

David Meerman Scott with Michelle Manafy



STANDOUT **VIRTUAL** EVENTS

HOW TO CREATE AN EXPERIENCE
THAT YOUR AUDIENCE WILL **LOVE**

Standout Virtual Events

How to create an experience
that your audience will love

David Meerman Scott

WITH

Michelle Manafy

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INTRODUCTION:

Making Connections in a Socially Distant World

In just the first two months of 2020, David delivered talks to thousands of people at 10 different in-person events on three continents.

Michelle's organization had a dozen events planned for the year, topics set, locations booked, contracts signed. And she'd already agreed to participate in many others.

Then Covid-19 hit. David's last in-person speaking engagement in 2020 was on March 3. Mid-March, Michelle's organization sent everyone home and went into wait-and-see mode. Both quickly realized that for the foreseeable future, there would be no in-person events.

David found himself in a bit of a daze when the in-person events industry vanished. For more than a decade, he had been used to delivering 30 or 40 presentations a year all over the world, racking up hundreds of thousands of air miles as he shared ideas about how organizations of all kinds create marketing strategies that turn customers into fans.

Michelle found herself part of a team that had produced live events together for many years, but with little experience in virtual events. Given the emotional, personal, and professional impact of Covid-19, some members were slow to abandon hope for the return of physical events. However, she could see that there was a need to quickly explore virtual options and build a plan.

Once he overcame his initial shock that the events business had dramatically changed, seemingly overnight, David became super excited and hopeful as he began testing many new ways to deliver content to people online. And within weeks, his work shifted to exclusively digital. Between April 2 and the end of September, when this book was completed, he delivered talks at 25 virtual events. Within a few short weeks, Michelle created a plan to shift her organization's events online, including rethinking their structure, timeline, sponsorships and more, which she pitched to key stakeholders, who jumped in to make the shift.

Both David and Michelle were quick to see that the events business — and their careers — were transforming in real time. In our own ways, and then together, we dug into the art and science of virtual events and looked at how to produce effective virtual events from every angle. And these explorations became the ideas you will read here.

As speakers at and organizers of virtual events, we had unique opportunities to learn from many different aspects of the events business. We spoke with virtual event organizers, event production companies, speaker bureaus, virtual event platform companies and

broadcast studios, as well as attendees, sponsors, and speakers at virtual events.

We studied what makes virtual events great as well as common problems and shortcomings. We focused on what makes for a wonderful virtual presentation. And we explored the technology required and the costs of hosting a virtual event.

Once we both realized that we had amassed a unique knowledge base very quickly, this short book was born to share what we have learned with event organizers, companies considering a virtual event, speakers, and others. The goal: To help everyone produce truly great virtual events.

This guide will take event planners through understanding the basics of virtual events, including how to choose the right platform, pick the best speakers, help all of your speakers better perform in a virtual setting, figure out what costs are involved, promote your event, and consider how to avoid common shortfalls of virtual events.

For virtual event speakers, we discuss how to deliver a great talk, how to be a good partner to event organizers and how to interact with your audience.

Whether you are a seasoned event organizer or speaker making the transition to virtual events, or just getting your first event off the ground, this guide will equip you with everything you need for success.

On a personal note, we are thrilled to be working together

again. Michelle was David's very first editor nearly 20 years ago, when he was a cub contributing editor at *EContent* magazine. Around that time, David spoke on a panel that Michelle moderated at the Buying and Selling EContent conference in Scottsdale, Arizona. Soon, they were collaborating on other projects including David's 2005 book *Cashing in with Content*, which Michelle edited.

We want to thank the many organizations that have stepped up to create high quality virtual events at a time when many of us are hungry to learn new things, and who were kind to share their experiences with us. This steep learning curve has been tough for organizers and speakers alike. But these skills will pay off in the short and long term.

We are both firmly convinced that virtual events are here to stay, even when in-person events can resume. While in-person events will certainly return, we think many events will move to a hybrid model with some people gathered in a physical venue and others coming together online. The advantages of virtual events are clear. They offer incredible flexibility along with emerging advantages and opportunities.

We have organized the content into chapters and within each chapter there are sections. You don't have to read this book cover to cover, or in order, for it to be useful. For some readers, it might be more helpful to dip in and out of the chapters and sections that most closely meet your needs and interests. Whether you read front to back, or start with your most pressing needs or interests, we believe you will find useful insights and advice that will help you be a

driving force behind creating standout virtual events that attendees will love.

CHAPTER 1

What Is The Purpose of Running a Virtual Event?

From corporate gatherings, industry meetings and roadshows, to trade shows and massive expos, events have been around forever. They provide an opportunity to bring people together to share knowledge and learn from one another. Attendees can network and make new professional contacts while corporations can demonstrate their products and knowledge to potential customers. Along the way, connections are made, business is built, and if things go right, everyone leaves feeling like the event was worth the time, money and effort.

