NEHA AFFILIATE FAQ ON VIRTUAL CONFERENCES

Many NEHA affiliated organizations have reached out to ask about developing a virtual conference in 2021. While we are in the planning stages of our virtual conference, we have some valuable experience that we would like to share with our partners. We developed the following FAQ to be a guide for the preparation stages of your conference in the year to come.

Conducting a needs assessment

Make sure all relevant parties are part of the conversation regarding what you are looking for in a virtual conference (members, attendees, partners, vendors, volunteers). You won't be able to move everything from your in-person conference virtual, so decisions will need to be made on what is the most important to reformat and include in the virtual format.

- **How much education will you have? Will the sessions be live virtual sessions or pre-recorded?**

  Pre-recorded can be more cost-effective when selecting a virtual conference provider, however, it can require a lot of work coordinating recording/editing with speakers. If sessions are pre-recorded, how will you incorporate Q&A? If you're planning live sessions, you'll want to have a back-up plan in case a speaker doesn't show up or has technical problems.

- **Will there be a virtual exhibit hall?**

  Getting attendees to engage in an in-person exhibit hall is always a challenge, and even more challenging in a virtual format. If you're having an exhibit hall, you'll need to have a plan for how to drive attendees there. You may also decide not to have an exhibit hall and steer vendors towards other opportunities to engage with attendees (paid commercials, sponsorships, and educational sessions).

- **Do you have additional events at your conference to think about such as a silent auction, fundraiser, or award ceremony?**

  You'll want to decide which events it makes sense to reformat virtually and which make sense to not include in the virtual format.

- **Will there be any pre-conference offerings?**

  If so, you'll want to make sure a virtual provider includes them in your package.

- **How many attendees do you expect?**

  You'll want to make sure the virtual provider can handle the number of attendees you have in mind and potentially the ability to scale up or down as registrations come in.

- **What will registration fees look like?**

  Keep in mind pricing for registration will drive attendance. Virtual Conferences are usually less expensive than in-person events, however, you'll need to crunch numbers to see what you need to charge to make the virtual conference profitable.

- **How will you incorporate networking/social events?**

  Will there be networking sessions/breaks? Does it make sense to have social/networking events after the education or mix in the educational content as networking sessions?

Assessing Technology Needs and Virtual Providers

Depending on the size of your virtual conference, you will likely need to use a virtual conference provider beyond just using Zoom. There are hundreds of virtual providers out there and many things to look for when demoing different options.

- **How much of the virtual conference is set up by the provider and how much is the responsibility of the client?**

  Some providers are all-service and others only provide the platform for the client to create the virtual conference, with a variety in the middle. How much the provider does is going to be a huge factor in the overall cost of the platform.

- **Does the platform include video streaming for live sessions?**

  Some providers have integrated Zoom at no cost, whereas other providers require you to bring your service (or pay more for access to their Zoom).

- **Is there a video chat for attendees and exhibitors? Likewise, does the virtual provider provide this or do individuals need to provide their own video conferencing?**

  If you have Exhibitors, they are likely interested in the ability to video conference with attendees and the ability for attendees to video conference is a networking opportunity.

- **Are there limits for either pre-recorded or live content? What is the cost for additional sessions?**

We found that most providers had limits on live sessions, the total number of concurrent sessions. You will want to know what is included and what would cost extra.

- **What kind of production timeline would you be looking at?**

   Some providers won't start building your virtual conference until 4-6 weeks before the event while others will begin as soon as you sign a contract. You'll want to keep that in mind as a short 4-6 week timeline can be challenging.

- **What kind of training is provided for staff, speakers, exhibitors, and attendees?**

   Again, this is across the board, some provide more training and others offer on-demand training demos.

- Are there any additional charges?

   We found that a lot of the interesting things they show during demos, incur additional charges and weren't within budget.

Further Questions? Please contact Membership Manager, Jonna Ashley, jashley@neha.org and AEC Manager Angelica Ledezma, aledezma@neha.org.