BABEL

Beyond the Webinar: A Guide to Virtual Events

June 2020

For businesses, events are a crucial means of engaging with customers and prospects – and the media. In the UK alone, the events industry is worth around £42.3 billion, with around 1.3 million business events held across more than 10,000 venues, which host a combined 85 million-plus attendees, every year. The exception, of course, is this year.

The cancellation of events was particularly felt by the technology and telecoms industry. Mobile World Congress was the first major tech sector event to be cancelled due to COVID-19. The decision by organisers the GSMA back in February set the tone for 2020, with other tech favourites, from NAB, Facebook F8 and SXSW, to DEF CON, Google I/O and the Paris Games Week all being called off. At the time, many businesses wondered how they'd manage to go ahead with product launches, gain media coverage, network with new and existing customers, and recoup their losses. The idea of hundreds of hours of conferences and discussions moving from a physical to a virtual setting wasn't too well received, especially in the early days when there was still much uncertainty about the gravity of COVID-19. After all, how could you recreate the atmosphere of an after-show drinks party online? Without a flashy stand and physical products to show, how could you impress prospects and explain complex tech to new journalist contacts?
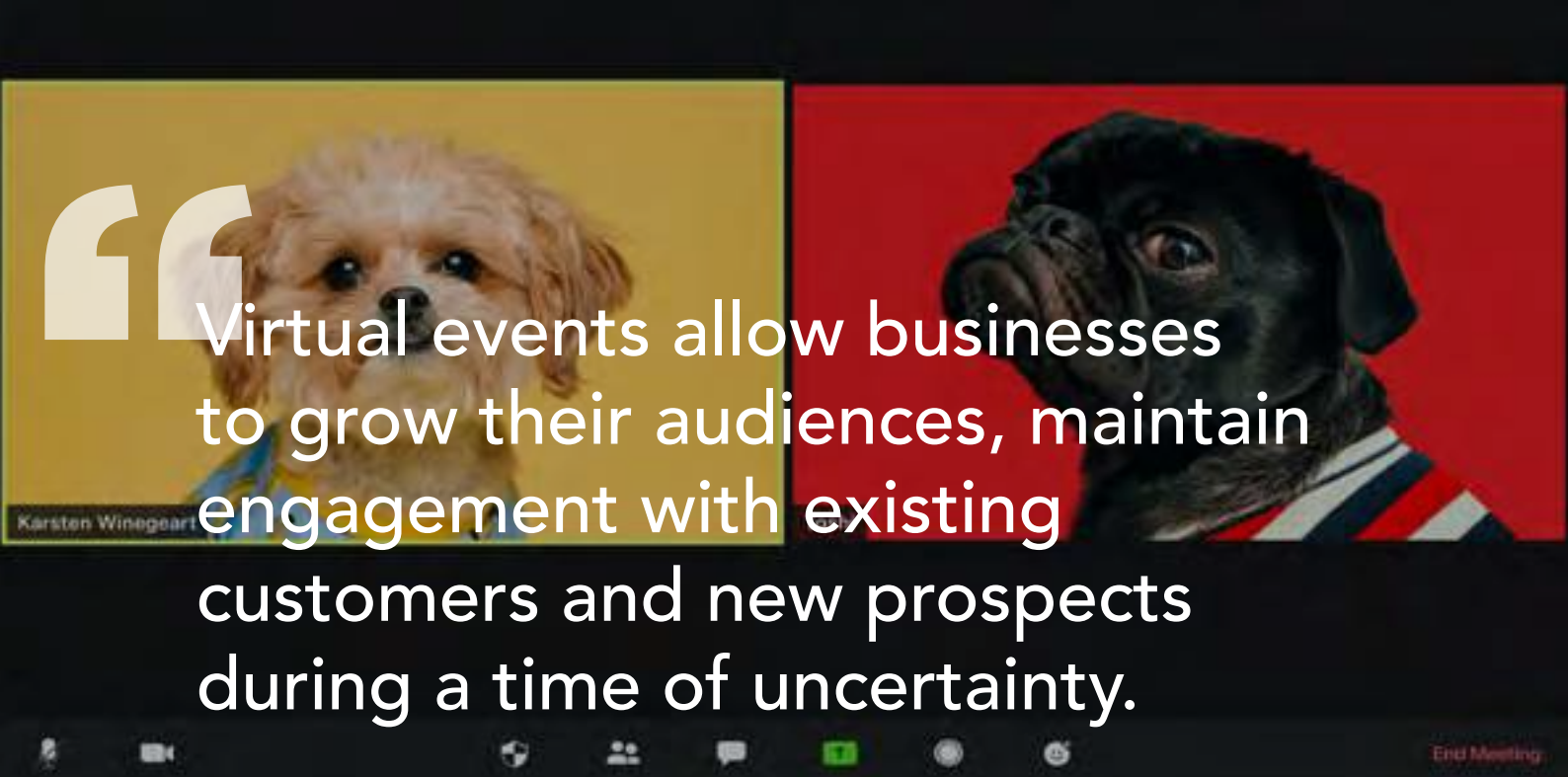
All valid questions; yet let's not forget, these companies are tech companies. They're the brains and power behind many of the technological solutions that are enabling remote and collaborative working – and yes, virtual events. Arguably, it's brands in the tech industry that should be the best-placed to move from physical to virtual event hosting, following in the footsteps of a whole host of businesses and organisations that have successfully made the leap.