Of course, for many organizations, events are a business unto themselves. There are entire industries built around conferences, huge venues dedicated to hosting them, and a whole slew of interconnected industries that do production, light and sound, provide meals, book speakers, and other critical components.

Virtual events are not a new thing either. With the advent of digital, virtual events cropped up. The old-school webinar (web-based seminar), for example, has been around for well over a decade. However, with the shutdown of in-person events starting in early

2020, many organizations were pushed to rethink what would be possible if people could not travel or gather in large groups.

Given the size of the events industry and the revenue at stake, it is no surprise that some organizations have turned an eye to the potential of virtual events. The trouble is that when people think of virtual events, those old-school webinars are the first thing that springs to mind. While they are a good way to share knowledge and even generate revenue, webinars can hardly supplant the entire events industry in terms of revenue or experience.

That said, virtual events have tremendous potential to create fans of the organizations that host them. Done well, a virtual event can be the best marketing a company can do all year. Big issues can be addressed by convening global experts. More sales leads can be generated through these types of initiatives than through any others. Non-profits can secure donations. Trade associations and other organizations can maintain member satisfaction.

Building fans of your organization with virtual events

In 2015 David began to dig deep into the idea of fandom. He looked at how and why people become a fan of a company, a product, a service, or an idea. We learned that much of fandom is rooted in neuroscience, which explains the power of events to build fans and grow business. Events offer a unique opportunity to build and reinforce “Fanocracy,” a concept coined by David explored in more depth in the Wall Street Journal bestselling book *Fanocracy: Turning Fans into Customers and Customers into Fans* (2020, Port-

folio/Penguin Random House), co-authored with his daughter, Reiko.

David and Reiko spoke with neuroscientists to understand what goes on in our brains when we connect with other people. It turns out that we humans are hard-wired to want to be part of a tribe of like-minded people. That is where we feel safe and comfortable. This concept is an important survival technique because when we are with people who we know and trust, we are safe. When we are with people we do not know, we can feel vulnerable. This goes back thousands of years and explains why humans live in groups.

That is why when you are with your friends you feel great and when you are in a crowded elevator you might feel vulnerable. It is also why you enjoy interacting with people at an in-person event, because everyone is there to learn from one another. A tribe is built by the organization hosting the event and people want to return year after year.

But can that experience be replicated or experienced virtually? We think so. However, it is not simply a question of dusting off a conference program and porting it online.

Can the dynamic of in-person be recreated through virtual events?

To go even deeper into the neuroscience of developing fans, it is important to look at a simple but frequently overlooked dynamic in our digital age: virtual proximity.

It is not always possible to bring people together in-person, a

fact that became a stark reality in 2020. However, an understanding of the power of proximity is important background to the concept of virtual proximity, which we can build with video as part of a virtual event.

To really understand virtual proximity, we need to look at the importance to all humans of in-person proximity to like-minded people.

What is it about being around other people that we humans crave? Why is physical proximity so important? Cultural anthropologist Edward T. Hall started studying this phenomenon in the 1950s.

Dr. Hall defined humans' use of physical space in a simple way in his 1966 book *The Hidden Dimension* where he describes how people like to keep certain distances between themselves and others. It explores how our use of space can affect our personal and business relations and explains why in-person events are so powerful.

To be effective communicators, we need to learn how to consciously manage the physical space between ourselves and others.

The significance of each level of proximity can be predicted and managed to create the most optimal outcomes. For instance, Hall described “public distance” as more than 12 feet away from others. When somebody is further than 12 feet from us, our unconscious brains know they are there, but we do not actively track them. He identified “social distance” for interactions among acquaintances, such as walking the exhibit hall at in-person events, as being from four feet to 12 feet. We unconsciously track people who

enter our social space because our ancient brains want to know if there is danger among those people. “Personal distance” for interactions among good friends or business contacts ranges from about a foot and a half to four feet, which would occur at meal breaks or the reception at an event.

Understanding these degrees of human proximity at in-person events and how they predict shared emotional connections with others has an enormous effect on building fans at an event. People who are able to cultivate physical closeness by engaging with them face-to-face can create stronger emotional bonds. At the same time, attendees cannot help but feel uncomfortable when walking the exhibit floor if a booth representative approaches them, getting too close in an unwanted way, because it is hardwired in us to be wary.

Normally, when we are able to interact together, the most rewarding encounters in our lives occur within our social space and personal space. It is one of the reasons in-person events are so popular.

Building fans with “proximity” at your virtual events

People go to an in-person event for more than the programming — they go to enjoy close proximity with other like-minded people.

So far, we have looked at the importance of in-person human connection to grow fans. However, not all businesses can have that kind of connection with every would-be fan. And as we write this, in-person events have essentially stopped because of the pandemic.

