Virtual Conferences vs. In-Person Conferences

Devolutions

What do Facebook F8, Microsoft Ignite, Mobile World Congress, Google I/O, SXSW, Cisco Live Melbourne, and F5 Agility 2020 all have in common? These conferences are among the thousands of events worldwide that have been postponed or cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Obviously, this is being done in the interest of public health and safety. But as the Event Specialist here at Devolutions, I must say that it's disappointing, since meeting our customers and strategic partners around the world is something I really look forward to. Scrambling to cancel travel arrangements and bookings hasn't been a lot of fun, either. However, there is another option: virtual conferences.

About Virtual Conferences

To be honest, until now I had no idea that virtual conferences existed. They're online events that are designed to mirror an in-person conference. For example, there is usually a morning keynote presentation followed by some breakout sessions, and then some opportunities for networking. The whole conference takes place right on your screen. You can wander around the exhibit hall, go up to specific booths, attend workshop sessions and seminars, and so on. Interaction takes place through chat rooms, webinars and webcasts.

So, which is better: in-person conferences or virtual conferences? I did some research, and thought I'd share the pros and cons of each. Let's start with in-person conferences:

In-Person Conferences
Pros of In-Person Conferences

- **Meeting Face-to-Face:** I've participated in many conferences over the last few years, and I can tell you that nothing compares to the excitement of getting everything ready for a show, hitting the road, and meeting people face-to-face, such as sponsors, keynote speakers, strategic partners, vendors, suppliers, and of course the best people of all: customers. I love meeting members of Devolutions Nation at various conferences – you guys are the best!

- **Networking:** In-person conferences bring together experts from all over the world. It's a great way to build relationships — maybe you can offer advice, maybe you can get advice (or maybe both). It's also nice to connect with people who understand the challenges and problems that you face in the workplace.

- **Opportunities:** Participating in lively discussions at conferences is a great way to generate new opportunities, and get help refining concepts and ideas. Also, you can make new real-life friends within the industry or even business partners.

- **Trying New Products:** There's nothing like trying out a new product first-hand. Imagine someone describing a HoloLens, and now imagine actually experiencing a HoloLens. Not quite the same thing, is it?

- **Improving Skills:** Conferences give you the chance to improve communication and presentation skills when meeting different types of people. Answering questions about your work or your product, chatting with other attendees, and introducing yourself to new people will help improve your communications skills.

- **Goodies:** Who doesn't love coming back from a conference with a nice bag of goodies, like USB gadgets, laptop bags, and of course plush Waykees!

Cons of In-Person Conferences:

- **Budget:** Let's be honest here, conferences are not cheap. Whether you attend the conference or you sponsor an event, the result is the same: it's always expensive. Between the flights, the hotels, the cell phone expenses and the restaurants, it really adds up.

- **Time:** Attending conferences is fun, but it's also very time consuming. There's tons of planning, and you spend a lot of time in cabs and waiting in airports. And there are line-ups everywhere!

- **Stressful:** Conferences can be stressful for both sponsors and attendees, because you want everything to work perfectly — and sometimes life has other plans in mind!

- **Getting Back Home:** Even though I love attending conferences, by the time they're over I just want to decompress for a few days before heading into work. My brain is spinning, and my body is exhausted. The flight home can be especially draining.

Virtual Conferences
Pros of Virtual Conferences

- **Cost-Effective:** Virtual conferences are much cheaper to attend than in-person conferences. There are no travel costs, and ticket prices are also significantly less expensive because producers and sponsors have much lower overhead costs. You'll also save time attending an online conference; I mean, no travel time to get there, no time change, not to mention you don't even have to put your makeup on to attend the event!

- **You're Shy? No Problem!** Virtual conferences are particularly beneficial for people who are shy or aren't too excited about meeting new people. In fact, I found out that 30% of people are more likely to speak to a person in a virtual booth than they would in person.

- **Reliable:** Virtual events are 100% reliable. There's never any need to cancel an event because of weather or even a pandemic (looking at you, COVID-19).

- **Convenient:** All you need to access a virtual conference is a computer, webcam and headset. You can carry on with your normal life and enjoy the event from the comfort of your own home. You can usually also download keynote speeches and sessions to watch them later or share them with your colleagues.

- **Global Reach:** Virtual conferences are a great way to meet people from all over the world who would otherwise be unable to attend an in-person conference due to financial or time restrictions.

Cons of Virtual Conferences

- **No Offline Interaction:** The fact that there is no "offline" interaction with exhibitors and speakers, and between attendees, is a big problem in my opinion. As we focus more and more of our attention on technology, I feel that in-person engagement at conferences is important for building relationships. So much of the anxiety right now surrounding "social distancing" is proving that we really need human contact.

- **Distractions:** Let's be honest, offices are full of distractions (hello coffee machine break, co-workers coming to tell you about the latest restaurant to try, pinball machines, etc.). To avoid these, it's a good idea for attendees to find a quiet place to log into the virtual conference vs. doing so at their desk.

- **Multiple Time Zones:** I know I said that one of the pros is global reach, but with that comes a con: because of time zones, not everyone can attend a virtual event online at the same time. For example, if there's a keynote session at 9:00am Eastern Standard Time, that's great for people in New York, Miami, Boston, Montreal, and so on. But it's not great for people in San Francisco (where it's 6:00am) or New Delhi (where it's 6:30pm) or Sydney (where it's 11:00pm).

- **Technical Issues:** Some virtual conference platforms need attendees to download and install a program or plugin to access webinars and chats. There could be technical issues, and of course there's always the possibility of data connectivity problems. If attendees have a "bad tech day" then they could miss out on something they were really looking forward to experiencing.

Here's My View

At first glance, virtual tech conferences seem like a great idea! I mean you get access to the same information as you would at a traditional conference but without the travel time and costs. Now, the question is, can virtual conferences be a replacement to in-person conferences?

My personal opinion is that virtual conferences are more like an add-on than a replacement to in-person conferences. It's impossible to attend every in-person conference that might be of interest — there just too many of them. Virtual conferences can give attendees the opportunity to participate in a lot more events.

With that said, I think there are multiple reasons why nothing compares to the overall experience of an in-person conference, and nothing can replace real live personal interactions. We just need that human contact!

What's Your View?

Have you attended a virtual conference? If so, what was the experience like? How could it be improved? Please share your experience and opinion by commenting below.