OC Communications Pros Share Top Tips for Virtual Engagement
Bryce Roberto, Public Affairs Coordinator, MWDOC

From customer service to board meetings, to field operations and program offerings, the COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly changed every aspect of how water districts do business. Just as each sector of the water industry had to navigate its own unique set of challenges, public affairs professionals were faced with a paradigm shift in communications. Community outreach, including facility tours, workshops, and events – traditionally in-person experiences – had to shift to a virtual environment, creating a slew of questions that needed answers. How do we connect with our customers without face-to-face interaction? Do we have the skill and capacity to seamlessly transition to a virtual platform? How will we measure engagement with our target audience?

To provide insight on managing expectations and implementing best practices in a virtual environment, the Municipal Water District of Orange County assembled a panel of three (3) experienced communicators from member agencies across the region to share how they successfully transitioned their agency's meetings, events, and workshops to a remote setting, and what they believe the future holds for communications in a post-COVID world.

Q: What challenges do you face hosting virtual events/meetings, and how do you overcome them? What are your preferred top three (3) ways to engage an audience virtually, and why?
(Nicole Stanfield, Public Information Manager, Santa Margarita Water District)

Hosting a virtual event in place of a planned face-to-face celebration has a unique set of challenges. From my experience planning a dedication event for Orange County's largest recycled water reservoir, there are three main challenges: connection, the visual and auditory experience, and overcoming technical complexities.

1. Connection

Human connection in a remote setting takes extra thought. We are competing for attention against emails, chats, distance learning with their children, and many other distractions.

Human connection requires emotion. It is no easy task for, say, an engineer to transform years of designing and planning into emotions about what it means to them now that their vision has come to life.

Encourage speakers to connect their emotions to the topic – people are seeking human connection now more than ever. While envisioning the event design, consider ways to connect the remote audience to the people rather than just the tactical story. Triggering the right emotions, keep eyes on the screen, and the person connected.

2. The Visual and Auditory Experience - Keep it Sharp and Simple

Keeping people's attention is a challenge of all virtual experiences. Being mindful of every minute of content will help create a memorable event. Breaking content into bite-sized chunks allows guests to stay engaged and digest the story more effectively. Speakers and video should be sharp and simple. When setting the event order, mix up the event's voices - male, female, energetic, subdued - to keep guests interested and engaged. Lastly, a nice mix of talking heads, interesting video or clips, and other engaging activities keeps the visual and auditory experience interesting.

3. Seek the Experts

How do you seamlessly blend four different platforms – Zoom, Facebook Live, recorded videos, and live in-person guests – into a memorable dedication event? Seek the experts!

I quickly realized that I needed help when we decided to have a small in-person ceremony and invite all others to join us virtually. I wanted to keep the event interesting for all guests regardless of how they were joining us. We brought in a production team early in the planning process to ensure our vision was possible and benefit from their expert advice.

Countless hours of video tutorials are available to help with single platform executions. When virtual events are more complex, it is okay to ask for help.

Q: What do you like/not about hosting a virtual event/meeting?
(Crystal Nettles, Senior Communications Specialist, Orange County Water District)

Virtual events have enabled the Orange County Water District to significantly increase our reach at a cost much lower than in person events. We are no longer limited to location or room capacity, and as such, our events and meetings have welcomed attendees from all over the world. We have also secured prominent guest speakers who otherwise could not have participated due to travel or scheduling constraints. Recordings of our events are also available, extending our reach even further.

In terms of drawbacks, there is nothing like experiencing the sights and sounds of the Groundwater Replenishment System in person. So, we look forward to the day we can resume in person tours. Another drawback is the potential loss of personal connection attendees have with each other when meeting in person. That can be hard to duplicate when there are hundreds of attendees and you cannot see everyone.

OCWD has received five awards for its virtual outreach, so I think we are doing a pretty good job of embracing the positives of virtual events while handling its drawbacks.

Q: How do you measure the success of a virtual event/meeting?
(Medha Patel, Communications Coordinator, Moulton Niguel Water District)

The virtual environment has not only changed the way we communicate with one another, our staff, and our different audiences, but it has also changed the we way measure success. Key to measuring

your event's success is setting those goals in advance, so that hasn't changed much from an overall communications strategy. However, with new tools at our fingertips and the shift to fully online events, analytics has a bigger role now than ever. Now that we have the ability to extend the promotional opportunity or replay events over time, consider setting milestones and frequent check-ins on your initiatives. Perhaps you may want to look at analytics in terms of "views" over the first hour, or the first day, or the first week – or all of the above. Or, perhaps one area of measuring success is whether your customers or key audience were able to access the event smoothly with little to no technical difficulties. Measuring success is an online world has changed, but some of our key strategies remain the same: set your measures of success in advance, evaluate what went well, and always look for opportunities to improve.

Q: What are your top three (3) takeaways for hosting virtual events/meetings?
(Crystal Nettles, Senior Communications Specialist, Orange County Water District)

1. Set goals and a timeline early. It is easy to think that virtual events do not require as much time or effort as in person events, but that is not true. Virtual events are a lot of work, and it's important to plan accordingly, including accurately determining the number of staff it takes to run one smoothly (hint: it helps to have many).

2. Practice, practice, practice. No matter how many virtual events you've hosted, it is important to practice each one. There can be a lot of technological hiccups with virtual events, so it helps to run the event with different scenarios to ensure you are prepared. At OCWD, we usually run each event three times: first with support staff, second with speakers, and then the final event. But we've held additional practice sessions depending on the event and/or issue.

3. Continue learning. Don't implement virtual events and then stop. Rather, take what you've learned and improve upon it. OCWD staff regularly attends virtual events, webinars and conferences hosted by companies, public agencies and associations. We've come away with great ideas to implement, and our outreach continuously evolves based upon internal and stakeholder feedback.

Q: What do you believe the future looks like for virtual events/meetings?
(Medha Patel, Communications Coordinator, Moulton Niguel Water District)

I believe the future includes a hybrid option, or an all of the above approach, for our meetings and events. Just like many of our industry and water supply strategies, it's important to consider all options to ensure equitable access and transparent communication. The water industry is embracing digital solutions more and more, and the COVID-19 pandemic has encouraged us to shift to this digital movement a little quicker. However, as communications professionals and especially for those serving in the public/government sector, we know our communities demand a high level of accessibility, transparency, and open communications and much of that can be best accomplished through in-person activity like a workshop, a meeting, or a one-on-one conversation out at a community event. It will be important to continue providing multiple options for your audiences and different stakeholders, to ensure they have the means to receive information when they want it and how they want it.

It's clear that there are both benefits and drawbacks to hosting virtual events. Though we may be missing in-person interaction, virtual events have granted us the unique opportunity to safely reach a larger audience while reducing costs, expanding our resources, and improving data-driven analytics. While the pandemic has forced us apart physically, we are fortunate to have the ability to quickly embrace and adapt to virtual outreach in order to continue providing valuable programs, education, and resources to Orange County's 3.2 million residents. Whether your agency has already hosted a virtual event or is just starting the process, shared knowledge and experience can lead to innovation and improvement, and the lessons learned today can provide an essential blueprint for enduring the next, unknown crisis.