Digital Event Forecast

New insights as of July 15, 2020

impact point

THE ART & SCIENCE OF EVENTS

Digital Event Forecast

A NOTE FROM OUR CHIEF STRATEGIST

For the better part of three decades, in-person, B2B events have been a cornerstone of the corporate marketing portfolio. They've withstood the test of time because in-person events remain differentiated in their ability to provide real, tangible connections to the brand in a way that no other medium can... including digital marketing.

But the world is now responding to the Coronavirus pandemic with a new work-from-home regimen and events continue to shift from in-person to digital, at least for the foreseeable future. The event industry now has to test its creative and logistical boundaries in the hope of keeping remote, distracted audiences engaged—and keep their brand and business relevant.

Surely, these are real, substantial challenges to navigate and they come with economic consequences. But our team has been working closely with the event teams at the front lines and, I must admit... *we're excited.* The creativity, experimentation and optimism we're seeing under pandemic pressure will leave a lasting impression on the way we build and model our overall strategy. Sekou Andrews spoke eloquently and inventively about disruption in his keynote for Cisco Live 2020—the only possible way to avoid the discomfort that comes with unexpected change is to embody the change yourself. Yes, event teams have been disrupted. And they're working actively to disrupt themselves. I can't wait to see what comes next.

One of the more significant disruptions that we capture in this report is what we're seeing as a critical shift from *event strategy to engagement strategy.* Those marquee, in-person events we've come to rely on can no longer be the centerpiece of our strategy, especially as audiences become more comfortable with—and, demanding of—digital access. Event teams will now need to forge new alliances with their colleagues in digital marketing, building content-centered campaigns that engage audiences for months (not days) at a time through a diverse constellation of digital, in-person and hybrid programming that meets their customers and partners where they stand.

We'll continue to track these and other industry shifts as we continue to audit and update this **Digital Event Forecast**. Foresight and perspective are gifts and value that we bring to our clients daily and, when things are changing at the quip of 2020, we're committed to sharing that wealth however we can. Together, we'll define how the next chapter in event strategy will read.

Erica Spoor,
Chief Event Strategist
Impact Point Group | ImpactPointGroup.com

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the world was catapulted into the COVID-19 pandemic in February 2020, we were witness to extreme shifts across all areas of our lives. The event industry responded swiftly, postponing, canceling, or quickly moving their in-person experience to digital platforms.

We are now several months into our "new normal" and the resumption of in-person events feels fairly far off, especially with companies like Microsoft and Atlassian announcing their plans to stay entirely digital until 2021. Event teams are taking the opportunity to rethink their overall approach.

Our country is also experiencing tumultuous social unrest—a global response to the gruesome death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officers and the increasingly visible instances of racism in the U.S. and around the world. In early June, #blackouttuesday began trending as corporate and industry leaders, performers, and others were asked to pause their shows and projects, so that the spotlight could more fully be kept on matters of social justice. A handful of prominent events in our audit, including PS5 and Cisco Live, responded by postponing several weeks. Corporate social responsibility is evolving into something far more dynamic and consequential, as companies seek out a greater digital presence and learn what it means to share that stage with others.

This report is the second edition of our findings—incorporating new learnings from the 16 events that have transpired in our most recent audit phase, March through June 12, 2020. Read on for an exploration and evaluation of an industry in transition and the various approaches we've seen to navigating uncertainty and transforming in-person events into digital experiences.

Event Evaluation Criteria

- 61 events hosted by enterprise-scale technology providers serving a global audience
- Events that were originally designed as an in-person or live experience
- Most of these targeted events have a B2B-focus
- Most events were hosted by a technology company
- Most were the company's flagship conference or event
- Most normally feature technical training

See the Appendix on [page 30] of this report for the full list of audited events.

Summary of Recommendations

We're well into a time of major change, shifting expectations and experimentation when it comes to corporate events and engagement strategy. As brands reinvent, we're watching for what strategies and tactics have an impact and what audiences are asking for directly. Here are our recommendations.

Adjust Your Strategy

It's time to shift our thinking from individual event touchpoints to a comprehensive and persistent strategy of audience engagement that captures and extends attention over weeks or months. But while our tactical perspective broadens, we're doubling down on the need for strategic alignment between content, audience journey and measurement and the top-line business goals they support.

Focus on Speaker Preparation and Training

Speakers can better prepare themselves to take on the challenges and nuances of digital events by being intentional with their lighting, audio quality, room environment, wardrobe and camera angle.

Elevate and Differentiate Through Engagement

Anytime there's a screen involved, you run the risk of creating a passive, one-way broadcast. Instead, work to bring the same kind of interactive, in-person engagement we're used to onto a digital platform. Make it both easy and obvious for your audience to interact with your content, participate in the conversation, and connect with experts and other attendees.

Infuse Your Event with Energy and Humanity

In-person events inspired us, brought us to tears, made us laugh out loud. Digital events should strive for the same vibrancy in experience, capturing the attention, hearts and minds of the audience. Help them feel connected, represented and drawn into your digital event experience through humor, entertainment and storytelling.

Gather Good Data

Track quality of audience engagement over the quantity of participants. Since our first report on April 30, 2020, we've seen an emerging trend of more detailed, sometimes multi-page, registration forms to leverage registrant data.

Realign Measurement Strategy

Capture audience satisfaction and specific feedback on speakers and sessions by using surveys and polls within the platform or in a post-event email. Registration conversion rates are much higher and overall experience ratings are lower for digital events, so adjust your benchmarks and set stakeholder expectations accordingly.

