

Insights from our Virtual Networking Incubator

Host Your Own Meaningful Networking Events



**Data from the Virtual Networking Incubator, a partnership
by Matchbox Virtual Media and Kaiser Insights LLC**



BY AMANDA KAISER

In the Beginning

Many people ask us why we created the Virtual Networking Incubator. (Here's the quick story, although, in real life, it took us nearly six months to go from idea figment to actual event).

First off, in case we haven't met yet, my name is Amanda. I'm a Member Engagement Specialist, which has had me on an endless quest to understand better how and why human beings engage in communities, online and during conferences.

I want to also introduce you to my partner in crime of this endeavor, Arianna. She is the CEO of Matchbox Virtual Media, which supports organizations producing virtual event experiences. Her background is in online community management, so she always approaches her work from the perspective of how the online space can facilitate meaningful connections.

During the early doldrums of the pandemic, we noticed that many virtual conferences excelled in education, but that was only one piece of the puzzle because pre-COVID, in-person meetings provided twice the value; **both education and networking**. During those early virtual conferences, networking was noticeably absent (and that made us sad and worried), so we started wondering what it would take to help attendees make meaningful connections, collaborate, and co-creation during online events.

The implications of virtual networking were such a driving force; I took a break from vacation to call Arianna. It was during that chat, the idea to host a Virtual Networking Incubator was born! I remember Arianna saying something like, "LET'S DO THIS!"

Fast forward many months of thinking of ideas, sharing ideas, tossing out ideas, and *yes and-ing* ideas, and we were finally ready for prime time. From February 11 to April 22, 150+ dedicated association leaders convened to experiment and ultimately create many modes of meaningful virtual networking events. The Incubator was part lab, part tech testing ground, part problem-solving event, with a dash of joy mixed in.

We need opportunities for levity, and fun, and silliness. No matter how serious your group may be, and your constituents may be, and the topic may be, we need moments where the community comes together and has a shared fun experience, or where they create something, they can take away. – a quote from an enthusiastic Incubator participant



Before We Put on Our Rose-Colored Glasses

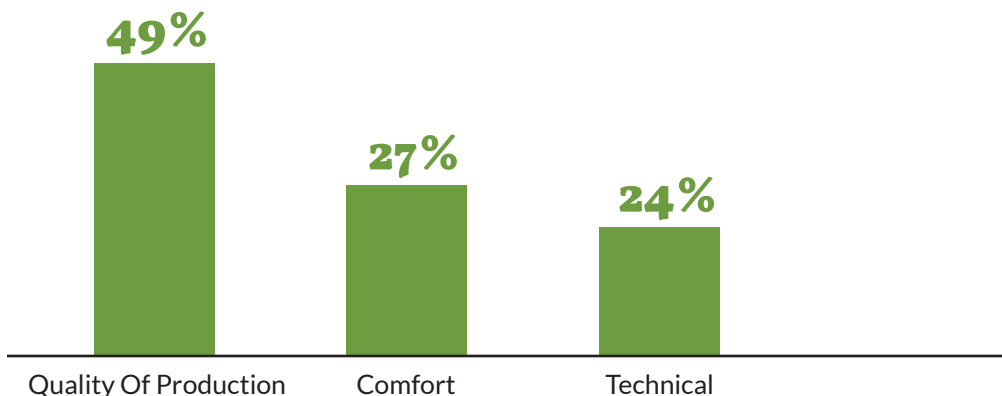
We know that nearly everyone in the association community has been struggling with hosting virtual networking events. Producing these events has been challenging, exhausting, and super nerve-wracking. We have a theory on why this is!

Virtual networking events are, in many ways, a totally new dynamic. Right now, you might be thinking, “I’ve formed some great relationships online.” Yes! (In fact, Arianna and I first met on Twitter many moons ago). Many of us have been networking virtually individually, but few organizations have been hosting actual. Virtual. Networking. Events.

So virtual networking events are new, and because they are new, we (the association community, the business community, the whole world) haven’t figured out how to do them well yet. Let’s unpack this.

We surveyed Incubator participants before the first live event, and nearly every respondent noted that the value of the experience for virtual networking events was not so hot. It was difficult to connect, make meaningful connections, and extend relationships beyond the event. One participant said it this way, “the impossibility of creating meaningful and serendipitous opportunities to connect virtually either in small groups or at scale. Everything virtually seems very staged and perfunctory.”

So why is the value of the experience so poor? Three reasons:



Most responses focused on quality of production, and this refers to how virtual networking events have mostly been planned and produced to date. Participants noted that the association community’s first attempts at virtual networking events force-fit the elements of in-person events online. For example, we tried to replicate in-person receptions on Zoom, but these felt forced and awkward like this, “some of the virtual networking events I’ve attended have not been well managed/organized. People were talking over each other, too much dead time/space, a bit chaotic, etc.” 😲

24% of the responses mentioned the technical constraints, primarily referring to the limitations of Zoom. For example, Zoom could not let participants pick their breakout group, A/B paring, autonomous movement, timing individual’s contribution, etc. A participant explained the limitations this way: “how do you create real, long-term connection in a limited time in what I feel is a limited format (small, square boxes).”

