



THYMEBASE

# Planning A Virtual Event

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# Introduction

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Planning a virtual event is easy. Seriously. In fact, it's simpler than planning a live event, but there are some new skills and techniques to learn. The good news is that you, as an event professional, are totally up to the task. If you've felt even the slightest bit of trepidation about digital events, you'll feel confident by the end of this article. I promise.

It's not complicated, but the assumption exists that planning a virtual event is a complex undertaking. As event planners have had to pivot (the official word of 2020), many have told me that they've been nervous about offering digital event planning to their resume. And sure, imposter syndrome is a real challenge to overcome in an ever-changing world, but let's quash that over the next ten minutes, okay?

So let's state this outright. Planning a virtual event is doable. And not only is it doable, but you're someone who can do it. You've got this.

Cheers,

Dean

Co-founder, [ThymeBase Event Planning Software](#)

# The Absolute Basics of Planning A Virtual Event

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Okay, I don't need to tell you, an event planner, about booking speakers and deciding on a date, right? Because in that regard, events are similar, whether held in-person or in pixels. So let's say you've got a couple of speakers lined up, and have decided on a date with your clients.

## Step 1: Registration

The first step is to set up registrations. This, too, isn't wildly different from a typical live event. You need a website where attendees can signup, make a payment, or, at the very least, register. Just because you're not limited by space, or guest counts (or catering budget), doesn't mean you can let this aspect slide. Having guests register will allow you to find sponsors, find more speakers, and ensure that your virtual event software is up to the task.

And when it comes to event registration software, you know the big ones. You've got:

*“Your choice of software is the venue, so choose well.”*

Natasha Russell,

[Natasha Russell Events](#)

- Eventbrite
- Eventzilla
- Bizzabo
- Whova
- Aventri
- Cvent
- And many, many others.

Heck, you could probably even use a Google Form if taking payment isn't required. My vote, to simplify matters, is Eventbrite because it's the most search engine friendly website. So if your event is open to the public, Eventbrite offers the best chance of people stumbling across your event based on the topics and theme.

## Step 2: Pre-Event Engagement

When planning a virtual event, you should be aware of the high rates of no-shows, especially if your ticket prices are low or free. Be prepared for only 30% attendance, and even that is pretty good. So, you might consider charging higher rates to ensure

people show up.

See, many people register for online events to receive a video recap. They want the recording, but won't show up to take part. In the long run, this isn't a big problem, but it can depress engagement during the event. We'll discuss this in more detail later, but what this means, practically, is that you'll want to give registrants a reason to show up for the virtual event when it's happening. But how?

From the moment your event website is live, start your pre-event engagement with the aim of ensuring live attendance. One company I know who does this well by soliciting questions for their panelists in advance with a promise to answer the questions live. Can you think of other ways to add real-time value?

Networking, breakout rooms, and one-on-one sessions with experts are excellent ways to drive real-time attendance. We'll discuss how to do that digitally below. But make sure that registrants know

this will happen, and try and even get commitments from them by booking a 15-minute coffee break with other attendees and even your speakers.

But what tools should you use? Well, most event marketing software solutions include emails. Still, you can just as easily use MailChimp, Mad Mimi, or your email marketing tool of choice.

### Step 3: Reminders

Live events mean travel, hotel bookings, and other substantial commitments. These are lacking for virtual events. So you'll need to be a little bit aggressive in reminding registrants about the upcoming event. I recommend emailing, and even texting reminders to people every week leading up to the date. Then, send out reminders the day before, the morning-of, and one hour before the start. Then send one more when the event begins.

There's one thing to emphasize here. When planning a virtual event, you'll be using technology unfamiliar to your attendees.



*People  
want the  
recording,  
but won't  
show up  
to take  
part*

Your reminders should include detailed instructions on how to interact. Videos walk-throughs, informative documentation, and a special email for questions will be impactful. Make these a part of the reminders.

