# 2020 CAMPUS STORE ASSOCIATION VIRTUAL EVENT GUIDE

COVID-19 has changed all of our lives, including our plans for personal and professional travel for the foreseeable future.

Despite these changes and the uncertainty ahead, the fall state and regional campus store conferences provide an invaluable collaborative experience for your association members. While nothing can truly replace the value of face-to-face interaction that in-person events allow, moving to a digital event can be an effective and valuable option for your association and its members.

ICBA, NACS, and Verba | VitalSource have put together a resource to help you realize the benefits of hosting a digital conference, offer best practices to transition to a virtual event, and outline some additional assets for virtual event support.

"ICBA is very pleased to support State/Regional Associations with this virtual conference resource guide developed in collaboration with Verba | VitalSource and NACS. We hope this will assist State/Regional Associations who conduct virtual conferences to make them as effective and valuable as possible."

**– Jon Bibo, ICBA CEO**

"As President of NACS and former President of MSACS, I believe that supporting our regional and state associations is essential to our industry. During this difficult time we must collaborate together to solve problems that lay before us. I am proud to have partnered NACS with ICBA and Verba | VitalSource to develop this resource to assist the regional and state associations."

**– Steven Westenbroek, President, NACS**

## Table of Contents

Throughout this document, you may see different references for events, such as: Digital, Online, Virtual, Remote, Experiences, Conferences, Events, etc. These words, and any combination thereof, all refer to a digital experience for your attendees.

# 2020 CAMPUS STORE ASSOCIATION VIRTUAL EVENT GUIDE

**The Next Best Thing:**

**Why Virtual Events Make Sense During the COVID Crisis**

Typically, state and regional conferences allow attendees to travel less distance than the big national meetings in the spring, making it easier and less expensive for more people to gather for education, networking, and exhibits. Moving to a digital format broadens this benefit, allowing for greater engagement from many types of attendees, including additional members, new vendors, and senior executives. See how each group benefits below.

**Members and Attendees:** New attendees to virtual events may include store employees who haven't had options for industry education and inter-store networking in the past. This expanded engagement will help your association deliver more value to member stores.

Increased attendance will be attractive to vendors and sponsors, which may, in-turn, increase profit from sponsorships. We will explore what virtual event sponsorship may look like further in the Sponsorship Ideas section.

**More Buyers:** For stores (and vendors), a virtual event may enable more buyers to participate.

**Senior Leaders:** An online conference may enable more senior leaders to participate, in addition to local and regional vendor reps. Without having to account for travel time, senior leaders will be more able to engage with your event as speakers and attendees.

**New Vendors:** Hosting a virtual event may enable a wider variety of companies, representing more product categories, to participate and exhibit at your event. This will allow for a larger choice of vendors for your store, and increased financial benefit if they pay for sponsorships.

## Six More Reasons to Consider a Virtual Conference in Fall 2020

As you consider the plans for your upcoming meeting and how to connect with members in the coming months, we've put together a few reasons why moving your state or regional meeting to a digital format will enable you to continue to serve your members in these unusual times.

**1. Digital Events Are Engaging for Attendees and Vendors.** It seems almost contradictory that an online event would have increased engagement. However, according to Melissa Hugel at WorkCast, virtual booths have a 30% increase in engagement over in-person booths. "Maybe that's because people are scared to approach someone at an event or they just enjoy the anonymity." She writes, "Either way, virtual events offer tools such as polls, Q&A, live chat, and even a downloadable resources section so your attendees can fully engage with your content."

a) This will be enticing for vendors, and education sessions can see increased engagement, as well. Additionally, virtual networking discussions may connect members that may have never met otherwise.

b) Social media will allow for further engagement with attendees, allowing them to continue interacting with each following your event.