Because of the poor quality of production and technical constraints, participants often feel uncomfortable/awkward/embarrassed during virtual networking events. So uncomfortable they don’t engage or participate. Instead, they might lurk or not attend at all. We heard many comments like, “it’s hard to start a conversation,” and “conversations are awkward,” and participants wondered, “how do we make it not feel weird?”

Even now, virtual networking events are new. New things are always weird, awkward, and clunky (does anyone remember online bulletin boards and dial-up modems? Ugh!) The good news is now we know how to seriously increase the value of the experience by improving the quality of production and leap over any technical hurdles to make participants feel far more comfortable.



We Love Our Rose-Colored Glasses

You should know that we are very positively biased about the power of virtual networking. We see virtual networking as a way to help members start relationships, solve problems, and feel belonging within their communities. We think virtual networking can engage members, raise attendance, and promote in-person events. Anytime members need to find collaborators, get support, or normalize their experience, virtual networking can help. **We believe that virtual networking can provide lots of value to members who otherwise would not have the opportunity to connect because they don't have the time or budget to travel.**

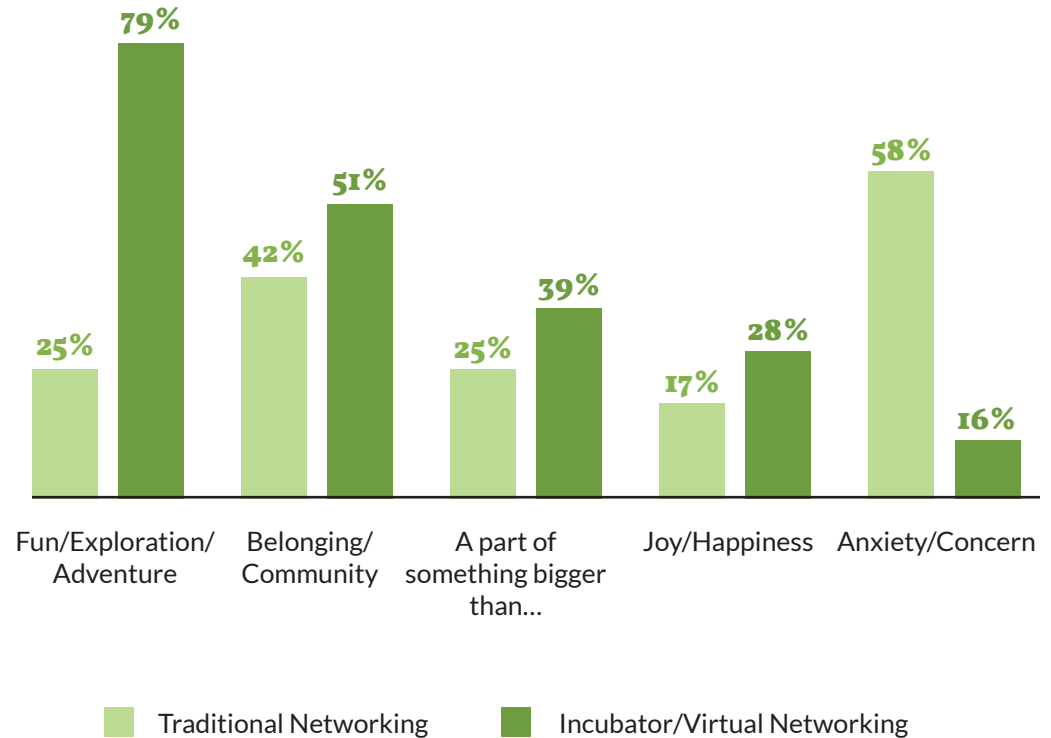
There's a phrase someone said that I wrote down, "blended equity." As we start to go back to live [events] and create these blended events, we have a real opportunity to use what we've learned to create more equity and create spaces that appeal to different people. The signature events that associations hold are very expensive, and these expenses create barriers. Hybrid can be a more inclusive activity because more members can be included. – a quote from a super thoughtful Incubator visionary

Not only that, but virtual networking also really works! (We can't wait to tell you about this next part!)

Data Shows Our Rose-Colored Glasses Are Fairly Accurate 🧐

We asked the Incubator participants to rate how traditional networking feels and asked the same set of questions at each live gathering. Here's the culmination of the responses.

What feelings does networking bring up for you?



Virtual networking can score higher for feelings like fun and belonging and lower for negative emotions like anxiety than traditional or reception-style networking. (Yay! Virtual Networking Events Work!) One caveat, though, some segments of your membership really, *really* miss the in-person reception-style networking events, and these folks are likely the ones who already have their networks in place. However, for many other members, virtual networking can have HUGE benefits.