In light of the pandemic, the message has been clear: where possible, don't cancel your event, and instead move it online. In our 'new normal', many experiences that were once tangible, in-person and involved physical contact, have been reinvented for the digital space. Fitness sessions, church services, meditation and yoga classes, graduation ceremonies, music and literary festivals, training and exams – all of these and more have taken advantage of readily-available and affordable technology. Importantly, they've also capitalised on a captive audience.

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> **"Virtual events allow businesses to grow their audiences, maintain engagement with existing customers and new prospects during a time of uncertainty.**

Virtual events allow businesses to grow their audiences – potentially into the hundreds of thousands – maintain engagement with existing customers and new prospects during a time of uncertainty. By moving events online, companies can continue to benefit from the opportunities (whether networking, educational, or revenue-driving) that traditional in-person events afforded them.

But setting up and running virtual events can bring its own challenges. One of these is actually the benefit highlighted above. While it's easy for individuals to log on to a virtual event and for brands to boost attendee numbers, it's also very easy for them to disengage, log off and browse the internet for a competitor offering something better. Furthermore, the tech industry has relied for so many years on physical conferences, trade shows, and product launches. Many companies will never have hosted an online event, making the process all the more intimidating. So how can you make an online event successful? And how can you move beyond simply hosting a webinar, and create more meaningful engagement with your target audience and the media?

These were among the questions we sought to explore at our own virtual event. We

hosted an interactive panel session, chaired by Babel's Associate Director, Katie Finn, offering guidance on how to host your own virtual event, and drive engagement with customers, prospects and the media. Broadcast to almost 100 attendees tuning in from across Europe, the US, and Asia, Finn was joined online and on screen by our esteemed panel of media and industry figures: Zoe Kleinman, Technology Reporter for the BBC; Martyn Landi, Technology Correspondent for PA Media (formerly Press Association); Jenny Mowat, Managing Director, Babel, and Derek Weeks, VP of Sonatype and Co-Founder of All Day DevOps, one of the world's largest virtual events, which last year attracted almost 40,000 technology professionals.

The insights and practical advice shared by our panel proved invaluable, so we wanted to make these available to the wider technology community, to help companies organise, host, and derive value from virtual events. We'll draw on our own experience, as well as advice from our panellists, to provide a comprehensive 'how to' guide for business leaders and marketers. Finally, we'll outline the services we offer to our clients, which include a number of new offerings to reflect the dramatic changes wrought by COVID-19.

THE CONTENT MARKETING & PR PERSPECTIVE

Think 'virtual event' and the first thing that probably comes to mind is a webinar. The format is simple: usually one presenter will introduce the topic, and either guide attendees through a PowerPoint presentation independently, or else navigate to other spokespeople who will introduce and deliver individual segments. The benefits of this approach are simplicity and cost, with webinar software readily available, many offering free trials and low-cost subscriptions.

