Transcript from A Why-To and a How-To: Virtual Conferences in the COVID-19 Era

Recording and slides available at:
https://www.leadinglearning.com/virtual-conferences-covid-19-era/

Jeff Cobb:

Hi, I'm Jeff Cobb.

Celisa Steele:

And I'm Celisa Steele, and we are the co-founders of Tagoras and Leading Learning. And we are joining from Carrboro, North Carolina, and we would love for you to share in the chat where you're joining from. And, in fact, some folks already had that idea and began doing it.

Celisa Steele:

If you don't know where chat is, it'll be down near the bottom of your Zoom interface. There'll be a chat button that you can check, and importantly, please take a second to confirm that in the drop down beside too, that everyone or all panelists and attendees is selected so that everyone can see where you're joining from. We know we have a big broad, diverse group joining.

Jeff Cobb:

Wow, that's quite a few already streaming through there. So we're here to talk about virtual conferences, a topic that's jumped to the forefront in this, well, odd COVID ID era that we're living in now. And in early March, we noticed a spike in the web traffic that was coming to our pages about virtual events.

Celisa Steele:

And requests for conversations with us about virtual events started rolling in as well.

Jeff Cobb:

So on March 9th, we decided to host this webinar. It seemed like a good way to not only respond to one-off requests that we were getting, but also potentially, to help folks who might not be reaching out to us directly.

Celisa Steele:

And so, in the week and a half that has passed since we made that decision to offer this webinar, the interest and the relevancy and the urgency around virtual conferences has only grown. Things have gotten much starker. We have college campuses and K through 12 schools closed, we have restaurants shuttered. We have federal and state level and local level states of emergency having been declared. And though I could go on, I won't, because you know it just as well as I do because we're all living this.

Jeff Cobb:

So while it's against this very serious backdrop that we're sharing our experience, we do feel it's important to note that when we made the decision to first host a virtual conference, we weren't facing the level of current pressures that we have right now. The decision for us was measured and strategic. We're very focused on reach, revenue and impact. Those are just core areas of

focus for us. But we recognize that virtual conferences have transitioned from being just one delivery option among many to really being the only viable option in this period of social distancing.

Celisa Steele:

And so, our hope is that you are able to pause long enough to consider any move online more strategically, that the need for more sustainable and accessible forms of connecting and convening, they've been there for some time. The emergence of COVID-19 has just made it glaringly apparent.

Celisa Steele:

So irrespective of dangerous viruses, there's a disconnect between the need to address climate issues and the amount of waste and emissions created by face-to-face conferences. Just as importantly, we know many people simply can't and don't attend face-to-face events for a range of reasons, including traveling costs and time away from home and family. As a learning format, face-to-face events are inaccessible to many, if not most of the people that we purport to serve.

Celisa Steele:

So with just those examples of why to, let's look at how we define virtual conference. A virtual conference is a web-based event that replicates many aspects of a traditional place-based conference, membership meeting, or trade show. It may take place on a standalone basis or in conjunction with a place- based conference. It might be a hybrid conference.

Celisa Steele:

Virtual events feature multiple sessions, so not just a single webinar or webcast, and those sessions may include keynote presentations, training and education workshops, discussion areas, social networking, exhibit areas for vendors and more. And then, those activities may take place in real time, so synchronously, on demand asynchronously, or a combination of the two.

Celisa Steele:

So I realize that definition is a mouthful but we just want to be clear what we mean when we say virtual conference. And so, Jeff's going to launch a quick two question poll so that we can find out if you've previously offered a virtual conference. And as you're answering, please keep in mind that definition that we just shared, particularly that we're talking about more than a single webinar. And let us know if you've offered one, haven't, but plan to, or don't have near term plans.

Celisa Steele:

And then, we'd also like to hear how COVID-19 has impacted what you're doing or thinking about doing with virtual conferences, if it has. And then, after you've finished that poll, after you've logged your answers there, if you would head over to the chat and share why you're here today, what brought you to this session.

Jeff Cobb:

So we've got about 50% of folks voting. It'd be good to get to some high participation on this. So we'll keep it open for just a little bit longer to see what folks here are thinking, what you've done with virtual conferences, and how COVID-19 has impacted your use. So will give this just

another few seconds. We got a lot of ground to cover today, so I don't want to hold this open for too long. But we've got a number of folks who haven't voted yet, so counting down now, within 10 seconds, I'm going to close this down. So let's see if we can get some more in here.

Jeff Cobb:

Okay. So we've got close to 300 responses, so that's great to be able to share that data. Most folks here have not offered a virtual conference. We do have some that have done a virtual conference before. Then we really encourage you in the chat throughout to share anything about your own experience with virtual conferences that you think would be helpful to others.

Jeff Cobb:

And then, in terms of COVID-19 impact, quite a few people, about a third, have plans now to offer their first virtual conference. Another 40, close to 45%, are now considering it. Some are expanding their virtual conference offerings or considering expanding their virtual conference offerings. Very few are saying that it's not impacted what they are doing with virtual conferences.

Celisa Steele:

So now that we've defined virtual conferences and gotten a sense of what you all have done and are doing now with virtual conferences, here's a quick look at how we want to spend the rest of our time today. We're going to look at four aspects of any virtual conference, namely planning, preparation, delivery, and follow up. Jeff and I will share what we've done and what we've tried with our virtual conferences. Our goal is to do all of that in about 30 to 35 minutes. So that then we can devote a good chunk of time to your questions before we offer some parting thoughts.

Celisa Steele:

Now to help us get to as many questions as possible, when we get to Q and A, we ask that you do please use the Q and A panel to send in questions. Near the bottom of the Zoom window, you'll see a button to open the Q and A window to send us questions. And you can also see questions that others have asked, and you can upvote those by clicking the thumbs up and we encourage you to use that up voting feature, assuming we got it turned on and set up right. You can also comment on questions that others have asked. And so, if you do have some information or experience to share, please do comment.

Celisa Steele:

Additionally, you can use the chat. So if you just have something you want to share, perhaps from your experience with virtual conferences, you can use the chat for that. Just do be sure that everyone or all panelists and attendees is selected. That'll allow everybody here to benefit from what you're sharing.

Celisa Steele:

So Q and A panel for sending in questions, chat for more general sharing, and we really do welcome that because we know there are folks here with valuable experience and points of view. And, in fact, I will note that when we get to QA, we have Jack Coursen from the American Speech Language Hearing Association. He's going to join us in responding to questions. He brings long experience with online conferences and he can contribute a different perspective that we know will be valuable.

Celisa Steele:

So now let's move on to the first of the four aspects, namely, planning. And a bit of background I think will help you understand how we came to plan a virtual conference. We first offered Learning Technology Design (https://ltd.leadinglearnint.com), or LTD for short, in May of 2016. We did that as a place-based event in Arlington, Virginia, and it was successful, if on the small end of conferences. We had a little over a hundred attendees. We used three rooms, two for breakouts and one that was large enough for all of us.

Celisa Steele:

But, as we've already mentioned at the opening, we had a hunch that we could reach more people, and therefore, have a bigger impact and result in more revenue if we went virtual. So in March of 2017, we offered the event for the second time, but this time as a virtual conference. And we've stuck with the virtual format every year since, 2018, 2019, and then we just wrapped up the live sessions that are part of LTD 2020 at the end of February. So, at this point, we have four years' experience offering Learning Technology Design as a virtual conference.

Jeff Cobb:

And here are some of the decision areas we looked at when making that transition from face-to-face to online. So first of all, timeline. Whether you're doing a conference online or off, it obviously can't happen overnight. Next, location. We of course had to change from a physical venue to an online platform. And then structure, how the sessions were going to be delivered. That was going to change, but going online also opened up questions and options for the schedule. Then the value proposition, how would we talk to prospective attendees and sponsors about the experience?

Celisa Steele:

And closely tied to the value proposition to sponsors, our decisions about sponsorship. Will you involve sponsors? How many sponsors and what value will you offer them in return? Pricing. What should we charge for a virtual conference? And marketing, because again, whether you're doing a conference online or off, you have to market it.

Celisa Steele:

So let's talk about each of these a bit more starting with timeline. We know that with the state of things with COVID-19 that many organizations, including some of yours, are under pressure to quickly pivot from in-person events to online delivery. So we feel it's important to acknowledge, again, that we've never had to plan a virtual conference under duress. And all things being equal, we find that our timeline for a virtual conference was a bit shorter than for an in-person conference, but not necessarily dramatically. We had a roughly nine month timeline for LTD in 2016 when it was face-to-face, and then since going virtual, we've had a roughly six month timeline.