*For more detailed explorations, skip ahead to the Forecast & Recommendations section on *
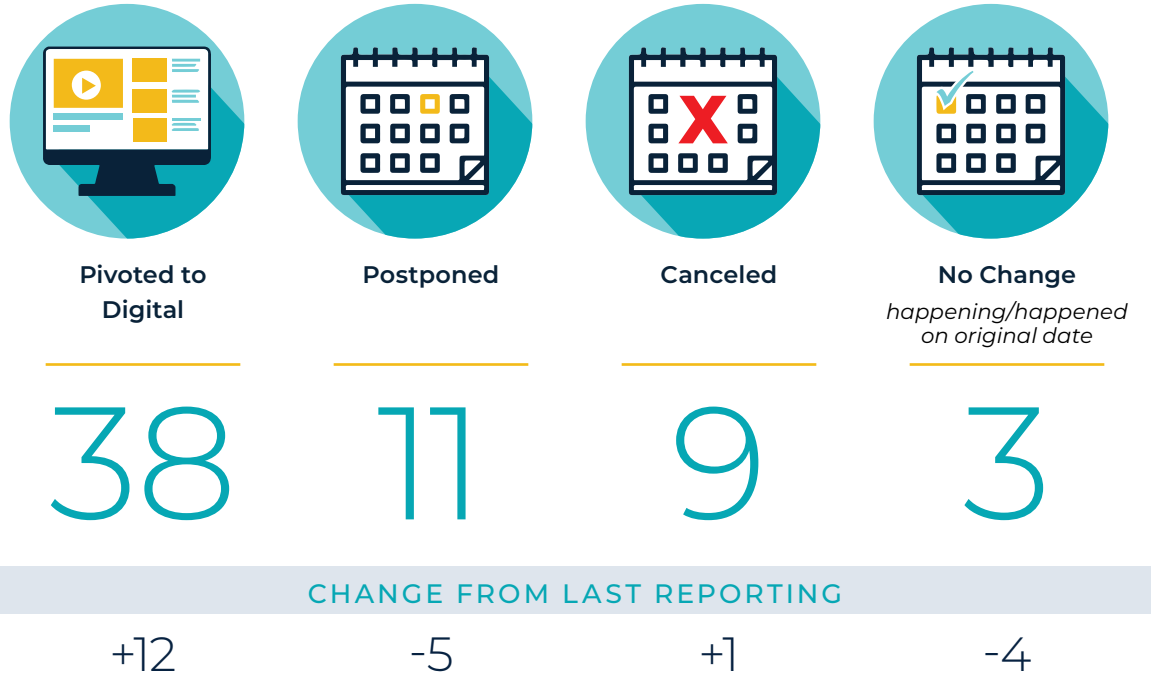
Digital Event Audit

DIGITAL EVENT AUDIT: BY THE NUMBERS

In the span of five months, the event industry has experienced massive change. We're working through technology and logistics challenges, competition for audience share, forward economic uncertainty and a pressing need to do more for our audiences, communities and planet. We've also witnessed risks and investments that resulted in high levels of registrations and engagement, unexpected brand exposure, product and market innovation and a flurry of technological development that is putting us on fast-forward into the future.

Here's what unfolded, by the numbers.

THE EVENTS WE'RE TRACKING

Of the 61 events we are tracking, 38 pivoted to digital, 11 events kept their in-person format and postponed to a later date (others postponed without announcing a new date) and nine canceled altogether. At the time of our last update, seven in-person events were on track to occur as planned and now that number has dropped to three, with several events deciding to pivot to digital, including Salesforce Dreamforce.*

Pivoted to Digital	Postponed	Canceled	No Change
			happening/happened on original date
38	11	9	3

CHANGE FROM LAST REPORTING			
+12	-5	+1	-4

(current as of 6/12/2020)

EVENT DURATION

In our observations, most event teams have paired a featured event (now averaging two days) with an on-demand content extension, stretching the full experience out for several weeks. We're expecting this to be a sustainable trend as companies capitalize on the opportunity to repurpose content and generate follow-on campaigns that bolster unique visits, view duration and engagement rates.
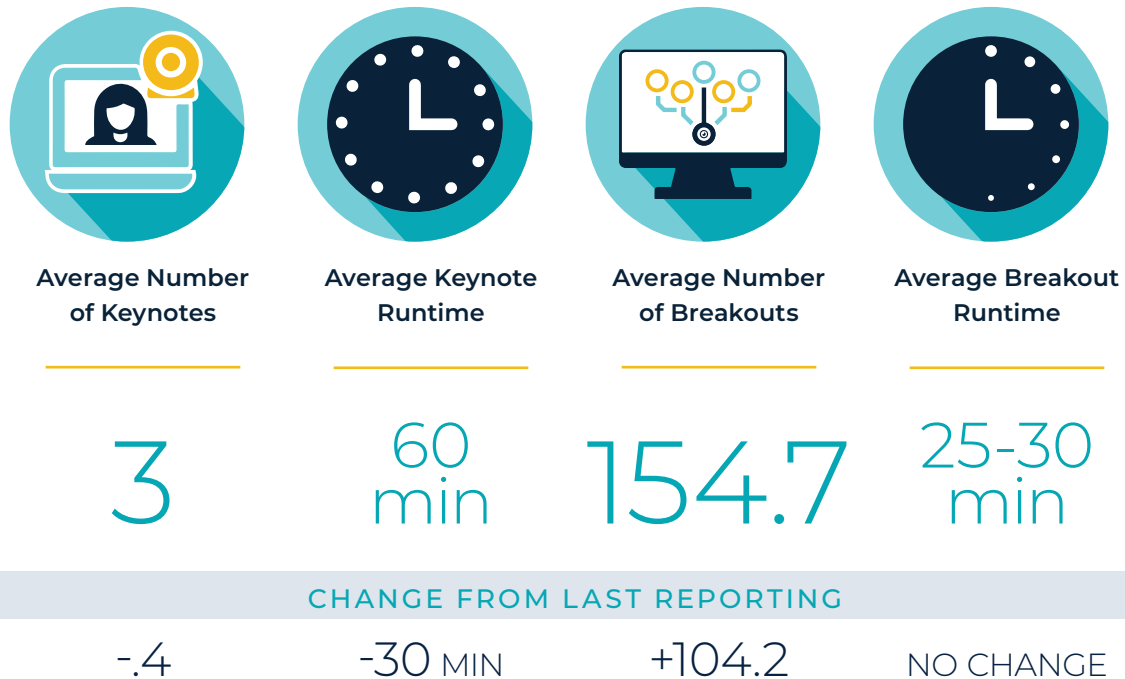

