

An Insider's Strategy for Planning the Perfect Online Event

By Caroline Berger

Hosting an event is challenging in the best of times, but the added pressure of planning an awesome *virtual* event doesn't have to be as daunting as you may expect. Luckily, many of the same motivations and objectives apply to both in-person and remote gatherings.

Despite obvious differences, the overall strategy is quite similar. Plus, with so many people now adept at using video platforms for work, they are likely to be comfortable attending a virtual event you host.

The why and the what

The first, most critical step is establishing the goal and identifying your target audience. Hosting a webinar without a clear reason or because your competitors are offering them is not the right approach. Implementing a strategic plan will guide your efforts and yield better results.

Bring your internal marketing staff or outsourced marketing team into the planning process at the start. Work with them to think creatively about your event, make your invitation stand out, and ensure your hook will entice people to attend.

Yes, the event needs a purpose, but don't overthink it. If you are a subject matter

expert on trademarks and want to educate current and prospective clients on the implications of a recent landmark decision, go for it. Been too long since you met referral sources and business partners? Schedule a virtual roundtable and order bagels, sandwiches, or wine and cheese to arrive just before the start. Are your contacts struggling to build new relationships remotely? Host a memorable online experience where guests can learn something new and have time to mingle.

Here's a simple list of event types that work well in a virtual setting:

- **Webinars.** These may cover a wide range of topics highlighting your firm or a keynote speaker covering an important trend. Because law firm webinars are common, make sure your topic is timely, skillfully presented, and delivers ready-to-go tips and takeaways.
- **Tours.** Museums, cultural venues, and nature centers are suffering due to the pandemic. Support them and offer a unique insider view to your audience while weaving in your firm's practice strengths.
- **Community initiative.** Corporate social responsibility isn't merely a marketing trend; it's a way firms give back to their communities. Partner with a local organization, spotlight its mission, and make a donation in honor of every guest who attends.
- **Virtual meetups.** The most informal option, these are great for building camaraderie and offer a casual setting to engage with people.
- **Fireside chats.** Gaining in popularity over the last several years, these are more relaxed than webinars and often held among a small group of peers.

Most important is the who

The next step is creating the invitation list. If you're planning a panel on cybersecurity, your target audience may be broad, including clients, prospects, referral sources, and friends of the firm. That's different from an intimate client appreciation gathering with a more specific guest list.

For larger-scale events, have relevant members of the firm identify possible guests. A webinar that can accommodate 100 or more attendees allows you to cast a wide net; you should get contacts from as many people in the firm as possible.

Bigger isn't always better, though. For smaller gatherings, focus on the value each attendee brings to the group. Play matchmaker; if there are guests who would benefit from being introduced to one another for business or professional reasons, make them a priority.

Work with your marketing team to set *realistic* dates and deadlines and check the calendar for holidays, conflicts, and competing programs. Events, even virtual ones, take significant time to plan, so "throwing together a simple happy hour" is not so simple, especially if you want it done well. Send save-the-date announcements and invitations far in advance to increase awareness, interest, and registrations.

Don't rely on email invitations alone. Follow up personally with your contacts to remind and urge them to attend. Personal outreach *always* produces positive results whether they can make it to your event or not. A phone call or video chat about your upcoming event is a valuable business development opportunity.

What's next

The date is set, the invitations have gone out, and the number of committed

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guests looks great. Hooray! Now the hard work begins.

Depending on the type of event, strive for no more than 60 to 90 minutes. Your attendees are experiencing Zoom fatigue, plus you want to respect their time and be mindful of their attention spans.

Carefully craft an agenda to establish how segments will flow. A day-of-event schedule prepared in advance will reduce stress and let all the players know their roles.

Determine the best host for your event, which may or may not be the managing partner or rainmaker-in-chief. A host welcomes guests, makes introductions, and facilitates conversations similar to in-person events. You want a person who will own the overall tone and pace and make course corrections when needed.

