

Virtual reality: 7 steps to delivering events online

A guide to creating successful online events programmes for your charity or nonprofit

The evolution of 'virtual events'

Wherever you are in the world, it is possible to presume that your organisation has been affected by restrictions caused by the response to COVID-19. Of the myriad ways this may be affecting you, limits on meeting in-person can be one of the hardest challenges to overcome, as **arguably there is no substitute for real-life engagement**.

However, many charities and nonprofits have been quick to transform their cancelled in-person events into virtual alternatives. Virtual events are providing replacement benefits to busy fundraisers, such as shorter to-do checklists and unlimited guest lists, and it seems unlikely even with the end of the pandemic in sight that virtual events will disappear from the norm.

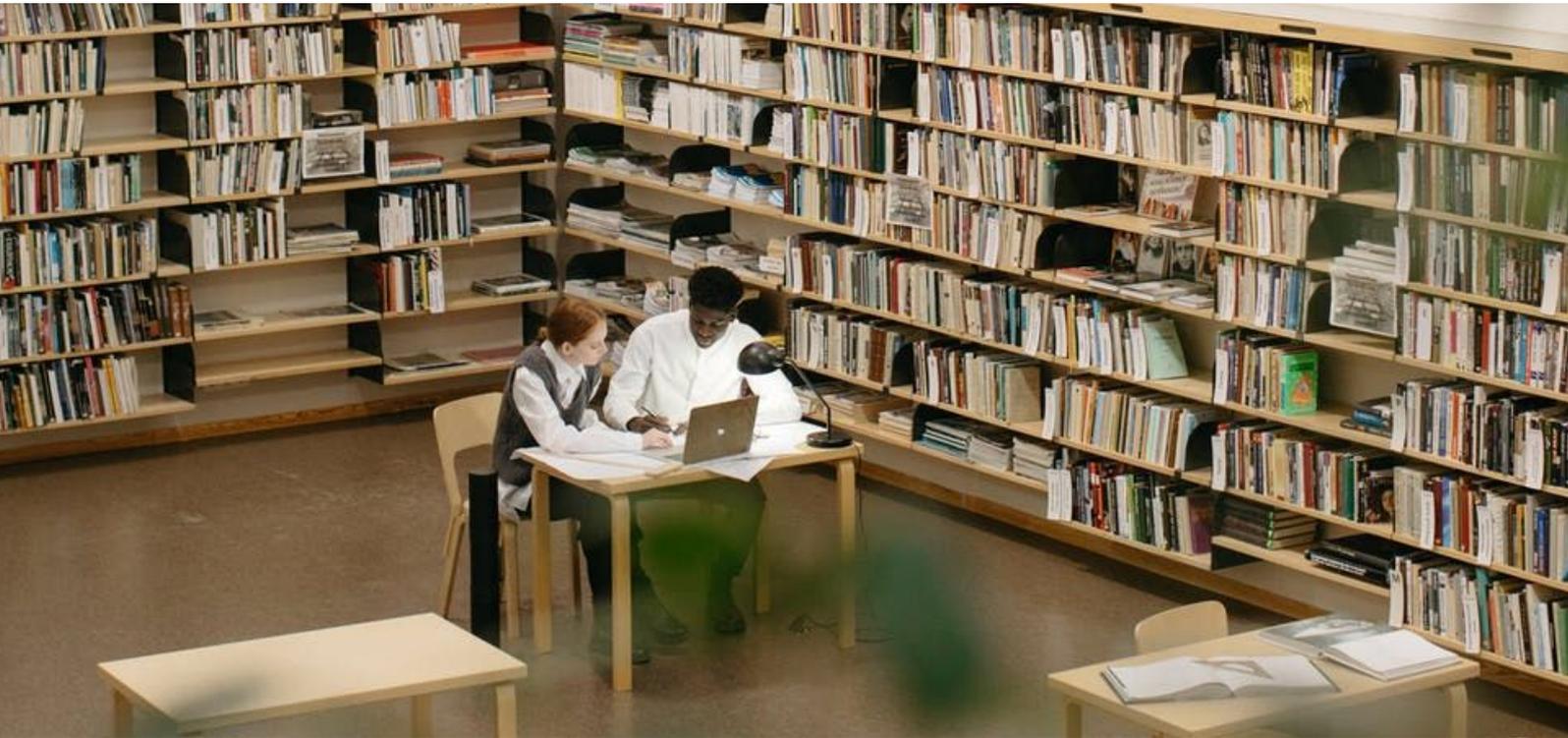
Being able to **meet your fundraising goals with an online events programme** is the most important metric of success, especially with the current economic climate in which charities are expecting to raise less in the coming years.

