

Tips for attending (and running) virtual conferences

3 MIN READ



By: John Finn

Over the last few months, I've had the opportunity to attend several virtual conferences. All of these conferences have historically been in-person events that were forced to shift to the digital space due to COVID-19. They have varied from a timetabled set of Zoom calls to a fully digital platform, with exhibition space and even a production office!

Here's what I've learned from these experiences...

If the video freezes, let it go! Expect technical issues. This type of event is new to everyone and there will be times when the technology fails. Whether it's the fault of the organizers or your own WiFi connection (as your teenage child starts streaming Netflix on 4k), be patient. If all else fails, stay calm and watch the recorded session on-demand.

Is this thing on? It can feel as though you're on your own when all you can see is the speaker, and I'm sure it's equally lonely on their end. My message to organizers is to find ways of helping us feel like we're in a crowd because events experienced together are always better. Participant lists are helpful and live chat allows us to participate in the session (and tell jokes to each other when the video link goes down!).

Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. While no one that knows me would call me shy, I don't think I'm alone in feeling that meeting new people at conferences (both in-person and virtual) can be challenging and nerve-racking. It takes effort to make connections, so don't let technology be your excuse for hiding behind a virtual pillar! If you don't see opportunities to network on the agenda, challenge the organizer to create the space so you can bring out your social butterfly.

You make your own conference. This holds true for any conference. If there are gaps in your itinerary where you have no session to attend, you'd probably grab a coffee, visit the exhibition, catch up with a friend, meet someone new, or just check your emails (but still be in the conference 'bubble'). Plan for this and try to avoid distractions. Just because things are happening online and you're sitting at your kitchen table doesn't mean you can't find opportunities to do some or all of the above. And at very least, the coffee will be up to your usual standards! (Message to organizers: remember to create social spaces or you may lose your audience.)

Finally, one just for organizers. Virtual conferences and exhibitions can fall into the same traps as they do in ‘real life’ – adverts dressed up as sessions, over-running and dull speakers, too many people to meet and not enough time. Virtual conferences are not simply a case of moving your normal event to Zoom. Try to ensure your content is geared to the medium and makes use of its unique features. The coffee? Well at least that’s not your problem!

Parting thought... I’ll leave you with a quote from my newest acquaintance that I met recently at, you guessed it, a virtual conference: “Technology on its own is nothing. It has to bring us to something we need or aspire to.”