

Optimizing attendee and exhibitor virtual experiences through the Cvent Attendee Hub®

\$700K

cost savings vs. in-person
Conference

62%

increase in
registrations

5,100+

appointments
managed

The Independent College Bookstore Association (ICBA) is a not-for-profit trade association that has been dedicated to serving institutionally-affiliated college store members across the U.S. and Canada since 1927. They provide value to their members through education, networking, and vendor partner programs. Their flagship annual conference typically brings together store members and a wide variety of suppliers/vendors to offer a national network of support in terms of national trends, buying power, idea-sharing, and more.

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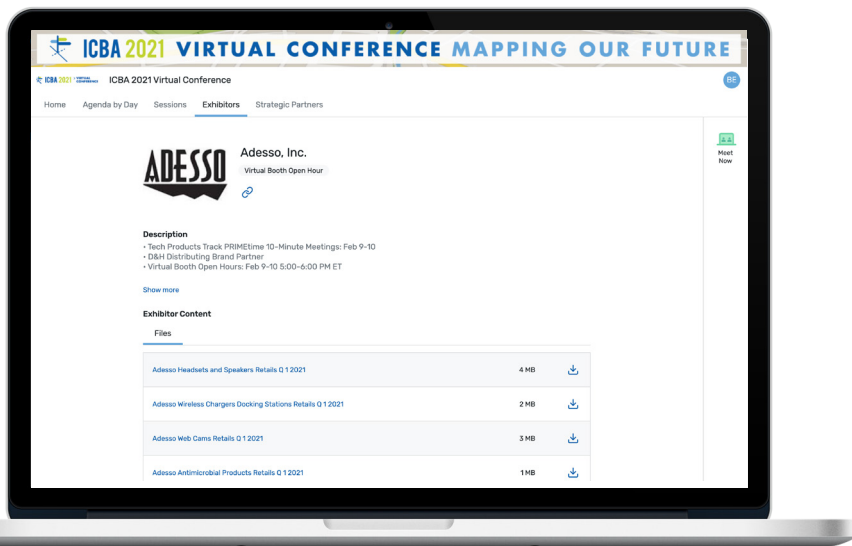
“We had never done a virtual event, much less one on this scale before...The conference is our biggest financial driver, it’s very important to our industry, and there was a lot of stake.”

— Jon Bibo, CEO

Reimagining the ICBA Virtual Conference Experience

The ICBA team supports over 200 member organizations across the US and Canada, with their annual conference serving as the premier opportunity to bring over 100 vendors together with industry buyers. “Our annual conference is really our signature event of the year for us at ICBA,” says Jon Bibo, CEO. “This is our biggest event of the year where we combine all of the services and programs that we develop to support our members and our vendor partners.” When the global health crisis first began, ICBA had just wrapped their in-person conference in Tucson, Arizona. As it became clear the next year’s conference would need to go virtual, the small, seven-person ICBA team knew they needed a strategic partner to support their ambitious conference goals. “We had never done a virtual event, much less one on this scale before,” says Jon. “The conference is our biggest financial driver, it’s very important to our industry, and there was a lot of stake.”

This meant ICBA had nearly a full year to plan their first virtual conference and review best practices from industry experts. “We have been working with Cvent for a number of years on our registration and it’s been excellent...Luckily, we had a little bit of time to talk to the people at Cvent and to our other partners across the industry and even outside of collegiate retail to figure out what we could do,” Jon explains. Having previously used the Cvent Event Management platform to manage registrations for their annual conference, Jon knew ICBA needed an end-to-end virtual platform that could accommodate complex scheduling while offering advanced production capabilities and comprehensive support for the ICBA team. After a thorough evaluation process, ICBA chose to leverage the Cvent Attendee Hub® platform to support their virtual conference.



Partnering with Cvent to Support the ICBA Virtual Conference

The conference typically consisted of three major components: education plenary sessions, small group collaborative networking sessions, and a unique vendor “PRIMEtime” program. “The structure of our event is usually a four-day event with formal and informal networking, so our first concern was: how can we convert that sort of intimacy and collaboration into a virtual event?” Jon notes.

Moreover, ICBA knew emulating the value of face-to-face meetings between vendors and buyers was paramount in helping to support the industry during this time. He says, “We’re trying to break down traditional walls between vendors and buyers, but also trying to ensure it’s more of a collaboration to have the entire industry succeed.” He notes the round-robin style PRIMEtime programming, a longtime staple of the conference, was a particular challenge within the virtual environment. Somewhat different than a typical trade show, vendors were scheduled to meet with buyers in small groups for up to 20 minutes at a time. Meeting schedules were set and managed entirely by ICBA to ensure all vendors met with all available buyers relative to their product category. For Jon’s team, this meant managing up over 5,000 unique schedules at once.