These include:

- ClickMeeting
- Zoho meeting
- GoToWebinar
- WebinarNinja
- Adobe Connect
- Zoom
- LiveStorm
- Google Hangouts

However, our own event, 'Beyond the webinar' was so-called for a reason. Until the start of this year, many of us will have attended a handful of webinars, and will often have done so alongside other forms of engagement with a brand. Now, many of those in-person engagements are not possible, resulting in a surge in companies pushing webinars for everything and anything. The novelty of watching a PowerPoint presentation from the comfort of your own desk suddenly seems less appealing. Media and prospects need something more.

An old-fashioned webinar is a cheap and cheerful option, but it's no longer always the best option for companies. Instead, we'd recommend formats that encourage two-way engagement, utilise multiple forms of media for delivery, and, if possible, incorporate some tangential elements in addition to the virtual.

More creative approaches to virtual events include:
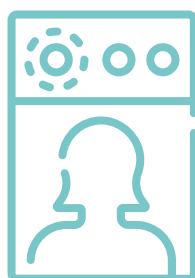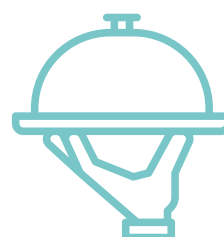

Tutorials/how tos/demos
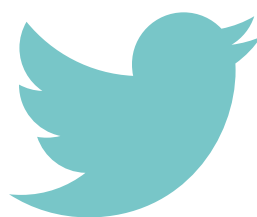
Live Tweeting/Q&As

Communications Platform

Social Stories

Dinners & Networking

The requirements and delivery of each of the above will depend on your brand, but let's take one of these as an example of creativity in action – virtually. Many brands already have experience of communicating educational information virtually, whether that's via a product demo or training exercise. What's often more difficult, however, is to recreate the informal atmosphere and networking opportunities offered by a dinner event or – that old tradeshow favourite – cocktail hour at your company's exhibition stand.

Katie Finn, Associate Director at Babel discusses just one of the approaches that has worked for one of our clients.

THE CHALLENGE

A software-as-a-service company relies on regular virtual and in-person events to connect with its global network of customers and partners. In the absence of these, it sought to host a virtual roundtable.

It needed to include key spokespeople from the company and wider industry, and a number of journalists who we knew would be interested in hearing their message – in this case, about the importance of open source IT projects geared at mitigating the impacts of COVID-19.

Our client had already set aside a date for the event but, being based in the US, had picked late afternoon on a Thursday, the final point in a journalists' day before clocking off for a bank holiday weekend. We knew the media would be interested in the story, but we also knew that the media would need some persuading to stay online and at their desks before a long weekend!

THE VIRTUAL EVENT & THE SOLUTION

The panel was moderated by a client spokesperson but with panellists from across the industry, to ensure journalists got a balanced view and more interesting debate.

Pubs and bars were shut due to lockdown and going out shopping was limited to buying essential goods. So, we recreated the spirit of a great British bank holiday kick-off by sending media attendees a DIY cocktail kit or crate of beer, meaning they could tune in while still winding down. In terms of delivery options for food and drink, there are lots out there depending on your budget and location.

Here's just a few:

- Beer52
- The Cocktail Man
- Your Sommelier
- Poison Cocktails
- NIO Cocktails

THE RESULTS

Target technology media attended the event, with every journalist who attended writing dedicated features afterwards, reflecting their engagement. The drinks offering further fuelled media engagement, with journalists even sharing pictures of themselves enjoying beverages while tuning in!

The above example had a tight turnaround, due to the subject matter and ensuring the execution and delivery weren't at odds with public mood and the rapidly-changing media agenda. Its success was down to planning and prep.

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PLANNING YOUR VIRTUAL EVENT

Whatever format it takes, the lead time for a virtual event should be similar to that of a physical event, even slightly longer if your team isn't familiar with the tech set-up. You still need to prep the outline, the logistics scripting and even more time for addressing the visuals. In terms of logistics, says Mowat, "You might not be organising transport for spokespeople but you'll still be navigating global time zones, dodgy internet connections, and dingy lighting."