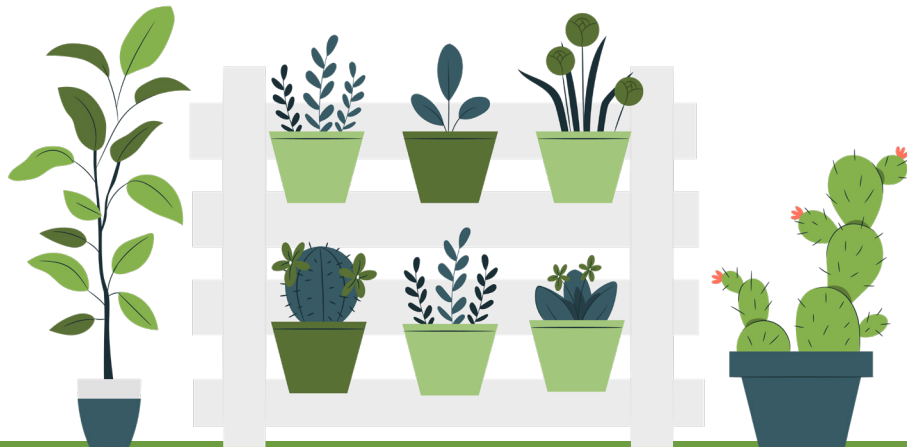
Not only can virtual networking provide value to new segments of your membership, but some critical elements of virtual networking events can also be adapted to future in-person events. We will show you how later in this report.

Post-COVID many associations can continue to provide their members value via virtual networking events. 44% of the Incubator participants said virtual networking will continue to be important in the future. In addition, 25% said that virtual networking is important during the pandemic and in the future. Only 30% said that virtual networking was only necessary for their members during the pandemic.

When asked what virtual networking could do for their community, crowd, flock, wolf-pack, participants said (in rank order):

1. Make and maintain connections
2. Build relationships and community
3. Foster engagement and collaboration

So YAY for virtual networking events! Now let's address the small, polka-dot, purple elephant in the room. How exactly do you host one of these unicorn events? Don't worry, read on!



Virtual Networking Events for Your Organization

We want to do everything we can to help you host your next super meaningful virtual networking event! In this report, we intend to provide you with actionable solutions that address your biggest worries about integrating virtual networking into your virtual events. (Well, maybe you are not worried, but we sure were, and in the following pages, you will see our biggest worries as we set out to host the Incubator).

So lay on our virtual couch and tell us what worries you most about hosting a virtual networking event.

We sure had some #ImposterSyndrome, and #WhatIfWeFail feelings like, what if we build it and no one comes? What if the technology fails? Or what if people attend but don't participate?

What if our events are too new, too frustrating, too corny, or too awkward?

Our job in this report is to help allay your deepest, darkest fears about hosting an entirely new (but super cool) kind of event.

While we zip off to crunch 942 data points, imagine this scenario –

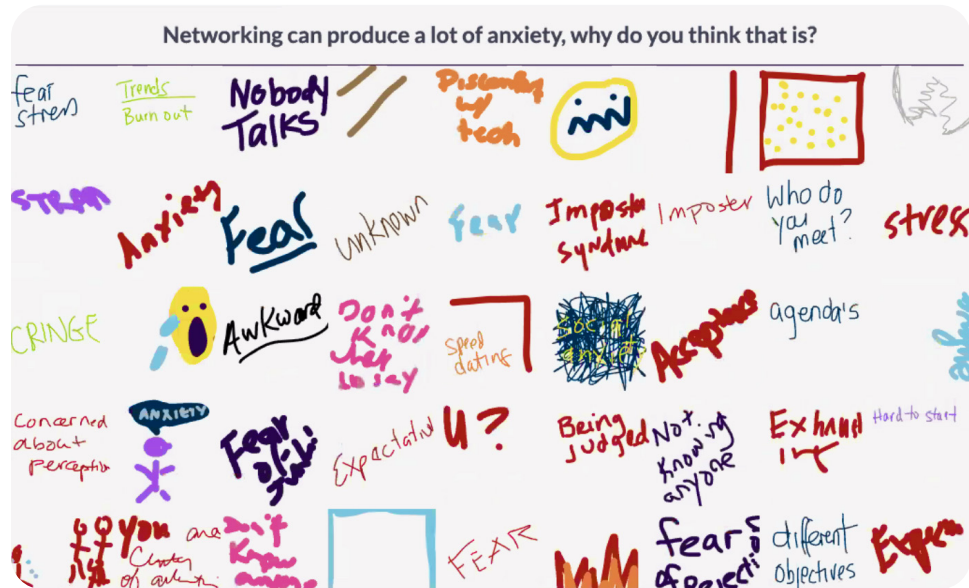
In three months, you enter a quick debrief Zoom meeting at the close of a super successful 60-minute virtual networking event that 300 members attended. The mood is jubilant because the schedule went as planned, the activities were fun and exciting, and the technology worked brilliantly. Members connected, and they also loved the experience and were not shy about saying so in the chat. Everyone is happy, including the executive director, the staff, the board.

Ahhhhhh! This fantastic daydream can be a reality!

Phew! We are back from crunching that mountain of data. We analyzed survey data, chat data (which, when there are hundreds of responses, is quite a bit like survey data), email analytics, feedback forms, and more. So, now that we have the goods, let's start tackling those worries one by one, shall we?

Will Participants Struggle with the Technology?

Networking can be scary enough on its own –



And on top of it, we want participants to learn a whole new technology!?!? So that's double intimidating, am I right?

After three + Zooms a day, every workday, for the last clown-car full of months, we're all getting pretty good at Zoom (well, I still find myself saying the most profound things while I'm on mute, but that's another story). You might remember that the Zoom learning curve was kind of protracted and a little painful, and many professionals didn't like it all that much. So,

what happens when we start to introduce different virtual networking technologies? Will members love the new technology, or will they have to slog painfully through another learning curve?