With these various requirements in mind and the need to offer six different registration tracks, ICBA partnered with Cvent’s Event Build services team to manage the registration build. The complex build was also due in part to the organizational structures of the vendor companies, which could have child organizations, multiple contacts, and so forth. They also wanted to integrate a new pricing model into

registration that would support the industry, which was struggling under lockdown measures that kept campuses shuttered for months. “We decided that affordability was very important, as a lot of college stores and vendors struggled through COVID,” notes Jon. ICBA created a reduced pricing model with opportunities for additional attendees to join the virtual conference. “Once one of our member stores had three attendees, they could add as many attendees as they wanted for free,” he adds. This meant ICBA could support their industry partners and broaden their reach to drive additional registrations. “This led to some of our members having 20, 25, even 30 people attend, and that was thanks to the virtual event as they, frankly, would have never been able to come in person,” Jon says.

He notes that ICBA saw a “tremendous response” to the new model, with first-time attendee numbers rising dramatically. “The overall attendance shot up from what was a record of 670 attendees in Tucson to nearly 1,100 people,” he says. Within this 62% increase in registrations, many were first-time attendees. As such, his team was able to target new personas through their content and marketing strategies across the event lifecycle. “So this was a very happy outcome to leverage the advantages of virtual, not instead of in-person, but in addition to that,” he adds.

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— Jon Bibo, CEO

Elevating Event Production with Cvent Virtual Event 360 Services

To start, the Event Build team created a comprehensive registration site to support the complex registration process needed to manage virtual attendees, thousands of appointments, and over 100 vendors and sponsors. ICBA also partnered with Cvent's Virtual Events 360 team to support the full event lifecycle. Using the Attendee Hub as their virtual platform meant all registration data was directly integrated with the virtual platform, ensuring a seamless dataflow and easily navigable user experience.

As nontraditional planners, ICBA's team relied on the expertise of their Virtual Events 360 team, including their dedicated Project Manager. Their Cvent team was able to implement strategic project management across ICBA's virtual event strategy, including session management, exhibitor management, speaker and moderator training, and reporting. The Advanced Production services offered ICBA a full-scale production strategy and elevated production value through custom graphics and overlays, video configuration and editing, content capture and casting, and much more.

The team decided to maximize the virtual environment by stretching the traditional four-day event to nine days, with dedicated programming from 11:30 am - 5:00 pm each day. Jon says an unexpected benefit arose from this decision, as ICBA could reduce the amount of concurrent programming and extend content availability to more people. "We started to realize, maybe virtual actually has some clear advantages

The image displays two screenshots of the ICBA 2021 Virtual Conference website. The top screenshot shows the 'Exhibitors' page for Adesso, Inc. The page features the Adesso logo, a 'Virtual Booth Open Hour' button, and a description of their participation in the Tech Products Track PRIMEtime 10-Minute Meetings. Below the description is a table of files for download:

File Name	Size	Download Icon
Adesso Headsets and Speakers Retails Q 1 2021	4 MB	Download
Adesso Wireless Chargers Docking Stations Retails Q 1 2021	2 MB	Download
Adesso Web Cams Retails Q 1 2021	3 MB	Download
Adesso Antimicrobial Products Retails Q 1 2021	1 MB	Download

The bottom screenshot shows the 'Home' page of the virtual conference. It includes a 'Welcome Brittany' message, a 'Featured Exhibitors' section with logos for Verba | VitalSource, D&H, and ICBA HELP DESK, and an 'Event Details' section with the conference logo and dates (February 4 - February 17, 2021). A 'Your Information' section displays the user's name (Brittany Estes) and email (BEstes@cvent.com), along with a 'View your registration' link.

that the in-person experience doesn't have," he explains. "This way, attendees could have access to more content than ever before." They offered 69 different sessions across those nine days, tracking 8,630 session check-ins across the conference.

The Cvent Video Player was used to livestream all plenary and breakout session content. With a mix of live and pre-recorded content, their Project Manager coordinated each session's run-of-show with daily briefs to ensure there were no technical issues. In fact, Jon says the user experience was unexpectedly smooth. He says, "When attendees went into the Attendee Hub, there was a very consistent experience. People seemed to understand the interface, and we worked in advance with our Cvent team to do training sessions, send out documentation, and it all worked well within the Attendee Hub." He adds that his team expected to have a large number of technical questions and inquiries at the start of the conference. "We had none," he says, smiling. "We were frankly high-fiving in that first hour, seeing that we had no technical issues. It was wonderful."

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To drive session engagement, ICBA also leveraged live Q&A within the Attendee Hub. Here, attendees could ask questions and upvote their favorites in real time. This allowed ICBA to track Q&A on the backend as a measure of session engagement, with over 300 questions asked across sessions. They were also able to track session attendance with comprehensive reporting in Cvent.