Celisa Steele:

Now I will note that, I think honestly, even a bit of more time would be valuable, more marketing time. But again, we've done most of the virtual events in around six months. Of course, your own timeline's going to vary for relatively small, relatively uncomplicated conferences, so if you don't necessarily have a huge number of attendees nor a huge number of sessions. And maybe if you already have speakers and topics and attendees from an already planned face-to-face event that you're now having to transition, then you might be able to get on the low end of the range of the timeline and you might even be able to pull it off in a couple

of months, or possibly even shorter. The more complex your situation, the closer you are to starting from scratch, the longer it will take you.

Jeff Cobb:

So while the length of timeline didn't change dramatically for us, what did change, and it's likely to change for you, is where and how you focus activities in the time you have. And to the extent that you're having to compress things, this is where you're going to really want to figure it out. So for face-to-face events, especially large ones, so much of the early timeline is focused on venue selection, food and beverage, those sorts of things.

Jeff Cobb:

And again, our conferences are small, they're in that 100 to 200 person range, so we don't have the big issues that conferences with thousands of attendees have in finding hotels, plural, in a city, and all the food and beverage to accommodate everybody. But where we have shifted the timeline is to allow more emphasis on working with the experts and facilitators who lead the sessions. And that's easily taken about the amount of time, about the amount of effort, same amount of effort as dealing with a venue.

Celisa Steele:

Now location, of course, changed. It's obvious that we had to look for a platform to support the virtual conference. But it's worth mentioning, not only because yes, you have to take the time to find a solution, which obviously has an impact on your timeline, but also because that switch to online is fundamental. I mean, it really underpins everything else. It opens up new possibilities and it also comes with limitations and constraints.

Celisa Steele:

As we planned for Learning Technology Design 2017, we opted to go with a full service provider. That was our first attempt at a virtual conference. And so, we felt better and safer taking that test run with a partner that had the technology, that had a depth and breadth of experience with the format of virtual conferences, and that had staff. So support staff and event producers to help us.

Jeff Cobb:

So here's a snapshot of how our 2016 face-to-face conference compared to our first virtual conference in 2017. And this'll just give you a sense of structure. So basically, we took the offline value proposition structure and really just transferred that online. So we're still having the typical sessions, doing it over a couple of day period. We did actually have sponsors and exhibitors in both cases. We added in a little bit of extra by having some demonstration sessions, which we can talk about a little bit later. But mostly, in terms of what changed around value proposition, it was around lowering the barriers to participation that we talked about earlier. Folks didn't have the cost of time and travel and they didn't need to completely leave home and work for days, which speaks to convenience.

Celisa Steele:

Now, since 2017 was our first virtual conference, we also had some questions about pricing. We weren't sure what our audience might be willing to pay for a virtual conference, and so, we decided to use the Van Westendorp price sensitivity meter. A Van Westendorp analysis is basically a survey that gets respondents, so you're prospective learners or buyers, to answer

four key questions and share what they think would be a cheap price for a particular product or service.

Celisa Steele:

This would be the virtual conference in this case. And so, you're basically asking them, what counts as a bargain. You're asking them about inexpensive price, so a price that they might pay even though they think it's high. And then, you're also asking them for what's too expensive, no way would they pay that amount. And also, too cheap. What's so inexpensive that that price raises questions and concerns about quality. And then, once you have responses from a range of respondents, they can be plotted as four intersecting lines, as you see here, and they yield an accepted price range.

Jeff Cobb:

And given that pricing isn't our full focus today, we could do a whole session on that, have done full sessions on that, we're not going to say much more about Van Westendorp. But a little note, that we actually did a session at the first virtual LTD conference on how we use Van Westendorp to set the price. And we've provided access to that as well as other information about it on the virtual events page on Leading Learning, which you can find at https://www.leadinglearning.com/resources/virtual-events/, that walks you through Van Westendorp.

Jeff Cobb:

Van Westendorp or another similar analysis may be warranted if you're doing your first virtual conference, in particular. It tends to work well then, if you need some input and can be specific enough about the offering to describe what the buyers are going to get. And what our prospective buyers told us was that, at least based on how we described the event, they weren't going to be willing to pay at quite the same level for virtual as we had charged for face-to-face.

Jeff Cobb:

And we realized, in hindsight, that probably a key reason for that was that we had, again, just really transferred the offline experience online without necessarily creating significantly new value in the process, at least in the eyes of the attendees. And, in fact, that going online actually represented a decrease in value in the eyes of prospective attendees.

Jeff Cobb:

Now we can have some debates and I know we'll talk about this more in Q and A, because there are also times where you want to say, Hey, we're charging the same thing online as we charge offline. And we'll talk about that, but at least in this case, we were being told not to do that. And so, as we move forward, that realization has led us to really more thinking and then experimentation around the structure and around the value proposition for the event, so that we were able to have more flexibility around the online pricing, to charge as much or possibly even more as offline.

Celisa Steele:

So we've already looked at how 2016 and 2017 compared, and they were pretty similar with just some small tweaks. In 2018, we ventured farther afield. We met on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays throughout the month of February, so met on 11 different days in all. Tuesdays and Fridays were short, just one hour days. Thursdays were long, but shorter than the 2017 and 2016 days. We didn't have any concurrents that year. And so, really, that format was one that

wouldn't be viable as face-to-face. It also wouldn't have been as viable if we were using a full service provider.

Celisa Steele:

So in 2018, we switched to a more DIY, do it yourself approach for the technology. For live sessions and to capture recordings, we used Zoom webinar, which is what we're using for this session now. And we've used Zoom for all the other years of LTD. And then, we used WordPress and a variety of free and paid plugins for online community, and we used Amazon web services for hosting recordings.

Celisa Steele:

I will note that our DIY approach has limitations. It works for us with a relatively small number of attendees and sessions, but it, of course, may not work for you. Scalability is something that you'll need to assess when looking at technology and partners. Can the platform's backend support you, and if you need or want it, do they have adequate staff to help with support or event production?

Celisa Steele:

We also jettisoned sponsorship in 2018. We'd invested a lot of time and effort in exhibitor prep and in the demos in 2017, and we decided we wanted to focus more on the learners in 2018. And also, note that the vendors seemed to generally like the demos that we did in 2017, but the feedback on virtual exhibits was a little bit lackluster.

Celisa Steele:

So in 2018 when we decided to focus on the learners, on the attendees, a big part of what we did there was work on an online community with discussion boards that could then supplement and extend the sessions and their content, and that interaction with session and other participants, beyond the confines of just the hour-long session or the hour-and-a-half- long session.

Celisa Steele:

In 2019, we brought vendors back in. We did it on a more egalitarian and less intensive approach. We called them patrons. We also pulled the schedule back down to two days. While some folks had loved that very spread out, ample nature of 2018, others reported that it was hard to carve out time to participate over that many days. And then, this year, 2020, we opened the schedule up a bit by adding a gap day. So we had a Wednesday without live sessions between a Tuesday and a Thursday with live sessions.

Jeff Cobb:

So as you can see, we've experimented quite a bit and tried things out, and clearly there've been implications for the structure that you can see here. And of course, that's also really impacted the value proposition for both the attendees and the sponsors. And we feel like this year's approach, where you see 2020 there, we've gotten pretty close to getting it right. So we've had an evolution in the right direction.

Jeff Cobb:

I'll say that this has also had implications for technology. As Celisa noted, we moved to that DIY approach in 2018, because we felt it might be outside of what would work well with an outside provider. So we definitely recommend having a very clear idea of your content and

your learning strategy and the structure that you need or aspire to before engaging with a platform vendor to really think through what's going to work well with a platform provider, if that's the route you go.

Jeff Cobb:

And we'll note that there are some very good platform providers who have significant experience with virtual conferences. Those include companies like Blue Sky eLearn, CommPartners, Community Brands with their Freestone platform, Digitell, Web Courseworks. And we've listed other vendors as well on the https://www.leadinglearning.com/resources/virtual-events/ page. So if you're looking for a potential vendor partner for your virtual conference, definitely go visit that and take a look at the companies that are listed there.