This guide will take you through the steps to hosting successful virtual events, with tips on how to encourage engagement and ultimately secure further support.



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Choosing a virtual host

What makes a great virtual host?

- Some technical ability, to ensure that moving between slides is a smooth process, and you can use interactive technology such as live polls and Q&A functions
- The ability to make an event feel lively and exciting even when talking to a blank screen!
- Content is even more important to keep people hooked in a virtual event, so choose speakers with great stories and practical tips that will leave your audience inspired and connected
- Ensure there is a point of relevance between your speaker and audience; whether they are a donor, or working in an industry that invitees may want to go into



Weighing up virtual events: pros & cons

When planning virtual events, you will often run into different hurdles to in-person events. Here are some key advantages and disadvantages to consider before getting started:

Advantages:

Accessibility

You can have guest speakers from around the world, without worrying about travel, accommodation or clashing schedules!

Your network of supporters can dial in from home, and can join and leave longer events as it suits. They are also more likely to be flexible on different time zones when connecting online as opposed to in-person.



Toucan Tip: Why not try expanding the audience for a would-be local event, into a national or even international one?

Capacity

Physical events present a very real maximum capacity, which must be considered when booking venues, allocating tickets and managing contingency plans. Virtual events don't have the same limitations, nor do they require a balancing act between ticket sales, overheads and a minimum viable number of attendees.

Cost

Even though there may be additional costs for the provision of an online events platform, virtual events are much more affordable for many organisations, which is why many hope that the trend towards digital and hybrid events is here to stay. In addition, the reduction in cost is passed on to attendees, who are attracted by lower ticket prices and transportation costs.

Engagement

As virtual meetings have dominated the last year, from family quizzes to work calls, many more people are now far more comfortable connecting online than ever before. As a result, virtual events provide a great opportunity to build engagement in your community, particularly while there are few opportunities on the horizon for in-person events.

Human resource

Another cost-saving area lies in the reduced requirement to staff physical events, saving employees or staffing agencies time from set-up to pack-down.



Weighing up virtual events - the pros and cons

Disadvantages:

Differing levels of tech confidence

While so many people of all ages have adapted to audio visual technology playing a bigger role in their lives, some still may not feel completely confident with their tech capabilities. It is possible that engagement with older members of your community may struggle to get to grips online events, and it may be wise to consider alternative communication methods to maintain connections with older or more vulnerable segments of your audience.



Toucan Tip: Having tech support on-hand is important, particularly when inviting an audience with varied age-ranges or abilities. Depending on the format and size of the event, you may need a bigger tech support team to ensure your event runs smoothly.

Limitations on certain formats

Certain event formats are more suited to a virtual alternative than others; when it comes to more interactive formats such as workshops or networking opportunities, it's important to plan carefully to keep your attendees engaged. Using online 'breakout rooms' for discussions can work well, and it's beneficial to include a 'host' in each of the rooms to structure the questions and give everyone a chance to contribute.



Toucan Tip: Allocate an employee to each breakout room beforehand, and give them a clear brief on how to introduce the topic, collect ideas and bring everyone back into the main session.

Collecting donations in-person isn't an option

While you can't bring charity buckets along to your next online event, it might not be as difficult as you anticipate to solicit donations from your attendees. By highlighting online giving as part of your registration process, or as a next step post-event for attendees, you can open the conversation to setting up regular payments.



Toucan Tip: Make the most of every donation, by including an opt-in for comms and capturing contact details in the online donation process.



3 questions to consider before you dive into the details

Hosting events can be time-consuming, so it's important to connect the outcome you need with the effort you're putting in

Set yourself up for success by asking these key questions



1. What is the purpose of your event?

Are you trying to engage a specific segment of your donors or prospects? Is this a direct fundraising event? Finding the purpose of your event is key to setting yourself up for success, and will ensure that you can report back to your stakeholders clearly and with great results. Make sure that you can share a great reason to attend with your invitees - it might be to drive awareness of an situation that has impacted on your cause, to share progress, or to connect with other donors.



2. What is the demographic of your event?

Understanding your audience and segmenting your event can be easier with digital events, and doing this carefully will ensure that your event hits the mark for those that attend. Considering details such as whether the event is tailored for potential or current donors, which types of stakeholders you will invite, and whether you will be mixing different demographics.



3. What are the needs of your attendees?

Virtual events do provide a challenge, not just for older attendees, but for anyone that may have low tech confidence. Often, step-by-step guides are needed to be sent out prior to the event, and live tech support is a must for any large or complex event. In addition, when hosting you're hosting a virtual event: safety is key. It's important to check details such as that your emails aren't getting caught in spam filters, and the meeting or event is secure.



