



Driving the industry forward with successful and safe hybrid events

1,739

virtual and in-person attendees

51,000

engagement points in mobile event app

\$62,000

raised for charity through hybrid event

As the largest meeting and event industry association in the world, Meeting Professionals International (MPI) understands the value of providing powerful in-person experiences for attendees. With a community of over 60,000 industry professionals and 70 different chapters and clubs around the globe, the industry-leading organization has been at the forefront of the changing events landscape during the global health crisis.

Leading the Industry through Hybrid Events

After seeing the swift pivot to virtual across the industry during the global health crisis, MPI leadership knew they needed an innovative approach for their WEC Grapevine conference in late 2020. With the goal of leading the industry to return to safe in-person experiences, they decided to host a hybrid event in early November. “We knew we wanted to go hybrid because we needed to be able to connect with our constituents and be able to move forward,” says Melinda Burdette, Director of Events. “We were bold in our commitment to move forward with an in-person and a fully live, digital event.”

Safely executing the hybrid event meant crafting a strategic plan for both the digital and in-person experiences. “You’re planning two events, essentially, not just one,” explains Jessie States, Director of MPI Academy. MPI needed to track and measure data points across both audiences using a centralized platform. They used Cvent’s Event Management solution to ensure a seamless registration process, allowing attendees to choose the right experience for their comfort level and education needs. MPI knew the flexibility of the system could field changing attendee needs as the global situation evolved. For example, the registration system could easily manage cancellations or conversions to digital with unique price points and other mitigating factors.



“We also implemented a risk-free registration opportunity because so many of our attendees were experiencing hardships due to the pandemic,” explains Melinda. MPI integrated the registration tool with the Freeman virtual platform to ensure a seamless data flow between systems. This gave their team on-demand reporting to help prove event ROI.

WEC Grapevine included 23 concurrent sessions and five general sessions attended by 1,739 total attendees. Of those, 1,131 attended digitally and the other 608 attended in-person. In addition to both general sessions and concurrent education sessions, the event included onsite food and beverage as well as offsite receptions and fundraisers. The program also consisted of a Hosted Buyer Program, live Digital Connections for business appointments, and a Thought Leaders Summit. Digital attendees accessed a special live broadcast while in-person sessions followed all designated safety protocols.



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Ensuring Duty of Care for In-Person Attendees

The MPI team faced significant challenges in ensuring the safety of onsite attendees. “Certainly, the safety of our attendees, the vendors, and the staff at the hotel meant we all had to figure out the common denominator of how we were going to move forward to minimize the exposure you would typically see at a conference,” explains Melinda. They worked closely with the venue and their technology providers to ensure the proper duty of care for all attendees. Attendees had to agree to a personal accountability statement during the registration process in order to mitigate against risk. The same information was communicated diligently throughout the event lifecycle. “We put together an entire digital experience around duty of care for our attendees,” explains Drew Holmgren, VP of Brand Engagement. “We created a web experience

and video that reinforced and demonstrated acutely how we would be ensuring duty of care for onsite attendees.” Branded signage and other marketing materials helped underscore onsite best practices to ensure attendee safety throughout the event.

The MPI team worked closely with the Gaylord Texan throughout the planning process to create a detailed strategy for the in-person experience. “Having a fully transparent relationship with your venue is key, and we certainly had that with every member of the staff at the Gaylord Texan,” says Melinda. The venue worked closely with the MPI team to mitigate risk by providing ample hand sanitizing stations, wiping stations, advanced cleaning protocols, temperature checks for hotel staff, contact tracing, and much more. Deep cleaning after sessions and each night helped create fully sanitized spaces. Following the CDC guidelines, MPI included additional protocols for such as a personal attestation from attendees that they were in good health. They also partnered with InHouse Physicians to create a full-service clinic. Branded signage with reminders to “Mask Up” were placed throughout the space, as were social distancing markers. Masks were required at all times unless actively eating or drinking, and all meals were “grab and go” or pre-plated with plexiglass barriers between staff and attendees.