Jeff Cobb:

So the final topic in planning is marketing. And really, when we went online, we saw a need for increased marketing, mostly because we really had to make the case for the online format at that point. Now, I suspect that given where the world is now, your need for marketing, or at least for making that case, may be lower than ours was in 2017. And in this COVID-19 era, people intuitively get the inherit benefits and value of virtual conferences. They're going to let learning and networking happen in a world where physically coming together is just difficult and dangerous, if not impossible.

Jeff Cobb:

But even so, you're still probably going to need an educational aspect to your marketing to help people understand what's possible with a virtual event. And I think too, positioning it as a collective effort, as a collaboration between you and your attendees to create an effective solution in challenging times, that's going to be very valuable, I think, as a marketing approach. And hopefully very true.

Jeff Cobb:

Going to be very valuable I think as a marketing approach and hopefully very true in what you're trying to do. I think it probably will be for this group. And then finally, keep in mind that your event has fundamental value, regardless of the medium. So continue to make use of strong social proof in the form of testimonials and any outcomes data that you have from your current face to face event that's still valuable. And then over time if you continue with virtual conferences, which we certainly think you should. Supplement those with testimonials and data, they come directly from your virtual conference and speak to its specific value.

Celisa Steele:

So that is a look at planning for virtual conference at least based on our experience. And so let's go ahead and look next at preparation. And as we've experimented with and refined our learning technology design virtual conference, we've been very focused on how to increase the value of the event year over year. And one key way has been by working with those people who facilitate and deliver sessions.

Jeff Cobb:

And we do put a lot of time into that. We've focused on finding interesting folks or interesting things that are being done in helping to shape the content. We're actively involved in helping to shape the content and supporting the session leaders in the online medium with an emphasis

on a high level of interaction. And we've had a lot of questions about that. We'll talk more about interaction in a minute. So we'll solicit ideas. We do this directly and indirectly from our audience, some indirectly by asking about their areas of concern of interest, the things that are keeping them up right now and then directly by just saying, "What topics, what session leaders do you want to see at the online event?"

Celisa Steele:

And then we hold content calls with each session leader and that's where we talk about our vision for the virtual conference as an entity. We go over who the attendees will be and we cover logistics, so what tools will be available to them. Things like chat and polls and then we listen. We have them share what they're planning and then offer feedback, and help shape their plan for their session. And then we do dry runs and tech checks with them. So that's once they have a slide deck together, they have a good sense of what they're going to cover. We'll bring them into the Zoom interface and have them run through it. So it's a lot of upfront investment since we're doing that with all of our presenters. But we think it helps to make those live sessions go as smoothly as possible and that helps make them be as valuable as possible.

Jeff Cobb:

And I'll note that we've nearly always opted for live, real time delivery, because we like the energy, we like the human feel of it, but we recognize and we've experienced that there are bound to be mistakes and technical issues when you go in that direction and you have to be comfortable with that happening. Pre recorded is another option and it can still have a lot of interaction. For example, in chat, when you do a pre recorded approach, you'll typically replay at scheduled times and ideally you can have your session leaders join and engage in the chat. Pre recorded can be very good for more technical training. We had a lot of folks ask in advance about how to make content decisions. If you've got more technical training where precision is of great value, you probably do want to go with pre recorded so you can make sure you get that level of precision.

Jeff Cobb:

And of course, with pre recorded you can schedule and replay the content again and again and that can be particularly valuable if you have a large international presence and you want to be able to offer an event in different time zones. You can take that content and replay it and then do it on different dates and at different times. Now one of the main things to watch with prerecorded is the amount of editing that you end up doing, because that will drive up costs significantly. So if you're going to go the pre recorded route, it's usually best to try to record in one shot whenever possible to try to keep costs down.

Jeff Cobb:

Now we've also worked with sponsors and we did a lot of work with sponsors and in 2017, when we started off, particularly since we're getting them to, to do demos and wanted to make sure that they were getting as much value out of the process as possible.

Jeff Cobb:

We then focused more on that learner experience in 2018, and then in 2019, came back to the sponsors but scaled back to having patrons as Celisa said. And in large part that shift it was because you know, we didn't want to have to invest quite significantly in prepping sponsors, which we did spend quite a bit of time on in 2017, and that may be worth it for you. For us, we decided a lighter weight approach would work better. Keep in mind that sponsors often aren't really prepared yet to fully capitalize on virtual events. They haven't necessarily thought

through what that takes and developed that skill set. And that's true even of those sponsors, you may actually provide virtual events services, we found.

Jeff Cobb:

So simple things like you know, encouraging a brevity from your sponsors if they're going to be speaking in any way during the event. I'm including calls to action in any pages or demos that you make available for them and just really helping them to take advantage of the medium. To actually participate in the chat to be a part of the event. So if you are going to have sponsors, you're going to need to be prepared to put that time into working with them to help them get the return on investment out of the event. And that of course can impact both your timeline and your resources.

Jeff Cobb:

We also put a lot of work into communication with attendees. Definitely be clear in communicating about technical aspects. How to get the software, how to get the links. We even did pre-sessions before our first do it yourself event and make sure any technical issues were addressed, so people could come to scheduled precessions and go through all the technical requirements. But also communicates to support the learning itself, not just the technical aspects. So sending out interesting pre materials or calls for questions like we did before this webinar. And then make use of the time before the session starts to provide information through pre slides. You see that we did that at the beginning of this session and we do that in all of our virtual conference sessions.

Celisa Steele:

We've also found it effective to have an overarching theme for the event, something that we can come back to over and again. We usually do that during our priming and synthesis sessions and we'll talk a little bit more about those when we get to delivery. This year for 2020, our theme was, "The learning business." Which that sort of united all of our attendees and so we were able to come back to that. In years past, we've drawn on our learning business maturity model and the five domains that it covers. We even use something as nebulous is the idea of attending. And that is as attendees, they're paying attention, they're attending to what's being shared, and that's the route of learning. That paying attention, that attending is necessary if learning is to happen. And then on a more purely tactical note, we've worked to make sure that we have adequate support in place, which for us has meant documenting a support plan and bringing on additional contractor resources to help out during the live sessions.

Jeff Cobb:

And after planning and preparation comes, of course delivery.

Celisa Steele:

And every year that we've held LTD as a virtual conference, we've used webcams. We really like the humanizing effect of webcams. You saw Jeff and I here at the top of the hour on camera. We've primarily used webcams and then slides, but depending on the platform, you're likely to have other options available to you. Zoom, for example, allows a presenter to play audio and video files that attendees can see and hear. So you can make use of some preexisting assets or create some bespoke assets for a virtual conference.

Celisa Steele:

Zoom also has a whiteboard functionality for presenters and the ability to send attendees to virtual breakout rooms. So you could divide a session of 100 into 10 groups of 10 to go work on a task and then bring them back together to share. The whiteboard and breakout rooms aren't functionalities that we've used for learning technology design. We just haven't quite seen the need or the appropriateness of them, but they are possibilities. We've also used chat and for us, having an attendee to attendee chat allows us to get beyond pure broadcast during. The sessions and it also recognizes Malcolm Knowles, the father of andragogy has pointed out that there's so much experience in the room anytime you bring adult learners together, so allowing them to share can be really powerful. I will say that we know from the questions that folks sent in ahead of today's session that engagement and networking are front of mind for many in this online format. And I will say that attendee to attendee chat options can really help with that.

Jeff Cobb:

Yeah, we really can't overemphasize that. Everybody here can see how much is going on in the chat when you have particularly a session of this size. It's impossible for us to stay on top of what's going on in the chat, but the people in the chat can can engage with each other. And then of course we're trying to organize the Q and A a little bit more this time, which we'll get to momentarily. Some tips around chat. First of all, be clear about how people are going to use chat. You saw our visuals around this at the very beginning and Celisa talked through chat and QA.

Jeff Cobb:

You have to do that. Get people chatting early on easy, close ended questions at the beginning here. We just asked about where you're coming in from, very typical. Doesn't have to be brain science. You're just trying to help instill some behavior and get people comfortable. And then finally, use pause and do, or pause and reflect. And this can be extremely uncomfortable for anybody doing a virtual conference, particularly for the first time. But actually setting a 30 second timer. We had somebody set a five minute timer to have people go off and do projects during our most recent LTD, and it worked. The people went off and did something that was actually very valuable, came back and got some feedback on it. So having the courage basically, to pause, to let that clock tick, to give people the time to reflect, to give them the time to actually go and do something and come back really can work.