Increasing PRIMETIME Value for Vendors with Cvent Appointments

ICBA also wanted to optimize the virtual trade show experience to support their vendors during this challenging time. They knew there was inherent value in offering vendors access to a much larger virtual audience, but also recognized that their vendors had often been disappointed in previous virtual trade shows from other entities that were limited in scope. “We wanted to ensure our vendors had a full schedule throughout the event, unlike previous virtual trade shows that sprung up as a result of the pandemic where they may have had sparse attendance or no appointments,” explains Jon. They decided to offer reduced pricing for their vendors, knowing that the vendors would be able to meet with more buyers than ever but would inevitably miss out on the traditional benefits of an in-person trade show like food and beverage or travel. ICBA needed a comprehensive technology solution that could accommodate thousands of tightly scheduled collaborative video meetings between vendors and buyers, with breakout rooms that could be further sub-divided into smaller meetings, all within the virtual platform.

ICBA worked closely with Cvent to configure the Cvent Appointments solution for the PRIMETIME Buyer and Vendor meetings. The collaborative appointments, facilitated through the Cvent Video Conferencing tool, had to be scheduled in 10- and 20-minute intervals. These were then integrated directly into the Attendee Hub and shared as links with all vendors and attendees. Moreover, those schedules could include one-on-one appointments as well as groups of people across similar tracks. “It really turns into a complex procedure, but our goal and what we were able to achieve with Cvent’s help is to make it very easy for the attendee,” says Jon. “You just clicked on your schedule

and knew exactly where you needed to be when, and the vendor with whom you're meeting knew you were coming at that time. It all translated to the virtual environment very well."

Jon says he appreciates the development of a close, collaborative relationship with Cvent in facilitating this solution. "For us, being able to translate the complex scheduling into the virtual world was a very daunting task...it was an unbelievable story of collaboration and teamwork with Cvent," he says.

Ultimately, they tracked more than 5,000 actualized appointments through the Attendee Hub, providing immense value for their vendors. Jon adds, "Cvent really seemed to take the time to understand what we needed and did incredible work behind the scenes to meet our needs on a tight schedule."

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In addition to the thousands of appointments managed, ICBA offered their virtual sponsors and exhibitors the ability to sponsor sessions, leverage virtual booths, and include session documents for deeper engagement. “We created virtual booth open hours at the end of each day, which was a time that a buyer could follow up with a vendor, or even someone like a store manager who might never get the chance to interact with their buyer and a vendor,” explains Jon. “So this became an additional opportunity in the virtual world that wouldn’t have happened otherwise...and we got very high marks both from exhibitors and attendees.”

Using exhibitor reports, they were able to showcase key metrics that further proved the value of the virtual conference for their vendors. They tracked more than 1,100 page views of the sponsors and exhibitors lists, with 121 inbound leads generated. Over 460 attendees joined a virtual booth and sponsored sessions saw particularly high engagement. They were also able to use feedback from attendees through surveys to quantify the success of the event. “The Net Promoter Score from our vendors was incredibly high, as was the score from the store side,” says Jon.

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— Jon Bibo, CEO





Proving Event Success for ICBA

Ultimately, the virtual conference proved to be a major success. Not only was ICBA able to support the industry through a difficult period, but they were able to generate revenue to continue supporting the business. “In a typical year, we might spend up to \$800,000 in expenses and it would be a little over \$1 million in income,” explains Jon. “In the virtual world, we ended up spending about \$700,000 less.” He explains that even though they discounted exhibitor fees and lowered the pricing model for attendees, they were able to keep a relatively equal margin of profit when compared to their previous in-person events. He explains, “Even though we discounted the exhibitor fees significantly, we kept the ratio intact to make sure we were giving great value to our vendor partners. So we ended up having a surplus financially, meaning we found a really successful virtual model from a financial standpoint as well.”

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The longevity of the content is an added value for ICBA, as they continued to drive engagement after the close of the event. They were able to host the livestreamed content for 90 days post-event. Because of the increased reach of the virtual environment, ICBA is planning to combine the benefits of in-person with the capabilities of virtual for their next conference. The upcoming dual conference will include an in-person experience directly followed by a fully-featured virtual experience the following week. “We believe this will provide the best of both worlds for our entire community as we continue to recover from the business challenges of the pandemic,” explains Jon. “This will be our future as it gives us a chance to increase our reach and give our vendor partners more access to more of our members while still providing a high return on investment to all parties.”

A Continued Collaborative Partnership between ICBA and Cvent

Jon says the pride his team felt in executing a successful virtual conference was important for ICBA as a business. "For us, it was really a feeling of empowerment, pride, and satisfaction," he says. "We could feel the energy of the team building around that across the conference and we surpassed our own expectations. It made us feel very proud that we were able to, from nothing, work with Cvent and some of our other partners to produce something that really seemed to hit the right tone, at the right time, at the right price."

He adds that ICBA's current relationship with Cvent - particularly with their Account Management team - is a key part of this success. Jon explains, "For us, it was essential that we could trust Cvent. We knew that Cvent in good faith was working behind the scenes and it gave us peace of mind."

As an executive leader, Jon sees immense value in continuing to foster this collaborative relationship. He says, "For me, having that executive connection and a feeling of trust and good faith made all the difference. That openness and honesty meant the world to us at ICBA."



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.

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