Lots of New Technology Can Do What Zoom Can't Do

There are just some things that are hard to do on Zoom. It's hard to facilitate small groups, and it is impossible to break people out into one-to-one conversations; participants cannot move autonomously from conversation to conversation. Other platforms have solved some of these problems. For example, tools like [Piccles](#) help communities come together over common topics creatively or [Circles](#), built for super meaningful conversations in small groups. And dozens of platforms can help you facilitate 1-to-1, small group, reception-like, and problem-solving discussions.

But These New Technologies are Not Without Considerations

We found that each platform needs a requirement or two to perform at its peak. Some only work with Chrome. Others need earbuds. Some require separate registration. And each tech consideration provides a slight wrinkle in the carpet for our participants to trip over.

Get Participants Tech Ready

One way to reduce the wrinkles is to send out an orientation email in advance. List the tech requirement, or perhaps ask participants to login in advance, or send them a super short demo. During the event intro, you can also review the technology and how the participant controls work but keep this short and sweet and refocus them on the topic and conversation you are about to have right before the conversation starts.

Many platforms are reasonably intuitive, but you might find that a small percent of your participants encounter tech problems (like cameras or microphones not working). We found it helps to have a few staff members managing the event tech strategically placed wherever you think attendees might have problems, for example, transitioning from one tool to another. Also, let participants know how to get help if they have issues. If you are hosting solo, many platforms have live support on hand to help your participants. You just need to know where to direct them.

What If We, the Hosts, Struggle with the Technology During a Live Event?

During many of our live Incubator gatherings, over 100 participants were experiencing the platform for the first time, AND we were also experiencing the platform as hosts for the first time. In retrospect, we could have set up a smaller pre-screening committee to test out the experience for the first time without the pressure of an official live event. Most platforms offer demos, but it's hard to know how the technology reacts in real-time until you push the buttons live. If we had used the small volunteer committee idea, I bet the live events would have been 87% smoother #IJustMadeThatStatUpButItHasToBeDirectionallyCorrect.

So, a pre-screening committee could be so helpful to you (and do I hear micro-volunteering opportunities, anyone?) Plus, there are a few more ways to eliminate tech snafus.

Start with the Providers Who Are Willing to Lend Personalized Support

We loved the personal training and support from the technologies that provided it. For example, during some of the more complex events, they had staff standing by helping our participants. It was such a relief to know that anyone experiencing a tech glitch was in good hands, which allowed us to focus on producing the event. Interestingly, feedback survey data showed that the platforms that provided us with personalized help scored far better in user satisfaction than the self-serve ones.

Create Your Backup Plan

Even on Zoom, a super well-known, mature platform, tech problems happen. One time I was speaking to over 600 people at a virtual conference, and I said, "let's head to breakout groups for five minutes," and breakout rooms went offline. #YouShouldHaveSeenMeTapDancing!

Anytime there is a transition in your schedule or new activity in the script, something can break. Even on well-known websites, tech glitches happen and can happen with new platforms too, so it helps to have a backup plan.

What do you do if breakout groups break? Or if people can't get into their one-to-one conversations? In case it takes much longer for an activity than you expect, prioritize your agenda, and have extra activities waiting in the wings to substitute if something doesn't work.

It is helpful to know, that if a tech gremlin comes out to bite you, often, participants are very gracious. They are so happy you are trying something new on their behalf they don't mind the minor blips along the way.



The Virtual Networking Events I've Seen Are Kind of Silly, Corny, or Sometimes Super Awkward; Can Virtual Networking Be Meaningful?

Yes! (I know we said we were biased about this, but it's true, so read on!)

The two styles of virtual networking most often used right now are entertainment-style events or open floor-style events. Entertainment-style events tend to be cooking shows, or comedians, or games. Entertainment-style events tend to be super structured, so people have something to do, but often there's not much time for participants to connect meaningfully.

Open-floor events hold the floor open for conversation with very minimal planned structure, so these events tend to be some degree of awkward for people who don't know anyone else or the group norms.

Neither style of virtual networking tends to lead to meaningful networking. This isn't to say that virtual networking can't be meaningful because (drumroll here) there are approximately 42 types of virtual networking events (maybe 78, we don't know they haven't all been invented yet).

So how do you design for meaningful virtual networking?

Well, young grasshopper, we are happy you asked. Here's a series of strategies to help you curate meaningful connections.



Meaningfulness Strategy #1: Decide What Attendees Will Accomplish

First, set your goal; what is the outcome you want participants to achieve from your virtual networking event? We found the top networking outcomes are:

- Get emotional support/vent/normalize experiences
- Discover vendors or consultants to work with
- Solve problems/brainstorm solutions
- Find a mentor or be a mentor
- Identify future collaborators
- Prepare for a job change
- Make friends/have fun
- Spot future trends

Which outcome or set of outcomes do you want networkers to achieve at your next event?

Meaningfulness Strategy #2: Pinpoint Who You Are Planning This Event For

Once you've set your goal, step two is to think about the group of people this networking event is for. Is it for new members, long-time members, students, innovators, or another special group in your membership? Think about what they need, want, and like as you plan this event. Ask yourself if they are strangers or friends. Do they have a particular problem to be solved? What unites them? What divides them?