Create a planning document and timeline ahead of the event – or partner with a team that can do it for you! – **based on the following questions:**

- How will you market it, or pitch it, what's your hook?
- How will it work on the day, how can you make it a better experience for media? Can you send them breakfast for a breakfast briefing, or mocktails for something later in the day?
- How do you keep people engaged? Can they submit questions before, is there an open dialogue or do you keep it more controlled?
- How do you offer meaningful follow-up?
- What content/insights can you share and how quickly?
- How do you keep that dialog open?

Think about the output of the event before you even start promoting it. **Ask yourself:**

- What can you share with the participants after? Is it a series of blogs, a whitepaper, a recording?
- When exactly will you share it? If it's just a media event; what's the output you are expecting and how will you try and make sure this happens?
- Once you have started the comms before/during the event; how will you continue it?
- What future events or content of interest can you share?

In terms of a planning strategy, Derek Weeks advocates a "a 60:1:60 strategy." In the case of All Day DevOps, he explained, it is "a 360:1:360 strategy: what are you doing the 60 days before the event or the 365 days before the event?" You must consider, "What's happening before and then what's happening post conference? So, you have to think about the production value of what you are producing. What are the goals of what you're producing? And I think most importantly, what kind of experience are you producing for your attendees?"

It's never too early to start planning a virtual event, and it's never too early to start engaging with potential attendees. For Weeks, it's a year-long process. "We start with figuring out what our programme needs to look like for keynote speakers, as we have multiple keynotes throughout the 24 hours of our event," he explained. "Their schedules are tight, they're hard to get, even if it's a virtual conference, and they don't have to travel. There are some people that

we need to lock down early. It's like: "I know it's 10 months away, but I want to see if you have availability at three o'clock in the afternoon on this day to participate with us.'"

Start talking about your event well in advance. For Weeks, this means kicking off a "very vocal timeline" in July, for a November event. This will help to build up a steady drumbeat of news and engagements, and allow the maximum time possible for people to register. To ensure your registrants don't forget, send reminder emails and calendar notifications. Make these fresh: include original content with these reminders, highlighting a different part of the event or a new speaker announcement.

It's helpful to think of hosting a virtual event as "producing". Your business is in the director's seat, and you're in charge of managing a live show, with all of the pre- and post-production that broadcast entails. Just like any other type of broadcast, you have to think of the practicalities, including the tech you're using and how to mitigate worst-case scenarios. Not sure where to start? Depending on the size and scope of your event (and your budget), the below list should be used as a starter for ten.

- **USE A SOCIAL MEDIA TEAM:** Assemble a team internally (or use a PR agency's service) to track conversations on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and Instagram around your event, and to live post on these channels during the event. This team can also monitor user-generated content, as Weeks explained: "We have people monitoring our Slack workspace to figure out, are people behaving? Are they following the Code of Conduct? If they're not, are we booting people out?"

- **NEEDS FIRST, PLATFORM SECOND:** Don't pick a hosting platform just because it's a big name/is easy to use/has all the bells and whistles. It has to meet your needs. Is it in budget? Will it scale to your requirements? Do you need to pay extra to store 'bells and whistles' assets in the cloud? As Weeks asserts, "It's really about determining the experience that you're trying to deliver and build and produce and operate during the conference, and then going to the [hosting platform] vendor saying, 'Okay, I have my checklist. Do you guys meet that?'"

- **HAVE BACKUPS:** Internet connectivity can – and does – go down. The possibility of network outages and dodgy connections due to speakers' remote (quite literally) working locations must be considered ahead of time, and back-ups put in place. Consider the physical: each participant should have a physical alternative to their home/ office in case their network goes down, or lockdown guidelines change and restrict movement. In terms of technology, make sure all participants have two sets of required hardware, in case a headset mic break, batteries go flat on a wireless mouse, a keyboard gets water damaged etc.

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Finally, ensure you do a full run-through of the event a week in advance.