Jeff Cobb:

Some other things we do, we have priming and synthesis around our events and we do this on each day of the event. So we have priming at the beginning where we're doing just a very brief opening to prime people to learn. And then at the end of the day we'll do a synthesis session to bring it all together and to help people kind of cement that learning. We do that each day and of course that that falls at the beginning and the end of the conference as well. So we're able to tie the conference together, tie together that that thematic arc that Celisa talked about and we do simple things two to help prime. Again, you can use slides for this and talk about it. In LTD this year we just posed the question, "What does it mean to you to be in the learning business?"

Jeff Cobb:

And that ran throughout the event. It was on slides, we asked presenters about it, we came back to it in the priming and synthesis sessions. So, simple approaches like that can be extremely powerful. We use a technique often called down collaborative coaching, which is basically getting somebody who's in the event who has a challenge or an opportunity, getting them to come on audio and or video posing their problem and having other attendees jump in and give their input on it. We do actually have a pretty thorough description of how we do this that we'll

link to from the resources page as well. We do something called Follow up Friday with most of our events so that the formal sessions are over, but anybody who wants to can come back together on Friday with us, with other attendees, often with the presenters, ask anything they want, have whatever conversation they want to help them clear up any issues and again kind of cement their learning.

Jeff Cobb:

So a very good way to add some additional interactivity and get to a really personalized level with people. And then finally, we do pay a lot of attention to the execution and technical points. There can be challenges at times with getting session leaders for example, to start video properly and not being muted. Starting slides too early, you're turning them off too soon using time-based phrases, which we try to discourage that because we want to be able to replay at any time. And we have to put a lot of emphasis on that. And as I said earlier, the mistakes are going to occur. Somebody asked earlier what happens when there is technical failure. We have had to reschedule sessions sometimes. People roll with it, you can deal with it. Nothing's going to make the world fall apart just because you have some technical issues at your virtual conference.

Celisa Steele:

And so now we're onto the last of the four key aspects, follow up. And follow up is very important to us philosophically, as well as logistically. There's the need to make recordings of our live sessions available so folks can view them or review them. So view them if they were in another concurrent or just not able to attend, or review them even if they showed up but they want to go back and get refreshed on some point. And we like to post the recordings in our online community, as that enables the possibility for discussion about the sessions to extend beyond the confines of the live sessions. And in general, we believe that virtual conferences and online communities can be very complimentary, each driving participation and engagement and value in the other. So an online community also really enhances that potential for networking and engagement that I know so many people have asked about.

Jeff Cobb:

And along those lines we provide a link from every recording to a discussion thread to go with that session. So it's easy for people to find a place to discuss. We of course do evaluations, we're big on trying to measure ROI. We have some ROI questions we use in our evaluation we'd be happy to share. We collect testimonials as part of our evaluation, so that we're able to both use those in marketing but also in the process of giving testimonials, that often tells us what it is that people most value about the event that we can do more with. And just as the use of the online community helps extend the event and hopefully makes it less of a one-off event and a more lasting experience, we've tried other tactics too. We did a boosting initiative one year where, for a period of weeks afterwards we sent out questions for people to answer, to help get them to recall how that effort for retrieval around the content and be able to cement their learning.

Jeff Cobb:

This year we put together an ebook, we'll make sure you get a copy of that. That pulled a bunch of material from the chat as well as the key takeaways from sessions and other information. So looking at ahead at this point, marketing is going to continue. We've learned over time that we really need to have persistence of our website for the virtual event. I've seen that oftentimes organizations will hold a virtual conference of some sort and then the website disappears. It's better to have a persistent presence over time to attract people to it, provide them with

information. We always put in interest popups. So if somebody is on the page of pop up will pop up and say, "If you're interested in the next round of this event, sign up so we can notify you and you'll get the best deal." And we make sure we're consistent about that over time.

Celisa Steele:

Okay, and so now we want to get to Q and A and after Q and A, we're going to offer a few parting thoughts. If you have a question you'd like to ask, please use the Q and a panel. We know we've already seen a lot come in there. You're welcome to continue to use the chat to share your thoughts or comments, but if it's a question you want us to address, please put it in the Q and A panel. Jeff and I are coming on, we're going to be joined by Jack Coursen.

Jeff Cobb:

So you can notice now that the Jack is down there with us, thank you, Jack. We asked Jack to come because he has extensive experience with virtual events and really just a different type of experience, different perspective than we have and we just thought it'd be incredibly valuable to have him here, so welcome Jack.

Jack Coursen:

Thank you. Just to I guess give a little bit of very brief background for me in relation to this topic. I created ASHA's first ever online conference in 2006, so quite awhile ago now. It was mainly to rescue a failing in-person conference that had really a pretty modest audience. I was an administrative assistant at the time and the original lead for the event left ASHA suddenly, so it was actually a circumstance with some real urgency. I put the event together in just a few weeks, really with basically zero experience. And that's one thing that I really want to say to everybody here, if I can do it and if I could have done it then, then definitely everyone on this call, you are better off than I was then. You definitely can do it. You totally can do it.

Jack Coursen:

For us, even by that very first offering, it was really clear that it was the start of a thriving online event category that just grew and grew. For nearly a decade now, we've hosted at least seven online conferences every year. Every aspect about them outside of intentional experimentation is based on well-established standards. So they're all 13 days, they all have live and recorded elements, they all have exhibits, they've all got daily announcements and so on.

Jack Coursen:

Our online conferences are consistently the best rated and most profitable product category ASHA offers. ASHA's big annual convention is the gold standard of excellence in learning, and our online conferences are always rated higher, often much higher. Last year an online conference I led garner a 4.74 out of five overall satisfaction rating, so best rated isn't just hyperbole, I really mean it. And online drive over $1 million in revenue annually for ASHA and provide really significant derivative offerings too.

Jeff Cobb:

Great. And we've already had a question about links to your conferences, Jack. I know we have at least a couple of links to ASHA conferences on that leadinglearning.com, virtual events page that we've put up a few times and we'll make sure everybody has access to, but we can get more there. And I know you're eager to provide people with whatever access is meaningful to them with your events. Well we have a lot of questions as you might guess. We got a bunch in beforehand, we have a bunch coming up now. So we're going to do our best to answer as many

as we can before the top of the hour and then we'll do a formal wrap up but then we'll stay on and are willing to continue answering questions and we'll do what we can to follow up with written answers and basically whatever we need to do to try to tackle questions.

Jeff Cobb:

So the first one we've got here that's got a lot of up votes is, how do you replicate a coffee break and networking? So I think and really just have that networking aspect of face-to-face events. And I think my initial reaction to that, and I'd love to hear what you have to say about this, Jack, is first of all, don't think of yourself as having to replicate everything from a face-to-face event. Think about what the possibilities are online and how you might leverage those possibilities. So I mean, even going what's going on in the chat right now, yes, people talk to each other obviously in face to face events but the just rapid fire back and forth and contribution of knowledge and then you know, we can capture that. That can be saved, that can be mined in various ways you can't do that really very well at a face-to-face event.

Jeff Cobb:

So you've got that as one option to take advantage of. Some of the other things we mentioned though, I mean the use of online community, tying an online community into this, making sure that you are actually scheduling time and giving some direction around how you expect people to use that time. So, getting people to engage in the chat, getting people to engage in the community around specific objectives are other ways that you can make that networking aspect come out online. Jack, how do you approach that?

Jack Coursen:

Yeah, I mean I think we kind of try and create lots of opportunities and then incentivize participation as much as possible. So half of our conferences really involves prerecorded sessions and so we expect everybody to do those at their own 24/7 really, but at the beginning of an event. And those lead into a full week of interactive chats with the speakers on those topics to dive deeper. And so those are for CE and they dive into the topic deeper, we get tons of questions, it's very interactive and collaborative. And we also kind of tie that together with every presentation has a discussion area. And it's been fortunate but our folks have really shined to that, both attendees and speakers.

Jack Coursen:

And it does vary a bit. In our private practice events where people really have an incentive, a built in incentive to network a lot, they're more interactive, people tend to take advantage of it even more. But if it's really easy to make a comment and it's really easy for the speakers to get that comment by email and just respond by email and have it automatically flow back into the system. If you can reduce all the friction and people can see the value, then we tend to see good uptick there.

