

Virtual events bring opportunity for connection amid pandemic

By Trina La Susa

MADISON, Wis. — Virtual cheese and dairy events are growing in popularity as the world continues to grapple with the coronavirus. Fortunately, modern technology has made it possible for companies to host online conferences, meetings and courses as a substitute for in-person events, leading to many benefits for event organizers and attendees alike.

Instead of making cancellations due to the pandemic, virtual events allow interactive gatherings through the internet that are not restricted to a single location. Remote attendees can join and participate from anywhere in the world, given they have access to the web.

HighGround Dairy, The McCully Group and GIRA recently decided to transition their first annual Global Dairy Outlook Conference, “Dairy’s Direction, a 20/20 Perspective,” from an in-person conference in Chicago to a free two-day webinar series June 24-25. The event will cover global dairy market fundamentals impacting prices today and what the market can expect in the future.

“A positive way to look at this is that our market thoughts and educational styles will be available for the entire industry to see around the world,” says Alyssa Badger, director of global operations, HighGround Dairy. “We chose to make the event free and available to anyone that is interested, which means the audience will be far stronger than we would have seen in Chicago next month given capacity restrictions at the Union League Club of Chicago and other obligations that individuals may have had.”

Badger says thanks to having a solid agenda already mapped out for the June event and the hosting organizations’ knowledge of markets, the process of moving the event online has been relatively simple. One challenge, she notes, is that maintaining attendee focus for more than an hour can be difficult, which means they cannot feature the original outside talent that they wanted to provide to customers and attendees.

“Our team had not considered doing something like this before. COVID-19 made the decision for us, and while the personal aspect of networking will be surely missed, our audience will be wider across the supply chain and every continent,” Badger says.

When switching an event to an online experience, Badger recommends running the technology ahead of time to work out any kinks. Additionally, organizers should be sure to transition discussion topics in a timely manner so as not to lose audience interest.

“There is going to be a lot of change in the business world after this pandemic, and creating more online events and educational tools will be a leading advance in this industry,” Badger says. “I think many companies did a great job of scheduling webinars in the past, but we will be sure to fine-tune along the way and create better ways to draw in crowds and provide value to our customers and potential customers.”

American Dairy Products Institute (ADPI) and its conference partner, American Butter Institute (ABI), also are preparing to host their traditional Chicago-based ADPI/ABI Joint Annual Conference via a virtual format July 27-31 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Social distancing is virtually impossible at a direct meeting comprised of more than 1,000 attendees from all over the world, but it is virtually possible using modern technology coupled with innovation and ingenuity,” says Blake Anderson, president and CEO, ADPI. “Health and safety is always our top priority, and by morphing from a direct to a virtual format we can continue to serve our members in a safe and socially responsible way.”

Anderson says the virtual format allows the potential of reaching more people, members and non-members alike, to provide world-class content and greater awareness of the dairy industry’s precompetitive and collaborative approaches to challenges and opportunities.

ADPI and ABI's virtual format will feature live sessions and panels that will last 2 to 2.5 hours per day, allowing more time for attendees to continue with their work schedules and manage the ongoing impacts relative to COVID-19. Registered attendees also will have the opportunity to watch sessions on demand.

"We've designed the conference to deliver world-class content from subject matter experts via virtual and interactive sessions spread over five days, and yet, be respectful of everyone's time so as to ensure all can 'take care of business' related to their work schedules," Anderson adds.

The conference also will feature a "Virtual Exhibit Hall," which will allow exhibitors and attendees to instantly jump into live video/audio conversations straight from the virtual event portal with no additional technology needed.

"We've always been constrained by physical space and time at our 'brick and mortar' venues when it comes to exhibitors," Anderson says. "In the Virtual Exhibit Hall, we are free of those constraints, and it will enable more connectivity between parties virtually and interactively 24/5. This is great for sponsors, exhibitors and conference attendees."

Anderson adds that the virtual format also allows attendees to receive many of the benefits of the ADPI/ABI Joint Annual Conference at a significantly reduced cost when compared to normal travel expenses and registration fees.

Professional Dairy Producers of Wisconsin (PDPW) nearly doubled registration when it was forced to move its annual in-person Business Conference online in March. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the decision to make the Business Conference into a virtual experience was made one week before the event was set to take place.

"As soon as the decision was made, we formed a crisis task force, partnered with Mediasite Events and started connecting with all of our attendees, sponsors and speakers to ensure they knew about the transition and make it as seamless as possible," says Cassandra Strupp, program manager, PDPW.

Strupp says hosting the virtual event had several benefits for PDPW, including increased registration and attendance, new captured online content for future access and education, and support for the global dairy and farming community during the pandemic. However, she notes that virtual meetings cannot compete with in-person connections, and hands-on workshops needed to be sidelined for this platform.

"Going virtual was vastly supported by our members. In years past, our attendance averaged at about 1,400 people," Strupp says. "By going virtual, we actually increased the number of registered attendees to more than 2,300 for our virtual conference. In addition, we continue to host educational content from the event which continues to drive new registrants who are seeking access to the content."

Attendees were able to participate at their convenience by watching and engaging live or at a later time. Strupp says this allowed for viewers to take in more content and learning opportunities than what would have been physically possible with the in-person structure.

"To say virtual meetings will replace in-person ones would be inaccurate. The need for human connection has never been stronger than in the world we have been thrust into," Strupp says. "However, used to our advantage, technology has allowed us to turn an otherwise bleak situation into something positive to reflect on."

"Moving forward, we continue to work with the Mediasite Events team as we look at ways to mesh or hybrid some of our events. Right now we are executing a program three times a week, every week, that is exclusively virtual providing the dairy world with vital information as we continue to navigate through these unprecedented times," she adds.

In addition to meetings and conferences, Cornell Dairy Foods Extension has transitioned some of its dairy education courses from in-person to online, including the Dairy Lab Seminar, Dairy Science and Sanitation, and Preventive Controls for Human Food Qualified Individual, with several

more in development.

“The most important considerations are the amount and type of time that processors have to complete course work — that directly relates to course delivery,” says Louise Felker, program coordinator, Cornell Dairy Foods

Extension. “Some courses which are designed for a new hire or line employee are self-paced, recorded lectures that employees can complete when they are off the line while other courses are live, instructor-led with exercises and group discussion.”

Felker says these online courses allow Cornell to serve a wider geographic audience, since participants are able to join courses from their own locality. Smaller processors, who only have two or three employees, also benefit from online courses since they are able to be at their farmstead operations rather than travel, Felker adds.

Delivering online courses requires additional planning and the ability to anticipate problems participants may have accessing the materials or technology, Felker says.

“Interaction with participants has been wonderful, and we are reaching audiences that don’t typically travel to the university or who may normally send one or two participants and are now enrolling 6-8 employees.” Felker says. “As we look at upcoming workshops, we are adapting courses that have multiple guest speakers and breakout sessions for online delivery. Those types of courses are more challenging to adapt, but with good planning and the willingness to do things differently, anything is possible.”

Felker says organizers at Cornell carefully outline their agendas to make certain they have content, interaction, discussion and assessment, all while keeping accessibility in mind.

“No one yet knows what the future will hold or when participants will have travel restrictions lifted, so it is important to consider how more events can be converted to online delivery,” Felker says. “We will continue to adapt courses for online delivery, both instructor-led and self-paced.”

Felker adds that it is important to consider that not everyone has the same access to computer equipment or technology like consistent internet access. Organizers should consider being more generous with both completion time and increased communication with participants. Events that include a heavy hands-on component take even more planning to be of value to participants — video recordings of processes, detailed narration and opportunities for participants to ask questions are vital, she says.

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