Changed from last reporting: +1 Day

Number of Events

Featured Event Duration

● March 4-April 30 ● May 1-June 12
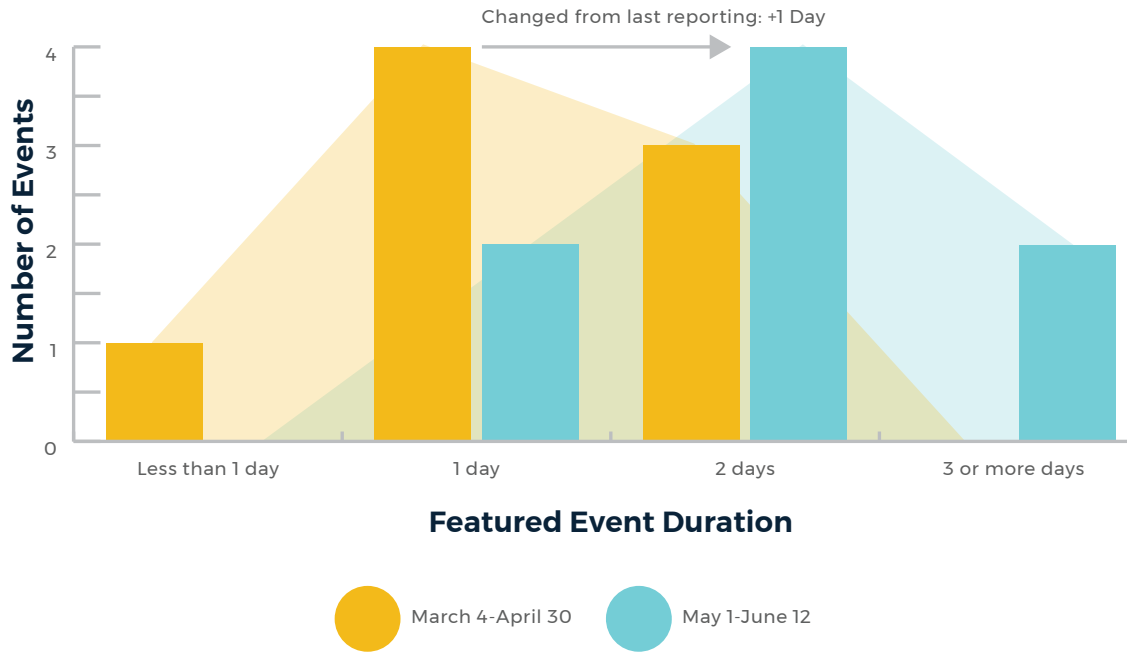
CONTENT DESIGN

Live, Simulive and Prerecorded Broadcasts—Most events have been offered as either live or simulive broadcasts, an approach that imbues spirit and vitality into a broadcast that many audiences are seeking in the dearth of in-person interaction. Since our last reporting in April, one impactful change is the common use of a TV broadcast format, with a live host creating and maintaining overall energy, offering takeaways after live sessions and prerecorded segments, and interviewing keynote speakers. Currently, most keynotes have been presented live (or simulive), while breakout sessions have been commonly pre-recorded.

Audience Journeys—It's now common practice for event teams to gate their content in order to collect data from registrants, with some registration processes stretching into multiple online pages. ServiceNow Knowledge and IBM Think Digital used the collected data to provide attendees with session recommendations. "The shift to virtual has enabled teams to aggregate both physical and virtual event data and behaviors to deliver more personalized and curated content experiences to their target audiences," says **Brian Gates, SVP of Marketing at RainFocus.** "That personalization and relevance is what keeps attendees returning, year after year."

Keynotes—We've seen a decrease in the average number of keynotes (from 3.4 to 3) and the average keynote duration (from 90 minutes to 60 minutes); drops that are likely attributable to the increase of new content released following the featured event.

Breakout Sessions—The number of breakout sessions has more than tripled since our last reporting in April, while the average session duration continues to linger at 25-30 minutes.
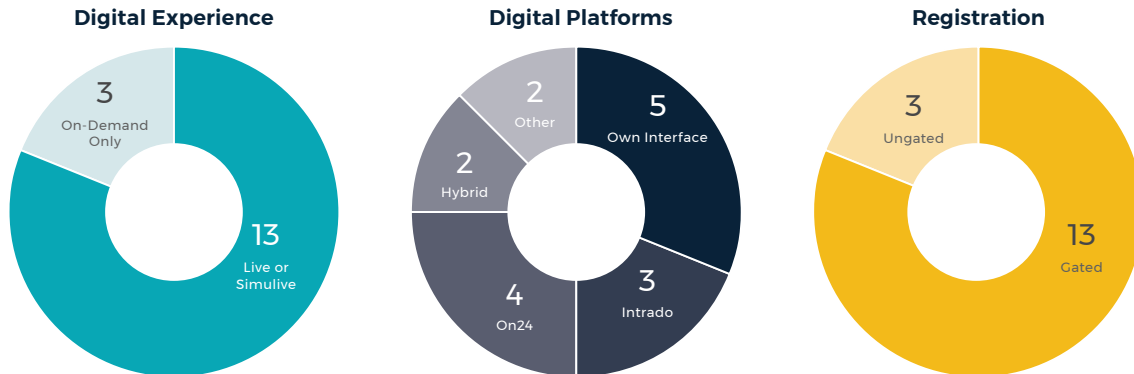
Average Number of Keynotes	Average Keynote Runtime	Average Number of Breakouts	Average Breakout Runtime
3	60 min	154.7	25-30 min

CHANGE FROM LAST REPORTING

-.4	-30 MIN	+104.2	NO CHANGE

Interaction—We've been impressed with the number of events that have experimented with effective engagement and interactivity techniques. Some events used gamification elements, live Q&A, badges and leaderboards, and charitable giving campaigns. Others offered mindfulness classes, live art-based learning sessions and diverse opportunities for attendees to engage and interact.

Virtual Trade Show or Exhibit Hall—Overall, only one of the 16 events we've audited, Oktane20 Live, featured a virtual trade show or exhibit hall feature. Many are starting to experiment with and explore both the available tech platforms and possibilities, working with sponsors and technology teams to figure out how to provide this level of high-touch interaction digitally. We expect to see more of these features put to use in the next wave of digital events.

On-Demand Content Extension	Live Chat and Q&A	Sponsor Integration
93%	80%	53%
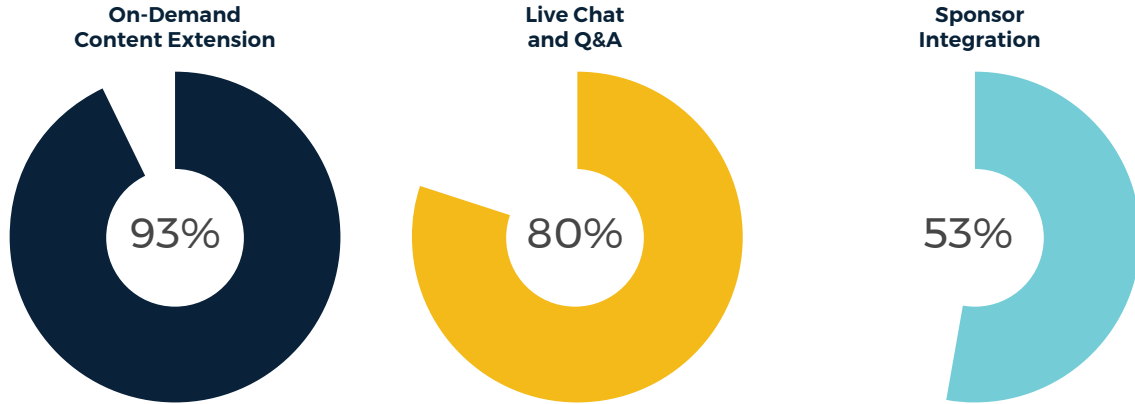
DIGITAL PLATFORMS AND TECHNOLOGY

We've continued to see companies stitch together a collection of "best in class" technologies, as opposed to using one turnkey solution.