Jeff Cobb:

Yeah, reducing friction is key. I would say we have not reduced friction to the degree that we aspire to. But here's, how can we best educate a non-technically savvy audience into this new type of conferencing? My immediate response to that is visually helps a lot, to show peers, colleagues who are actually engaging and doing this. Photographs, video, using video to advantage to really walk people through things to make it clear that this isn't a terribly difficult thing to do and a lot of value can be gotten out of it. And practice sessions ahead of time like we did with our initial one, to have people show up ahead of time and actually try things out and make sure that they feel comfortable. Chances are, your audience isn't as non-technically savvy

as you may think they are, but you want to make sure you're addressing this for the ones who are. Jack, anything you'd like to add there?

Jack Coursen:

No, I don't think so. I think it, you covered it well, I think.

Jeff Cobb:

Great. Next one ism do you have a checklist that can you share for creating a virtual event? Sort of. So in our virtual events, our resources page, and you'll see that. I think based on what we're getting out of this session and all the inquiries we've been getting, we'll probably create a checklist and we'll see if we can find some good ones to link you to as well.

Jack Coursen:

Yeah, we have a checklist of tasks that we do, but that's going to be highly personalized to what your event is. How you structure the event, what the idea is, what platform you're using, what kind of sessions you're offering. All of the details are really probably going to drive it. And yeah, I mean to me, the technology that you use and the fact that it's distance, to me that really is trivial. It's all about, what's the content and what's best for the content? And to be honest, usually in person isn't best with the content. We happen to be more comfortable with it, it's the norm for us. And in some cases, it really is. In some cases, you're truly leveraging that in person experience for something that's completely unique that can only happen in person. But by and large, in my experience, a heck of a lot are easily done remotely.

Jeff Cobb:

Yeah, and good point about the details. I mean, even in any checklists we do, it would really be about the things you'd need to be thinking about, which is really what we've covered in this webinar. That the types of things that we thought about are the types of things you need to be thinking about, but your specific approach to them obviously is going to differ. Alyssa's asks if there's a forum or community where we may connect with other individuals or organizations that have experience in planning virtual conferences? I will say-

PART 2 OF 4 ENDS [00:48:04]

Jeff Cobb:

Experience in planning virtual conferences. I will say, this is completely self-serving, but we do have a community, leadinglearning.com/join. If you go there, you can actually get into the forums that we use around our virtual events and all the content that we've delivered at our virtual events, so that's a resource for you. I don't know another one to suggest off hand, other than obviously if you're an association, ASAE has its list serves obviously and there are going to be people in there. I don't think they have a specific dedicated one at this point, but in the events and professional development, you'd be able to find that.

Jeff Cobb:

I'm going to ask you this one. Jack, because I don't feel like we've got a ton of experience with this, but how have you brought reluctant speakers, instructors, on board with virtual conferences and training?

Jack Coursen:

Well, one of the very first online conferences that I worked on, I think it's the second year, it's not new to all of our speakers anymore, but back then and when we started, it really was. You kind of show them examples, you show them good examples of what you did the first time and give them a sense of what it's like, walk them through the process. I don't find that to be a particularly heavy lift and in fact, that first year there were a couple of really big names in the field and they were super skeptical of the idea, almost dismissive, but I guess we had enough to give it a shot.

Jack Coursen:

At the end of it, one of them contacted me after the fact and was like, this was the one of the best experiences I've ever had. She pointed back to that earlier communication of skepticism and said, if you ever have anybody that was maybe as skeptical as I was early on, you can send them to me and I'd be happy to talk with them about the experience. Usually I don't find that to be the case, but both first speakers and attendees, in our experience, once you've done one, it kind of hooks you.

Jeff Cobb:

Great. Yeah, I think so much of this is about modeling. It's about you modeling, what can work in these environments, you getting those subject matter experts, presenters, on board and get them modeling and getting attendees who can model it. You're creating behavior change here and that's really how you create behavior change.

Jack Coursen:

And be cool about it, too. It really is not a big deal and the more worried you are, or the more hesitant you are about it, the more that's going to come across to your speakers.

Jeff Cobb:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jack Coursen:

It's really just, feel confident. For us, again, when I first did it, I had zero experience, I didn't even know what ISD (instructional systems design) meant. I had no experience in anything and it really is something that you can jump in and if it's a new experience for you and it's a new experience for your attendees, there's no competitive landscape, then there's nothing going to be wrong about it, right?

Jeff Cobb:

Yeah.

Jack Coursen:

It's just going to be a first thing and you'll continue to expand and improve over the years.

Jeff Cobb:

Yep. I'm going to jump over, I'm hoping we got a lot of pre-questions, a lot of them had to do with interactivity, engagement, those sorts of things, which I think we've talked about a pretty good amount. So I'm going to assume that if there are other specific questions around that then we definitely want to try to answer them, but what I want to make sure to jump to that did come through in pre-questions is around pricing.

Jeff Cobb:

We talked a little bit about how we use Van Westendorp because we thought we were going out with something new and we just really needed to figure out how people were thinking about it. Jack, you may have a little bit of a different perspective on pricing than we do, so please share yours.

Jack Coursen:

Yeah, the first one again, I was an admin so I didn't know what Van Westendorp was, I only learned about that a few years ago, probably. We just went out with a rough sense of what we thought we could tolerate from a risk perspective. I think that first year was a pilot. The second year we actually did not do that. We just said, our conferences cost this and that just doesn't matter if it's online it's no worse than in person, it's the same, it's just a different delivery method. So all of our conferences, whether they're in person or online are pretty similar.

Jeff Cobb:

I think again that goes back to you're not downplaying it, you just being clear. We know how to do this in a high quality way and I think, particularly, also if you're in a continuing education area where people need that credit, they may be a little more open to, I can get it online or I can get it off, just, I want to get it and they're willing to pay the same for that. We've got some people asking about sponsors, I'm not sure the extent to which you deal with sponsors, Jack, but somebody's asking, what typically do you do to get sponsors to agree to this format? We also had some sponsorship questions come in earlier. Ways to engage sponsors, ideas for sponsorship benefits, why would corporations agree to this?

Jeff Cobb:

My view is when you got them online, you're in a position to much more immediately interact with a wide variety of different prospects. You're in a position to create a content that can have a shelf life for them. You're in a position to get a lot of data that can be much harder to get offline. You're in a position to give them many more opportunities to interact in a meaningful way with participants. Any other thoughts around that, Jack?

Jack Coursen:

We have a sort of a sponsorship manager that really took an idea and ran with it really effectively. We pretty much look at it from the exhibitor or sponsor's perspective. What's their ideal outcome and really about lead acquisition. So we've structured our entire process of engagement around that. So basically what we do is we offer a raffle that where attendees, in order to get a ticket to the raffle, they have to provide their name, contact info and a note about why that company's products or service might be useful to them. That stuff is all folded within the exhibit space for that sponsor or exhibitor and it's automatically emailed to the exhibitor. The exhibitor can respond back and engage in conversation.

Jack Coursen:

Ultimately they're getting a massive list of names, email addresses and why specifically that product or service could be relevant to that person. That's just flowing back to them and again, when we're giving away an online conference or when we're giving away something of real value to people, our members are nuts about free stuff so they definitely take us up on that. In fact, I would say that our exhibit hall is at least as, if not more, well trafficked in terms of posts than the regular conference halls, sometimes.

Jeff Cobb:

This will probably be the last question we'll answer before we do sort of a formal wrap up, but then like we said, we will stay on to answer everything we can in real time. These are kind of related questions, somebody is asking about face to face events. People get a lot of time to stand up and walk about, how do you keep people engaged when they're sitting at their computer screens all day? And then somebody else has asked, is there a good rule of thumb for length of presentations or how long we should keep participants engaged for the day?

Jeff Cobb:

First of all, I'll say definitely do scheduled breaks and make sure that they know when breaks are going to be. We like to schedule both some shorter and some longer breaks. We may only have 15 minutes between some sessions, but then we'll allow for half hour an hour, whatever seems appropriate for people to get a lunch and do those sorts of things.

Jeff Cobb:

I obviously encourage people to actually get up and do things during those times. As far as actual length of sessions go, we've experimented with that a lot and we've gone from as low as 20 minutes for demo sessions up to an hour and a half for our longer, deeper dive type sessions. This year we settled in at around 45 minutes for the main concurrence and we've found that people like that pretty well, but then we did also do some longer ones in that hour and 15 minute range. So having a mix of sessions based on how in depth you're going to go. We've come towards having more shorter sessions and fewer longer sessions. How about you Jack?

