



HSMAI ME bravely forayed into hybrid events territory in 2020 by successfully turning their flagship annual conference into a hybrid event, with the help of Cvent.

## About the Company

The Hospitality Sales and Marketing Association International (HSMAI) is the hospitality industry's leading advocate for intelligent, sustainable hotel revenue growth. The association's Middle East chapter (HSMAI ME) is committed to growing business for hotels and their partners in the Middle East region, by providing them with tools, insights, and expertise to fuel sales, inspire marketing, and optimise revenue.

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*“While we did explore some other event technology solutions, we came back to Cvent. And we couldn't have made a better choice!”*

– Mona Faraj, Managing Director, HSMAI Middle East



**300** attendees  
– **121** in-person &  
**179** virtual

**67** appointments  
and meetings done  
virtually

**95%**  
show rate for virtual  
attendees

## Pandemic Problems

HSMAI ME relied heavily on in-person events to nurture and grow their membership base. They hosted their annual Revenue Optimisation Conference (ROC) to provide a forum where hospitality industry professionals could consume educational and thought leadership content, exchange best practices and form connections. After two years of successfully hosting ROC, the membership organisation faced a roadblock when the COVID-19 pandemic took hold of the world. They had to rethink whether it was viable to produce the third instalment of their not-for-profit conference amidst such a climate.



## Leading by Example

Cancelling ROC was not an option as it was HSMAI ME's biggest event. For a brief period, they considered pivoting the entire conference to online but eventually decided against making it fully virtual. As a champion for the hospitality industry in the Middle East, the association realised they had to step forward and be the first to do an in-person event again if they wanted to prove their commitment to the growth and recovery of the industry. They realised hosting their event in person would help build confidence among their members, partners, and the industry at large. *"In order for us to encourage guests to come and stay in a hotel, we as an industry need to lead by example and show everyone that face-to-face meetings and events can still go on,"* says HSMAI ME's Events & Membership Manager Jean Alolor.

However, the association also understood the risks that came with hosting a physical event in the middle of a pandemic. They knew many of their attendees would not be comfortable meeting in person or simply could not attend due to travel restrictions. After much deliberation, HSMAI ME decided to try out the hybrid event model.

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*“It was not an easy decision. We had no prior experience hosting an event in this dual format. But we wanted to keep the options open for our attendees”*

– Jean Alolor, HSMAI ME's Events & Membership Manager

## Big Plans for Hybrid

The membership organisation had big goals for their first hybrid conference. Says HSMAI ME Steering Committee Member Angie Lacia, “We wanted to do a true hybrid event! We didn’t want just 10-15 people at the venue and the rest attending it virtually. We wanted to see a sizeable audience – at least a 100 or more attendees – at the venue, aside from the virtual audience.” With only three months to plan and promote the conference, the association realised they had a lot of planning to do if they wanted to execute this successfully. The first step was to get a dependable event technology provider on board.

Because they were doing this for the first time, HSMAI ME studied several software solutions to decide on the features they wanted in their hybrid event platform. They found Cvent to be the most suitable to their

requirements as well as the most dependable because the association’s European division was already using the Cvent platform for their events. “And the best part was, we already had a long-standing partnership with Cvent as they have been supporting our vision by being a sponsor for our annual conference since its launch in 2018. So we thought, why not take our partnership ahead and make them our key technology provider,” remarks Jean, adding, “While we did explore some other event technology solutions, we came back to Cvent. And we couldn’t have made a better choice!”

The association decided to bring in another sponsor from the past, InterContinental Dubai - Festival City (DFC), to act as the host venue for ROC. They also decided to hire an AV company, eclipse Group, to put together the technical production.