Now you know who's coming and why they are coming, let's dive into the soft, gushy (but critically important) stuff called emotions.

Meaningfulness Strategy #3: Think of How You Want Attendees to Feel After the Event

People may not remember the flow of the event or what they accomplished years later, but they do tend to remember their emotions. Furthermore, these emotions play a significant role in their future decision-making, so let's make the event a super positive experience!

The Incubator participants brainstormed a list of positive emotions. Use our favorites to start tickling your brain. Do you want your participants to feel:

- Joyful, happy, giddy
- Generous, open, giving
- Relaxed, carefree, content
- Excited, engaged, exhilarated
- Accomplished, focused, powerful
- Connected, community, belonging
- Experimental, imaginative, creative
- Curious, inquisitive, open to possibilities

Meaningfulness Strategy #4: Design for the Outcome

We've talked about the first three pillars for virtual networking event planning - 1) the outcome, 2) who the participants are, 3) the emotions we hope this event brings up for them. It is time to pull these three key inputs together to plan your event.

Place the salient information in front of you and work through the questions and subsequent answers for each point. For example, let's say your participants are primarily strangers. You will want to pick a virtual networking format with a lot of structure while still allowing people to connect. Or let's say you want participants to feel a lot of joy during and after the event. Think about how to do things that are unexpected while also making the environment super safe and fun.

Would you like some event templates and activities to get you started? As part of the Incubator, we co-created a cookbook of virtual networking recipes, [which you can download here](#).

Meaningfulness Strategy #5: Design for Meaningful Connection, Collaboration, Co-Creation

The Incubator participants found that more meaningful events generally leveraged these components -

1. Ensure enough time for each conversation
2. Prime participants for exploration mode
3. Have small breakout groups (3-4 individuals each)
4. Provide people in the breakout groups with equal speaking time
5. Develop a deep topic to theme the event with subsequent deep questions for the participants to play with



What If Everyone Lurks and Doesn't Participate?

You are planning a highly participatory event, and it won't work unless nearly everyone, well, you know, participates. If no one chats, or talks, or plays along, the event won't work. Sometimes members can be quiet, so lack of participation can be a real worry.

We should make an effort to normalize vulnerability and encourage and create safe communities where attendees can step out of our comfort zone in the event world. – a quote from a fantastic Incubator contributor

No fear! There are a lot of ways to prime your attendees for participation.

Orientations Help Introverts

Remember we talked about orientation emails in the earlier technology section of this report? Orientation emails are not just great for introducing the tech, but you can also introduce the topic.

Introducing the topic early helps everyone prepare, especially the introverts and ambiverts among us who like getting their thoughts together before the live event. As a result, our orientation emails were popular, and the average open rate was 64%.

Prime for Participation Immediately

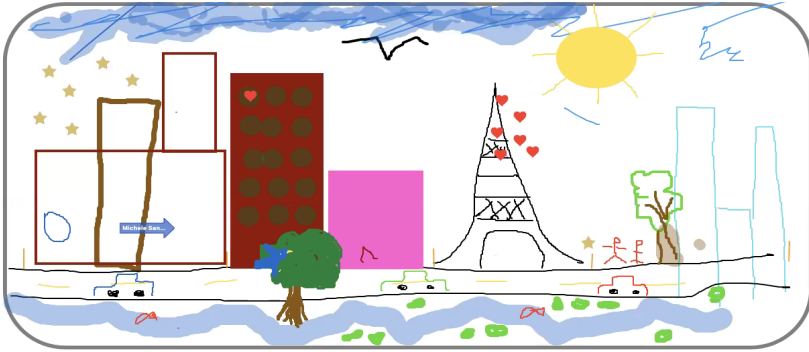
You've got Early-Birds, right? Early-Birds are your attendees who log in 3, 5, or even 20 minutes before the show. Likely you have more Late-Comers than Early-Birds. Late-Comers log in 5, 10, 20 minutes late, missing the setup and instructions, and usually feel a little lost for the duration of the event.

We wanted to reward the Early-Birds and persuade the Late-Comers to arrive on time, so we built an Unofficial Start activity into the schedule of every live event. (The Unofficial Start idea comes from Mark Collard at [Playmeo](#).) Our unofficial starts commenced 3-4 minutes before the official start time and continued 1-2 minutes into the program. We asked questions, played with Zoom's annotate tool, spun upbeat tunes to set the mood (looking for some fun royalty-free songs? Sze (Six) Pak Ng, one of Matchbox's superheroes, [pulled this list together](#)).



After a while, we realized that perhaps the Unofficial Start activities might prime participants to engage in what came next. So, when we wanted to tackle the big topic of psychological safety, we asked participants to get really thoughtful during the Unofficial Start by answering questions like, "what is one thing life is teaching you right now?" Then during a super co-creative session, we set the tone by asking them to do some collaborative creating together.

When we asked what part of each session's agenda was the most engaging, 49% of participants, on average, voted for the Unofficial Start.



WELCOME! Let's create together! Grab your annotate tool and help draw a city.