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Creating a Safe Onsite Experience with Social Tables and OnArrival

MPI used Cvent’s Social Tables solution to manage seating and diagramming requirements in line with designated safety protocols. “We were able to use Social Tables to plan out the entire room set for this hybrid event,” says Melinda. They were able to collaboratively design all spaces to meet safety requirements, such as implementing 72-inch rounds with four at a table, rather than the usual eight. They also diagrammed ingress and egress pathways in education spaces and created color-coded General Session zones for a controlled exit strategy. For hosted buyer appointments, the team created one-way lanes and used plexiglass barriers between suppliers and planners. Equally important, the added social distancing measures meant the MPI team needed to optimize the space as efficiently as possible. Real-time edits allowed the team to adjust as needed based on changing registration numbers and safety requirements. This eliminated the cumbersome back-and-forth with the hotel, creating a truly streamlined process. They were also able to run diagram checks to ensure layouts met all health and safety guidelines.

To create a risk-free first touchpoint for onsite attendees, MPI used Cvent's OnArrival 360 solution to pre-print over 600 badges. These were mailed in advance in designated safety kits that included masks, sponsor gifts, and more. This created a controlled access point to enter the conference through fully contactless check-in. "We needed to avoid touchpoints for contact or queue lines," explains Melinda. With the onsite tools, they could print new badges as needed and were able to track session attendance through contactless session scanning. This ensured staff and attendee safety while allowing the team to capture key data points.

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WEC Grapevine: One Event, Two Experiences™

In order to create value for both in-person and virtual attendees, content needed to be timely and relevant to the concerns of the pandemic. Jessie explains that meant completely reimagining their previously planned content to fit the new hybrid experience. "We needed to create a separate agenda for the in-person attendees versus the digital attendees, while still finding areas for those synergies," adds Melinda. Rather than simply livestream all sessions, a separate green room gave speakers the opportunity to present directly to the digital audience within a collaborative Zoom environment. "We really wanted our audiences to see each other, to have the ability for breakout spaces, and for people to be able to connect with each other in a different way," explains Jessie.



These sessions were aligned to four learning pathways around business strategy, meeting design, professional development, and wellness concerns relevant to the global health crisis. The packaged virtual experiences offered exclusive interviews and content as a value add for digital attendees. They were also hosted by a virtual emcee, who helped guide the digital user experience and drive session attendance. MPI brought virtual presenters to the stage where possible and highlighted digital attendees through talk-show style general sessions featuring “fan cams.” In addition, the digital experience included an onsite studio with broadcasted interviews exclusively tailored to the remote audience.

Onsite, the MPI team needed a cohesive solution to create attendee engagement and help facilitate certain safety protocols. They used the CrowdCompass mobile event app to manage daily health checks, with attendees required to attest to their health status each day in the app. “The CrowdCompass mobile event app had a health check that included four questions and gave you a thumbs up or thumbs down,” explains Melinda. “If you had a thumbs down, it meant you needed to dive a little deeper into why you were feeling bad, so we were able to mitigate against that risk onsite.” Next, attendees completed required temperature checks with the InHouse Physicians, who then distributed color-coded wristbands specific to that day. This guaranteed only approved attendees and staff were present onsite. They used daily push notifications within the app to remind attendees to complete their required safety form and temperature checks. The app also housed a variety of other tools used to engage attendees across the event including interactive maps, sponsors, schedules, agenda items, an integrated social feed, and gamification to encourage attendee interaction through safe, digital means.



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Showcasing the Future State of Industry through Hybrid Event Technology

With a 93% approval rating in the post-event survey and the safe onsite experience completed, the hybrid event was a clear success. MPI tracked over 51,000 engagement points, 9,630 social shares and messages, and 46,500 minutes spent in the app through Cvent reporting. Not only did the hybrid event help support industry professionals through career counseling and educational content, but the MPI Foundation raised more than \$31,000 for scholarships and grants during the event. They raised an additional \$25,000 through a Silent Auction and a third charity initiative garnered \$6,250 in donations, bringing the total to over \$62,000.

As they look towards WEC Las Vegas in 2021, the team offers key advice for executing a successful hybrid events. They note that having a flexible registration process is key, as the audience mix can shift drastically – and quickly – based on the changing global landscape. In fact, over one-third of attendees for WEC Grapevine registered in the last six weeks before

the event. Drew advises maintaining fully-transparent communication strategies throughout the event lifecycle so attendees feel comfortable and safe with the onsite experience. Lastly, documenting all risk mitigation and assessment strategies across the entirety of the planning process is vital. Melinda explains, “It was important for us to do these types of hybrid events, and show people that you can do them safely.” While there were some challenges associated with going entirely live for both the digital and in-person experiences, it was a decision the MPI team fully supports. As Jessie explains, “It’s so incredibly important for us to bring our community together like this.”

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