



MICHAEL GERARD AND ASSOCIATES

Starting the Conversation: How to Exhibit in a Virtual World



The Current Situation

The US exhibitions market is the largest in the world, valued at c. \$13.7bn in 2017¹. And the global exhibition and conventions market is forecast to continue growing at c. 4% CAGR to 2023². With such growth and importance, the exhibit space remains a critical element in a company's marketing strategy.

The global pandemic of 2020, however, has changed the industry's growth and trajectory in significant ways. With few alternatives, medical congresses (ASCO, ADA, APA, EHA, ESMO) are already pivoting to an all-virtual exhibit experience. While 75% of exhibit professionals anticipate an increase in virtual/hybrid events, only 44% have plans to exhibit in a virtual space³.

The rationale may be that these virtual events (meetings and exhibitions) have yet to establish a means to meet the needs of the hosting organization, their sponsors and virtual attendees. In this white paper, we will focus on the exhibit side of sponsorship. Specifically, that exhibitors need to redefine

what they consider "congress success" - an ROI metric that is often related to the number of badges scanned, length of engagements, requests for resources and meetings held. As one marketing consultant put it, "Thus far, it looks like online trade shows are a lot of work with relatively little return on investment."⁴

In a virtual world success requires a new set of expectations.

4 IBID

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1 AMR International, Globex 2018

2 AMR International, Venues 2.0

3 Exhibitor, Covid-19'S Impact on the Tradeshow Industry

Pivoting to a Virtual Congress

When the decision was made to transition to a Virtual Exhibit experience, many organizations were faced with the enormous challenge of developing a complex infrastructure to meet everyone's needs. The organization and its strategic partners, as well as sponsors and attendees, had to reevaluate how best to move forward in uncharted territories.

In analyzing a number of recent all-virtual medical congresses, we discovered a number of distinct challenges. Because the events are all online, sponsorship offerings were determined by the technological limitations associated with a web-based platform. And in analyzing the offerings of the medical congresses that moved to an all-virtual event, we noticed many similarities amongst the offerings to sponsors.

These offerings included:

- + Logo & singular banner image
- + Company description
- + PDFs, PowerPoint slides
- + Embedded Videos
- + Third-party conferencing solution
- + Chat Feature
- + Satellite symposium

In all cases, the number of options afforded to the exhibitor were predicated on their level of sponsorship. For exhibitors who purchased the lowest level of sponsorship, the offering was typically just a logo and company description.

For the exhibitors, this pivot also demanded assembling new or existing content that could be reconfigured into this new construct. In a few instances, new content was created specifically for the virtual event with varying degrees of success and quality. Additionally, exhibitors were unable to utilize traditional forms of marketing tactics to ensure a participant's ROI¹ and ROT². This made the challenge of measuring their success more difficult.

1 Return on Investment

2 Return on Time

ASCO: A Case Study

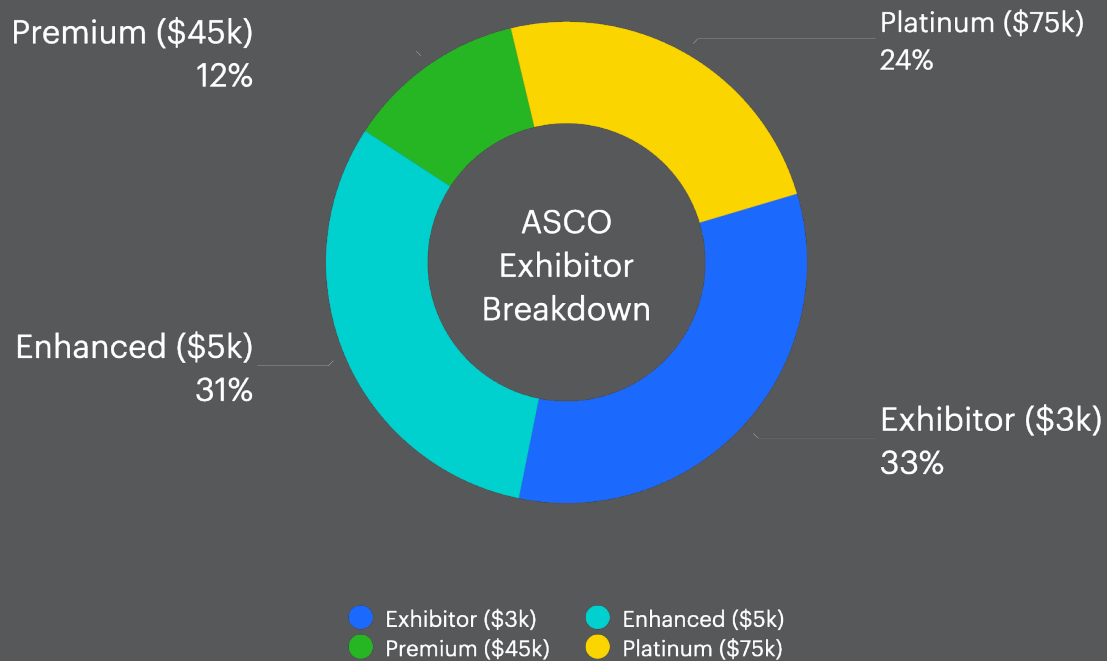
Only a couple of months prior to the start of the 2020 American Society of Clinical Oncology Annual Meeting (ASCO), the decision was made to hold the congress virtually. With such a condensed timeline for execution, decisions on how to structure such an event needed to be made quickly. One aspect of those decisions was how to establish sponsorship levels and what benefits and offerings came with each.