Amanda and Arianna would ask all these questions, and I got to know the other participant's personalities from the chat without ever meeting them before. The conversations and side conversations [in the chat] were hilarious. – a quote from a fun Incubator fan

Plan for Progressive Participation

Quick! At the count of three - what is the meaning of life? 1 - 2 - 3!

Unless this is a topic you've been deliberating a lot lately, this question might have you just a little stumped, which means it's not a good question to ask at the start of an event.

When you plan the flow of your event's schedule, cue up topics and ask questions that everyone can respond to and have no right or wrong answers. Start with questions that will prompt quick answers, maybe a word or short phrase. Social proof works in your favor at the front end of your event because seeing lots of participation (in many cases, this is a robust text chat) primes participants to participate.

Start your program with the easiest ways to participate before you transition into activities that require more effort.

(BTW, if you have some theories on the meaning of life, we are all ears!)

What if Our Members Are Skeptical About Trying Something New? Or We Are Worried About Experimenting in Front of Members?

Not everyone likes or is tolerant of an experiment, but in every organization, there are always some members who are. These curious, generous, innovative members are your beta testers of the future.

We are probably frustrating our attendees by dangling amazing people in front of them at our events (their colleagues) but not giving them enough opportunities to really get into meaningful conversations. Networking/connection should always be a priority (and maybe THE priority) for every event. – a quote from an incredible Incubator collaborator

Find Your Peeps!

A group of 8-15 might be a sufficient beta test group to see what event templates, activities, technologies, and communication styles will work for your broader membership. A few members might respond to your call for volunteers because they are curious about what you are doing. Some might respond because they see it as an opportunity to connect with other members. Some might sign up because they are naturally innovative and are drawn to new things. Others might sign up because they are giving back. If core members are not signing up, you may find willing volunteers among students, retirees, and members who are temporarily between jobs.

Set Expectations

Be very explicit in your recruitment, subsequent messaging, and within your program that they are a **beta test group**. This event is an **experiment**, which means it **might work or not**.

Let them know you are **testing** this out for the first time and share why you are taking this risk to help them. You can share that this is an **iterative process** and that the participants are at the **forefront** of something exciting.

When participants know the background, they tend to give hosts a lot more grace.

We want to give a big, hearty thank you and virtual hug to our 150+ Incubator participants who let us experiment and were so kind, generous, and downright AMAZING!!!! Thank you!!! 🍷🎉🌈



What If Too Many Advertisers, Sponsors, and Exhibitors Overwhelm Core Members?

Your naturally extroverted affiliate partner members may leap at the chance to connect with core members, and that certainly is a problem when there are eight salespeople for every one core member.

Natural Selection by Outcome

One little trick for increasing registration for your networking event and catching the attention of your core members is to **NOT** put the word “networking” in the title of your event. #TriggerWord.

Instead, build the title of the event by stating the outcome. For example:

- Find Your Next Research Collaborator
- Normalize New Manager Crisis of Conscious
- Help Solve the Consolidation Problem in Our Industry

Vendors cruising for an easy sale may not be interested in these topics, while people very interested in the topic (mostly core members and possibly a few very invested, well-meaning associate partners) will wholeheartedly opt-in.

Behaviors Not People

I realized I was all business online, and there is a real place for being personal. Doing emotional check-ins. – a quote from an outstanding Incubator contributor

Sometimes it's not people, rather behaviors that overwhelm participants. So we asked the Incubator participants what behaviors break the chain of psychological safety in your member community. Here's how they answered:

- Interrupting, over-talking, shutting down ideas, dominating
- Passive-aggressiveness, sarcasm
- Ignoring, dismissive, judging

Stop These Damaging Behaviors In Their Tracks

We also asked, what can we do to stop, eliminate or prevent damaging behaviors to make way for meaningful connection? Here are some of the best ideas from the wisdom of the crowd:

- Set expectations early and often, have ground rules.
- Create shared community norms together, and together create clear consequences.
- Use a moderator(s), and equip them with tools to break the bad behavior or address uncomfortable comments as they happen.
- Model/create good behaviors as a way to crowd out bad ones. (Easier than flagging violations.)
- Privately message offenders instead of calling them out in front of everyone or get to know your troublemakers and coach them up.

Not Only Am I Going to Host My First Virtual Networking Event, but I'm Going to Be the MC Too! Help!

MCing is one of my favorite things, but I'm the first to admit there can be a lot to manage during a live event. So here is how I reduce my cognitive load.

Preplan With a Curriculum

Before every event, I create a curriculum that is kind of like an agenda matrix. The first thing I do is write down those strategies we talked about earlier:

- 1) The goal or outcome,
- 2) Who the participants are, and
- 3) All the feelings I hope the event will bring up for participants

As I construct each section of the curriculum, I map back every activity back to these three pillars.

Then I fill out the matrix with these column headers.

Section	Outline	Chat Text	Minute	Time
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- **Section** is the section of the agenda, like an unofficial start, introduction, or first activity.
- **Outline** is an outline of that section, which helps me stay on track and details complete instructions, so I make sure to give participants good information.
- In the **Chat Text** column, I pre-write the questions that I want participants to respond to. Pre-writing the question makes it simple to copy and paste into the chat. Publishing those questions in the chat at the right time helps participants understand the question I'm asking because they hear me ask it and read it. In the Text Chat



column, I'll also add links and resources.