Step 1: Deciding on your purpose and target audience for your event

What are you aiming to achieve with the event, and with who?



Lead generation -

Ways to use virtual events to secure new leads:

- When asking people to sign up, if you're running a content-based event (such as a webinar or roundtable), encourage them to sign up even if they can't make the event, and send a recording of the event to them afterwards.
- Write a round-up of the event for your community site, so that people who did not join can get a sense of what your events are like, and gain insights such as updates on development projects. Ask your members to sign up to your community site to read the full roundup.



Nurture -

Ways to use virtual events to nurture existing donors:

- Events are a brilliant way to warm up your community to a donation; if an prospect attends your event and is regularly engaging with other digital content such as emails or newsletters, it could be a good opportunity to make an ask.
- Ensure that your attendee journey offers plenty of opportunities to take the next step, for example with donations, include an option to donate at registration, signpost donation options during the event, and include a call to action to donate in your post-event comms.



Stewardship -

Ways to deliver value for your community:

- Share inspiring stories of how donations have helped your beneficiaries, and your next steps to make progress.
- Share how they can get involved by supporting your next cause.
- Setting up networking events to give supporters a chance to connect with peers.



Step 2: Choosing the right format

Virtual events don't have to stick to the same formula as your previous events: now is a good time to experiment and try a new format to engage your audience

Webinars

Webinars are speaker to audience events that can be run with one host or as a panel of speakers.

Hybrid events

A mixture of in-person and virtual events. For example, a webinar with a live audience that is also streamed online.

Virtual conferences

Multi-day or multi-session events that can be effective for going into detail on content, or covering a wide range of topics.

Regional meetings

Though in-person events might not be able to go ahead, members may still find it useful to speak to those within their region as they are likely to have the same experiences of COVID restrictions etc.

Roundtables

A virtual roundtable is an online session designed to share knowledge, insights and experiences among members on a specific topic.

Networking (speed dating)

Keep networking short and sweet online; one way to make the most of virtual networking is to match those looking to discuss similar topics, or to give each person a set of questions and a time limit to encourage everyone to get involved!

Workshops

Workshops, similar to roundtables, give members the chance to focus on a specific topic, but often include smaller breakout rooms with tasks to complete.

General/recurring updates

Association, foundation or school updates that can be recorded and uploaded to your community site, or members can tune in live and ask questions.

Fun social events

From wine tasting to floristry classes, social events can be a great way to drive fundraising income through ticket sales.

Competitions

Running virtual competitions such as a bake-off, talent contest or poetry slam can be done fairly easily online, and can drive lots of interest!



Toucan Tip:

Match your format to your purpose - if you want to have one-to-one conversations with major donors, consider networking or smaller, intimate social events. If you're looking to attract new supporters or drive awareness, running larger events will bring in a greater number of leads.



Step 3: Funding your event & setting fundraising goals

While virtual events tend to be significantly cheaper than in-person alternatives, there are still costs involved, so in order to make your efforts worthwhile and aiming for positive ROI, setting your budget and income goals should be done early on.

Ticket prices are often valued differently compared to in-person events; what you're offering in virtual events is often more intangible than a traditional dinner-and-drinks ticket.

In a similar vein of thinking, donors may feel that they have already done their bit by buying a virtual event ticket, and may not be inclined to donate further afterwards. Therefore, in some cases it might be wise to make your event very affordable or free, and follow up with personalised asks to maximise your fundraising potential.

Opportunities to donate can be made available through the ticket options you choose to build and promote for the event, and woven into the ticketing experience for delegates. For example, in lieu of at-event donation methods, why not create tiered ticket prices, with donations of ascending amounts built into the cost of the ticket?

Getting creative with corporate sponsorship

Put simply, sponsors want to connect with people in your network, and are willing to pay a price to do so. The positive engagement opportunities at events make them a popular piece of activity to 'sponsor', and this introduces another revenue stream for the organisation.

If you have not had sponsors for one of your events before, going virtual is a great opportunity to test out what works. There are still so many ways to provide exposure for sponsors through online events, including -

- Branding on event promotional comms and materials
- Offering the chance for the sponsor to introduce themselves
- Branding on the presentation slides
- Providing a tailored offer in follow-up comms
- Capturing opt-ins to be contacted by the sponsor in future



Here's a few suggestions for who to invite to sponsor your event

- Donor-owned businesses
- Locally-owned businesses
- Affiliated corporates or potential new partners



Step 4: Promoting your online events

How can you publicise your virtual events

Promoting online events is a new challenge; no longer can invitees be won over with the promise of dinner and drinks!