## Event Management Made Easy

HSMAI ME decided to pull out all stops by making maximum use of Cvent's suite of solutions – they used everything from Event Management™ and Onsite Solutions™ to Virtual Attendee Hub® and Appointments™. Jean admits that the thought of learning to use such a feature-rich platform in a short time was initially intimidating. *“Honestly, at first, I really didn't know how to start or where to start with all of this. But thanks to support from Cvent, it actually eased up the process. Things were far easier than we had imagined.”* Within no time, the association was taking advantage of all the available features that Cvent had to offer.



*“The Cvent integration helped us easily sync the registration data with DTCM and get those QR codes printed on the registrant badges with little effort. It saved us a lot of time.”*

– Jean Alolor, HSMAI ME's Events & Membership Manager

HSMAI ME began by building their event website and email communication from scratch using Event Management, and taking help from Cvent's Professional Services, to get the content and navigation elements right.

As this was going to be a novel experience for attendees who had never attended an event virtually, the association made sure to send out emails with instructions on how to register and log into the event hub. Closer to the event, they leveraged email notifications to let people know when the Virtual Attendee Hub was live, so attendees could visit, log in and explore the hub prior to the event.

Another feature that came in handy for HSMAI ME was Cvent's integration with DTCM. Since the in-person portion of the event was being held in Dubai, they had to apply for a permit with Dubai's Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing (DTCM) – a process that was made easier with Cvent.

## Duty of Care for Attendees

On the day of the event, HSMIAI ME used Cvent's Onsite Solutions to track the onsite attendance and ensure a **contact-less check-in for their attendees**. Jean explains, "We set up an iPad with the check-in app at the venue so that guests could come in, check in by entering their names on the iPad, and then print their name badges from there. They just took it out from the printer, took their ID holders and lanyards and went into the event. It all went without a hitch." "The intention was to have as much of a contact-less process as possible. Onsite Solutions helped us get that self-serve model," adds Angie. For their virtual attendees, the association sent emails notifying them where they could find the livestream sessions on the Attendee Hub.

The check-in process wasn't the only thing handled keeping attendees' health and safety in mind. HSMIAI ME's venue partner, InterContinental DFC (IHG DFC), had taken several measures so that proper social distancing and hygiene standards were followed. This included setting up temperature check stations, ensuring adequate spacing between seats, arranging individual servings of pre-wrapped food items as opposed to a buffet, and sanitising the venue at frequent intervals. "They also set up multiple food and coffee stations, so people didn't crowd in one place. The venue space was also outdoors, so there was free air circulation and attendees were more comfortable," adds Jean.

## Bridging Social Distancing with Colours

To ensure all this social distancing didn't put a dampener to their onsite networking, HSMIAI ME came up with a creative solution. They handed out colour-coded wrist bands to attendees during check-in based on their level of comfort with physical proximity and contact.



The bands allowed attendees to make their individual preferences known without having to say a word. The different colours signified different levels of comfort: a red band meant you didn't want any physical contact; yellow indicated you wanted contact to be minimal, like a fist bump; and green meant you were okay with hugs or handshakes. "Our attendees were so glad they were given this choice," explains Jean, "You see, while planning this event, we were not entirely sure if we should use these social distancing preference bands because we didn't know whether people would be comfortable disclosing their socialisation preferences so publicly for fear of offending someone. But this turned out to be a success! They were happy to be given this choice."



## One Event, Two Experiences™

Since this was HSMIAI ME's first time hosting a hybrid conference, it was vital that both their in-person and virtual attendees felt included in the event experience. The association worked closely with Cvent to bring the event to life for both audiences and make them feel connected across simultaneous experiences.

The conference was composed of two parts. They had a plenary session in the morning, which was common for all attendees (in-person and virtual), followed by breakout sessions in the afternoon. All sessions were streamed live in the Virtual Attendee Hub – enabling in-person

and virtual attendees to attend these sessions simultaneously. [“The hub also had a Q&A feature that allowed virtual participants to post their questions and upvote them. This helped with engagement,”](#) says Jean. What’s more, having an appointments feature in the hub encouraged HSMIAI ME’s virtual members to meet and engage further, driving a total of 67 virtual appointments by the end of the event.