- **Minute** is the # of minutes it will take to complete the section. I rehearse the event and time each section adding additional estimated time for participant chat, breakouts, and other activities.
- With a glance at the **Time** column, i.e., 1:15, I can tell if the event is running fast or slow, and I can make adjustments so we end on time.

Get Help With Production

It is possible to be both the technical host and MC at the same time. For example, I've single-handedly hosted events with as many as 117 people. But, take it from me, it is challenging to admit late-comers from the waiting room while at the same time moderating the chat and verbally welcoming everyone to the event. Hosting and handling the tech is kind of like juggling flaming bowling pins while spinning plates simultaneously (we suspect this is correct, but we don't honestly know because we like our dishes too much to try, and we can't find our flaming bowling pins).

If you can, find someone who can take care of the production part of the event so you can focus on your participants and content. Your production partner can take care of all the technical duties, monitor the chat for questions, including any emerging tech issues. In addition, your production partner will know what needs to be done and when because you can schedule a run-of-show meeting before the live event. Take them through your curriculum, plan transitions and talk about backup plans if something doesn't go as expected. Great production partners will make the live event seamless for attendees. (#QuickPitch, Matchbox does this!)

What Do I Do If There Is Lag Time in Participant Responses?

Sometimes you ask a question during a live event and “see crickets” in the chat, but don't worry because there are a few ways to deal with this situation. Participants need a warmup to get their typing fingers nimble and their brains switched to contribute-mode. *Revisit the Plan for Progressive Participation Section.*

You don't want to back up? No worries, here's the quick summary: I like to start with a chat question that needs only a one-word response. The best way to do this is to ask participants to describe their feelings on your topic. For the subject of networking, we asked questions like, “what does great networking feel like to you?” Or “when you hear the word networking, what immediately comes to mind?” Early in the session, ask easy questions, and make sure participants know there are no wrong answers (because everyone has a different lived experience.) Hold your deeply thought-provoking questions for the middle to end of the session.

When there is a lag, use that time to repeat the question or even tell a short, related story.



How Do I Pick the Right Platform?

After studying how participants engaged in the platforms and methods, Arianna (she's a super brilliant smarty pants) realized that effective virtual networking events tend to fall into three categories. Virtual networking helps participants:

1. Feel connectedness with the community – new members say that they already feel connected to the community even though they don't yet know many people. You know that feeling you get when you hear the first speaker at a conference and know you've found your peeps? That same dynamic can happen in the virtual world.
2. Solve a Problem- members have lots of problems to solve. Often, professions and industries have problems too. Virtual networking events can be the perfect place to solve a small or big problem.
3. Identify people to connect with later- Sometimes, members want to talk to someone who is one step ahead. Or sometimes they want to commiserate with someone who experienced the same thing. Or sometimes they want to connect with someone like-minded. We can help them identify those folks to connect with later.

We can use these three categories to help narrow down your platform choices:

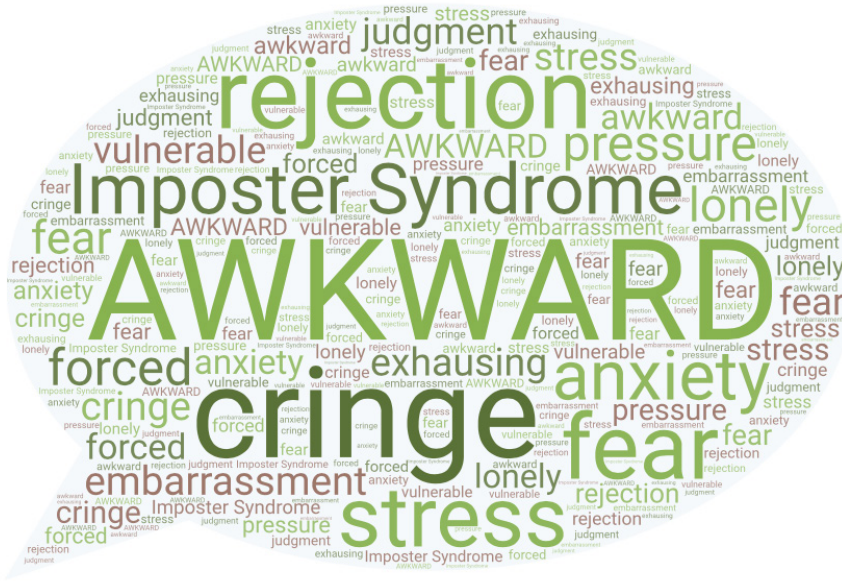
Type	Technology	Feel Connectedness with the Community	Solve a Problem	Identify People to Connect with Later
1-to-1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gatheround • Twine • Run the World 	✓		✓
Autonomous Movement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wonder • Gather • Kumospace 	✓		✓
Small-Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Circles • Gatherly • Social Hour • Rally • Zoom 	✓	✓	✓
Big Group Networking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Zoom 	✓	✓	✓
Tools for Virtual Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Piccles • Miro • Mural 	✓	✓	

We can be more inclusive now. For members who can never afford to come to conferences, they can participate in ways they could never have before. – a quote from a contemplative Incubator ambassador



Adapting these insights to in-person

We found that the word “networking” is a major trigger word. When networking doesn’t go well, here’s how it can feel for participants.