Digital Experience

- 3 — On-Demand Only
- 13 — Live or Simulive

Digital Platforms

- 2 — Other
- 5 — Own Interface
- 2 — Hybrid
- 3 — Intrado
- 4 — On24

Registration

- 3 — Ungated
- 13 — Gated

Case Studies

CASE STUDIES

Red Hat Summit 2020 Virtual Experience

Original Date: April 28   **Actual Date:** April 28

Featured Event Format:
Blended live, simulive and prerecorded

On-Demand Content Extension: Ongoing with new content announced through July

Reported Virtual Registration: More than 70,000*

Typical In-Person Event Registration: Around 9,000*

Technology Platform: Intrado

Sponsor Integration: Sponsors were featured on the event platform with a demo video and hyperlink to their websites

➡ We appreciated the short welcome video highlighting agenda items and key platform elements, as well as mindfulness sessions, offered throughout the day. The Red Hat event team was likely striving to manage short attention spans by chopping their keynote sessions down into 20–minute segments, a cadence that captured us while also creating content diversity and energy throughout the day. Audience interactivity and product demos converged with open source software showcased via interactive arcade games and opportunities to win swag. On-demand content is available for a limited time with new content and live "ask the expert" sessions released in July.

Source: IT Pro Today, April 29, 2020
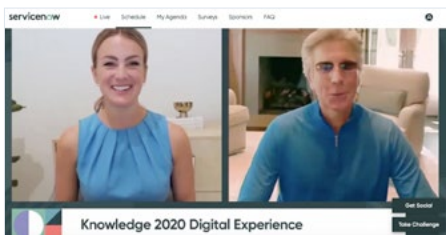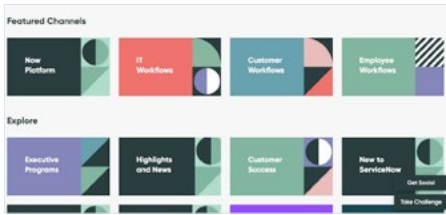
ServiceNow Knowledge 2020

Original Date: May 3-7 ✓ **Actual Date:** May 5

Featured Event Format: Blended live, simulive and prerecorded

On-Demand Content Extension: Six weeks with new content added weekly

Registration: Unreported

Technology Platform: ServiceNow and RainFocus

Sponsor Integration: Sponsors were featured on an interactive sponsor page with a hyperlink to their websites. The live event host also highlighted premiere sponsors during the broadcast.

➡ The ServiceNow team clearly pushed themselves to think outside of the box and double-down on producing a lively and powerful digital event. "We didn't want to take our plans for Knowledge and slap a camera on them—with the time and space constraints removed by going digital, we could reinvent the entire experience," says **Kurt Smith, Senior Director of Strategic Events for ServiceNow.** "We dreamt big and thought more like broadcast network programmers than physical event producers."

British technology journalist and TV presenter Georgie Barrat was an engaging live host, easing transitions and building energy and excitement for remote viewers. Other presenters incorporated video in their sessions, engaged easily with the camera and were clearly well-prepared with great lighting and camera placement.

Humor and humanity were woven throughout. Each presentation began with a short, engaging stinger video and comedic "commercials" were distributed throughout the day's agenda, some of which were filmed while employees and actors were sheltering in place. (We appreciated the behind-the-scenes highlights shared to their social media channels.)

ServiceNow also used the opportunity to throw a spotlight on corporate social responsibility, challenging users to engage with the platform and agenda sessions to raise money for nonprofit organizations Feeding America and International Medical Corps.

"In the end, we went from a four-day event to one that lasted six weeks and now offers over 1000 on-demand videos," says Smith. "As a rapidly growing company, it was a huge achievement to deliver an experience that rivaled in many ways, and surpassed in others, what we see the big tech players produce. And our audience loved it."

AWS Global Summit

Original Date: May 13 ✓ **Actual Date:** May 13

Featured Event Format: Prerecorded

On-Demand Content Extension: Ongoing with new content, tracks and sessions added on August 5

Registration: Unreported

Technology Platform: Intrado and On24

Sponsor Integration: None

➔ AWS Global Summit kicked off their featured event experience with a welcome video that helped visitors navigate the platform. No live or simulive content was offered, but short, helpful videos on each platform page highlighted key features and information.

There was considerable thought put into attendee experience and engagement and we welcomed the multiple learning opportunities tailored to a diverse audience, including an "Experiential Zone" where attendees could practice their skills and learn from experts. The "something for everyone" approach provided the opportunity for all attendees to engage with the AWS platform and technologies, with the obvious value of further expanding their network of customers and promoters.

Additional experience highlights included the "DeepRacer League Summit" where users could code to win prizes, as well as the "Start-Up Loft," a space specifically curated for business start-ups. We also appreciated a "virtual briefcase" feature to extend learning beyond the event, allowing attendees to tag and save studies and other resource materials to read post-event.
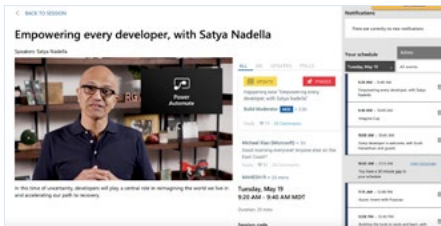
Microsoft Build 2020

Original Date: May 19-21　　**Actual Date:** May 19-20

Featured Event Format: Live and Simulive

On-Demand Content Extension: Ongoing

Reported Virtual Registration: 230,000*

Typical In-Person Event Registration: 6,000*

Technology Platform: Microsoft, Pubble and Tagboard

Sponsor Integration: None

Microsoft Build took the unique approach of a continuous, 48-hour stream of live and simulive content, generating an average view duration of 173 minutes. They considered global attendee experience by replaying content multiple times throughout the broadcast, accommodating viewership in different time zones.

Presenters set a casual, relatable and light tone throughout all sessions, often embracing the then "shelter-in-place" restrictions by introducing their dogs and kids and presenting outside. Product demos felt real and engaging, with product experts casually walking the audience through features and use applications, similar to the "how-to" YouTube videos we're now so comfortable with (and reliant on) and a smart approach that we haven't yet seen with other events. We also appreciated the unique additions to their wellness offerings, like classes in creative thinking, art murals and welding.

Microsoft used its own technology platform, integrating Pubble for live chat and Tagboard for storytelling in their videos.