This should include:

- If it's a panel discussion send questions to panellists in advance and request bullet-pointed responses to ensure there are no embarrassing surprises on the day – and broadcast across the internet. Script introductions, moderator questions and conclusions.

- Make sure you test the technology. Use members of your team to tune in on different devices, on different browsers, and with different mics and headsets.

- Once they've tuned in, make sure that they'll want to stick with you for the duration. Practising your lines and running jazzy graphics might be entertaining/clear/make sense to you, but on screen (and with all the distractions of the internet at your attendees' disposal), can be a very different matter. Do a real time run through with colleagues – preferably not those involved in the set up and delivery of the event, and request honest (read: ruthless) feedback.

- Ensure your computer equipment – and that of participants – is set up in the place and at the exact time as it will be when the event is broadcast live. What may appear as a well-lit room on a sunny morning ahead of the event may look very different on a dark evening a week later. In short: prepare for all eventualities.

PITCHING YOUR EVENT TO CLIENTS & PROSPECTS

Next, consider how to invite customer and prospect attendees. "You should have a clear social and marketing plan before any invites go out" says Mowat. "Content should include snippets of themes, visuals, data, which should be approved and scheduled for publication in the build up to your event and beyond."

Shouting about your event via social channels shouldn't be your only approach to invites, though. Clocking up registrations before your event can be exciting to see, but it'll mean little if: a) half of these registrants don't tune in on the day, b) they don't engage with your content or they quickly tune out, c) aren't likely to broadcast your message or buy your product afterwards. Sending direct mailers to people who've engaged with your brand in the past is a far more valuable strategy – just make sure you comply with GDPR before reaching out.

Here are our top tips for pitching your event:

1 Avoid lengthy pitches and wordy invites. For all target audiences your pitch needs to be to the point. BBC's Kleinman advised to ensure you include "what, when, where, why, how. And don't overwrite them." Instead, she advises using bullet points which quickly encapsulate: "here's what you can expect to get from this session".

2 Personalise it. Think about your target audience, their interest areas and also whether they are in your network or your colleagues – who is actually the best person to invite them?

3 Time it wisely. Don't invite potential attendees before you've got all your event collateral to hand: an email should include links to an event landing page with registration details. Blogs, photos, and insight from speakers are all helpful in building momentum and attracting attendees.

4 Make it shareable. If appropriate, encourage your target audience to share the invite within their network, and make this easy across your owned social media channels.

"To drum up interest about your event among the people that matter, make sure you make it shareable," advises Babel's PR and Digital Marketing Manager, Dan Parris. "Speakers often double as influencers, so provide them with the details they need to become event ambassadors. Always include who, what, where, and how. That means no virtual event marketing should be without a link. Whether it's a link to a registration form or your Instagram profile, show people where they need to go."

"Don't forget to share an event hashtag, to help people promote the event and drive conversations online," adds Parris. "Whatever you go with, please double check that it's not already being used for – and has associations with – another event or influencer. Nor that it could be misread in any way, a la the 2016 edition of Chester Literary Festival, forever remembered as #CLitFest."

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ATTRACTING THE MEDIA

Going to a conference or trade show is good for talking to existing customers and schmoozing new business prospects. But it's also great for PR. Both business leaders and journalists get a lot from one-to-one briefings, while networking events are usually where the real stories come out!

The option of wining and dining journalists in-person doesn't currently exist. What's more, the competition has increased, with so many companies now offering virtual events: both Kleinman and PA Media's Landi get "about four or five" invites to events every day.

How can you grab the media's attention and persuade a recipient that your event is the best of those five? In short: what makes a journalist want to attend an event? Kleinman offered a succinct response: it must be "useful" and "make a story." Journalists don't want sales pitches. In fact, our panellists agreed, this is the biggest mistake companies make when hosting virtual events. Creating a stage to solely promote your company, your brand, or your product line is, says Kleinman, "a waste of everybody's time."

They definitely don't want a sales pitch, so what do journalists look for when deciding whether or not to attend an event?