## Step 4. Post-Event Follow-Ups

Whether your event is live or digital, post-event follow-ups are worthwhile. But when it comes to a virtual event, sending a link to a recording is pretty much expected. The thing is, you don't have to make this "free." You can "gate" it and require an email address to unlock it, or even charge a fee for non-registrants.

The post-event recording is an opportunity unique to online events. Use it for lead gen, marketing, and further sponsor-attendee connections.

Again, use your email tool of choice to send these follow-up emails. And when it comes to hosting, and gating video content, Vimeo and Wistia are excellent video platforms that effectively do this.

*Planning a virtual event means deciding on the right software*

# Planning With Virtual Event Software

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Planning a virtual event means deciding on the right virtual event software. And here's something I want to emphasize. You don't need to use specialized software. I repeat. You do not need to pay for "virtual event software." I'll tell you how to hack together a virtual event using non-event specific tools, but there are pros and cons.

However, be wary. There are a lot of companies marketing themselves as "virtual event platforms" that are anything but. And there's a difference between webinar software and true virtual event software. I'll recommend some legitimate options below.



## The Pros of Virtual Event Software

Using virtual event software that was designed for this purpose often makes life easier. The best virtual event software must offer an easy way for you to:

- Register attendees
- Take payments
- Handle your attendance size
- Offer breakout rooms
- Networking solution
- Expo area (for sponsors)

While you might not need all of that, you should, at the very least, check that your software can somehow facilitate those aspects. And that's where specialized software wins. Virtual event software has met these needs and combined them all into one platform.

## The Cons of Virtual Event Software

The biggest negative is the price. Depending on your event's size, the fees can range from the low hundreds to the thousands. Virtual event software was built for enterprise businesses, and they're priced accordingly.

The second problem is the learning curve. Virtual event software will be new to attendees. It might require them to download new software, navigate an unfamiliar environment, and you won't be an expert either. While most good options out there are relatively user-friendly, I've been in software for over a decade. Nothing is fool-proof or bug-free. So be ready to offer some low-level tech support.

# Virtual Event Software Companies

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Okay, let's look at some players in the virtual event startup space. It's a nascent industry, but already there are some well-developed solutions. However, the COVID-19 shutdown of the events industry has spurred a lot of fast-moving newcomers – some of which are simply repackaged webinar or meeting software. I won't include any lame options here, but this list isn't exhaustive either. So, when you're exploring options, just be sure that the company you choose fits your event's needs and budget.

## Hopin

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Hopin is open for early access and is a virtual venue with multiple interactive areas for connecting and engaging. Attendees can move in and out of rooms just like in-person events and enjoy the content and connections you've created for them. With Hopin, you can attend full-fledged live events, join hands-on sessions, visit expo booths, meet 1-on-1.

I've watched some demos of their platform, and I think it's a great solution.

## YoTribe

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YoTribe, in their own words is “a space where people choose their conversation partners/groups by approaching others – just like in real life.”

Their main differentiator is, in my opinion, the possibilities for networking in a way that's as close to real life as possible. Large gatherings in Zoom or Google Hangouts become crowded and clunky, but YoTribe purports to solve that.

While on the YoTribe platform, each person is represented by a little avatar. By clicking or dragging your mouse, you can move around the room. If you get close enough to someone else, a videochat opens. You can see other people moving around the space and talking to each other, but you cannot hear or see their conversation unless you stand in the small circle around them.

## Run The World

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Run The World is, like Hopin, one of the earlier movers in the virtual events arena. They offer group chats, ticketing and registration, booths, and quite a lot more. They have a pretty cool thing called a video handshake, which seems like a fun networking aspect.

## BigMarker

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BigMarker, like the two above, is a virtual event native. They're all about webinars, virtual conferences, and digital summits. Also, BigMarker is browser-based, with no software downloads required, which is great for your attendees. They also have pretty neat integrations with email marketing, CRMs, and others.

