going virtual with your event is an increase in participants. In-person events can tend to be limited by your attendee's ability to both travel and afford the commitment of time and resources to attend your event. Virtual events can oftentimes double or triple attendees, and expand it geographically. You may have an untapped national or even global audience that you are now able to reach because of a virtual event.

So much content has moved online these days. From Netflix to Masterclass, content distributors have decided to meet their audience *where they are.* This is another added benefit of virtual events. Content that you stream live can be made available on-demand for later viewing, with the potential of adding an additional revenue stream for your organization. What was a live virtual event can be swiftly positioned as a digital offering, and a way to continue to engage with your attendees. The opportunities are really endless if you're willing to get creative and surround yourself with partners who have experience and expertise in the digital space.

Hybrid Event
An event that has both in-person and virtual attendees.

Run of Show
Your program content; what your attendees will experience.

Platform
Where your video player is held, and the site your attendees interact with as they participate in your event.

Bandwidth
Just like you need physical space for an in-person event, you need the space for a virtual event. Each participant uses a certain amount of data or bandwidth that must be considered in your budget.

Q ▷ How should planners program for a virtual event? How might content change?

Virtual event planning starts with largely the same approach as in-person events, with asking vital questions, like: *What is our vision, values and goals? Who is our audience, and what will connect with them? What experiences are most important?*

You are creating an experience for your attendees based on your goals and values. What's important is that you thoughtfully consider your programming through your attendees' eyes. Just like you adapt your programming for a new city, or a new conference center, you adapt for this new virtual space. Think about the user's experience from their home, and how you will keep them engaged and connected to your community. Chances are you'll need to implement a little different programming style. That's okay–see this as a new opportunity for you to get creative!

Make sure the goals and priorities for your event and programs is solidified before picking the platform. Your programming goals must be clear so you can pick a platform or platforms that fit. I will share more about platforms in the next question.

Q ▷ Should I consider a tech partner to help broadcast my event? (Can't I just stream it myself?)

The first thing to understand is there are two types of virtual events. First, there is the **web based platform** of virtual events. This type of event uses personal web cams and is all done from the comfort of home. This type of event uses platforms like WebX, Microsoft Teams, and is often referred to as a Zoom call or webinar. For this, we recommend hiring a consultant who has in-depth knowledge of these products and can help you create and manage your virtual event.

The second type is a **broadcast event**. This is when you ABSOLUTELY want to hire someone who has experience in streaming. Quality and access to the stream depends on the partner you chose. Not only are you hiring them to consult you on your event, but they must shoot live video and stream it to the internet using a custom video player or service provider. The advantage of having a custom video player is you are not at the mercy of an out-of-the-box company where it's difficult to get in touch with customer support. Custom video players also give participants an experience that feels like you have your own channel, with custom content curated for your attendees. It also enables you to use tailored graphics to highlight sponsors and draw more interactivity.

Whether you stream through a customer video player, Vimeo or another out-of-the-box solution, you will most likely pay for **bandwidth**. The needed bandwidth is determined by the number of people watching and for how long. So, it's important to partner with a platform that has **a single user login** to ensure that people don't share a login, which will drive up bandwidth cost.

ⓠ ▷ How does sponsorship, workshops, and trade shows work in virtual space?

I honestly believe sponsors have the potential to get so much more out of a virtual event. Think of your almost everyday experience with sponsors. Anytime you watch ESPN GAME DAY, which logo do you see all over the screens? That's right - The Home Depot. The same way The Home Depot is the presenting sponsor for GAME DAY, you can have presenting sponsors for sessions, keynotes etc. They can have bumpers and tickers like you see on the news.

Virtual events shouldn't be just one thing happening at a time. Think about the world we live in. When you watch the news, Youtube, or Netflix, how many other things are you really watching or doing at the same time? Broadcast experiences are very stimulating,

with multiple points of interaction. Your event should be no different. Sponsors and points of connection should be everywhere.

Similarly, your trade-show floor, one-on-one meetings, networking and attendee connection all can still be, and should be, prioritized in the virtual space. There are several platforms and apps that can assist in all of this. Companies are investing heavily in virtual event connectivity – it is advancing quickly to meet the growing demand.

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"It is more than possible to make virtual events interactive and personal, in some ways it is easier than live events!"

ⓠ ▷ How do you make virtual events interactive and personal?

I think interactivity is the key to a successful virtual event. From social media to hosting segments, there are countless ways for your attendees to feel like they are personally connected to your event.

Incorporating a LIVE broadcast from a studio provides greater opportunities for real time interaction with attendees. For instance, an attendee's face and name could appear on a scrolling sidebar when they login. Instead of just being an anonymous viewer, they've just become a name, and feel more a part of the experience. Giveaways, polls, social callouts, real time Q&A with your speakers–interactive moments and attendee engagement should be woven into every piece of your live event.

We recently produced The Global Leadership Summit virtual conference for over 70,000 people. We had a

mix of live and pre-recorded speakers sharing stories of leadership transformation. We anchored the entire conference with two live hosts who were able to interact with attendees during the conference. For example, after each keynote, our hosts called out attendee reactions and questions posted to social media as we displayed them on screen, integrating them into the experience.

We also had polling throughout the entire two day conference on related topics that was updated on screen live. In addition to these elements, our hosts would also weave in stories and comments attendees shared in the chat area of the platform. It is more than possible to make virtual events interactive and personal, in some ways it is easier than live events!

VIRTUAL EVENTS DO'S AND DONT'S

DO let your creativity run wild!

DO keep your attendees engaged. A one hour in-person keynote should be 25-30 in virtual.

DO plan to learn something new! You won't get it all right the first time - every event is an opportunity to learn.

DON'T assume you will spend less on production just because it's virtual.

DON'T always offer your event for free - your content still holds value.

DON'T think your event starts and ends with your live stream - how are you marketing, how are you following up, how can your content keep working for you?

What are the biggest challenges and pitfalls of virtual events?

The biggest pitfall is thinking that everything you've done in person will translate perfectly to virtual. *Programming has to be adapted for new environments.* For many, virtual events are uncharted territory. It can be nerve-racking to plan and program for a space you don't have experience in. That's why it's so crucial to find the right partner who has experience and can help you adapt.

Another big challenge is finding a production team that truly understands virtual events. Many production companies are "now streaming" but just started doing this due to the change in the market. Event production is different in a virtual world, even more so when you are providing live content. For example, mixing audio for a band in a large room with a live audience is completely different than mixing it for a live stream. So, it's crucial to partner with a production team who has experience in online events.

How do you think virtual events will evolve in the next five years?

People are realizing right now that virtual events aren't going anywhere. While many are entering this space as a necessity, they soon realize the lasting benefits. Even when in-person events fully resume, organizations will incorporate virtual space into everything they do. In the coming years, most in-person events will become hybrid events. Technologies and apps for virtual space is improving in capacity and ease of use with each day, making entry into virtual space even easier and more accessible. I think the biggest evolution and innovation will come through new ways for attendee engagement. At PullSpark we are following this closely and excited to learn and incorporate what is next.