



VIRTUAL CONFERENCES:

THE NEXT FRONTIER IN CHAPTER OUTREACH

They still require organizational muscle, but virtual conferences are a viable fallback plan.

By Maureen A. Will



In 2020 we saw the importance of taking previously large-scale in-person conferences virtual due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Knowing that my chapter wasn't the only one in this position, I spoke with others to gather a wealth of knowledge on the ins and outs of virtual conferences. Colorado, Kansas and California's two APCO chapters each had successful virtual conferences in 2020. Each had unique experiences with the same goal: provide training at low or no cost to their memberships.

They also had other things in common — they had never done a virtual conference before and had to cancel their normally scheduled in-person conferences. Colorado

and Kansas used the same platform for their events. Northern California and Southern California (CPRA) Chapters traditionally hold annual vendor expo events as chapter

fundraisers but collaborated as "California APCO" and developed a 2-day Virtual Public Safety Training and Vendor Expo.

Having "attended" all three virtual conferences, I knew I needed to speak with these chapters specifically to pass on their wisdom and lessons learned to other chapters. I had the pleasure of speaking with Jennifer Kirkland of Colorado NENA/APCO, John Wright of CPRA and Angela Murphy from Kansas APCO to develop a framework that will allow all of us to have a "Plan B" for what to do if we have to cancel our in-person annual conferences in the future.



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The first step in the journey of virtual conference planning is choosing a platform. Colorado and Kansas contracted with Moetivations, Inc., which is an established training/QA company based in Colorado. Kirkland related that Moetivations is a regular participant in their chapter meetings as well as in-person conferences, and they had reached out to the chapter to offer their virtual conference platform. Murphy and other Kansas Chapter members attended the Colorado APCO virtual presentation and were impressed with the platform and contracted with Moetivations as well. According to Wright, after the two California chapters teamed up for a virtual conference, they chose Zoom as their platform.

After these initial decisions are made, planning and organization are key. You have challenges in front of you and no question is too minor. Some elements to consider are:

- Attendee registration (pre-conference and during the conference).
- Supporting multiple training tracks simultaneously.
- Allowing attendees to see multiple presentations across multiple session tracks (roaming between sessions).
- Accessing handout materials.
- Creating an interactive program guide.
- Awarding donated door prizes.
- Program scheduling (live vs. recorded; program guide for attendees; multiple tracks for different audiences).
- Sponsorships.
- Exhibit sessions.
- Keynote speakers.
- Promoting the conference (using badges).

Fortunately, Colorado had much of this work already done in preparation for their in-person conference. The call for papers was completed, session selections were made, the keynote speaker had confirmed, and the conference theme was chosen. The groundwork was completed but the next step was contacting speakers to ask if they would record their presentations.

California and Kansas worked with local trainers to provide prerecorded training and

used live streaming for several of their sessions. “One of the nice things about the live training,” said Murphy, “is that participants were able to ask questions in chat (real-time), and the instructors engaged with them — there was also a lot of networking among participants in the chat room.”

Virtual platforms allow more people to participate in training because they are all recorded, allowing our staff to participate in training regardless of the shift they are working. Virtual sessions also allow more participation, not just from our own chapters, but from people outside our states. This can open-up sessions that are not state-specific. In the case of the California sessions, “exhibitors were able to use a Zoom background with their company logo, or a camera set up with the presenter standing in their company’s exhibit booth just as if attending a live exhibit hall booth at a conference,” Wright said.

Our commercial members are an integral part of our conferences, whether virtual or live. Everyone remarked how involved the commercial partnership was, so the use of our Chapter Commercial Advisory members is an important component in hosting a virtual conference. They can assist with the development of sponsorship levels for the participation of commercial partners, and the need to be respectful of them is important as they have also been impacted by COVID-19. Some of the ideas that they came up with include:

- Ask commercial partners to send “swag” for a conference bag. Fill the bag and send materials to participants. You can limit the number of bags (providing to the first registrants for example) and even make the bag a surprise to participants.
- Place sponsorship logos in prominent locations.
- Provide an opportunity for them to record a message.
- Allow posting of product flyers or presentations in “chats” during their sessions so participants can download them during the session.