Instead, nonprofits and charities must focus on the content and delivery of their events, and which channels they use to promote, to encourage members to register - and then to turn up!

Channels to share your online event

- On your social media channels
- Emailing your database - make sure to segment and tailor your invitations!
- Through your speakers' channels - ask speakers to feature the event on their website or with their network
- Media/press - if your event is open to the general public, ask journalists to share the details



Toucan Tip

Start promoting your event approximately 6 weeks before the event - online events typically have a shorter promotion cycle.

Considerations

Encouraging sign ups to limitless events

With little risk of online events 'selling out' (format dependent), members can be slower to sign up. To combat this, use teaser content when promoting and direct invitees to the website to learn more, where it's easier to persuade them to sign up in a few moments. Additionally, offers of exclusivity such as cheaper tickets, or unlocking exclusive content, can drive registrations. Finally, you can use 'last chance' communications to encourage final sign ups in the last few days (or day of!) your event.

How to sell virtual networking

Virtual networking can be difficult, even though many people are feeling more confident after a year of online socialising! To make virtual networking work, people need to have conversations in small groups or one-on-one, so using breakout rooms can work well. In addition, pairing networking sessions with industries is a good way to assure people that they will be making valuable connections.

Getting registrants to turn up!

Now they've registered, how can you encourage people to turn up? How many of us have signed up to a webinar in the last year with all the right intentions, but didn't quite make it? Virtual events are often cheaper than in-person events, not least from the financial gain of not having to pay for accommodation or travel. This can present a risk that people will sign up to your events and not turn up. To encourage registrants to show up, consider sending out an email to ask for questions for the speaker, so attendees will join to hear their question answered live.



Step 5: Getting it right on the day

Hosting an engaging session

Audience participation isn't out of the question for virtual events; in fact, audience participation is more accessible and may feel far more comfortable to people who would prefer to type a question than stand up in a conference theatre.

How can you encourage audience participation?

- Send an email before the event which prompts registrars to send in a question to the speaker
- Use chat facilities available on most virtual event platforms to encourage open dialogue throughout
- Use breakout rooms to discuss content in smaller groups
- Encourage the use of social media hashtags throughout larger events, such as a conference, to generate awareness

Creating a framework

As well as a schedule, think about what kinds of software your audience will need to use to attend your event. ToucanTech can facilitate events management with online giving capabilities, for a smooth process - supporters can even make their first donation during their sign up process!

Communicating a schedule for your audience is important: is the event running over multiple days, and will supporters participate on their own schedule (e.g. walkathon) or join in live for a speaker session?



Testing, testing...

Ensure that at least a week prior, you conduct platform training for speakers. Make sure to go through switching between speakers, screen sharing, and checking audio and webcam quality!

Pulling off a successful speaker session

1. Make sure to have clear, structured slides if you're using them. Keeping information to a minimum on the slides will help to focus the audience on your speaker's words instead!
2. Create an active virtual environment: encourage your audience to ask questions and either answer as you go through, or leave time for a Q&A at the end - remember to come up with a few seed questions.
3. Have someone on-hand to monitor the chat box and help with anyone having technical issues
4. Ensure you are well-lit, preferably with a neutral or clear background



Step 6: Executing your follow up

Considering the attendee experience

It's important to consider how your virtual event will sit alongside the rest of your events programme, as well as your other engagement activities, and how these moments compliment the other engagement opportunities you offer.

Planning your follow-up and intended 'next steps' for your attendees should come early on in the planning process, to ensure your core messaging is followed throughout, and makes clear sense to your attendees.

What is the next step you want attendees to take?

Is it to make a donation, or sign up for another event? Defining a next step, and using this as the thread throughout your event will lead to a greater number of your attendees taking a subsequent action.

Consider what your attendee's goals are by registering for your event. Are they looking to learn more about what you do, searching for best practice, or trying to connect with other members?

Matching up your event to their own personal journey is a great way to create meaningful engagement that will encourage further participation.

Example attendee journey



Step 7: Analysing your data post-event

Using metrics to find out more about what worked in your events, and draw insights you can use for improving next time.

The more data you can gather about your event, from your comms to speaker feedback, the greater your opportunity to tailor your event next time.