DIVERSITY:

#metoo and BLM are but two recent movements that have highlighted the need for more diverse representation in media and culture and for all voices to be heard. Yes, the technology industry has traditionally been dominated by middle class white men, but it is vital that companies ensure they don't fall back on the usual suspects when drafting speaker lists, and look to other voices instead. "I wouldn't even go to something that was full of white men of a certain age," said Kleinman. "In this day and age, it's just lazy." There are plenty of resources available to help improve diversity at tech events, so there really is no excuse.

TIMING:

Yes, virtual events are a whole lot easier for journalists to attend than physical, but it's still important to consider the timing of your event. "Timing is everything," said Kleinman. "I am often at my busiest in the mornings. So, breakfast/morning/late morning things I'm hugely unlikely to be able to ever make as I'm setting what I think my news agenda is going to be for the day." Again, it all comes down to understanding the industry your target media operate in and the different demands on their day. If you can't find a right time for everyone, think about offering one-to-one briefings to offer something different; as Landi explained, "we have to show our value by constantly putting out the exclusive things that no one else has got."

KNOWLEDGE:

This is something Derek Weeks knows all about, having run AllDayDevOps as a virtual event for the past five years, and attracting tens of thousands of engaged attendees as a result. "We don't allow any vendor pitches," he said. "Can you imagine having to host a 24-hour conference of vendor pitches? Yeah, I don't have that much hair, but if I did it'd all be gone by then!" He continued, "That conference is to give people something useful that they can learn from. It's not a sales pitch, it's to share knowledge. Give me something to learn that I didn't have before. And that's really what people will come back for year after a year."

ASSETS:

"No journalist wants to get to the end of a virtual event and realise that all they've got out of this is exactly what they would have got off the press release," said Landi. Use the current climate to offer something different, that goes beyond the press release basics. Post out products for journalists to demo ahead of/during an event or invite a speaker based halfway across the world, for instance.

DO YOUR HOMEWORK:

Ensure you have a proper understanding of each journalist's remit before reaching out. "Nothing is more annoying than getting something that's so obviously not got anything to do with your professional area of expertise. It just becomes irritating," said Kleinman.

ENGAGING YOUR PARTICIPENTS

Think about the above when planning your event, and communicate your event's selling points clearly in your marketing content. Once you've got media to your event, how do you keep them there – and keep them engaged? Perhaps more importantly, how can you recreate the kind of engagements which are what most visitors really go to trade shows for? Those speaker critiques you share with the stranger next to you in the auditorium, those ideas you posit as you're filing in and out of a conference room, those chats over coffee, that juicy gossip you overhear in the bar…

ALWAYS LIVE

Broadcasting a live event can seem daunting, but it'll be of far more value than anything pre-recorded could offer. In something pre-recorded, "we can't have the live back and forth," said Weeks. "It's just not as authentic and not as real." You want journalists to put in the effort and tune in on a certain day and at a certain time? Then you put the effort in to go bold and go live. Plus, you can always use a media training service to prep speakers in advance.

MIXED MEDIA

"No one wants to see a presentation that is one single slide for an hour and one single voice," said Landi. Think about using video, integrate live polls, a chat box, graphics, and a Q&A session at the end. Whatever you do, ensure it's well managed. Landi recalls a not-so-great virtual event which ended with questions going out to the floor, at which point "80 people came off mute and all tried to ask questions at the same time."
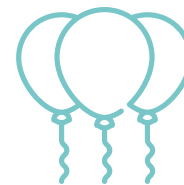
BUILD A VIRTUAL COMMUNITY

Don't create velvet ropes" around your event, said Weeks. I.e., don't make it exclusive and instead create virtual spaces for attendees to share ideas and, yes, critique those of your speakers! Weeks suggests creating a Slack channel, an approach that's worked well for All Day DevOps. In fact, the channel used for a previous edition of the conference is still going strong: "people still speak in it every day, people still connect in it every day," he said. It's all part of "keeping the community engaged and giving them value," he continued, and is but one example of "creating a two-way dialogue and making an event about something more than just broadcasting."