Source: CNN, May 21, 2020.

KUDOS

Engagement & Creativity

With this round of events, we saw some engaging gamification, including open-source arcade games and challenges offering swag prizes. Both ServiceNow Knowledge 2020 and Think 2020 challenged audiences to raise funds for dedicated global change initiatives. Creativity was dialed up with both mindfulness and play offerings, interesting learning opportunities and even an adorable animal cam. ATM Digital brought in actor and comedian James Corden as a consistent voice throughout the event platform for some playful banter and humor.

Prepared Speakers and Presenters

This phase of events showcased well-prepared speakers who were shipped production kits that supported a much higher production quality. We saw shorter and more succinct presentations that, while still capturing some casual humanity, had clearly been rehearsed and edited. Professional event hosts made a big difference, contributing to a "live event feel," helping presenters maintain excitement, keeping speakers on track and helping provide high-level summary overviews of the content. Keynotes were shorter overall (under an hour) and broken down into smaller sections with hosts helping reconnect and reset. Breakout presenters were all on video while presenting content.

Comprehensive Communication Strategy

Events used social media channels to share behind-the-scenes videos (blooper reels, dance parties, kid interruptions), "best of" clips from the live event and never-before-seen content. These playful contributions kept audiences engaged long after the featured event was over. Pre-event audience outreach thoughtfully mitigated connectivity issues with "tech checks," rallied excitement with sneak peeks into agenda highlights and platform features, and provided direct links to access the featured event once it was ready to launch. Post-event communications shared "best-of" moments and encouraged feedback via a survey.

Thoughtful User Experience

We appreciated welcome videos that launched automatically, helped set the tone and showed us event highlights to come. AWS Global Summit and ATM Digital smartly leveraged video on each page of the event platform. More events offered personalized experiences with recommended agendas and tracks based on audience member information and preferences. Global audiences were engaged more fully with live sessions repeated at regular intervals and agenda schedules aligning automatically to local time zones. And we're starting to see event teams put as much thought into the post-event on-demand experience as they are in the featured event experience—offering Q&A for both and creating new methods of continuous content engagement.

IPG Special Focus:

Should You Charge a Fee for Your Digital Event?

SHOULD YOU CHARGE A FEE FOR YOUR DIGITAL EVENT?

Event teams are hustling to redesign and rethink audience engagement, test and stitch together tech solutions, and make a plan for long-term strategy adjustments in the wake of current restrictions on large in-person gatherings.

Certainly, with all of the quick turns and experimentation, there has been a general worry about how audiences would value first-time digital events. And a presiding fear about whether audiences would not (or could not) engage at all, as they navigated new personal and business challenges, awash in newly–free content offered everywhere—from virtual yoga and cooking classes to drawing tutorials with famous illustrators and even full-length concerts.

Over the last several months, giving content away for free seemed like a sensible investment in a time rife with a lot of unknowns. It was possibly also just a nice thing to do, a nod to our shared humanity in a time of global unease.

But now there's increasing pressure on corporate event leaders to make long-term plans and shore up revenue shortfalls and many are unsure how to answer a nagging question—should you charge for digital events?

Free or Fee? ...Both

Free events attract a broad audience with little friction. We believe that events that feature product promotion, informative presentations, simple Q&A formats and expansive thought leadership should be free so that the event team can maximize both lead generation and brand awareness. In some instances, brands offering free digital experiences are seeing their audiences grow seven-fold over their historical draw when events were in-person and required a fee.

Also, with many events going digital for the first time, a low barrier of entry keeps audiences fairly tolerant of tech issues, should they occur.

However, while perhaps not offsetting event costs in their entirety, companies have built their event and engagement budgets with the anticipation that they'll be bringing in some revenue via sponsorship and audience admission fees for in-person events. And, in an age where content has become commoditized, generating a sense of value and luxury in what you're building (and the brand associated with it) supports long-term engagement, customer loyalty and brand advocacy.

Ultimately, if there is an opportunity to minimize your investment, that just makes for good business. And our event and engagement experts agree that, while there is value in keeping some portions of your event free, it's time to start charging for specialized content.

Which Digital Events Are Charging a Fee?

The vast majority of digital events in our audit to date have been free. Half of those that did charge limited their fees to training and other high-level educational content, including NVIDIA GTC East (free for general entry and $39-$79 for a follow-on instructor-led workshop) and Oktane 20 (free for general entry and an associated fee for pre-event training). Both Collision and ODSC East 2020 charged for general entry, with Collision charging a general admittance of $79 and discounting multi-ticket packages and ODSC East pricing ranging from $479 for general admittance and a two-day content access pass to $1,399 for a complete training program and four-day content access pass.
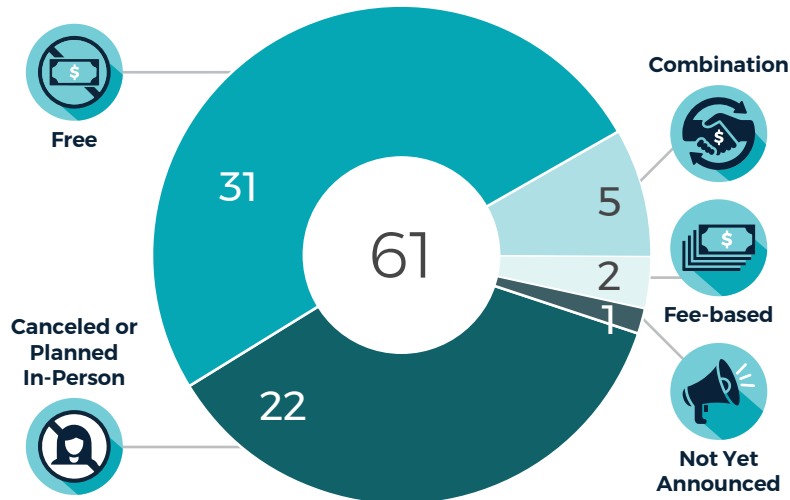
What Content Should I Charge For?

We anticipate that more events will offer tiered digital event admission—generally complimentary, with open and often on-demand access to most content, but will require a fee for "premium" sessions.

All technical training and other engagement that results in continuing education credits or other professional credentialing fall into this category. The same goes for programming that is exclusive to association members. Event design teams can create that same feeling of exclusivity by offering VIP opportunities featuring high-value networking opportunities or intimate learning experiences with esteemed thought leaders. As hybrid events emerge, teams will be working to distinguish the in-person experience from the digital experience in similar ways, which may result in an increasingly "high-touch" in-person experience tailored to a smaller and more intimate audience.

How Much Should I Charge?