So, given travel limitations or because your audience is spread out all over the world, how can your business achieve similar success?

It turns out that virtual events can still deliver the power of connection through another fascinating form of what neuroscience called “mirror neurons.” Mirror neurons are a group of cells in the premotor cortex and inferior parietal cortex of our brain. That is a mouthful of scientific language!

To keep it simple, these neurons offer some valuable insights for virtual event speakers and planners. They not only activate when we perform an action — biting into a lemon, smiling — but they also fire when we observe somebody else performing the same action. For instance, when those around us are happy and smiling, our unconscious brain tells us that we are happy. Often, we will also smile.

A critical aspect of understanding mirror neurons is remembering that it is how we humans are hardwired. Our ancient brain is at work helping us cope with the world around us, protecting us from danger and keeping us healthy. We are not able to choose to turn on or choose to ignore.

We cannot help but react the way we do.

Here is where it gets really interesting for the virtual events business: People unconsciously bond with people they see on screens and on-stage as if we were together with them in-person because of mirror neurons. This helps to explain why we feel that we “know” movie stars and television personalities. We have seen those actors

or commentators on a screen as if they were in our personal space, inside of four feet, and our brain gives us the feeling that we have actually met them.

The same thing is true for virtual events. If a speaker's video is cropped effectively and she looks directly at the camera and presents in a warm and familiar tone, audience members will develop a powerful bond with her. These positive virtual connections serve to make those people fans of your business.

Video of people builds fandom in your business

A deeper understanding of mirror neurons can help you build fans within your organization, or market any products and services you want to sell by hosting virtual events. Businesses can use the concept of mirror neurons to build fans in many ways. One important aspect is creating connections via our virtual toolset.

Video of people, as part of a virtual event, is a fabulous way to reach people emotionally through the power of mirror neurons. However, watching an actor perform is quite different than seeing one in a brilliant fireside chat, or breaking down the fourth wall and communicating directly with the audience.

As in face to face encounters, there is something truly profound about eye contact and focused attention. When you shoot video for a virtual event, ensure that speakers look directly into the camera and adopt a friendly and open approach.

Beyond employing talented speakers and producers to ensure that virtual connections are enabled, it will take creativity to build

lasting connections among attendees. You will need to consider ways to connect fans with each other, with the speakers, and with your business. As with an in-person event, fostering social connections is critical for a virtual event's success.

CHAPTER 2

In-person vs. Virtual Events

Why do some virtual events succeed while others miss the mark?

One likely reason is that organizations simply try to recreate the in-person event they are familiar with digitally. Unfortunately, they fail to find the right medium and methodology for virtual success.

Swim into the torpedo

“The biggest thing we’ve learned is that when you are in a situation like this: You cannot simply translate by taking all the magical moments that happened in the in-person events and try to recreate things like an expo, and the hotel lobby bar. You really have to reinvent,” said Bob Bejan, the corporate vice president: global events, production studios and marketing community at Microsoft. “You just have to let it all go. You have to say what I’m trying to do is make human connections. What I’m trying to do is make people more knowledgeable and understand more. And we’re trying to make people understand that they are part of something bigger

than themselves. The root of these online experiences is about that, not how to create a perfect expo booth or a perfect keynote.”

In the second week of March 2020, Microsoft went from a strong focus on in-person event experiences, some for tens of thousands of people at a time, to cancelling 32 global events, taking almost all of them into the digital world. “That kind of transformation is pretty radical,” said Bejan. “When you think about taking all the experiences that we know about and all of the things we’ve done for years and years and transforming them to a different medium, the learning curve has been very steep. What’s incredible is that when groups of people get forced into these situations, if you are willing to let yourself have your mind opened, it can create an enormously creative cycle. And that’s what’s happened at Microsoft.”

David co-presented at Microsoft Inspire with Bejan on July 22 in a session titled *Digital experiences in a pandemic era – connecting with customers when it is hard to connect*. Their talk focused on how to make a quick shift to digital communications.

“During times of adversity, how do you unlock the creativity that’s required to respond effectively? I think the answer is to cultivate a discipline of design thinking and develop a culture where you embrace failure,” Bejan said about the strategies he uses at Microsoft. “What we say in our team is ‘swim into the torpedo’. Our entire team thinks it’s better to accelerate into the problem. We cultivate that and it takes discipline because you can blow yourself up. It’s like athletics, you have to do it every day. If you do that you can respond to difficult problems like the pandemic.”

While some powerful elements are lost when an event moves from a hotel ballroom or conference center to a computer screen or smartphone, there are other aspects that are optimized and superior online.

“The digital medium is way better than in-person for certain things like delivering information verbally together with additional supporting material and driving you to action,” Bejan said. “This is more effective in the digital world. All of us in the events business have been lazy for the past decade about not thinking about the power of digital in combination with in-person. That’s been quite a revelation and humbling, I think. It’s so easy to get lazy.”