Colorado and Kansas incorporated door prize giveaways separate from the prize giveaways vendors do during the vendor show. Chapter door prize giveaways were contingent on participation in the virtual conference as an incentive for people to participate.

The door prize announcements were used as part of their promotional materials and the flyer was attached for reference. California also had several exhibitors donate door prizes in the form of gift cards or logoed items. The exhibitors gave a list of their “donations” and were given the name and email of the winner after the drawings were held. The donor reached out to the winner to arrange sending the prize. They used an application called Wheel of Names, which was populated with the names from the registered attendees, to select the winners. Zoom share showed the wheel and the name of the winner to the attendees live. This was done during their “Auditorium” meeting track and the event closing sessions.

Each chapter provided takeaways that are important for anyone considering hosting a virtual event. Most important is the tracking of assignments — commitments on the part of the conference committee — and a stable platform. Other considerations include:

- A minimum of two conference committee members available during conference hours to handle questions/needs and at least one following along with the conference to ensure it is running smoothly.
- Ensuring the registration vendor/platform can quickly pass new registrant information to the conference platform vendor/person responsible so new registrants can quickly access the conference.
- A firm deadline for conference registration cutoff.
- Someone following social media each day of the conference in the event members are asking questions on that platform.
- A quick turnaround to load the “live” presentations into the conference platform recordings.

- A survey platform that allows you to aggregate the data.
- A pathway to ask follow-up questions of the presenters if a platform does not provide for a Q&A session.

Now you have an idea of what goes into hosting a virtual conference. It is as complicated and as simple as when we host our live events, with other considerations such as opening ceremonies and awards that may need to be factored in. Those who have hosted these virtual events all said they would do it again, which tells me I need not be afraid of trying it, knowing that fellow

members are willing to lend their expertise. Just as we have continuity of operations plans for our centers, we need one for our chapter events to help us continue to do the business of the chapters. ●

Maureen A. Will, CPE, RPL, is Director, Newtown ECC, and Past President, Atlantic APCO.

Contributing to this article were:

Angela Murphy, Liaison for Kansas 911 Coordinating Council, who has served in public safety since 1996 and 12 years as a PSAP Manager and Manager of Emergency

Management. She is currently the Kansas APCO President.

Jennifer Kirkland, ENP, CPE, RPL, ARM-P, 911 Center Manger Grand Junction (Colorado) Regional Communications Center, Secretary Colorado Training Standards Institute and APCO Executive Council Representative — Colorado NENA/APCO Chapter.

John W. Wright is CFO/PIO — Southern California Chapter of APCO and 79th President of APCO International.

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QUIZ

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Choosing a platform is the first step during the journey of planning a virtual conference. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. True b. False 2) More people are able to participate in what type of platform? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Live/in-person platform b. Any platform c. Virtual platform d. One-on-one platform 3) In 2020, Kansas, Connecticut and two California APCO chapters had successful virtual conferences. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. True b. False 4) Some considerations to hosting a virtual conference include: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. How to access handout materials b. Sponsorships c. Keynote speakers d. All of the above | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5) These individuals are an integral part of the conference. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. APCO members b. APCO leaders c. Sponsors d. Commercial members 6) Chapter Commercial Advisory members suggested ways to include commercial partners in the conference planning by: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Placing sponsorship logos in prominent locations b. Asking them to build a new display area c. Hanging decorations d. Delivering public updates on their fields of expertise 7) Colorado and Kansas tied door prize giveaways to _____ in the virtual conference. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Registration b. Participation c. Donations d. None of the above | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8) After the initial decisions are made, planning and organization is key to hosting a virtual conference. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. True b. False 9) Colorado, Kansas and California's two APCO chapters shared the same goal: provide training at low or no cost to their memberships. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. True b. False 10) What is the most important takeaway for anyone considering hosting a virtual event? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Tracking of registrations b. Planning and organization c. Tracking of assignments — commitments d. Door prizes |
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