With so few digital events experimenting with fees, there's little data to draw from. While we don't yet know what audience fee tolerance looks like overall, it's certainly a safe bet that everyone expects to pay less for a digital event than for an in-person experience.

That being said, many people will justify paying the same amount for virtual training as they would have previously for in-person training, as long as they can illustrate clear proof of professional skill development—through certifications and other tactics—and the depth and breadth of content is there to support the associated cost. Not only will they be better able to argue for the return on their company's investment, but they'll be motivated to do so if they have an opportunity to secure or advance their careers in a shaky economy. And CFOs should soon recognize that remote training may well be worth the investment, especially when it doesn't come with the associated travel costs.

In many ways, we're still experimenting and there is certainly room for A/B testing and audience surveys that explore the price tag question directly. But, while we're also experimenting with imperfect platforms and tech solutions, do keep in mind that, when fees go up, so do audience expectations for a seamless experience and high-quality content.

Forecast & Recommendations

FORECAST & RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our research, collaboration with industry leaders and technologists, and cumulative decades of experience with event and engagement strategy, these are the recommendations that will shape the event industry for the next months and years to come.

Adjust Your Strategy	Focus on Speaker Preparation and Training	Elevate and Differentiate Through Engagement	Infuse Your Event with Energy and Humanity	Gather Good Data	Realign Measurement Strategy

Adjust Your Strategy

The pivot to digital will have staying power. There's a bounty of fun diversity to play and experiment with when it comes to event design, platform experience and on-demand availability, but it's time to start thinking about how things have changed for good... and what will come next. As always, thoughtful engagement strategies are a necessity.

Align to Your Business Goals—Clarify your business objectives and outline clearly how you'll work to achieve them, whether with a digital event or through other engagement methods. Think through the original objectives and value of your marquee conference and how a digital framework will impact overall reach, value and effectiveness.

Build an Engagement Strategy—Extend the life of your event by providing on-demand content before, during and after the featured event takes place. Strive to leverage content and integrate it with other campaigns and platforms.

Know Your Audience—Understand what your audience and stakeholders need and want from you, now and into the future. And if you're unsure, find opportunities to ask them.

Make Sure Your Technology Delivers—Provide your audience with the resources they need for a friction-free, polished experience and take care of technical logistics ahead of the event. Make extra efforts to ensure tech stability and performance, scaling your platform capacity to accommodate 6–10x your in-person registration. We've seen the biggest and best succumb to technical glitches and breakdowns because demand far-exceeded capacity or the process was just too complicated. Test, test, test. And test again.

Design For a Broad Reach—Digital events have a larger reach and tend to attract both long-time loyalists and newer audiences who are less familiar with your brand. You'll want to plan a journey for a loyal customer base that wants to indulge in deep technical training and may prefer the longer sessions. A general audience will likely be interested in thought leadership, innovative trends, company announcements and product roadmaps.

Focus on Speaker Preparation & Training

When you are thoughtful about speaker preparation and training you serve both your speakers and your audiences. If speakers feel prepared to navigate the challenges and nuances of a digital platform, they feel more confident and able to connect easily with audiences. And audiences will better hear your messaging and calls to action, without being distracted by lighting, audio, room environment, wardrobe and camera angle.

Set Clear Expectations—When it comes to executing speaker contracts, think through and include requirements unique to a digital experience, including on-demand, broad access to recorded content and commitments to participate in the technical rehearsal, pre-event content meeting and session recording. And what about future in-person and hybrid events? We expect that those *force majeure* clauses will reference pandemics and include contingencies for cancellation and digital pivoting.

Rehearse Ahead of Time—Encourage speakers to practice ahead of time, so that they're familiar with their content. It's painful in-person, as well, but no one is interested in watching a video of someone reading their presentation notes, word-for-word. And make sure to bring everyone together for technical rehearsals and other connection-point meetings in advance of the event. Not only will speakers familiarize themselves with content and tech platforms, but co-presenters will get more comfortable with each other, building a rapport they would have otherwise done in person.

Prioritize Production Quality—Outline comprehensive presenter guidelines and ensure high-quality audio and video production, even when captured at home. Include your technology teams in rehearsals and pre-event meetings, so they can spot and resolve issues with bandwidth, audio and video.

Elevate and Differentiate Through Engagement

Anytime there's a screen involved, you run the risk of creating a passive, undifferentiated, one-way broadcast. Instead, work to bring the same kind of interactive engagement we're used to in-person onto a digital platform. Make it both easy and obvious for your audience to interact with your content—walk their own unique path through the event, lend their voices to the conversation, connect with experts and other attendees and engage in ways that result in business impact.

Know Before You Go—Pre-event communications are a great opportunity to show attendees what to expect and encourage engagement right at the start. Share browser, platform and other technology requirements in advance. We've also appreciated how-to or introductory videos, with hosts walking participants through what they can expect from the approaching featured event.

Outline & Nurture Journeys—Provide attendees with specific agenda recommendations and reminders of upcoming live or simulive sessions. And don't overlook the opportunity to capture interest in the moment when it comes to nurturing the buying journey. ServiceNow featured a smart and simple option in each breakout session—one click connected attendees to a technical expert, who sent a timely email to follow up. If the focus is on adding value and solving their unique business challenges, it's palatable to attendees.

Offer Live Chat & Moderated Q&A—Give attendees the opportunity to participate in and drive the conversation with speakers and other experts in real-time. You may need a moderator to inspire the interaction, but other times those conversations can be very busy. Threaded chats keep things organized and help everyone learn from each others' questions and ideas. A moderator can also help weave key messaging into the conversation, address dysfunction on chat streams and respond to tech problems.

Make It a Game—Leverage competition to encourage attendees to fill out surveys, attend sessions, try activities and post on social media. Audiences often respond strongly to opportunities to earn swag or participate in charitable giving.

Offer a VIP Experience—We know that many buyers are looking for a differentiated experience with brands. Consider charging for a high-touch, VIP experience that includes additional networking and "meet the expert" opportunities. Just as with in-person events, we believe that some will pay for the premium experience if they believe it's really exclusive and value-add.

Keep It Tight—Viewers' attention spans are harder to harness online. Sticking to shorter keynote and breakout sessions—lasting 30 minutes or less—will make for a strong connection before anyone gets the impulse to click elsewhere.

Infuse Your Event with Energy and Humanity

In-person events inspired us, brought us to tears, made us laugh out loud. Digital events should strive for the same vibrancy in experience, even if we're communicating through screens. Work to capture the hearts, minds and attention of audience members. Help them feel connected, represented and drawn into your digital event experience through humor, entertainment and storytelling.

