

5 Tips for Converting Your In-Person Event to a Digital Experience

Use your agile HR leadership skills to create special virtual meetings

By Kathy Gurchiek

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The fifth annual She-Suite Summit was less than two days away from opening its doors to 300 attendees, 17 speakers and numerous vendors. More than a dozen national partners and corporate sponsors were on board for the women's leadership conference held by Velvet Suite, a brand and leadership development consultancy.

But 38 hours before the daylong summit was to open on March 13 just outside Washington, D.C., the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic and local governments began banning large group meetings. Summit planners had to make a quick decision: Cancel, reschedule or convert the summit into a virtual event?

Melissa Dawn Simkins, CEO of Velvet Suite, and her colleagues chose to go digital. While the event does generate income, its real value is to showcase the company and give customers and potential customers a way to connect, Simkins said. Attendees also create a 90-day personal brand partnership and action plan, which is a Velvet Suite tool.

Simkins and her team marshaled forces to plan the technological logistics of transforming the summit into a virtual experience. They used e-mail, social media, phone calls and the summit website to reach registrants, vendors, community partners and sponsors, which included the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM).

Re-creating the event wasn't easy, Simkins acknowledged, but her experience in crisis communication helped her and her team create a fully digital event (<https://vimeo.com/399281652>) that drew 200 people via streaming and posts on Facebook, LinkedIn and other social media platforms.

There will always be "pivotal, social moments that often are out of your control," Simkins observed. Proceeding with the summit in a different way "was definitely a crash course in agility and being able to make swift decisions to put people first and to think about moving forward."

The result, noted Simkins, a SHRM Foundation board member, was a "textbook example of how HR leaders model the agile leadership [they] are asking for from [their] talent.

"HR was and is integral to our success. Unprecedented crises and the ongoing challenges posed by COVID-19 give HR a rare chance to step out from behind the curtain and shine as a brand in its own right," she noted.

Leading with confidence and conviction, she added, "will elevate the role of HR as a strategic partner committed to advancing the organization in an increasingly unpredictable world."

How They Did It

Simkins had a team of 20 people, including volunteers. One volunteer who is an expert in coordinating Zoom events managed the technology and social connections.

"We created a level of engagement and community as much as we could virtually," in part by asking registrants to send photos of themselves working at home with their children, Simkins said.

She shared the following five tips for other organizations, including SHRM state councils, to consider for turning their in-person event into a virtual one:

1. **Consider your strengths—your membership, content and expertise—and use them to invent something new.** "Ours was developing online content," Simkins said, noting that Velvet Suite has created more than 500 on-demand webinars and podcasts and executed more than 1,200 virtual courses.
2. **Assign people to communicate with your speakers, vendors, sponsors and partners.** "If we didn't do this immediately, we wouldn't get them back," Simkins said. Her team members asked vendors, speakers and others to allow them four hours to give them time to research how to proceed with a digital event.
3. **Consider 10 FAQs your registrants and others are likely to ask—"Can I get a refund?" "How can I access the event?"—and assign team members to find answers.**
4. **Welcome assistance.** "Community is everything. A lot of times we can get in our own way as business owners [and] HR professionals because we get caught in the perfecting," she said. "The fact is that now more than ever, people need to feel engaged, connected, and they want to help create the narrative. It requires us as business leaders and HR leaders to let go of some of the control ... in a way we would not have done in a pre-COVID-19 [time]."
5. **Put people first.** This not only includes safety considerations, "but thinking about the mindset during this time" and communicating a positive message that "we are going to get through this," Simkins said. Top of mind right now is "helping people work through the challenges of this time. That's putting them first, even if it interrupts the way we thought we would do it."

The biggest takeaway from this experience, she said, is the importance of being flexible and agile, "and we have to first demonstrate it ourselves."

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