

How to network effectively at digital events

 By Yael Geffen

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In one short year, events like conferences have largely moved online, giving attendees virtual access to expert speakers, industry leaders and a wealth of information from the comfort and safety of their homes.



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The only aspect that has been missing from the experience, though, is networking, which is one of the primary reasons that people attend and it usually occurs when you stand around the coffee table chatting in between speakers or do the rounds at an after-conference networking event.

However, I recently discovered that, if done properly, just because you can't shake hands and pass around business cards doesn't mean you can't network at a virtual event. And, when done properly, there are many more upsides to virtual meetings and events than being able to wear your pyjama pants.

I was recently invited to attend the annual Sotheby's International Realty conference and, being 'zoom' fatigued like most people, I was dreading the occasion but, as it happens, I not only thoroughly enjoyed myself, I felt energised and loved the productivity of the whole occasion.

What it highlighted very clearly for me is that the success of such an event very much depends on the platform used as some are more advanced and flexible than others and certain platforms work best with certain types of events.

On the Hopin platform, networking was actually very easy as there were numerous 'rooms' with multiple people and you could move from room to room until you found people with similar interests.

And, like a real-time meeting, once we had met kindred spirits, much like speed dating, we were also able to chat one-on-one in a room with an initial time period of two minutes and, if you felt you had more to discuss, you could simply extend the time.

It also allowed for live interactive entertainment, just as one would experience when attending an even in person.



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The event also demonstrated numerous advantages that networking on digital platforms has over meeting people in person:

- You are able to use your time more effectively;
- It's easier to 'walk' away from someone when you have nothing more to say or have little in common;
- Instead of handing out business cards in the hope of connecting later, you can immediately tap into LinkedIn and connect with the person.

There are a number of factors that organisers can do to ensure a seamless and successful digital or hybrid event:

- **Select the right platform** - In order to host a successful event from which attendees can gain maximum benefit, it's critical to use the platform that best fulfils your goals and attendees needs.
- **Implement intelligent matchmaking** – An automated system that recommends connections based on mutual interests helps create a structured environment to help businesses promote stronger networking throughout their events, as well as before and after.

When attendees register for the first time, they should be able to opt in to receive recommendations for new connections and personalised content which will allow them to view profiles and initiate chats with people they want to connect to.

- **Virtual hangout area** – Traditional events offer attendees ample opportunities to socialise and mingle, either between presentations or at after parties, so a good digital event will have online lounges for specific topic areas that give your attendees and presenters spaces where they can come together to meet like-minded individuals and share their ideas and feedback.
- **Virtual booths or rooms** – these facilitate one-on-one networking and are akin to the stands you see at in-person events like trade shows and festivals which make it easier for sponsors, organizers, and attendees to connect.
- **Real-time messaging** – many virtual events still focus almost exclusively on presentations to an audience, in which there is minimal opportunity for two-way conversation and one-to-one networking. Attendees need to have opportunities to connect with speakers and other attendees and instant messaging video and audio chat fulfil that critical need.

- **Group chat channels** – create dedicated groups and chat channels for specific topics by integrating platforms like LinkedIn, Facebook, and WhatsApp into your virtual event networking program. This way you can set up as many interest groups as you need to allow people to seamlessly make the right connections.

However, the event organisers can only provide the right platform and tools to facilitate networking – at the end of the day, it's up to the attendees to optimise the opportunities and the best way to do so is to be prepared:

- **Establish your goals** – at a virtual event there's no chance of running into someone at a presentation or booth so virtual networking requires more homework and planning.

Make a list of your networking goals and check the list of attendees if available. This will help you focus your efforts and help you know where and how to invest your time most efficiently.

- **Register on the event guide/app** - most virtual events have an online tool or app that lists seminar topics, speakers, and often attendees as well. If possible, submit a bio and include contact information. Familiarize yourself with your event's guide and look for community notice boards and other means of connecting with fellow attendees.

Get active on social media – announce your attendance to your connections, use the event hashtags and share links. Give feedback by sharing your thoughts during and after the event. Share insightful comments on the event platform and showcase your expertise by engaging with targeted sessions and presenters.

- **Engage in real-time messaging during presentations** – use the events' private messaging tools to ask new connections their opinions of a particular topic or idea when it's presented. This not only conveys that you value their opinion, it also builds trust and conveys interest beyond being merely a sales opportunity.
- **Don't wait too long to follow-up with your new connections** – within three days (while the event is still fresh in everyone's mind), you should email your event contacts to thank them, contact attendees with whom you had the most rapport, search social media platforms for mention of the event or hashtags to connect to others who are talking about the event, cross-reference your new connections on LinkedIn, sending link requests with reference to the event.

ABOUT Yael GEFFEN

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