Strive For Inclusivity & Diversity—Panels on diversity, equity and inclusion within the industry are both timely and evergreen. Consider representation when it comes to building your speaker portfolio and reflect on the accessibility of your tech platform in the same way that you'd consider accessibility for physical spaces. Providing ALS interpretation and closed captioning will extend your audience even further.

Bring In a Professional Host—Capture the excitement of a live event by using professional event hosts. They can bring energy into the digital experience, guide attendees through articulated journeys, direct attention to event features and add a bit of humanity to what can otherwise feel like a particularly solitary experience for your audience.

Create Content Cohesion—Consider stinger videos—animated video transitions or sound transitions (i.e. the bass lines before Seinfeld)—to introduce or end a segment. While the urge may be strong to add corporate ads as filler, avoid excessive self-promotion.

Make Them Laugh—Think of innovative ways to infuse fun and deliver entertainment value; surprises or "wow" moments are important. Some events we attended featured comedic commercials to highlight their brand and deliver laughs. Others shared blooper reels, "behind the scenes" pictures and videos and even a live puppy cam.

- **Encourage Creativity**—Provide attendees with much-needed brain breaks, while still allowing them to engage with the platform. Think about incorporating movement, play, mindfulness and socialization with other event attendees.

- **Be Real**—We enjoyed when presenters showed the nature of their circumstances, with pets and kids interrupting live presentations. We recommend not trying to cover up the reality of this situation, and instead, embrace it with humor and humanity.

Gather Good Data

Since April, we've seen companies begin to develop more detailed (sometimes multi-page) registration forms. The value of collecting audience metrics is obvious, but think about how you might repay that value back to the attendee with curated experiences and personalized recommendations based on their responses. This is the value exchange that events have to get right.

- **Get To Know Your Audience**—If you can't map each registrant to an existing account or customer ID, allow them to self-identify their relationship with your company. A simple way to gauge the number of unique accounts is to analyze registrant email domains. The gaming industry is developing an additional level of data by having gamers test their playing skills (and meet certain requirements) in order to be allowed into the virtual event or session. How could similar skills challenges help you better understand your audience?

- **Aim For Deep Engagement**—The next wave of measurement will be about understanding what participants do and how they engage. Metrics are continuing to emerge, but consider tracking what content individual attendees are viewing and downloading. We recommend that, in addition to registering, attendees should also be *required to login* to view content in order for event teams to accurately track conversion rates.

Realign Measurement Strategy

Capture audience satisfaction and specific feedback on speakers and sessions by using surveys and polls within the platform (often with the benefit of higher response rates) or in a post-event email. Typically, registration conversion rates are much higher and overall experience ratings are much lower for digital events than they are for in-person events, so adjust your benchmarks and set stakeholder expectations accordingly.

- **Expect Higher Conversation Rates**—Conversion rates for traditional webinars typically average 30-40%, but we're currently seeing much higher rates when it comes to featured digital events. RainFocus recently suggested that they were seeing an average of 4–6x the registration numbers for digital events versus historic in-person averages.
  "When comparing virtual and physical event data, it is important to note that your virtual registration numbers will likely be much higher than those of your physical event, however, your attendance and engagement rates will likely be lower," says **Brian Gates, SVP of Marketing at RainFocus.** "But, while you may experience lower engagement and conversion rates for virtual, that *total amount of overall engagement* can exceed physical."

Smart Pre- & Post-Event Surveys—Start with the end in mind, identifying target products and key messaging and brand statements, then outline questions that measure pre- to post-event lifts or enhanced product familiarity. Pre-event surveys should capture a baseline audience sentiment and help identify what content or experiences they feel matter most, helping your content design team develop highly-relevant agendas and audience journeys. Post-event surveys should measure overall audience satisfaction, impact on brand and product awareness, and specific feedback on speakers and sessions. Overall, consider your question set carefully and keep it succinct in order to keep your survey abandon rate low.

Capture Sentiment—Gathering insights about what your audiences think or do during or after the event—even if that means trolling Twitter—is exceptionally valuable.

Lower Benchmarks For Surveys—Adjust your benchmarks accordingly for digital events, as we are generally seeing them trend lower than for in-person events. Early indications show session scores between 3.5–4.3 on a five-point scale, with keynotes generally scoring higher than other sessions. As with in-person events, speakers with strong presentation skills and content that is well-aligned to audience priorities can still earn 4.0 and higher ratings.

WHAT'S NEXT:
OUR FORECAST FOR DIGITAL EVENTS

Defining the New Hybrid Event—The digital shifting that event teams have done in response to coronavirus will have staying power. Not only is it our opportunity to tap into new audiences who either couldn't (budget, timing, physical limitations) or wouldn't (socially introverted, don't see the value in events) previously attend a live event, but we think a large percentage of audiences—particularly millennials—will now, going forward, expect digital access. But, what does "hybrid" really mean? It's clear to us that all future events will have some digital component or feature going forward. But things are moving quickly these days and "hybrid event" may be something entirely different altogether, with event teams experimenting with on-demand content and broadcast strategies and event platforms gearing up to present new, enhanced virtual interaction features. We're anticipating that we'll be defining and redefining at a rapid pace, with events teams competing for audience share and working hard to stand out.

Borrowing From TV—Much like we saw with ServiceNow Knowledge, Microsoft Build, and IBM Think, digital event experiences will draw more and more heavily from good ol' familiar and comfortable television. Audiences are increasingly expecting both polish and human connection, something we've honed over generations of live broadcasts, telefundraisers, cable news, talk shows and reality TV. We're likely to see more presenters in high-end studio environments (while keeping physical distance). Premiere sponsors will be highlighted and integrated in different ways, likely in what feels very much like a commercial or in a "special segment" with a professional host.

Building the Perfect Platform—Event teams are already experimenting with a curated mix of platforms to host their event, tagging in their own technology when possible. With the future in-person return date looking murky, there's going to be increasing demand and interest in platform development—an arms race to refine and add new capabilities and build something that helps brands shine. Historically, there have been relatively few platforms dedicated to digital events, with On24 and Intrado leading the market. We're about to see this space crack wide open, with other developers and agencies—including Socio, Cvent and MSM Inc., the creators of the new interactive engagement platform LiVi—entering the field. Get ready for immersive, real-world environments, enhanced gamification, VR interactivity and a first-person point of view. We also hope to see better chat and engagement technology that will help retain the value of the easy, in-person interactivity, including facilitation and whiteboarding tools, as well as the opportunity for event hosts, speakers and attendees to request and schedule impromptu 1:1s with each other.

Return of Monetization—This next chapter of events will come with more price tags. While the featured event experience is likely to remain free—ensuring broad reach and brand exposure—event teams will be working to make up for lost revenue by charging for VIP access, special content and professional training, especially when attendees benefit with certifications and other professional accolades.