Metric	Calculating your metric	How you can use this insight to improve your events?
Email open rate - pre-event	How many people opened divided by How many people you sent your email to x 100	If your open rates are low, try using a different subject line. For networking events, making it explicit that it's an invitation can work well, e.g. 'Sign up to our 2020 progress update'.
Registration rate	How many people registered divided by how many people were invited x 100	You may be able to improve your registration rate by adding more information to your event listing, or tailoring your invitations to different segments.
Attendee rate	How many people attended divided by how many people registered x 100	If you have a particularly high drop off rate for attendees, it might be worth considering testing running your events at different times, and sending a reminder on the day of your event.
Email click through rate - post event	How many people clicked divided by how many people opened your post-event email x 100	Ensure you're making it easy for your supporters to take the next step in their donor journey, whether that's clicking through to a donation page or signing up to another event. Use buttons in your emails and a strong call to action to incentivise clicks.



25 ideas for your next virtual event

Get creative - this is the time to try new ideas and capture people's attention.

Raising money through your community

1. Sponsored walkathon/marathon
2. Art auction
3. Silent auction
4. Matched giving
5. Climb everest from home

Raising money through ticket sales

6. Virtual concert
7. Bingo night
8. Online cookery masterclass
9. Virtual murder mystery
10. Craft afternoon/evening
11. Coffee morning
12. Online language lessons
13. Floristry class
14. Virtual book club
15. Quiz night
16. Inspirational speaker evenings
17. Yoga/fitness class
18. Wine tasting
19. Soft-skills training e.g. productivity
20. Virtual escape room

Raising money through competition entries

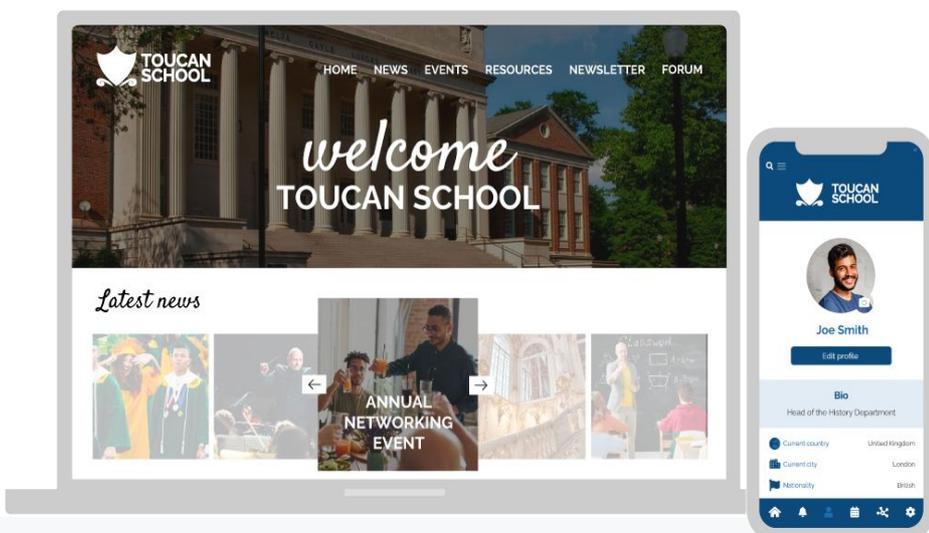
21. Virtual bake off/ cook off
22. Raffle / tombola
23. Writing competition
24. Talent contest
25. Come dine with me



About ToucanTech



ToucanTech is a **community software** used by charities, nonprofits, and schools for marketing, membership, donor engagement, careers, and fundraising activities. Combining a flexible **website** and powerful **database/ CRM**, it's an easy, all-in-one system.



Database

Import, filter, update and merge record, create custom fields, forms and admin permissions



Community

Connect your members on a branded network with privacy controls and mobile app



CRM

Track activity, measure engagement, capture consents, create postal labels, sync emails



Groups

Set-up club pages where admins can manage their own members, discussions, events



Email

Design and schedule newsletters, view stats, remove bounced emails, manage unsubscribes



Fundraising

Process donations and tax relief, set up funds, reconcile payments, run reports, steward donors



Resources

Upload photos, documents, magazines - tag, categorise, share and track downloads



Careers

Run a mentoring system, post jobs, publish careers guides, promote business networking



News

Publish articles, videos, and other content - track views, tag people, share on social media



Events

Manage your events (online or in-person), invites, reminders, seating plans and ticketing

“

My charity relies on an efficient database and website to manage our fundraising events, email newsletters and admin processes - we replaced four different systems to switch to ToucanTech and have found the system so easy to use with phenomenal support from their expert data and training team.”

Spencer Gelding

Chief Executive
Beit Halochem UK



Visit toucantech.com or email hello@toucantech.com to book a product demo