## HeySummit

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HeySummit's marketing language is very centered on the word "summit," but their features appear quite robust. They offer landing pages, registration, reporting, speaker dashboards, and more. Plus, they offer recorded videos as an option too, which I thought was pretty cool. However, as far as I could tell, you do need a Zoom or BigMarker account also for the video streaming.

## GoToWebinar

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It's been a long time since I used GoToWebinar, and I hope they've improved their design. But they've been around a long time, have a robust system and really well-formed features around attendee engagement.

## Bizzabo

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Bizzabo is an event management platform first that has built out virtual and hybrid event tools. They offer polls, surveys, Q&A, landing pages, registration, and all the expected stuff. Where I think Bizzabo shines is in their design. Some other event management software companies have come late to the virtual events game and rushed the design. Bizzabo's features actually look pretty good.

## Whova

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Whova is also event management software that appears to have expanded into virtual conferences. They offer live streaming, video replay, attendee engagement & networking. They're a robust system, but frankly, their design could be improved.

# Non-Event Software

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Now here's the thing about all that virtual event software stuff above. You don't always need it. In fact, with a little ingenuity, you can plan and execute a digital event with tools you already have on hand. You'll need to hack things a bit, but sometimes, that's part of the fun.

[I recently interviewed Ellie](#), the co-founder of a fledgling virtual events agency who mentioned:

*"I think if you want to get multiple people engaging directly with the event, then Zoom is definitely one of the better ones to go for. Google Hangouts works out pretty well. Skype is a pretty good one to hold conferences on, and it's becoming more and more adapted to the ever-changing situation."*

And I similarly spoke to Aliza of [TwoHeads](#), who used Zoom to host a virtual conference for over 100 attendees, with multiple "rooms" and panels. And that's what I'm driving at here. You can plan and host a virtual event without expensive software.

*You can  
plan and  
host a  
virtual  
event  
without  
expensive  
software*

*Pretty  
much  
everyone  
will be  
alright  
with  
Zoom*

# Plan An Event Without Special Software

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Here are some ideas for hosting virtual events without specialized software. I'll use Zoom as the stand-in, but you can substitute Google Meet, Hangouts, Skype, or whatever.

First, keep the event short, somewhere around 3 hours max. You probably will need to keep things somewhat slimmed down, say, two or three “tracks” and a handful of breakout sessions. This keeps things manageable.

Then, it's merely a matter of using multiple Zoom meeting links. For example, if you're hosting two separate tracks, all that really means is two Zoom meetings. You can have a third meeting link for any breakout sessions.

It's a bit clunky, but pretty much everyone will already be comfortable with Zoom, and likely won't have any issues navigating it. The trick to successfully do this is to have a “live” event page, with the schedule, links, and details.



# The Coffee Talk Seminar

Aug 03, 2020 Virtual Event

Time	Duration	Description	Location	Contacts
^ MONDAY, AUG 03, 2020				
> 04:00 pm	15 minutes	Welcome To The Coffee Talk Seminar	Virtual Room 1	John Jackson
> 04:15 pm	45 minutes	Gear Talk: Purchasing The Perfect Home Grinder	Virtual Room 2	Chris Spring
▼ 04:15 pm	45 minutes	Panel: Dialing In The Perfect Espresso	Virtual Room 1	Panel
<b>Description</b> <b>Topic: Dialing In The Perfect Espresso</b> A conversation about the perfect ratio of water to grinds.  <b>Speakers:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>John Jackson</li><li>Alina Kowalski</li><li>Jimmy Hoffman</li></ul> Join Zoom Meeting <a href="https://example.zoom.us/j/55x93438x35118x5454">https://example.zoom.us/j/55x93438x35118x5454</a>			<b>Location</b> Virtual Room 1  <b>Contacts</b> Panel	

ThymeBase's event timeline is an excellent option here. You can share the schedule with attendees in advance, and link to each Zoom meeting clearly and easily. And that landing page is critical – it's the reception area of the event, where attendees can switch Zoom rooms, plan their day and get other information.