On-Demand Content Hubs—One perk of taking events online? Your "event" can now last just about as long as you want it to, with minimal additional investment. The average featured event duration is now two days, but we'll start to see those experiences extend several weeks or months beyond that with on-demand content libraries that refresh regularly in order to keep audiences engaged. Brands that were once focused exclusively in broadcasting, news and entertainment, corporate events, technology, production, digital marketing and story-telling are likely to converge and look for new ways to partner in order to feed and promote these content engines and social media channels will play a continually greater role in maintaining audience engagement over the duration.

Required Collaboration—The focus on long-term digital engagement through multiple channels and experiences is going to blur the lines between what corporate event teams own and what the in-house digital marketing teams own. Ultimately, this will require a collaborative team and functional integration that we haven't seen previously.

"More than ever, event teams are leaning on their digital marketing counterparts to bring best practices, innovative tools and new ideas to the table. At the same time, event teams are helping to push the envelope in the digital realm, to elevate the customer experience with a stronger focus on storytelling," says **Donna Shultz, Founder & CEO of experience design agency MSM Inc.**

While event professionals will continue to curate content and experiences for the audience and objective—a huge differentiator in our new reality—they'll ultimately partner with digital marketing teams to create and drive forward a persistent, year-round experiential engagement strategy. We expect to see some truly awe-inspiring and high-return digital and hybrid experiences emerge in the process. To be certain, this will redefine the talent pipeline for our industry.

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Impact Point Group can help you move fast—and intelligently—to redefine your engagement strategy. For more research, articles, and an overview of our Digital Events Strategy Workshops and Services, visit **impactpointgroup.com/digital-event-strategy**.

APPENDIX

61 events, tracked March 4-June 12, 2020

Adobe
Adobe Summit
https://www.adobe.com/summit.html

Apple

Apple WorldWide Developer Conference
https://www.apple.com/newsroom/2020/03/apples-wwdc-2020-kicks-off-in-june-with-an-all-new-online-format/

Atlassian
Atlassian Summit
https://atlassian.swoogo.com/summit20_live_stream

Atmosphere
Atmosphere20
https://www.arubanetworks.com/atmosphere/

AWS
AWS Summit Online
https://aws.amazon.com/events/summits/online/us-canada/

Cisco
Cisco Americas Marketing Velocity Live
https://partnersuccess.cisco.com/LP=1932?_lrsc=98dd3392-a9a2-4140-9866-6c813c66ccff&dtid=osolin001080
Cisco APJC
https://www.cisco.com/c/m/en_au/ciscolive/index.html
Cisco Live
https://www.ciscolive.com/
Cisco Live Melbourne
https://www.ciscolive.com/apjc.html

Cloud Software Association
SaaS Connect
http://www.cloudsoftwareassociation.com/saas-connect/

Collision
Collision
https://collisionconf.com/

Dell
Dell Technologies World
https://www.delltechnologiesworld.com/index.htm

DocuSign
Docusign Momentum
https://momentum.docusign.com/

Domo
Domopalooza
https://www.domo.com/domopalooza

EmTech
EmTech Asia
https://emtechasia.com/

Enterprise Connect
Enterprise Connect 2020
https://www.enterpriseconnect.com/sanfrancisco

ESports
ESports Summit
https://www.esportsbizsummit.com/

ESRI
ESRI Developer Summit 2020
https://www.esri.com/en-us/about/events/devsummit/overview

Exhibitor
Exhibitor Live 2020
https://www.exhibitoronline.com/live/2020/index.asp

F5
F5 Agility 2020
https://www.f5.com/agility

Facebook
Facebook F8
https://www.f8.com/
Facebook Global DIgital Marketing Summit
https://www.facebook.com/GDMSThinkIn/

Gartner
Gartner CIO IT Symposium
https://www.gartner.com/en/conferences/na/symposium-us
Gartner Data and Analytics Summit 2020
https://www.gartner.com/en/conferences/na/data-analytics-us

Google
Google Cloud Next
https://cloud.withgoogle.com/next/sf/
Google Global News Initiative Summit
https://newsinitiative.withgoogle.com/
Google I/O 2020
https://events.google.com/io/

IBM
IBM Think
https://www.ibm.com/events/think/

IIOT
IIOT World Days
https://iiotday.com/
IOT World Developer Conference
https://tmt.knect365.com/iot-world/developer-conference/

Microsoft
Microsoft Build
https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/build
Microsoft Ignite
https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/ignite
Microsoft MVP Global Summit
https://mvp.microsoft.com/summit
WSL Conference
https://www.wslconf.dev/

Mobile World Congress
Mobile World Congress MWC Barcelona
https://www.mwcbarcelona.com/
Mobile World Congress MWC Americas
https://www.mwclosangeles.com/

MSP World
MSP World
https://www.mspworldconference.com/

NetApp
NetApp INSIGHT Digital Event
https://insight.netapp.com/

NVIDIA
NVIDIA GTC Digital
https://www.nvidia.com/en-us/gtc/

Oktane
Oktane Live 20
https://www.oktane20.com/

Oracle
Oracle Code One
https://www.oracle.com/code-one/
Oracle Modern Business Experience
https://www.oracle.com/modern-business-experience/
Oracle Open World
https://www.oracle.com/openworld/

ODSC
ODSC East 2020
https://odsc.com/boston/

Qualtrics
Qualtrics X4 Summit
https://www.qualtrics.com/x4summit/

Red Hat
Red Hat
https://www.redhat.com/en/summit

RSA
RSA Conference
https://www.rsaconference.com/usa

SaaStr
SaaStr Annual 2020
https://www.saastrannual.com/

Salesforce
Salesforce Dreamforce 2020
https://www.salesforce.com/dreamforce/faq/
Salesforce World Tour Sydney
https://www.salesforce.com/au/events/worldtour/syd20/overview/

SAP
SAP Ariba Live
https://events.sap.com/aribalive-2020-las-vegas/en/home
SAP Concur Fusion
https://fusion.concur.com/virtual-summit
SAP Sapphire Now
https://events.sap.com/sapandasug/en/home

SAS
SAS Global Forum
https://www.sas.com/en_us/events/sas-global-forum/announcement.html

ServiceNow
ServiceNow Knowledge
https://knowledge.servicenow.com/

Shopify
Shopify Unite 2020 Developers Conference
https://unite.shopify.com/

South by Southwest (SXSW)
SXSW
https://www.sxsw.com/

VMWorld
VMWorld
https://www.vmworld.com/en/index.html

World Education
World Education Congress
https://worldeducationcongress.com/