**2. Digital Events Are Economical.** We know that in-person events are a great revenue generator for your association. But online events can also be helpful in generating revenue. An increase in attendance (discussed above) will create income from the event if you are choosing to incorporate a registration fee. The cost of registration may vary based on the value you believe your digital event offers. Based on our research, we've come across three suggestions for registration fees:

a) Free if membership dues have been paid for the year, otherwise a registration charge will apply.

b) Charging between $20-50 per registration for the conference.

c) Utilize vendor sponsorships or scholarships to provide a free event to attendees.

A greater number and variety of sponsors will also produce more event revenue. See more information about sponsorship possibilities below. With the above options and lower overhead (i.e. no food or rental costs), you will likely still see some increase in event revenue.

**3. Digital Events Are Time Efficient.** With budget cuts meaning store teams may be spread thin, time is a precious commodity. Not having to travel to a meeting, but instead being able to jump onto an educational webinar or panel session will almost certainly increase attendance. This is more attractive for speakers, as well. Caroline Forsey at HubSpot notes that moving to a digital event "may help you attract high-demand speakers who don't have the time to commit to an in-person conference, but are happy to share industry takeaways via a quick video call or pre-recorded presentation."

**4. Digital Events Are Social-Distancing and Environmentally Friendly.** According to WorkCast, "the costs of hosting an in-person event aren't just monetary, they can be environmental. US residents made 463.6 million person-trips for business purposes in 2018, with 38% for meetings and events." We know many institutions have put in place green initiatives to combat global warming. By going digital, you are demonstrating solidarity with your institution's leadership. You are also doing your part in participating in social distancing and flattening the COVID-19 curve.

**5. Digital Events Are Measurable.** This one is a no-brainer. How long have we all struggled to demonstrate ROI or record engagement at in-person events? With built-in analytics reports and engagement dashboards in many online platforms, you can easily measure engagement. The ability to track attendance, length of views, number of questions asked, number of resources downloaded, and keywords in chats and emails are right at your fingertips. By going digital you will be even more in-tune with what member stores are saying and doing, which in turn positions your association to deliver in-demand education and support. You will also be able to demonstrate the value of the conference to your vendors and sponsors.

**6. Digital Events Are Content-Producing.** Digital events are the gift that keeps on giving. By recording sessions, you can create on-demand content like pre-recorded webinars, blog posts, or "snackable" video content. With this content, you'll have the power to create specific resources for your member stores' unique needs. With this content, you can continue low-cost engagement with members throughout the year.

You can also look at the engagement on each piece to learn what your members are finding most valuable. From this, you can tool your next event to address those needs. You may even want to work this into sponsorships and add another revenue-generating feature to your conference. You could offer a re-release of an education session they sponsored or hosted with additional branding. Or you could use thecontent of a session to create a blog you co-brand and release with the sponsor.  This will also allow vendors to distribute the content as well.

Hopefully the benefits above give you more confidence and comfort in considering whether a digital event is right for your association.

If you'd like to move forward with a digital event, the next step is to begin planning. To help with that, we've outlined a few best practices and resources below.

## How to Plan A Virtual Conference

Use the resources linked in *Extra Credit* to begin the transition of your conference to a virtual event. Some of the more important things to note:

**1. Select your platform.** In the Recommended Platforms section of this guide we'll provide suggestions on possible event platforms. This is a critical initial step since a given platform's capabilities, cost, limitations, technical requirements, etc., will partially dictate what you can and can't implement/execute.

**2. Determine the event length, dates, and times.** Unlike in-person events, virtual events are rarely days-long affairs. Here are some virtual event agendas to spark ideas:
   a) https://pioneers.io/discover/learning-lab
   b) https://trustyourmedia.tv/
   c) https://bestmarketingconference.com/program-schedule

**3. Develop a consistent theme to run throughout your event.** This will help align the different sessions so that it feels like a fully-realized conference instead of a series of unrelated webinars. Curated content will also hold your attendees' attention more consistently. Topics could include:
   a) COVID-19 and the impact on higher ed
   b) Anticipating the future - how to position your store as a leader on campus
   c) Growing your store's online sales presence

**4. Consider the number of virtual "rooms" you will need** and the size of the team you will need to pull off a successful event.