# Communicate With Registrants

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When it comes to live events, you need to make sure that attendees know the location's name and address. At the very least, the name will suffice, and Google maps can do the rest. Attendees will assume they'll find their way around, or that they can just ask someone. You can post signs too.

But when it comes to planning a virtual event, you need to be extra-detailed. Because there's no in-person hand-holding, you'll need to ensure that attendees know the details. Send people an email about how to connect, what time it starts, what software is required, and anything else. Then send those details to them again.

I recommend sharing those details as part of their registration confirmation and then sending repeats. Do it a week out, a day out, and on the day of the virtual event. The last thing you want is confused people emailing you (or commenting on your social media) that they don't know how to access your conference.

*You need  
to be  
extra  
detailed*



# Virtual Events Need Tech-Support

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I'm confident that you'll have to field some technical questions. Not everyone is comfortable with new software, and some people won't understand some tech-terminology. So plan for this, and you'll be glad you did.

Here are some tips to ensure attendees feel included, even if they're not very tech-savvy:

Google common troubleshooting questions for the software you're using. You'll be able to share help docs with those who need it. Maybe you'll even add links to these documents in an email or your event website.

Also, avoid using jargon. While most people understand what a browser is, many others don't. I recommend using words like Chrome, Safari, or Microsoft Edge. People will realize that they use Chrome to access the web, even if they don't know that it's

called a browser.

Have alternative ways to access the event. The most common solution is phone call-ins, which Zoom and many others provide. There will always be people who just can't get technology to work, and sound is a common point of failure. So having a phone option allows them to listen in.

## Setting Up A Reception

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I touched on this above in some small ways, but let's dig into the virtual reception in a little more detail. Just like a live conference, attendees need a central location that launches them into the event. The reception is the meeting point, the information booth, and their map. It's where they decide which talks to attend, and how to get there.

So how do you create a virtual reception? Easy! There are actually a few options.

At it's most basic, you can use a ThymeBase shareable timeline like I mentioned above – a simple link

from which people can see the schedule and find the URLs they need.

Virtual event software, like Hopin, or event management software, will help you create a gorgeous reception. It's basically the agenda page of any standard event website. You could create your own reception landing page on your website, or set up a page using Wix or Squarespace.

Others have simply used their registration confirmation email as the source of all information. Still, I'm not a fan of this option. It's too static.

See, things change, and you might need to update a meeting link or other information in real-time. That's why a website (or live timeline) is so useful. Because everyone always has the latest version, and it updates instantly.

One more idea is to use your social media profile for live communication. If you do go this route, my recommendation is a Facebook event page. I'd bet

that every attendee has a Facebook account, and changes will reflect as notifications in people's accounts. Plus, FB Messenger is an excellent customer support tool where you can answer any questions directly.

*No one has truly solved the digital networking problem*

# Networking In Virtual Events

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In my opinion, no one has truly solved the digital networking problem. While some virtual event software has made some pretty good strides, I'm not convinced that it's remotely as impactful as in-person connections. But let's not be downers about it. Let's instead look at what solutions are actually out there.

First, let's get the specialized solutions out the way. Hopin does this better than anyone else that I've seen. They've built out a part of their software specifically for breakout rooms and one-on-one networking. Other virtual event software solutions have invested time and energy into solving this in various ways.

But there's another networking idea: Slack and Discord. If you set up a Slack or Discord for your virtual event, you'll have an awesome chat room where people can break off into topic-based channels. Just think of the possibilities: channels dedicated to the speakers, breakout rooms, or purely networking. And direct messaging means people can go one-on-one.

# Virtual Attendee Engagement Tools

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I think I've spent enough time discussing the virtual [event software](#) solutions. Suffice it to say that almost all of them include the below features. But whether you use special event software or not, consider using these ideas to spur attendee engagement.