The switch to an entirely digital event schedule from March 2020 has been demanding for Bejan and his team at Microsoft. However, by rethinking the entire events program and “swimming into the torpedo,” the efforts have proven to be extremely valuable for Microsoft customers, partners, and employees.

“The power of the human spirit to connect with another one has been the biggest challenge as we explore and move ourselves forward as we learn how to communicate in a digital world. How do you make these emotional connections? Our feedback from the audiences at our digital events has been crazily, overwhelmingly positive” said Bejan.

As you make the transition to virtual events like Microsoft has done, start with your audience. Think about what they need and what value you plan to deliver. Consider their desires and ex-

pectations. Then, consider budget and objectives.

It is possible to find the optimal intersection and deliver a virtual event that will delight audiences, build fans, and add to the bottom line. But the worst mistake you can make is to begin from a place of “we have always done it this way.” While you can deliver much of the value of an in-person event in virtual, the tools and tactics are different.

Virtual events are more like television than theater

In a theatrical performance, the audience is present. Their feedback is immediate and palpable. You know right away whether your performance is resonating. You are on the big stage and have to play big and bold to connect with those in the back row. Lighting, sound and production value all come into play and they can enhance or detract from a presentation.

Stage performers sometimes struggle to transition to the screen because of the proximity to the camera and the lack of an in-person audience. Production values matter, but they are far from the same as those in a theater. Playing to a camera is very different from reacting to — and interacting with — a physical crowd. Yet without a doubt, connections can be made, and audiences can be informed and entertained. It is, however, a question of mastering a new medium.

It probably will not come as a big surprise that — given our work in and around the media industry — we have a fascination with the inner workings of the business. Longtime readers will re-

About The Authors

David Meerman Scott is a marketing and business growth strategist, entrepreneur, advisor to emerging companies, author and public speaker.

He spotted the real-time marketing revolution in its infancy and wrote five books about it including *The New Rules of Marketing and PR*, now in a seventh edition, with more than 400,000 copies sold in English and available in 29 languages from Albanian to Vietnamese. His most recent *Wall Street Journal* bestselling book, *Fanocracy: Turning Fans into Customers and Customers into Fans*, written with his daughter Reiko, was released in early 2020 from Portfolio / Penguin Random House.

David considers speaking his art. He cannot sing, dance, or play a musical instrument, but he loves to perform on a stage or at a virtual event. He's delivered in-person events in 46 countries and on all seven continents and has delivered presentations at hundreds of virtual events.

Standout Virtual Events is his 12th book.

Learn more about David or contact him at
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Michelle Manafy learned to use a computer (DOS based) in journalism school at San Francisco State University. A few months later, she became the computer lab monitor as part of her work study. Despite learning her keyboard skills on a manual typewriter, Michelle whole-heartedly embraced the digital transformation of her craft. Now, she is an expert on the business and technology of digital media.

Currently, Michelle serves as the editorial director of Digital Content Next (DCN), the only trade organization dedicated to serving the unique and diverse needs of high-quality digital media companies. In this role, Michelle is responsible for DCN's content-related initiatives, including its InContext site, social media presence as well as the organization's technology, product development, and video events.

As a speaker and writer, she promotes industry best-practices in a wide range of venues. Michelle is a regular contributor to *Inc. com* and her career has included leadership roles at the *Media Industry Newsletter* (min), UK-based digital publisher FreePint Limited, and Information Today, Inc.

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Everyone wonders what the future holds for events if people are unable to travel or gather in large groups in the short term, and how the industry may be impacted in the long term. One thing we know for sure: Whether you are an event organizer or speaker, your business is changing.

Unfortunately, when experienced events folks move into the virtual setting, they often try to replicate what works for in-person events. However, what works on a stage rarely translates well to digital. To succeed in virtual events we need to reimagine what is possible.

In this essential guide, David Meerman Scott and Michelle Manafy share newly emerging best practices in virtual events. As speakers at, and organizers of, virtual events, they have unique opportunities to speak with people in many different aspects of the events business to learn what works. Here, they offer concise, practical guidance you can quickly put into practice.

Whether you are a seasoned event organizer, a speaker making the transition to virtual events, or just getting your first event off the ground, this guide will equip you with everything you need to run a great virtual event.



David Meerman Scott is a marketing and business growth strategist, entrepreneur, advisor to emerging companies, author of 12 books including four international bestsellers, and public speaker. He has delivered in-person talks in 46 countries and on all seven continents and has presented at hundreds of virtual events.



Michelle Manafy is the editorial director of media trade association *Digital Content Next* and a regular contributor to *Inc.* She focuses on digital media, marketing and entrepreneurship and promotes best practices in a variety of venues.