Jack Coursen:

Yeah, I think typically our stuff is about an hour long, but I would say just try stuff. I don't think that there is really probably a wrong answer. You might want to tailor it to your specific members, the competitive landscape for their attention. Again, we're doing these over a 13 day period, always inclusive of two weekends. So convenience is the reason to do these, so because of that, you need to make it convenient. You need to build around the concept of most importance to the member or the customer. For us, having those two weekends means that if it's an hour or two hours, you do it at night when your kids are asleep. You work it in and you can pause and come back later if you need to, but just giving that flexibility. Really, also I would say what does the content dictate in terms of time that's needed? Sometimes the idea can be hit in 30 minutes, sometimes you need to dig in and maybe it's a couple of sessions that are an hour long each.

Jeff Cobb:

Yeah, definitely let the content and the learning outcomes drive more than anything else. I know people also have continuing education requirements...

Jack Coursen:

Yeah, which is basically why we started with one hour because that was the minimum increment for a CE session. Part of us was like, the speaker has got to hit 60 minutes. Come on Luke, space it out.

Jeff Cobb:

Yeah, it can be kind of tyrannical. So we're going to do sort of a formal wrap up just to tie a bow around this session, but then we will stay on to continue answering questions for anybody who has time...

Jack Coursen:

Jeff, could I add something?

Jeff Cobb:

Sure.

Jack Coursen:

I had this idea and I'm more than a little nervous about it right now given the number of people on the call, but I think I better put it out before I think too much about it. Ashley has an online conference happening right now and so I'm going to go way out on a limb here and say given what's going on and the need, that I will extend an offer to provide complimentary access to anyone in the community to see what that looks like. To steal ideas, to steal boilerplate language and so on. It is a real conference that's happening right now, so it's for our members, so I need everybody to be mindful and respectful of that. My email address is in the materials and I guess, send me an email and I'm going to figure that out.

Jeff Cobb:

Okay. Well Jack, you're always a brave and bold person so we appreciate that. We'll just touch on a few things here to again, formally wrap up this session. One is that we don't offer direct services around virtual conferences. We're getting a lot of inquiries about those though. People are looking for services, so we have formed a partnership with **Matchbox Virtual Media** because we know people are looking for solutions.

Jeff Cobb:

Matchbox does a fantastic work, we're very familiar with them. We've participated in their events, we've known them for a while, so we feel very, very comfortable referring people to them as a service provider for their virtual conference. You can get to them just by going to https://www.leadinglearning.com/matchbox, that'll put you on a page where can sign up for a free consultation, which is not just a marketing ploy there. It's valuable to talk to them so we encourage you to check that out. If it does look like you want to get that consultation, potentially work with them, we'd ask that you please use that form on that page. That would help us out in then supporting and being able to do things like this. So, https://www.leadinglearning.com/matchbox, please go check them out.

Jeff Cobb:

And then, we've written about virtual conferences in the past and you can find the last edition of our virtual events report. We'll have that on the leading learning.com/virtual-events page, along with other resources for helping you out with virtual conferences. That's whether you're doing a DIY approach that we've done mostly, or whether you're working with providers. We're due for a new issue of this report, actually, so we would like to get your input on that. We'll be doing a new survey to get the data for this, so you know whether you've done a virtual conference or you're just thinking about a virtual conference, we need to hear from you either way. So there will be a link on this page, the leadinglearning.com virtual events page, to participate in that survey. We'll also email that out to you as well. So please, please, we would really, really appreciate it if you would participate in that and help give us some good data on how virtual conferences are being used.

Celisa Steele:

In addition to the resources on that leadinglearning.com page, you also have us as resources. Jack, obviously, just extended that very nice offer. Here's his email address, you have our email addresses, feel free to reach out to us. Tomorrow, we will be following up with information on how you can access a recording of today's session, so look out for that.

Jeff Cobb:

So just to quickly wrap up here, we started saying that we were in the fortunate position of not really having to respond to something like COVID-19 and reaching the decision to do a virtual event. We know probably most of the folks on this webinar are under a lot of pressure to make a move quickly and you need to do what you need to do, but we do encourage you and hope that you'll be able to step back at some point in the process and think as strategically as possible about what a virtual event can do for you.

Jeff Cobb:

We think in terms of reach, revenue and impact, how you're actually going to be able to reach more of your prospective audience with a virtual event. How are you really going to be able to generate some new revenue opportunities for your organization. Whether you're a for profit or nonprofit, we all typically have to be sustainable, so how is this going to contribute to that? Then, how might it allow you to have an even greater impact in the field or profession that you're serving. So we encourage you, urge you, to step back and have that perspective.

Jeff Cobb:

So that formally wraps up this session. You have contact information to get in touch with us following this and we will send out the recordings and the slides for the sessions, a link to those. That said, we did say we would stick around for anybody who wants to continue asking questions, listening in on the answers to questions. We do encourage you to continue to upload questions if you're seeing ones that you definitely would like to have answered. We'll do the best we can and stay on here for a while to answer questions, but we're probably not going to get to everything, so we'll also be doing some follow-up in the coming weeks to make sure that everybody feels like they're getting the support they need to do this. Let's look at some of the questions that have come in here.

Jack Coursen:

For folks still on, too, we are really public about how our conferences work because it is new to a lot of people, so between what you've got access to on asha.org our events page, which lists all of our online conferences, you know there's going to be link off to registration and more details there between all of that stuff and the stuff that's actually in the conference itself, there's a ton that you can rip off, basically.

Jeff Cobb:

Great. We have somebody who's asked about taking time-zones into account with a virtual conference and that is something that we've tried to account for as much as possible, really just thinking of more from a national perspective. So within the United States we've tried to schedule sessions in a way that somebody on the West Coast could get up relatively early and be able to participate in live sessions if they really want to do the live and somebody on the East Coast doesn't have to stay too terribly late to be able to participate. That's obviously just within the U.S.

Jeff Cobb:

If you're international though, back to what I said earlier, we've had people participate from the Middle East and other places, getting up at the hours they need to, to do that. The prerecorded approach that we talked about earlier and being able to replay at scheduled times, we've known organizations that have done an Eastern version of their conference that's specifically aimed at China and Japan and it's a different event. It's scheduled at a different time, but it's the same content and prerecorded gives you the ability to do that. So if you really have to take into account wide time zones, that prerecorded approach may really be the best way to go.

Jeff Cobb:

In some of the pre-questions, I want to be sure to approach this, some questions about the costs that are involved with a virtual event and somebody hearing that it's twice the work for less than 50% of the money, so seeing very high costs with it. Somebody else is just wondering what are all of the costs involved, additional fees. I will say from our perspective, we have found it to be very cost effective. Even if you have a provider involved, generally you're not going to have anywhere near the level of financial risk that you're going to have with hotels, food and beverage, that sort of thing.

Jeff Cobb:

Our do it yourself approach when you're using Zoom, you're using open source for community. For the actual technology aspects of it you're not talking more than a few thousand dollars at most for that, but then of course, you have to obviously take into account the staff that are involved, the contractors that may be involved, but the pure technology side of it can be done relatively inexpensively. Jack, what's, what's your view on the cost involved?

Jack Coursen:

Yeah, I mean the expenses, if you are managing a budget program that has in person conference and online conference, the expenses for an online conference are trivial, it's basically nothing. Even if it's entirely supported, if you have 12 or 15 prerecorded sessions and you do full event assist for that and you have a platform fee, too and you're just paying your speakers a bit of an honorarium, again, it's still just not going to add up to remotely anything like an in person conference.

Jack Coursen:

An person event has massive scale. If you've got 15 or 20,000 people attending and you're bringing in $5.5+ million, the net revenue total is going to be hard to compete with, but online conferences, the gross revenue may be less, but the net revenue is always going to be really strong. When we compare it to our smaller in-person conferences, even when gross revenue is less, even when it's way less, net revenue can actually be higher.

Jeff Cobb:

Yeah, that is a really good point and something that we probably haven't stressed enough yet. I mean, thinking in terms of the net on it is extremely important and if you're having to make the case to an executive team or board or that sort of thing who aren't seeing those gross figures, make sure you're looking at the net because the net can be quite good.

