

BRING YOUR CONFERENCE TO YOUR MEMBERS VIA HYBRID EVENTS

“Hybrid events are creating more learning communities,” said Rich Finstein, Co-Founder of CommPartners, LLC, speaking with Kelly Snyder, CommPartners’ Director of Online Events, at HSMAI’s Affordable Meetings® National in Washington, D.C., in September. “With hybrid conferences, you can engage members and/or stakeholders in person and online live at the same time, bringing your learning opportunities directly to your audience from wherever they choose to participate.”

There is no limit to the number of attendees who can watch a live conference or meeting from a remote site. Various pricing plans, depending on your platform provider, can charge per person logging in, per minute, or offer a flat rate for the event.

To demonstrate how the technology works, this session was delivered as a hybrid event at Affordable Meetings for an audience of meeting planners in the room and about 50 invited attendees who logged in throughout the country. Finstein and Snyder brought an onsite producer, a camera/sound person, and they had an additional technical support person working on the event from their headquarters. For this event, they used a PowerPoint presentation for the room, but they could as easily have shown the screen that the remote attendees were seeing (see picture). The remote screen shows the PowerPoint as well as the speakers, and provides a box for remote attendees to type in questions. An Internet line is necessary in the room, and if meeting planners would like to be able to show various shots (instead of just the speakers), two cameras are needed.



The speakers and their technical team were at the Washington Convention Center to set up two and a half hours before the event. “We probably could have done it in less time, but you never know what you’re going to run into,” said Kelly Snyder. “You have to prepare for one of these events. You need to look at the room set up, test the sound, the network connection, adjust the lighting, and do speaker training. You have to set up the podium or panel, have an event timeline and script, and determine the best position for the speaker. There’s a lot to it. It’s kind of like cat-herding.”

Hybrid events can feature one speaker, or stretch out for multiple days of a conference. You can record everything and make the archives available for a wider audience (either for free or for a fee).

If you’re thinking about doing one of these hybrid events, you’ll need to prepare your presenters as well. It is best if the speakers are not walking around much while presenting, and if this is your presenter’s style, you’ll want to make sure they are aware of the camera. They’ll also want to look into the camera sometimes as well as at the live audience.

Hybrid events are becoming more and more popular with costs and time at a premium in nearly every business today. Travel is being cut across the board, but that doesn’t mean you have to cancel your meetings, conferences, and educational events. Participating virtually has much greater acceptance today given the improved technologies available and the increasing frustration with the economy and travel restrictions.

So do you think you’re ready for a hybrid? Finstein advises that you create a vision statement. Ask yourself:

- Why are we doing this? What do we hope to accomplish?
- How will these programs benefit our organization and/or our employees?
- How well do they fit in with our other programs?
- What will we use as a benchmark for success?
- How do we organize the event?
- Who is our audience?
- How do we promote it, and how do we take registration?
- How will we integrate it with our social media?
- How will we brand the event?
- How are we going to set up the room?

- What provider, and what equipment, will we need to use?

You'll want to create your business strategy and budget, confirm your tactical approach and the technology elements, and align resources with program objectives. Do a cost-benefit analysis. Get sponsorships if appropriate. You can build a "knowledge center" – a brand for past and future sessions,

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integrate it with your database, and create a "home for knowledge" for your members/attendees.

Determine how you will price the event and the archive recordings of the event. How many people can you expect in your remote audience? If you have 50 to 100, you can probably set up pricing to cover the expenses of the event. If you only have 20 people logging on, you probably won't be able to cover the costs. A very rough estimate of expenses, given that there are a lot of variables, might be \$2,000 for an all-day conference.

There are basically two types of hybrids: interactive meetings, and multimedia presentations and events. In the first, remote audiences participate; in the second, you'll probably have a speaker broadcasting to them. Like doing a webinar, you have to create the energy. Remote audiences need to stay engaged. They're probably watching at their desks, and can be easily distracted.

Finstein offered additional tips, many of which apply to any meeting you plan, whether face-to-face or hybrid:

- Understand all the details of producing successful events;
- Prepare the onsite production weeks before the event;
- Work with the onsite A/V contacts;
- Market the event clearly so your audience understands how it will work;

- Engage and train your presenters;
- Be willing to modify the program – speakers and/or content might not be appropriate for remote viewing;
- Create back-up plans – have a fast way to communicate with your audience if the Internet goes down;
- If you're using speakers from remote locations, be sure to do sound checks. Have speakers who are not present in the room use headsets or handsets – no speaker phones;
- Have seeded questions ready to ask speakers in case the audience is slow to ask questions;
- Be prepared for post-event follow-up, including a link to buy the archived recording and a plan for marketing it, a way to get the slide presentations to the audience, send thank you emails, and provide CEUs if that is your intent.

These events may sound complicated, and they are, but they are worth doing, especially now in this economic environment.



Rich Finstein is an online e-learning specialist and co-founder of *CommPartners*, a technology firm based in Columbia, Maryland. He has more than 25 years of consulting experience. Rich often serves as a guest speaker for many different organizations, and devises technology solutions for organizations and nonprofits. In 1998, he co-developed the technology partner program with the American Society of Association Executives. Contact: rfinstein@commpartners.com.



Kelly C. Snyder, CMP, currently serves as the Director of Online Events for *CommPartners*. She began her career in event management working for the National Stone, Sand & Gravel Association and the American Society for Training & Development. She has more than 10 years of event planning experience and her education includes a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration and Marketing from Towson University and an event management certification from The George Washington University. Contact: ksnyder@commpartners.com.