Campus store association meetings typically consist of keynotes as well as 2-3 different tracks. This means that you will need at least three rooms. A room refers to the virtual space where you are joining others for your video conferencing session. A single room can usually only sustain a single conversation. Therefore, if you would like to have different conversations or sessions for each track, you would need a room for each track.  If you would like to have a virtual tradeshow with each vendor having their own room, you will likely need to have several more rooms available. Being consistent with the platform will create the best user experience.

   a)  Along with rooms, you will also need to establish roles for each track which may include facilitators, note-takers, technical helpers, time-keepers, and etc. This will vary if it is an education session vs. a networking session vs. a vendor commercial. It may also vary by track.

**5. Seek Event Sponsors and Vendors**. In addition to / in place of typical sponsorships for meals, etc. consider seeking in-kind donations of platforms, marketing support, etc.

**6. Rely on stakeholders for promotion.** Include your vendors, speakers, and attendees in the promotion of your event. Going digital for events is a brand new concept in the store space and will likely need more promotion than usual. Having a clear and informative website is extremely critical to executing a successful event as it will be the best tool for stakeholders to share and promote.

**7. Allow time for networking.** Your association meetings aren't just a time for education, but for valuable meetings and communications between stores. Set a space and time especially denoted to allow for this beneficial practice and designate a moderator to encourage interaction with pre-made prompts.

**8. Be creative and have fun.** Part of the fun of in-person events is the interactions that happen outside of sessions. Look for ways for attendees to meet new people and have fun together. Consider running virtual contests, setting up themed virtual happy hours, offering virtual tours of member stores, and more.

    a) One creative solution to resolving technical problems is to set up a virtual happy hour the night before the event. This allows attendees to log in to the platform prior to an education session and see if there are any complications in their set up. It also gives them time to get used to the technology and fosters the feeling that there is still a community, even if they are apart.

## Recommended Platforms

You may already have access to am online communications platform or a sponsor may be able to provide in-kind donation of virtual event tools and platforms. Below is a short list of some of the more popular digital communications tools.

- Zoom: Video-conferencing, webinars
- GoToWebinar: Webinars, video conferencing
- InXpo: Video-streaming, webcasts
- Cvent: Event management software
- WorkCast: Webinars and webcasts
- Bizzabo: Event management software, webinars, webcasts
- Eventbrite: Online ticketing system
- On24: Event management software, webinars, webcasts
- MailChimp: Email marketing and website platform
- Constant Contact: Email marketing and website platform

You may decide to go with a more holistic solution, such as Bizzabo or On24 which allow for everything from email marketing, website building, ticketing, webcasts, webinars and video conference within their software. Or you may decide to use a selection of different platforms to address each of those needs. This might look like using Eventbrite for ticketing, MailChimp for website hosting (offering a free domain for a year through the end of May), and Zoom for video-conferencing and webinars.

## Sponsorship Ideas

Just as other aspects of the meeting will change by going virtual, so too will sponsorships. Though costs will decrease by moving to a digital experience, items such as the hosting platform and speaker fees remain. Below are a few ideas of what sponsorship might look like for your event.

You may want to bundle these options into tiers and have sponsors at each tier pay a flat fee. Or, you may want to assign value to each option and allow sponsors to pick a la carte for each.

- 30-minute speaking session (limit to a certain number of sponsors)
- Logo on website
- Logo on email(s)
- Introduction of Keynote speaker
- Vendor representative may moderate a panel (limit to certain number sponsors)
- List of registrants and ability to send one pre-conference and one post-conference email
- Swag included in any packages sent to attendees
- One piece of content available on the digital resources page

- Dedicated virtual booth during the tradeshow*
- Engagement reporting
- Ability to include a pre-recorded promotional video in the virtual tradeshow
- 5 minute quick pitch sessions
- Hosting a virtual networking happy hour
- Sponsor and moderate an ongoing Q&A room
- Sponsor a scholarship to allow free access to attendees
- Re-release of a sponsored sessions on-demand

*Trade show booths in a digital context will function differently based on the platform you choose and its capabilities.

