

Alternatives to Traditional Conferences

Many organizations are considering alternatives to their traditional in-person annual conference because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Here are some ideas to help you start thinking of alternatives to hosting conferences.

Why do you have a conference?

First, identify your WHY. Simon Sinek's [TED talk](#) provides an excellent summary of an approach to determining what really matters.

Instead of focusing on what you do, or how you do it – first ask **why** you do it. By identifying your intention of having a conference, you will be able to zero in on what is most important.

You may be able to prioritize what's most important to conference audiences by looking at past years' feedback data.

After you have your WHY, you can narrow down alternatives to traditional professional conferences. Here are some examples of WHY people attend conferences:

Personal Reasons

- Socializing and fun
- Self-care through travel and/or a respite from home
- Personal development – to gain leadership skills or improve other personal skills

Work Reasons

- Professional development
- Accredited education opportunities

- To feel inspired and renewed
- A break from work
- Status or ego
- To add the conference to a resume/CV
- Networking – to meet old friends or connect with new colleagues
- To find solutions to work problems
- Exposure to new work perspectives
- Learn from beyond the profession
- Opportunity for people to present their work
- Using up professional development time offered by a job

Organization Reasons

- Showing members value for their fees
- To increase member engagement with the organization
- Opportunity to give awards and show appreciation
- To share organization messaging
- Relationship building between organization staff and members
- To participate in an Annual General Meeting

Why do you want to change your conference format?

Next, consider WHY you want **a change** from your traditional conference. While COVID-19 is the current big reason to make a change, a virtual conference simply can't offer all the value of an in-person conference – but there are several other benefits.

Consider the value of replacing the traditional conference, including:

1. Environmental savings (saving gas/airfare costs, physical programs, etc.)
2. Reaching more members by creating a conference that is more accessible to those who can't attend in-person conferences for whatever reasons (childcare or other caregiving, no time off work, cost, disability)
3. Cost to the organization of putting on a conference
4. Partnership opportunities with other professional associations
5. Health and safety reasons due to COVID-19

Time to change. How can you pick the best option?

Instead of thinking that an alternative conference is a lesser option than an in-person one, focus on the positives of a new, creative way to deliver a conference that focuses on filling your members' needs.

Ask your members for ideas. This is a good strategy to engage your members and find out what they want. It can be easily done through a survey or poll send out through email or posted on social media. Your members may well have innovative alternatives to traditional conferences.

References

Event or conference organizers are good places to research the nuts and bolts of hosting a virtual conference. Here are some links to get you started:

Cvent – <https://www.cvent.com/en/blog/events/virtual-events>

Bizzaboo – <https://blog.bizzabo.com/virtual-event-ideas>

Brix Studio – <https://www.brixstudio.com/virtual-conferences/>

Poll Everywhere – <https://meet.ps/>

House Party – <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/houseparty/id1065781769>

Pandemic University – <https://pandemicuniversity.com/>

What are some alternative conference ideas?

To get you started, here are some ideas for alternative conferences. Feel free to pick and choose to create a new conference format for your organization.

CONCEPT	DETAILS
BYOC – Bring Your Own Conference	These are super local conferences, hosted by local groups. They are highly engaging because local groups organize them (with the organization’s support) and tap their own colleagues to be speakers to share their professional interests/expertise.
Travelling Road Show	The organization’s staff plan road trips across the region, bringing the conference with them.
Pop Up Conference	These are mini-sessions that ‘pop-up’ in workplaces with just a few days’ notice. Offers the element of surprise. Hosted either by local members or organization staff.
Partner with Other Professional Associations	Partner with other aligned professional associations (whether it is a different profession or an equivalent organization in a different province) to generate conference ideas or perhaps co-host an alternative conference.
Course Based Material	If focusing on the education aspect of a conference, expand your on-line offerings of courses.
Member Retreat	Offer spa day or hotel booking for members – either at a discounted rate, or through a contest. Consider offering counselling sessions, massage, dance classes or other self-care activities.
Virtual Pub Night	Offer more social opportunities (like through the House Party app) for members to get together to have fun!
Pandemic University	Using the writers’ Pandemic University model, create a faculty model to offer live or recorded webinars to members. Faculty could include members or organization leaders who talk on their area of experience, or by enlisting traditional conference experts and speakers.
Private Coaching Lessons	For those who want one-on-one time with a mentor or leader in the field.
Virtual Conference	A more traditional model that brings the standard conference online, but with both live and recorded sessions, and ability to interact (Q +A, offer a poll app like Poll Everywhere).
Podcast	Create regular podcasts that includes interviews with interesting folks to offer ongoing learning opportunities for members.
Book or TED Talk Club	Offer ongoing sessions in the form of a Book Club or a talk following a TED Talk viewing.
Piggyback with Other Virtual Events	Gather a collection of other virtual learning events and share information with members.