For the purposes of this white paper, we will review how the exhibitors worked within the structure and how the exhibition industry can learn from this experience.

ASCO established four (4) levels of sponsorship at different price points and inclusions for each. This table illustrates the various offerings for each exhibitor.

Item	Exhibitor \$3,000	Enhanced \$5,000	Premium \$45,000	Platinum \$75,000
Virtual Exhibits Page Button	-	√	with logo	with logo
Company Name	√	√	√	√
Website URL	√	√	√	√
Location	√	√	√	√
Company Logo	-	√	√	√
Social Media Platform Links	-	-	√	√
Product and Services Categories	Up to 5	Up to 5	Up to 7	Up to 9
Company Description	250 Characters	600 Characters	800 Characters	800 Characters
Corporate, Product or Services Images	-	1	2	4
Company Banner	-	-	√	√
Videos (up to 5 minutes)	-	-	1	3
PDFs	-	-	5	20
Virtual Meeting Registrations	\$375 each	2	12	20

ASCO: A Case Study



For the 2020 ASCO (American Society of Clinical Oncology) Annual Meeting there was a total of 240 “exhibitors.” These included companies that exhibited independently, part of a Joint Venture/Co-Market, or companies that chose to purchase more than one sponsorship (i.e., Medical Affairs and Commercial).

Of the 240 who participated in the virtual congress, seven (7) companies selected the two (2) sponsorship option (to create a “firewall” between Medical Affairs and Commercial), a decision typically driven by Legal and Regulatory practices. In some cases, these levels of support matched (both at the Platinum Level). In others, they were different and granted different benefits for each (one at the Premium Level and another at the Enhanced Level).

Marketing opportunities such as banner ads or pop-ups were not provided, nor were there any additional incentives to drive traffic

Experiencing the Virtual Exhibit began with a tabled alphabetical listing of all the sponsors, with Platinum sponsors positioned at all times at the top. Each listing was either a tiled image with a company logo, or, for Exhibitor Sponsors, simply a company name. A user-friendly filtering system for both category (area of study and industry) and location (country) was provided. Marketing opportunities such as banner ads or pop-ups were not provided, nor were there any additional incentives to drive traffic to a particular company page or on-line event.

The Exhibitor Page

The range of choices exhibitors made for their virtual exhibit varied. A few provided a direct to a “virtual booth” hosted on their corporate site, while a majority of exhibitors chose only to utilize and execute their benefits that came with their funding level.

A majority of the content that the exhibitor

chose to provide to attendees fell into these categories:

- + Currently approved media resources. (PDFs, renderings, videos, etc.).
- + Corporate information discussing the history and mission of the company
- + Corporate banner with non-product specific branding
- + A direct link to the corporate website; an oncology-specific page; or a simulated virtual booth hosted on the corporate site.
- + A single representative listed with direct contact information including their name, title, and corporate email address.
- + Link to third-party “networking” software (<https://grip.events>)

Since the user data for these shows is private, it is difficult to ascertain whether these shows would be considered successful using traditional exhibit metrics. But what is clear is that moving forward exhibitors need to redefine their strategies within this strict paradigm. Few exhibitors utilized their sponsorship offerings to create a singular, unified experience for the attendee. A majority, in our opinion, recycled existing medical affairs and marketing materials. This made it incumbent upon the attendee to search for the material relevant to them.