Jeff Cobb:

We've had a few people ask about the difference between a sponsor and a patron, so I just want to address that quickly. That's just our language, we decided a patron, we wanted it to be somebody who's just really showing their support, basically, for the community, the audience

that we serve. So it's less about a focus on them, more about them really showing that they care about this audience that we're serving. So we borrowed that language, obviously, from places like NPR and other nonprofit type organizations. If we're going to call somebody a sponsor, we're probably going to be much more concerned with what are the benefits that you're getting? What's the concrete ROI, what are we giving you in terms for those sponsorship dollars besides the good feeling of having supported this audience that's important to both of us.

Jeff Cobb:

We've also had somebody ask about just addressing online community further. I'll say with this, we feel like, first of all, if you want to start an online community, a virtual conference can be a great way to do that because you're obviously getting people online to do something together and then to provide a channel for them to go into resources to connect with each other, to connect with the content from the event. It can be a real catalyst for an online community. It's not a silver bullet by any stretch, but it can be very helpful for that.

Jeff Cobb:

We just viewed it as the main way to really turn it into not just an event but a process, something that can carry on over time. Even from one version of the event to the next version of the event, to keep people connected across all of that time and community, just being a great way to do that. But it takes work to connect what's going on in the virtual events, into what's going on in the community and back and forth, that does take some resources and management. It definitely does not happen magically, at least not until you hit a critical mass of people involved in it.

Jeff Cobb:

I'm searching for questions, I think a lot of what's up here we've touched on in one way or another, so I don't want to get too repetitive. Julie has asked, and I unfortunately don't have great answers to this, about to accessibility, captions, transcripts what do you use for your virtual events? Jack, is that something that you actively address?

Jack Coursen:

Yeah, I think one of the conferences that we offer, actually the conference that first went online is our audiology conference. Basically, professionals that address hearing disorders and so that is kind of a key element. All, again, our stuff, is mindful of our memberships. So we have prerecorded sessions, all of those have a written transcripts created for all of the sessions. So all that stuff is available from the get go when people try and get in and then we actually, there's a reason, all of our live interactions are actually text-based chats that are moderated, so they're like a Q&A discussion that's using a text-based chat tool that's moderated. Again, we found that that's a pretty good option for most folks and really when it comes to other stuff, it's just a matter of working directly. Ashley works, we work directly with people to find the solution that meets their needs, too.

Jeff Cobb:
Great.

Celisa Steele:
I will add, I was thinking about the pre-recording...

Jeff Cobb:

Great.

Celisa Steele:

I will add, I was thinking about the pre-recording, obviously giving you the chance to have those transcripts out there. There's a feature in PowerPoint that I haven't had enough time to play with and if people aren't aware of it, there is a live captioning function available in PowerPoint, so we could have, for example, turned that on today. It has inherent flaws of the system, at least at this point, where it's sending to the cloud, and it's going to mess up either some percentage of what you're saying, but that is a tool to potentially try, and there may be others that can kind of help with that live captioning.

Jeff Cobb:

We have had a number of questions about platforms, examples of platforms to use. I mean accessibility is one of those areas we're looking at how well a platform provider is tuned into accessibility because they do vary pretty widely. I mean at this point we're starting to see more attention given to it. And then some of your baseline tools, like for example, PowerPoint, as Lisa was indicating, have capabilities there. But in terms of what to ask for, and I'll comment a little bit more on the platform question too since it is pretty highly voted up. I mean really this comes down to determining what your requirements are and whether a platform's going to support it or not.

Jeff Cobb:

So if you need to do a lot of group breakout activity, if you need the accessibility component, if you want the community really built in to the platform, those are the types of things that you have to determine, there isn't a best platform out there for doing this. As you can see how we did it, we've done it in various ways. I know Jack has done it in various ways over time. It really is figuring out what you're trying to accomplish and making sure that you're comfortable, that the vendor, that the provider you're working with gets it, gets where you're trying to go, that they're not just trying to shoehorn you into whatever model they have for producing virtual events. Because it is starting to become much more sort of templated and commoditized in a way. And so if you're going to step into that, you want to make sure that that template or that commoditized approach actually fits what you're trying to do. And if it does and if it's going to save you money and great, but if it's not, then looking elsewhere.

Jack Coursen:

Yeah. And if you're really making big pushes into online conference and that space basically, then I wouldn't work with a partner, a vendor who I wouldn't say is a partner instead. If they're not growing the platform around but we need and they're not kind of thinking about how to boost up what we're doing, I don't know.

Jeff Cobb:

Yeah, definitely. And as we indicated earlier, I mean there are certainly companies out there who have a good long track record at this point. So you can check references, you can figure out what kind of events they've done and how well those have gone. So as with any sort of technology, do your due diligence basically.

Jeff Cobb:

We've had one question. We talked about virtual exhibits some, we can touch on it a little bit more. Somebody asked, what's the best way an idea to make virtual exhibition with

conferences? With us, we did it pretty straight forward, they get a dedicated webpage. This is when we actually did exhibits and we worked with them to help determine that the content that would be valuable on that dedicated webpage, how they could best showcase themselves, how they could have a call to action that would actually get people to do something with them. There are, to go back to platforms again, I mean there are some of the platforms that have very sophisticated virtual, even 3D type of exhibit halls, they're much more geared towards trade shows. So that's another thing to look for in a platform. If you need a big trade show element to it, look at what those trade show capabilities are. But there's some very good options for doing that at this point. And the main thing is to try some of those outs and see how they feel to you and how they're likely to feel to your audience.

Jeff Cobb:

I'm just looking at three to see if there's anything jumping out that feels like we haven't touched on in one way or another yet. We have quite a few pricing questions. I am hoping we've talked enough about pricing at this point. We will also link, we've done full webinars on just pricing in general, not necessarily pricing virtual conferences, but the general pricing strategy applies no matter what, so we'll make sure we link to some of that on the resources pages as well.

Jeff Cobb:

Somebody's asking about whether speakers are paid or volunteer, I think this probably varies greatly from organization to organization. Our are mostly volunteer and they tend to be people who are passionate about what we do, what they do. I think that's probably going to be possible, certainly with most of the trading professional associations who are on here. But even, I mean, we're not a trade or professional association, we're a for profit company, but any field or industry you work in, you're going to have people who are passionate and are going to be excited about using a new medium. Remember, this is exposure for them and it helps them to build up a valuable skill in doing this. So even if they're not a seasoned speaker, getting somebody to volunteer can work well.

Celisa Steele:

And too, whether they're paid or whether they're a volunteer, often presenting in a virtual conference format, means that they don't have the travel and the time away from home. So they either may make someone who couldn't do it before, suddenly an option or it may reduce the barriers enough that they don't need an honorarium or they don't need as high of an honorarium.

Jack Coursen:

It seems like it's kind of like that question of is the relationship a social relationship or is it a market relationship? And there's just very different rules and kind of impact around those two things. And I would definitely not recommend if you have more of a social relationship with your members, where they're not typically getting honorariums, if you move into market relationship, then it's very, very different in suddenly what somebody would've done for free, if you offer them 1000 bucks to do it, it could actually rub them the wrong way because that's just way under what they typically would get. So I would keep your member in mind and what those relationships look like.

Jeff Cobb:

Yeah, definitely. And intrinsic motivation is a powerful thing. So yes, flipping to extrinsic can backfire. We have a question about how many people do you have working a concurrent session. So kind of going to the staffing, resources around this including the subject matter

experts. When we do a webinar, we have the subject matter expert, the organizational host who runs the event, another staff for monitoring tech and one helping keep eyes on questions, chat and that's basically what we do in ours. I mean it's usually the presenter, usually Celisa or I is playing the organizational host and also keeping an eye on the questions and chat and then we do have somebody on staff or contract, who's monitoring from a technical standpoint as well. Sometimes we'll have both of us in there, both Celisa and I monitoring things and making sure that questions are being answered. I think that's probably a pretty typical model. Is that about how you staff Jack?

Jack Coursen:

No. If we're paying somebody to do it, like we have just totally switched over to working with partners that are familiar with what associations need and we don't want anybody. I don't want to be there, I don't want any of the instructional designers or PM's in there, I don't even want that, our content liaisons aren't even in there anymore. It's the speaker and the person that's recording and that needs to be the person that's recording that, the vendor partner that we're using, the recording lead, they need to be good enough to work effectively with our speakers and we have partners that are. It didn't start that way, we were definitely like, we need the lead PM who's the instructional designer also, they need to be on the call, the content liaison and needs to be on the call.