Technology is your new best friend

Now that most of us can activate our webcams and unmute ourselves, video chatting is a much more approachable medium for hosting an event. Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Skype are commonly used, but options like runtheworld.today let you present roundtables, panels, speed networking, and streaming parties. Identify the best platform for your event based on the agenda, the group, desired features, and cost.

A few things to consider when selecting a videoconferencing service:

- How big is your intended audience? Do you need a more sophisticated platform for a larger group?
- Do you want your audience to do more than just view and chat?
- Do you need breakout rooms or a different way to display presenters, guests, and materials?
- Do you need higher-resolution cameras, lapel microphones, or enhanced lighting?

Don't forget to test the tech! Not once, not twice, but *multiple* times, especially if voting, whiteboards, streaming video, or a live demonstration is involved. Testing also allows your host and presenters to get comfortable leading your event. Depending on the technical complexity, you may want a stage manager to oversee the production,

watch for guests' chat questions and comments, monitor the time, and keep the host and presenters on track.

And if there is ever a time to enlist the invaluable services of an IT person (within or outside the firm) this is it. Nothing will sour your fabulous event more than a tech failure.

Don't be afraid to have fun

The pandemic has drastically reduced our ability to have fun. Sure, you may know your area of law better than anyone else, but is a legal lecture the most effective way to engage with your audience at this moment?

The web and creative small businesses have provided a wealth of encounters you can share with your guests. Be bold when you're brainstorming! There are loads of fun experiences that can be delivered virtually:

- Have an alpaca pop into a meeting or tour a farm's baby animals.
- Host a mixology class where each attendee receives a gift basket with ingredients to make their own cocktails during the event.
- Throw a Fourth of July party featuring a satirical history lesson by a costumed historian with custom-decorated red, white, and blue cupcakes sent to your guests.
- Hold a superhero-themed speed networking event with breakout rooms and ask attendees to divulge their favorite super tool (Wonder Woman's lasso of truth, anyone?) as an ice-breaker.

Make it meaningful

Whatever your event or theme, make it an authentic representation of your firm. If you're devoted to your community, partner with your local food pantry to highlight its work and bring attention to its cause. If networking events aren't your forte, offer a webinar or an industry-specific keynote speaker.

Do what feels right to you and makes sense for your firm or personal brand. If planning a virtual event seems overwhelming, don't let it be. Start small with a virtual Zoom happy hour with one or two clients and send them their favorite craft beer or spirit to enjoy.

Done but not over: Follow up

You may have hit it out of the park with your event, but the work is not done. Your successful event only entitles you to follow up, have your next business development conversation, and strengthen your relationships.

The effectiveness of an event lies not only in the execution, but in the subsequent touchpoints. A mixologist might provide additional cocktail and mocktail recipes you can send. Share an article mentioned in a presentation. At least send a personal "thank you for attending" note, preferably handwritten. Gratitude and thoughtfulness never go out of style and are rarely forgotten.

Make connections around the world and across the hall

Face-to-face interaction will always be a critical component to developing and maintaining strong relationships. Until we can see each other in person regularly, virtual events are where it's at. They are also useful for staying connected in a meaningful way to your strategic connections — wherever they are.

Lastly, don't forget these same ideas and approaches make for fantastic *employee* appreciation events. Now more than ever, it's incredibly important to engage with your colleagues to maintain the camaraderie that may be lost with so many people working remotely. So, go ahead and hire those cute farm animals for a firmwide happy hour. Baby goats make everyone smile. ■



Caroline Berger is a marketing and business development consultant with Rain BDM and previously held marketing roles in midsize firms in Chicago and Miami. She devises strategies and implements plans that engage law firms' target audiences and generate new client opportunities. Berger has successfully designed, managed, and executed hundreds of events ranging from conferences, retreats, and gala celebrations to intimate dinners, flower arranging classes, and fashion shows.