



CONFERENCE

FACE-TO-FACE VIRTUAL OR HYBRID | CONFERENCES

Some hints, tips and pitfalls

Are face-to-face conferences a thing of the past? If so, what is the new normal?

Virtual conferences or Hybrid conferences (which combine both face-to-face and virtual experiences) will, like cream, rise to the top in the current climate.

This article is designed to help you through conferencing in a pandemic.

Conferences Require a Strategic Plan



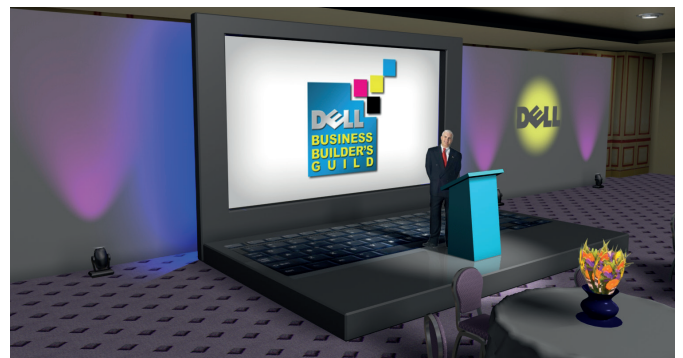
Conferences and meetings require planning. Ask yourself: what are the objectives; the strategy; the tactics; the delegate features and benefits; the timescale and budget? Answers help you to build your plan, but remember to write them down because if you keep these in your head, it's not a plan but a wish.

When planning, your conference options could include:

1. Face-to-Face Conferences

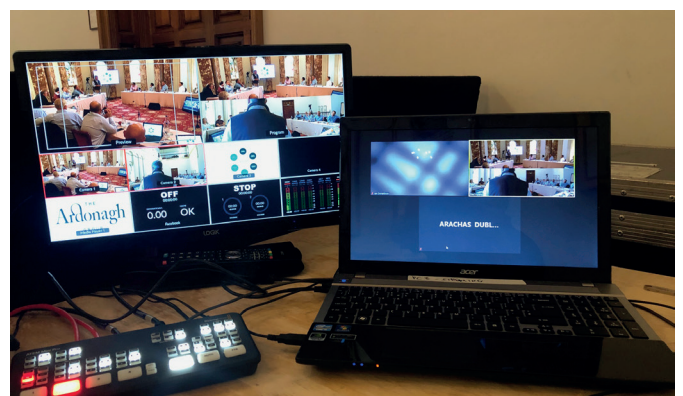
Face-to-face conferences, training sessions and meetings are a rarity these days – but they still go on. They happen because the content is highly confidential or because the content will not translate well virtually.

What you do will depend on the number of delegates and the reason for holding the event in the first place.



Covid safety will of course be front of mind in order to allay delegate concerns, so you will need to, at least:

- plan the seating arrangements with the help of the venue
- offer private or self-service check-in
- stagger delegate arrival times
- provide masks and sanitising gels
- complete a risk assessment highlighting the level of risk (low, medium, high) and the control measures taken
- review venue cleaning regime
- check isolation measures taken with regard to other delegates in the venue



2. Virtual Conferences

If the budget is low and the importance high; if information can be shared effectively, via one of the video streaming systems (Microsoft Teams, Google Meets, Zoom, Skype etc); or if delegates are being drawn from across the country; this is the time to consider a virtual conference. All you need to do is:

- create the conference concept
- engage delegates by getting them to register in advance
- develop presentation content
- utilise two-way audio/video and punctuate the event with questions to increase engagement
- provide event video post conference
- use feedback surveys post conference



3. Hybrid Conferences

Hybrid conferences are the perfect solution when the event can be held partially onsite and virtually.

Such events are also extremely useful solutions when many attendees cannot attend. Reasons include:

1. when Covid-19 prevents travel
2. when Covid-19 prevents the congregation of large groups
3. when the venue hosting the conference can no longer accommodate the numbers – socially distanced

Hybrid Conferences Features and Benefits



There's more to running a Hybrid conference than hooking up to Zoom or one of the many similar systems. A successful Hybrid event requires the same dynamic elements as a face-to-face event.

Below we outline the key features and benefits of setting up a Hybrid conference.

Content is King

Content is even more important at a Hybrid event. Everyone needs to be kept engaged, particularly those attending virtually. Speakers must be prepared and deputy speakers appointed in case of local IT malfunctions.

Marketing

Hybrid conferences are likely to attract more delegates than face-to-face events – because of the ease of attending; ease of asking questions and receiving answers; ease of being able to reprise the conference via the conference video link.

Internal conferences respond to a 3 line whip. However, external conferences require an increased level of marketing and communication including a dynamic website for registration, programme information, news, distance learning, Q&As etc.

Registration

A dynamic website can not only aid registration but also aid in placing delegates into team chat rooms; monitoring the difference in questions and attitudes between virtual and live attendees and monitoring differences regionally.

Appointment Tools and Networking

Particularly for external conferences, appointment tools can aid networking between virtual and live attendees and between virtual attendees some distance apart.