Jack Coursen:

We had all these different people and over time and with better support, we just scaled back and back and back. And now for a recorded session or even one of our live webinars, totally different format, it's the speaker and that team. And then we do a lot of prep work to make sure that we're really, really refining the idea before anything happens. And then as materials come back, we further refine, when the presentation comes back, every presentation for the most part, at least right now, is being touched by three people on our side. So instructional design, content and editorial, so we kind of try and do as much prep in advance. And we've kind of realized that even with all those people in the line, stuff happens and without those people in the line, stuff happens. So in terms of the measurable outcomes, we always go back to what are the data tell us at the and we don't see differences when we're not there.

Jack Coursen:

And the same thing even with the live chat, the text-based chat, of course we've done a ton of experiments around doing webinars instead. Because why on earth would you do a text-based chat? I mean goodness. And just the surveys show nothing. There's no difference. People don't see any difference at all. The text-based chats get even better ratings than the pre-recorded sessions and it's text and it's no different when we do a webinar or sell instead. So it's kind of like going back to that too.

Jeff Cobb:

Yeah. Well I mean it sounds like you've got a reliable provider who's really taking care of the technical side of things. You've got your subject matter experts well prepared. I think for us, we like to be in there, meaning Celisa and I, because it's part of who we are to be in there. So it's another one of those areas where you should try on different approaches and figure out what actually works well for how you do it. Somebody asked an interesting question. Ezra had asked, how is a keynote different in a virtual conference? It seems like it would not be as useful virtually, but if we previously scheduled a keynote and are now going virtual, how can we optimize it?

Jeff Cobb:

And this is interesting because we really have not had sort of true keynotes at learning technology design. We have done it with other events. But we have sort of settled in on what we call featured speakers and this year we made those sessions a little bit longer and sort of treated them a little bit like keynotes. But I know for us, we're big on interactivity, we're big on people actually being able to do something with what they're given. So we're not necessarily going to have somebody come in and just be inspirational. I mean I think that could still work well, I've certainly been in virtual events where you've had more of a sort of a keynote type person. I think my bias would be to make those relatively brief, not to do the longer type sessions like we do, but do more of a 30 minutes or 40 minute keynote type presentation. But I think it can absolutely work. Again, you're going to want to work with that keynote or to make sure they get the medium, that they're comfortable in the medium.

Jack Coursen:

Yeah, we've done it both ways. So sometimes if the topic array kind of doesn't really warrant it, then we don't do anything. Sometimes it is nice to have a speaker, it's kind of like the, you guys have talked about this, Pre-Suasion. And it's kind of like how do you want to ... What's the tone? Something's going to be at the top. Most people, most of your attendees are going to start with that session at the top. And so how is that preparing them for the rest of it? And is it just to have something interesting that is not really touching on the rest? I mean that can work totally, but maybe it is something that does talk about the overarching problems that are going to be talked about, kind of putting it all together or just motivating people. And I think any of those things, I don't think there's a right or wrong answer, it's just kind of like trying stuff and see what works. But I think there can be a place for it, definitely.

Jeff Cobb:

Yeah, definitely. Let me see what else we have here, that maybe not been touched on so much before.

Celisa Steele:

We had a question around why Zoom webinar versus Zoom meetings and I'll just comment briefly on that. There's trade-offs because obviously we want to have that peer to peer interaction, but in my experience with those large meetings, it gets a little dicey if people don't know how to mute and unmute and it can be just very distracting. And so really kind of channeling people to that text based chat for their interaction, is what we've erred on the side of. Sometimes if we have those smaller sessions, like those Follow-Up Fridays, then we'll bring anyone who wants to, on audio or audio and video, just because it's a smaller group and you can sort of a deal with any background issue noises, where if you have a hundred folks who all are potentially have themselves un-muted, it can get, like I said, distracting.

Jeff Cobb:

Yeah. And I mean it's just another example of, we figured out, well what we're trying to achieve and what works for us. And so we get good engagement through the chat and don't necessarily have the need to break off into groups. Now we might just determine at some point that that would be beneficial and then we would definitely be open to trying it. So you'd have to look at what you're trying to achieve. See what else here.

Jeff Cobb:

And we have had some questions about sharing support plans, sharing our pre slides, things like that. We'll figure out the best way to kind of make some of those resources available as well, so you have examples of how we do it.

Celisa Steele:

It looks to me like we've at least touched on most of the questions that have come in. A lot of the ones, even though we still have ones technically open in the Q and A window, a lot of them are kind of repeats or flavors of things that we've already addressed. I'm going to go back and just put up our contact information to make sure that folks have that. But again, we will be sending the recording along with the slides out tomorrow.

Jeff Cobb:

Yeah. One that just sort of jumped out at me from Andy, I don't have a definite answer to it, is what is the dividing line between requiring a "real virtual events platform" versus a series of webinars. Is that just needing to offer concurrent live sessions? I mean we did concurrent sessions with Zoom, that's just a scheduling thing. I think it's really just ... I think once you hit a certain number of sessions and I don't know what that magic number is, but once you're handling a lot of different sessions and getting a lot of people into a lot of different sessions, particularly if they're concurrent, that's when you really do need to be looking at the "real virtual events platform."

Jeff Cobb:

But before that it's really, what kind of glue do you have to hold it together? And we've found that Zoom, we could probably do everything we do with just Zoom and a good email program to be honest. In terms of coordinating things, obviously we need a way to do registration, so we've done that through just a website that can handle registration and we think it's valuable to do community on top of this as a way to house the recordings. But as long as you can sort of think through what that glue is, that's pulling the pieces together, I mean, I think you can get fairly large without necessarily having to go to that real platform. But often what you're going to get with that real platform is not just the platform, it's going to be what Jack has, the people that go along with it who can really help you not have to dedicate a ton of internal resources to it.

Jack Coursen:

Yeah. And our support stuff, that's for prerecorded. We get customer support through the platform too, but I wouldn't, if it's just a series of webinars, I would not call it an online conference, I would call it a webinar series. To me, an online conference needs to be a conference. It's got to have real stuff happen every day, daily announcements. It needs to have discussion where people can engage with each other. It needs to have some content that people can engage with anytime, just because of the sort of the need for convenience and flexibility. That's such an important factor. But it also needs to have real-time stuff too. I do not like concurrent stuff at all. I think people that are doing an online conference, they want to do it all. They don't want to, if they can't do something, in our experience, if people can't do something, they get pissed off. But I think they want to do it all, but you want it to be a real event, that feels like stuff is happening and feels like stuff is happening.

Jeff Cobb:

Yeah. And I think you're getting at, I think, what I was not so eloquently saying with the glue analogy, what kind of combines it all together. So it's not just a string of webinars. And I'll say we've done concurrence, we've done it with concurrence, we've done without concurrence.

We've actually had pretty good success both ways. I'm not sure where we'll end up in the future, but this year works very well and we have concurrence, again, so much depends on your audience.

Jack Coursen:

Yeah. If people aren't getting pissed off about it, then I think there's definitely, from a logistics standpoint, that might make more sense for people. Like you said, it's just a matter of what's your audience tell syou.

Jeff Cobb:

Well, great. So we're a half hour past when we were going to finish. Like you were saying, Celisa, I think we've addressed most of the sort of, at least the major categories of questions at this point. We'll take the chat from this. We'll take the Q and A from this. We'll take the recording itself and over the coming weeks and months, well we're going to be running the survey so please, please do participate in the survey. Again, you can find it on that virtual events resources page and we'll also send out an email about it. We'll be doing that. We'll be continuing to write about this, trying to make as many resources available as possible. As we noted earlier, we don't actually provide services around this, this isn't a business model for us.

Jeff Cobb:

We've done this, we want it to be helpful. We do have the partnership with Matchbox though, so to the extent that you'd really like somebody to support you, we do encourage you to go to https://www.leadinglearning.com/matchbox. Again, great folks. But with that, I think we will wrap up the session and again, we'll be following up with the recording of everything we've done today and the slides and everything we've done today. And so on behalf of Jack Coursen, thanks so much for joining us and sharing your experience and wisdom. And on behalf of Celisa and I, have a great rest of your day.