Most state/regional association conference sponsorships cost between $500-$2,000 to sponsor. For a digital event, you may wish to consider introducing some lower-cost sponsorship options in the range of $500-$1,000 as many vendors have been economically impacted and may not be able to commit to what they have in years past.

Compensate for the decrease in sponsorship amounts by increasing the number of sponsors. With lower-cost sponsorships you should be able to recruit new vendors, which in turn increases the value of your conference to your members.

**Ensuring Attendee Engagement**

Even though people are 30% more likely to speak to someone in a virtual booth, and our entire industry is getting much more comfortable with online educational webinars and video conferences, there is still an incorrect preconception that digital events mean less engagement from attendees. By observing a few best practices can you encourage engagement and conveniently track that engagement. Some best practices to observe:

**1. Ensure Sessions Have A Clear Focus.** With the average human attention span currently at 8 seconds, and the lure of checking email a click away, it's best to consider the length of sessions and the content to be emphasized to ensure they are as focused as possible. In many cases, this may mean shortening them vs. an in-person event session. Being thoughtful about key topics and length will be helpful to attendees who are struggling with being spread thin at their stores.
The appropriate length for a given session will vary, depending on its type: exhibitor presentation, education presentation with audience Q & A, or interactive networking session. If shorter sessions do make sense, they will allow for more programming in the schedule, which would increase overall conference value. This will also let you give sessions to a larger number of vendors, a value add that would likely increase sponsorship.

**2. Leverage digital engagement tools.** Store conferences are intimate experiences, which foster an environment that feels collaborative and inclusive. This leads to very interactive sessions with attendees feeling comfortable enough to ask any questions that come to their mind. Transitioning to digital, it might be difficult to recreate that environment. Use tools such as the chat feature, Q&A's, slack channels, downloadable resources, polls, pre and post-conference emails, and social media to create an interactive setting.

**3. Hold networking events.** This was mentioned before, but allowing attendees to come together is a valuable part of store association conferences. You can do something as simple as having a dedicated networking or social hour via Zoom. Or, you could go as far as to set up smaller group chats or video calls to simulate the type of conversation that happens over a meal.

**4. Utilize social media.** You could create a hashtag and have attendees post pics of their new work from home setups. Have a crazy hat day and have attendees post pictures of that. Ask for posts about your attendees' favorite quote, takeaway or session. This will create a sense of community and interactivity beyond a webinar chat. This will also help promote your event.

**Measuring Success**

Since this is a new frontier, especially for store associations, what success will look like may be difficult to imagine. But measuring success is more important than ever. With funds and time being precious commodities, you will need to demonstrate value to both attendees and sponsors.

Start by considering what is most important to you:

- Attendance?
- Engagement?
- Education?

Here's how to measure each.

- Attendance reports are one of the simplest ways to measure success. If you have multiple sessions, you can compare attendance at each for a popularity check. You might also want to observe the amount of time each attendee spends in a session.

- For engagement, you can look at several factors:
  - The number of questions asked and who asked them
  - The activity in the chat
  - The participation in polls
  - And any other engagement tools you may have used

- If the education of your attendees is what you'd like to measure, then perhaps a post-conference survey would be your best tool. You can encourage your attendees to participate in the survey throughout the conference and through many of the channels we've already mentioned.

## Thank You and Have A Successful Event

We hope all the information we have gathered here is useful to you determining whether a digital event is right for your association, and if so, executing your event.

Thank you for continuing to provide education to your community and for creating collaborative spaces in such isolating times.

## Extra Credit
## Guides We Found Helpful (& Think You May, Too)

How to Turn an In-Person Event Into a Compelling Virtual Experience
by Salesforce

How to Host a Virtual Conference – 10 Tips for Success
By Learning Revolution

THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO VIRTUAL EVENTS
by Cvent

Are Virtual Events The Right Move For You?
by Forrester

How to Keep Attendees Engaged During Virtual Events
by Eventbrite