The following are some of the biggest advantages of running a Hybrid conference.

Increased Attendance

Changing to Hybrid events can increase attendance because:

- delegates can attend from the comfort of their own homes
- they do not need to travel to attend a face-to-face event



And don't forget, a Hybrid conference is low budget compared to many onsite events.

Post Event Engagement

Hybrid conferences involve live streaming of speakers and breakout sessions for virtual delegates. These can be video recorded and sent to all attendees post conference. Attendees can therefore engage with content days or even weeks after the event is over.

Lower Carbon Footprint

This speaks for itself. Reduced attendees means less travel, less food and beverages, less equipment rental and transport.

Increased Sponsorship Value



Due to the digital environment, sponsors are able to get in front of a captive audience – your delegates. This effective marketing opportunity can help to offset Hybrid conference costs.

The Key Steps Towards a Successful Hybrid Conference

The various video conferencing systems on the market make life relatively easy but there are pitfalls.

Be Prepared



One Hybrid conference has two audiences and therefore two experiences. The organiser will have to:

- test and ensure that the video streaming is working and without interruption
- juggle 2 different groups
- ensure presenters are prepared
- plan joint activities so as not to isolate one group
- rehearse presenters so that they see how they present themselves on video

Engaging Content is a Must

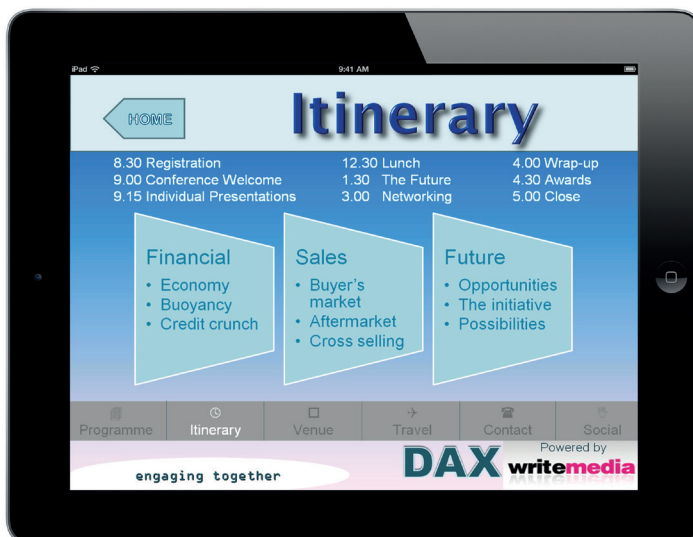
It is much more difficult to keep virtual attendees engaged when they are miles away and alone. So

- keep presenters' content short and sweet
- ask questions of the audience throughout the event to keep them engaged (and sometimes awake)

The Time Zone Trap

Hybrid conferences can reach out to international delegates. Balancing the time zones can be challenging. You may therefore have to run the conference twice or provide an 'on demand' facility so that virtual attendees can access it at a more convenient time.

Market the Agenda



Use the agenda as a marketing tool to help create excitement before and during the conference.

Communication in the virtual environment is paramount, so over communicate by 1000%.

Ask Yourself These Key Questions

How long will each speaker sessions run?

Virtual attendees have a shorter attention span sat in front of a computer. So make the presentations content-rich and keep things as short and sweet as possible.

How many sessions will you include in the conference? Ditto above.

How do I bring virtual and face-to-face delegates together? Assuming you won't have different sessions for virtual and face-to-face attendees, try to create a community feel by setting up mixed teams and chat rooms.

How do I keep all delegates engaged? Connect virtual and face-to-face audiences with live polls during the conference and also call for questions during the conference too.

What gets measured gets done

This very simple truth leads to some simple checks (but by no means an exhaustive list). Trying to measure some of the following will enable the organiser to establish a return on investment for the conference.

- **Immediate post-event response from attendees** (Quick but not very scientific)
- **Survey results** (Survey questions created to a clear list of objectives. Survey must be conducted both pre and post event)
- **Learnings taken from an event** (Survey the delegates back in the workplace on the key messages of the event. This can highlight a training gap)
- **New client leads** (Effective if the leads are purchasing prospects)
- **Client retention and growth** (Event must have relevant content and engagement for business partners)
- **Total attendance** (Can be significant if not a 3 line whip)
- **Revenue** (Revenue against target, from a revenue-generating event)
- **Quality of attendees** (Providing one is conducting a meeting where business partners and/or prospects comprise the audience)
- **Response from management** (It is becoming more and more important that events demonstrate discernible ROI/ROO – a strong endorsement from management can go a long way in helping sustain the internal momentum)
- **Sales growth** (It is very difficult to tie sales to a single event. That being said, a positive experience at an event can go a long way in helping contribute to an eventual sale)
- **Press / media coverage** (If not just an internal event, positive press and media coverage is usually a primary objective because it results in increased awareness and performance)
- **The Pledge** (Measure whether attendees carry out their pledges post conference – whether they do what they say they are going to do. Usually takes 3 months)