

Post-Pandemic Meetings: 10 Strategies for Reinventing Your Education Portfolio



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In early 2018, a group of 12 state societies of association executives collaborated with Whorton Marketing & Research and Event Garde to conduct a survey of their education, meetings, and professional development activities.

In addition to revenue share derived from meetings, human resources capacity

spent on education, and experience with professional speakers, respondents were asked about the meetings they planned in 2017 by type. The findings were likely not all that surprising:

- Blended (or hybrid) learning was particularly rare, reported by only 13% of organizations.
- Multi-day, face-to-face meetings (83%) were more commonly held than one-day (68%) or half-day face-to-face meetings (68%).
- Digital meetings were only held by 59% of respondents.

Fast forward to 2020.

While many organizations likely began the calendar year defaulting to in-person events of one form or another, COVID-19 caused most to rethink the appropriate delivery methods for the various learning and networking opportunities that comprise their respective education portfolios.

Although traditional webinars may have always been a part of those portfolios, they likely served a supporting role. In the current environment, powered by new and evolving technologies, organizations were forced to adapt quickly to deliver more meaningful virtual and hybrid meetings and events than ever before.

In fact, research in the recently published **Virtual Event Tech Guide** found that less than 10% of planners consider themselves to be “savvy” when it comes to virtual event tech. And with the recent rush of new technology platforms to market, it’s no wonder. The options are endless and, unfortunately, only a fraction of the suppliers offering these fledgling solutions actually have the experience to pull off a successful virtual event.

[<https://www.eventmanagerblog.com/virtual-event-tech-guide-2020>]

While no one definitively knows how long the current situation will last, one thing’s for sure: meetings will look different in the short-term, but likely even longer.

Education portfolios once burgeoning with in-person events are bound to see a completely different distribution of meetings, to include the full range of virtual, hybrid and in-person options. And **rather than wait for the perfect time to determine what the next six to 18 months should look like for your organization and its members, the time is now to start imagining a new future.**

While it's admittedly difficult to helicopter up to the 50,000 foot view when so much time has been spent these last several months in the weeds triaging the next big decision, more time can't be lost. Associations must look beyond the short-term solutions and focus more on long-term strategies to plan for and deliver events that will both resonate with members and meet identified financial goals.

Following are 10 strategies designed to help your organization reinvent its education portfolio as you look beyond 2020:

1. Lead with strategy.

Don't assume you know what your members will need in the next year. Either survey them or convene small stakeholder groups to get a clearer picture of their current pain points. Your board or other volunteer leaders may be a valuable resource as you interpret findings and frame possible

solutions. During this discovery process, consider what just-in-time skills are needed, along with preferred delivery formats, anticipated travel restrictions and future budget limitations.

2. Leverage the knowledge and expertise of your event partners.

Associations leaders often ascend to positions of responsibility because their knowledge and experience help them take quick and decisive action. But the pandemic has flipped the script. The things we've always known to be true are no longer applicable. So don't go it alone. Invite your event partners to the table and encourage them to share insights, perspectives and options for consideration and exploration.

3. Pilot learning launches with a receptive audience.

Not every member is interested in your organization's experiments. In fact, many long-time members likely expect a fully fleshed out, professional, near-perfect program

out of the gate. So rather than launch a full new-product rollout, invite a receptive audience of early adopters who are interested in participating in a quick and inexpensive experiment that will result in helpful feedback you can use in iterating future offerings that are ready for prime time.

4. Create asynchronous learning opportunities. It's unclear when our members (particularly parents) will have time to attend/participate in professional development opportunities. Consider expanding your organization's library of high-quality, on-demand learning so members can participate when it's most convenient for their schedules.

5. Develop new and interesting networking meet-ups.

While the Zoom happy hour may have been fun and novel at the onset of the pandemic, Zoom fatigue is beginning to set in for many. And yet the desire to connect with friends and colleagues is at an all-time high, particularly for extroverts. Seize this opportunity to develop unique experiences that help members not only connect with one another, but also destress. (Cooking class, anyone?)

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6. Maximize shared interest groups. Consider the natural ways in which your members currently organize around functional groups or communities of practice, and provide specific opportunities for them to gather around issues of most importance to them. Dust off your member community and inject renewed intention into daily/weekly discussion questions, the curating of models/samples and the sharing of best practices and other resources.

7. Favor thoughtful dialogue over slides. Not every program has to be a fully produced event with all the bells and whistles. Particularly for CEOs, meaningful opportunities to dialogue with thought partners can be more energizing and beneficial than PowerPoint presentations and trade show booths. Consider how you will identify and make

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- stuffers, and shield guards were placed on registration counters between volunteers and delegates.
- General sessions and Awards banquet seating were strictly distanced because of the length of time people would be in that space.
 - No-contact Awards presentation and sponsor recognition.
 - Created a Speaker Safety Packet which included gloves and alcohol wipes, as well as a cover for the hand held microphones.
 - Our Audio Visual Company was stellar and had representatives in the hallways of the breakout areas so they were constantly available. Between sessions, they sanitized markers, remotes, podiums, microphones, etc., and left a note so speakers would be assured their equipment had been cleaned prior to their arrival.
 - Eliminated communal sign-in sheets for classes and replaced with evaluations that everyone individually completed and returned at the end of each session – this would have also assisted us in the instance we had to contact trace.



- Meal tickets were printed with the delegate names on them so we could contact trace if necessary.
- All third-party contractors were required to be temperature checked daily and adhere to the mask requirement.
- And, so much more that we have shared on the FSAE community.

The most important consideration in moving forward is to not try to make an in-person event in COVID times the “same” as it would normally be – it just isn’t possible, so let yourself off the hook for that. Manage the expectations, communicate continually, and hold your breath. You can do it!

*NOTE: All of our documents have been shared on the **FSAE Online Community**, and we would be more than happy to share more details about our experience.*

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space for your organization’s C-suite members to talk about some of the unprecedented issues now facing them. Where appropriate, secure a thought leader/provocateur to seed and lead discussion.

8. Establish a book club/video series. It may seem basic, but some of the best and most organic learning comes from selecting a thought-provoking book or video and organizing an informal discussion around it. A seasoned facilitator is key as you work to unearth and explore the various perspectives inherent in the group. This approach is particularly helpful as you consider ways to introduce your members to themes of diversity, equity and inclusion.

9. Plan smaller in-person events designed to regain confidence. While your members may not be ready to attend the large annual meeting, show them that safe in-person meetings are possible by offering smaller gatherings by topic or region. Collect and share testimonials from those who participated in the event, hold debrief sessions for participants to openly discuss lessons learned and field

questions from members who may be interested in holding their own in-person events.

10. Revisit the tenets of a successful hybrid event. The lackluster hybrid events of the past won’t cut it today. It’s not enough to simply livestream a handful of general sessions. Proper hybrid events offer complete, stand-alone in-person and virtual elements, while also successfully integrating members at key touch points so the chosen modality isn’t a barrier to participation and engagement.

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