This approach to the exhibitor page may have been driven by the lack of time, inability to obtain FDA or Regulatory approval, or in getting the necessary “buy-in” from the various departments. The result, however, was a virtual exhibit experience that was far from successful.

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Redefining Success

As we noted prior, the major medical congresses are all pivoting to a virtual solution. Whether it be a temporary solution or a permanent addendum to the congress experience, it is paramount that companies formulate a strategy that redefines the requirement for “success.” While the offerings are limited in a virtual booth, you still need to develop an over-arching strategy for messaging.

What steps must you take to ensure you hit the targets that lead to success? First, you must redefine what “success” looks like and how it is measured in this new environment. While each stakeholder will have different goals and objectives to achieve, cross-functional alignment is vital. Once you have alignment, surround yourself with the right support team--people committed to your success.

From here, define your priorities and messages and clearly outline what has to happen for you to know you’ve been successful. Are you developing the right methods of engagement, messaging, collateral and supportive media to ensure that success is achieved? Is there continuity and flow throughout your virtual exhibit page? Most importantly, use your sponsorship page as a starting point to initiate the conversation with your visitor, not just as a way to provide content to them. The fundamental goal of the physical

exhibit booth was to engage the visitor in conversation, that goal is still achievable in this virtual world.

The corresponding table has the exhibitor features listed as inclusions for ASCO sponsorship. Since many of these features have crossed over to other virtual congresses, we’ve developed a number of considerations you and your team need to evaluate when developing a virtual experience.

Most importantly, use your sponsorship page as a starting point to initiate the conversation with your visitor.

Items	Considerations
Virtual Exhibits Page Button	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Will including a company logo make it easier for someone to find you? + How will this information be displayed/sorted and will it be based on package level?
Company Name	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Standard
Website URL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + If time allows, create a customized page for that particular congress instead of a link to the corporate home page.
Location	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Standard
Company Logo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + How important is your logo/brand identity to what you are trying to achieve? + Will someone find you without the logo?
Social Media Platform Links	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Include all appropriate social media platforms, even customized social media accounts for the congress.
Product and Services Categories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Clearly define the categories of service your customers are looking for to find you.
Company Description	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Try and start the conversation here rather than provide boiler-plate corporate information. Tell a bigger story that engages and supports your message.
Corporate, Product or Service Images	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Lifecycles of products and molecules change, update your focus accordingly.
Company Banner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Define if it is part of a larger virtual exhibit strategy and use an image that is part of a broader campaign.
Flash Videos	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Have the CEO create a customized “welcome video” that promotes the company’s goals and discusses the information available on your exhibitor’s page. + Ensure that any home recorded video is as professional as possible with good lighting and clean audio.
PDFs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + These buttons link you out to various pieces of information. Clarify what those can be: videos, infographics with links to more information and resources, simple PDFs, websites, etc. + Clearly define the name of a linked items so it’s obvious where the attendee will go. Make it easy to find information.
Virtual Meeting Registrations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Utilize these for your team + Share them across the overall delegation

Conclusion

Virtual exhibits need to do more than provide a page with a list of links and generic videos, they need to be a stepping stone to virtual encounters and continuous engagement.

The most important place to start for any company considering a virtual exhibit is to initiate a strategic conversation as early as possible. Begin with your internal colleagues from a cross-functional perspective so all parties with a stake in the game have a seat at the table. The blending of the voices of all vested will drive success.

As you create your strategy, consider the life of your plan beyond a single event. What happens with your message and engagements once the event ends? The week following? The month following? The entire year? Continue the conversation before and after each congress; building upon what you started. And shift as necessary. Maybe the

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congress has a specific focus within a disease state? Is there consideration based on the location of the congress? Where in its lifecycle is your product? These considerations will set you on the right path and give you the proper toolkit you need to navigate the new world of virtual exhibiting within the healthcare industry.

Request further information

Michael Gerard + Associates is a consultant agency that specializes in the medical congress space. With 35+ years of experience, we assist companies in achieving their congress goals.

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Michael Gerard + Associates is a consultant agency that specializes in the medical congress space by optimizing the presence of our partners while executing a global strategy.

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