These feelings get in the way of engagement, whether the networking is happening in-person or online. So here are three new ideas that we learned from 12 weeks of intense virtual networking that can be adapted to in-person networking.

Good networking is something that needs to be done intentionally, both in person and virtually, but in the virtual sphere, you’re forced to think about that intentionality because of the different platforms being used. We don’t think about it in-person but should because that would help us be better at it.
– a quote from an extraordinary Incubator experimenter

Create a Safe Space

The moment people sense they are not in a safe space, they clam up. And when participants realize they are in a safe space, we can whole-heartedly participate. We asked the Incubator participants what behaviors members of a safe and trusting community would value, and they said: kindness, empathy, listening, non-judgment, openness, compassion, respectfulness, vulnerability, curiosity, and supportiveness.

One way we tried to create a safe space was to set shared expectations early. Codes of conduct strive to do this, but when Arianna and I were developing the Virtual Networking Incubator, we wanted a positive, short, but impactful set of words that would ground participants in the expectations before each live event. A legalese-ridden Code of Conduct didn’t seem to strike the right chord.

After some hard thinking, we came up with the idea of creating a Golden Rule Haiku. So we wrote the first verse:

**Learn. Share. Try. Be kind.
Support all. Be generous.
Be here with purpose.**

Then we threw it open to the group, and some participants individually offered more verses, ideas, and phrases to help complete the haiku.

The Golden Rule Haiku

**Learn. Share. Try. Be kind.
Support all. Be generous.
Be here with purpose.**

**Do what works for you.
Acknowledge differences.
Show up. Plan to grow.**

**Look beyond today.
Together we discover.
Creatively play! 😊**

At the start of every live gathering, we recited the Golden Rule Haiku all together and wrapped it up with a round of jazz hands. Participants liked this concept because it signaled to them: unity, a growth mindset, openness, togetherness, inclusive, positive intention, respect, community, supportive, and honesty, among other affirming descriptors.

Communicate In a New Tone

“Register now for the association’s monthly networking event” has a very different feel than “we are bursting at the seams to share this new opportunity that we’ve been hard at work on...”

You might have noticed that many organizations are using a more conversational, uber-enthusiastic, and super friendly tone in their communications. They do this because it’s fun and #engaging. Striking just the right tone can help your members feel more comfortable before they even log into your event.

So how do you friendly-up your tone?

Try some interjections, like, “aww”, “yay”, “phew” or “yikes”. Throw in an emoji, but not too many because readers might think you’ve gotten too silly 😊.

Do you have a super-expressive, kind, generous, witty, and overall awesome friend? I do, and her name is Stephanie. I try to write like Stephanie talks when I’m striking that friendly tone. And you know what? Just writing like this makes my brain cells happy!

#Don’tForgetAFunHashtag, image, and even feel free to play with font and color.

Overall, try to plus up the emotion, which might mean sacrificing the perfectly polished, but dry messaging. Do you know what? Your members will be 🙌.

Plan a Lot of Structure

At the start of the Incubator, I had a hunch that virtual networking events required far more structure and planned activities to be successful. Now I’m starting to think that in-person networking events would also benefit from more structure and planned activities to be successful (for nearly all types of events except maybe reunion events). – a quote from a super cool Incubator participant.

We learned that structure is super important for all types of virtual networking events – structure helps participants know what to do and eliminates awkward times.

Our Incubator event schedules were jam-packed with activities. Participants told us how professionals are primed to think networking is awkward. That’s because it can be – there’s nothing to do but try to make small talk, but if you guide participants through a whole event of fun, fast, exciting activities where they can have meaningful conversations, they’ll serendipitously meet the folks they need to meet.



A few more words from us!

You got this!

You go!

You can do it!

You can put on a tremendous virtual networking event!

Be willing to try new things. They may not all work, but most will. – a quote from a brave Incubator creator

We think you are ready to host your next virtual networking event confidently. However, we also know that sometimes it's more fun to try something new with partners, so if you suspect you would like some help getting your event ideas out into the world – let's talk!

[Matchbox Virtual Media](#) can help you produce super engaging virtual networking events, and [Amanda Kaiser](#) offers keynotes about meaningful networking, innovations in networking, and hosting impactful virtual networking events.

Also, if you didn't do the download yet, we co-created an excellent resource with the incubator participants. It's a [Cookbook for Virtual Networking](#), a curated bundle of the best recipes for a variety of virtual networking templates.

By planning your next virtual networking event, you never know what kind of great thing you are putting out into the world. So, we asked participants, what can networking do at its best?

"Take you on an adventure."

"Creates long-term connections – friends AND colleagues."

"Get outside of my own head, learn, hear new ideas."

"It can help you solve a problem that you're stuck on."

"Someone gets me!"

See how worthwhile your next networking event will be? 👍



Credits

Amanda Kaiser

Incubator Co-Creator & Author

Arianna Rehak

Incubator Co-Creator & Collaborator

Sze Pak Ng

Incubator Production Manager Extraordinaire

Damindu Navinda

Senior Designer

The Virtual Networking Incubator worked so well, a new Incubator is in development! [Learn more and sign up now.](#)