Polls, Q&A, and Surveys are all common engagement tactics in both virtual and live events. Virtual events differ because you might want to run the polls, surveys, and solicit questions before the event. With attendance being unreliable in the digital space, pre-event engagement is an effective way to bump up your day-of participation. The idea is that people will show up to hear the speakers address their questions. [Post-event](#), this stuff is identical to live events, and not worth getting into in this already lengthy article.

My favorite non-event software tools for this stuff is Typeform – they do surveys beautifully. Another top solution is SurveyMonkey, but you could just as easily use Google Forms too.

# Common Virtual Event Problems

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I doubt these will come as much of a surprise for you, but it's worth bringing up. Common problems that might occur are:

## Internet Connectivity

You'll absolutely want to make sure your speakers have a good connection and a mobile hotspot backup. For the best results, virtual event planners recommend your speakers plug directly into the router with an ethernet cable. And again, make sure that speakers can call in through a phone number as a last resort.

If bandwidth is a problem, turn off the video and just use audio. That's often the quickest fix.

## Sound Clarity

This one is extraordinarily frustrating when it goes wrong and is often impossible to troubleshoot. I urge you to run a sound-check with every speaker before the event. Common reasons for sound



*If the video is distracting, then it annoys everyone*

problems are poor microphones, crappy Bluetooth connectivity, and the worst of all, incorrect audio settings. The audio settings are the most difficult to solve because your speakers might not know where to look for these settings. Trust me – test and test again.

Watch out for wireless headphones and wireless microphones. One of the most common reasons for sound problems is that a wireless device is connected, but the speaker has forgotten about it. So while they're frantically pounding at the computer, the problem is simply that a nearby device has control of the audio inputs and outputs. My suggestion is to turn off Bluetooth on the computer itself if the speaker is planning to use the computer's mic.

## Video Quality

Viewers have quite a high tolerance for low-quality video, so this one isn't a common issue. But if the video freezes often, or is distressingly out of sync, just turn it off and go audio-only. If the video is distracting, then it annoys everyone.

*Take the  
time to  
learn the  
software*

# Learn The Software

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Trust me – take the time to learn the software. Whether it's Zoom, Google Hangouts, or anything else, invest in exploring every button. You'll want to know how to mute attendees and turn other people's videos off. Also, know where to find the meeting URL and how to invite others.

Make sure that you understand how to give screen sharing access to presenters, how to change hosts, and how to answer chat questions. Plus, if you know the software well, you might be inspired to use some of their features that you otherwise would have missed.

# Marketing Virtual Events

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When planning a virtual event, you'll often also be in charge of [event marketing](#). It's not wildly different from marketing a live event, so I'll keep this high level here.

Read [How To Market Your Event](#) for a more detailed list of marketing ideas.

Apart from the ideas listed in the above article, one very cool idea is to have your speakers contribute to the marketing effort. Because a virtual event has no location, your speakers' social media audience, email subscribers, and LinkedIn followers are often relevant to you. So have your speakers commit to promoting the event to their audience.

[A neat idea suggested to me by Aliza at TwoHeads](#), a video marketing company, is to have your speakers record short videos about their topics.

Work with the various partners and sponsors to share the videos on social media and through email marketing.

The bottom line is that partners and sponsors are your best bet for marketing your virtual event. Of course, other marketing channels include:

- Attendee referrals
- Media & PR
- Paid social media marketing
- Influencer marketing
- Content marketing
- SEO

A special side note for those familiar with search engine optimization and Schema: there's a unique schema for virtual events. [Read more about that here.](#)



# Planning A Virtual Event Is Easy

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No, seriously. I've probably over-complicated it by throwing around so many options and ideas. But whether you're using [event planning software to stay organized](#), winging it entirely with Zoom and emails, or using special virtual event software, it's doable.

You don't need specialized training. You just need a few hours to explore the various options. But there's one thing that was instrumental in my learning process. I attended some virtual events myself. Seeing first-hand how even the simplest of setups was enjoyable, and valuable, boosted my confidence immeasurably.

So go on! And let me know how your first virtual event goes.