The association wanted to keep the experience consistent for both audiences. For the afternoon sessions, the in-person audience split to two separate groups in different meeting rooms at the event venue. Simultaneously, the virtual audience was also able to exit their sessions and join separate tracks in the attendee hub with a single click.



*“ROC ME 2020 was a collaboration masterpiece! We couldn’t have delivered such a seamless hybrid conference without Cvent, IHG and eclipse Group, let’s just put it this way.”*

– Mona Faraj, Managing Director, HSMIAI Middle East

## Getting Hybrid Right in the First Try

The ROC 2020 conference was not simply an event for HSMIAI ME, but also their signal to the world that the hospitality industry was on the road to recovery. With the help of their event partners, the association was able to successfully execute this event and prove to members and sponsors that the industry was resilient enough to survive any crisis. Says Jean, *“This event was very important for our members and the industry – they are the reason why ROC and HSMIAI is still here. And we were able to deliver it to them successfully thanks to our partners.”* HSMIAI ME’s Managing Director Mona Faraj adds in the same vein, *“ROC ME 2020 is a collaboration masterpiece! We couldn’t have delivered such*

*a seamless hybrid conference without Cvent, IHG and eclipse Group, let’s just put it this way.”*

The biggest testimony of ROC 2020’s success was getting more than 100 hospitality leaders to the event in person during the pandemic. *“Everyone was very sceptical about meetings and events making a comeback anytime soon. They thought ‘virtual’ was the only viable option for events, and we had to prove them wrong. And I think we did! We built that confidence in our attendees and gave them a sense of security with the help of IHG,”* says Jean.

HSMIAI ME was also filled with great praise for the Cvent support team. Apart from the professional services offering, HSMIAI ME took Cvent’s help to resolve any teething troubles they had while using Virtual Attendee Hub. *“The customer support team were all amazing! They gave us the right content and the right guidance during onboarding. They were always very helpful – I think I overused them! They would stay hours on the phone just to sort out any problems and challenges I had while building the event. The team was trained well to support and guide users like me,”* gushes Jean. *“And the follow-ups as well were also very good! The entire journey itself was good,”* exclaims Angie.

Not only was HSMIAI ME able to deliver a great event, but by going hybrid, they were also able to get more people to attend and hit their goals. At their 2019 ROC, the association saw around 200 people in attendance. This number increased to 300 in 2020, of which 179 attended virtually and 121 in person.



Jean further adds, "In most of the feedback we received, our attendees said they couldn't believe they actually managed to come to a conference in person. They said they felt safe at our event due to the strict adherence to all safety protocols. We followed all the social distancing guidelines and we were able to successfully deliver the in-person component."

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*“We hope our success inspires other organisations to think hybrid this year.”*

— Jean Alolor, HSMIA ME's Events & Membership Manager

## The Future Looks Hybrid

With a successful hybrid event under their belt, HSMIA ME now plans to replicate the experience at all future instalments of their annual conference. "We hope to continue with this hybrid format for future ROCs," says Mona, adding, "Because of the virtual element this time around, we were able to get more people to attend the conference and grow our audience size. Our goal is to attract more attendance from other countries in the Middle East (especially from the GCC) and the African continent. Hybrid can help us with that."

## Products Used:

- Event – Onsite Solutions
- Event – Professional
- Event – Professional Services
- Virtual Attendee Hub
- Appointments
- Merchant Services



A photograph of a modern office building at dusk. The building is illuminated from within, and the sky is a deep blue. The word "cvent" is visible in the top right corner of the building's facade.

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*Cvent is the global meeting, event, travel, and hospitality technology leader.*

Cvent provides easy-to-use, integrated technology solutions to maximise the impact of meetings and events of all sizes. We help organisations plan and market events, execute onsite, engage audiences, and measure and analyse results.

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