THROW A PARTY

Conferences and large events might still be off the cards, but in many regions smaller gatherings are taking place, and workplaces are slowing opening up. This presents the opportunity for attendees to throw (and for organisers to encourage) viewing parties. Encourage attendee's colleagues or journalists' teams to register and make it a community event. "We had over 180 viewing parties" for last year's All Day DevOps, said Weeks. "Different communities were hosting parties, either at their company or open to the public in their regional locations. So we get a massive amount of people participating in the conference."

MAXIMISING THE CONTENT MARKETING OPPORTUNITY

A virtual event's value doesn't end when participants log off. Create the right kind of content – and prompt others to do the same – and noise around your event (and your brand) will continue for weeks and months after. "You have to think about how you take the value of content that you're creating that day and utilise it over time to keep people engaged," said Weeks.

There are endless possibilities for content creation, all of which should be amplified by a strong and consistent social media strategy. Whatever the size/scope/theme of your virtual event, we'd advise leveraging these top three:

BLOGS
As well as using blogs to publicise the fact your event is happening (the when, where and how), use this as a platform to entice potential attendees with hints of what the event has to offer. This could include a speaker Q&A, some data points, an intro from a report you're launching, or a reveal of a feature on a new product launching.

RECORDINGS
Make sure the hosting platform you're using will enable you to record the live stream, and post both AV and audio on your website and social channels after the event. Clever editing could also enable you to transform parts of the event into a podcast series.

WHITEPAPERS
Use key insights from your event – plus data, if you have it – to create a whitepaper or series of whitepapers. These can then be hosted as gated assets on your website, and provide a great tool for generating leads.

OUR NEW VIRTUAL REALITY

We opened our virtual event with a poll in which we asked if our attendees plan to hold a virtual event in the next six months. A whopping 93% do have such plans (though we hope the ideas and delivery of our session boosted this figure by the time our hour was up!). It'll be interesting to ask the same question six months down the line. While we hope that the state of the global economy will have improved since the current period, we also predict that many things will remain the same.

One of those things is the popularity of virtual events. COVID-19 and lockdown cancelled conferences, furloughed festivals and trounced tradeshows. Yet it's also demonstrated what can be achieved with technology, creativity and a fraction of

the marketing spend usually allocated to physical events. "I'm 100% looking forward to the next physical conference I can go to," said Weeks during our panel session, "but I don't think that's going to diminish the value of the virtual experience."

Organising a virtual event might seem like the easy option for companies used to running engaging and exciting customer experience days, or regular networking drinks. However, getting people to engage, open up, and share knowledge honestly and authentically online has its own very unique challenges. And ensuring attendees actually enjoy sitting in front of a screen for an hour upwards – as opposed to catching up with industry peers post-conference – is also far from straightforward. For smaller

companies, any kind of event management and delivery may well seem off limits. With this whitepaper, we hope we've provided insights and guidance to companies of all sizes looking to host successful virtual events. We hope we've shown that with plenty of preparation, consistent media relations, and creative content marketing, a digitally hosted conference or tradeshow can deliver just as much value as its physical counterpart. And all within a budget far lower than the cost of an exhibition stand!

During our panel event, Weeks was spot on when talking about the secret of success of virtual events: "the key thing is inclusivity." He said, it's "the whole reason we started All Day DevOps in the first place." It should be front of mind when planning an event: "focus on inclusivity from the beginning; make it available to everyone, make it free, make it worldwide, put it on the internet

and remove all those barriers [that exist with a physical conference]," said Weeks. Often requiring lower budgets and more flexibility than their physical counterparts, virtual experiences level the playing field and provide platforms for the smallest of start-ups right through to blue-chip brands.

Democratising access to knowledge, making resources and insight available for free, uniting speakers and attendees across global barriers and time zones: these were all goals of ours when hosting our own virtual event. And they're things we hope to support other companies to achieve in the future.

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To find out more about the following event support services at Babel, please get in touch by emailing newbusiness@babelpr.com:

- Media and presentation training for spokespeople

- Messaging workshops and discussion point of view brainstorms

- Virtual cook-a-long dinner and networking events with a Michelin star chef

- Content marketing creation and amplification

- Virtual media roundtables, press conferences, and briefings

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