

Tools & Tips for Hosting Virtual Gatherings

Now more than ever it is important to **stay connected ... socially and professionally ...** even as we practice physical distancing in the world of COVID-19.

Here are some tools and tips to help you migrate from in-person contacts to virtual gatherings ... with colleagues, collaborators, and community members as well as with friends and family.

First, it is important to know **who** you want to reach, the **impact** you want to make and **what** you hope to accomplish. Then you can choose the best approach and platform [a few non-endorsed suggestions are listed below] for **how** to virtually engage your community.

PRESENTATIONS & DISCUSSIONS

There are a number of platforms that will allow you to make virtual your awareness and advocacy gatherings, which might feature:

- One-to-many information sessions where you have one (or a few speakers), slides or presentations to share with the wider community
- Interactive sessions where you can screen share or do breakout rooms
- Q&A sessions where participants sign up and can have more interaction with the speakers or presenters
- Community meetings of many different sizes that have multiple speakers and interaction between participants

A few possible platforms include:

Zoom: Zoom is an increasingly popular platform because it is one of the least expensive for some of the biggest perks. There is also a free version. You can sign into the meeting via phone, web browser or download the application. It is minimally “clunky,” meaning people with a variety of broadband availabilities can sign in and generally get a clear connection. Zoom has a number of ideal features:

- Screen share ... that makes it easy to do presentations with slides
- Breakout rooms ... where you can group people randomly or assign them to rooms for smaller conversations
- Chat and raise hand ... this feature makes it easy to interact with the presenter and other participants

Maestro Conference: For more baseline features and integrations, Maestro is a reliable platform, and it has special pricing for non-profits. Maestro also allows participants to call-in via a phone line. Maestro has more interactive tools that come as a part of the product like participant polls, Facebook and Skype integration, data capture (to keep track of who is on the call and for how long), and a staff chat.

WebEx: WebEx has a whole line of products that are more customizable to your organization's needs. This is useful if you have a more specific need that requires more features depending on whether you wish to engage people via meetings, training, webinars, team collaboration, or video support.

Go-to-Meeting / Go-to-Webinar: The most economical option next to Zoom, but with fewer features (no breakout rooms in the cheapest version), it has a great baseline platform that allows up to 150 participants for first tier customers (vs 100 for Zoom).

- **CONFERENCE CALL TIPS**

Call Leader:

1. Have an agenda
2. Get on the call early [5-10 mins early] to work out any glitches and to welcome those who arrive early
3. You're running the call ... act like it
4. Remind people to say their name before they speak ... If multiple people say their names, it is your job to call on someone to start
5. Keep the call moving along and on topic ... Keep the call on time
6. Follow up with notes and action items

Call Participants:

1. Call in on-time ... if not before
2. Put your phone on mute when you are not speaking
3. Unmute your phone when you what to speak
4. If someone said it ... don't just repeat it
5. Sarcasm can be heard through the phone
6. Stay on topic

PUBLIC LIVESTREAM / BROADCAST EVENTS

Public livestreamed events happen on most social media platforms now -- **Facebook Live, Instagram Live, Twitter Live, YouTube Live**. These events usually feature one, sometimes two speakers. You can also host a type of class or activity – even a fundraiser!

Livestream events are great for low-barrier participation as anyone can join YouTube Live, and as long as one has a Facebook, Twitter or Instagram account, they can join these, too.

But these platforms are less helpful if the goal is to build up your audience base over the long-term because you are not able to track participants in the same way you would on conferencing platforms. Choosing which social media platform to use depends on where you have the most active following. Livestreamed videos can also be made available on the broadcast platform afterward the event.

Facebook Watch Parties: Facebook watch parties allows you to watch Facebook Live videos with a group of people in order to share in the experience of watching with others.

There are a number of ways to structure these parties, and you can find helpful info about how to do so [here](https://www.facebook.com/help/1681245065258554?helpref=about_content). https://www.facebook.com/help/1681245065258554?helpref=about_content

Twitter Chat: Twitter chats are live conversations about a specific topic (usually followed through a designated hashtag). It is a helpful tool to engage existing and new audiences. It usually takes place as a Q & A with a host (using a personal handle or an organization's handle) and some panelists. Participants can ask the panelists questions. Here is a guide on how to host a Twitter chat. <https://blog.hootsuite.com/a-step-by-step-guide-to-twitter-chats/>

STORYTELLING PLATFORMS

There are so many platforms to tell stories and get your stories out there to better humanize what it means to have sickle cell disease. The way you choose to tell people's stories depends on the medium (written, video, photo). You can publish stories of survivors and family members in a more curated way or create spaces for people to tell their own stories. Some examples of successful story-telling formats are: [Humans of New York](#), [It Gets Better](#) Project, [Letters from the Future](#), and [Time to Change](#).

A few possible platforms include:

Facebook: A Facebook page or group enables people with similar interests to post their own stories, articles, opinions about a topic. A Facebook page is also a way to curate content and publish stories about people living with sickle cell. (Like Humans of New York. And a Facebook group is a good way to community with like-minded people around a specific topic of interest.

Medium: Medium is a self-publishing platform that allows people to create their own articles or blogs. [Medium Collections](#) also allows editors to bring together a series of stories about a certain topic.

Tumblr: Usually for younger audiences, Tumblr is a social media platform that is based on longer posts (than Twitter's 240 characters) that allows users to share content and help it go viral by "reblogging" post. Consider using Tumblr if you already have a following on the platform or hope to build a consistent, interactive audience.

Instagram: Instagram is also a wonderful platform to use photo or video to tell stories. It has a posting feature as well as an Instastories feature, where photos or videos that are posted will display for 24 hours.

Your organization's website or blog: You can also create a stories collection on your own website. The challenge is often driving traffic to that website and not always the easiest way to engage audiences long-term.

COLLABORATION TOOLS

The following tools are effective ways to engage and sustain highly engaged communities or teams that may support you as you organize your virtual events.

Google Groups: Google groups is an email-based forum that allows a mass group of people to communicate with one another. Anyone in the group can "post" forum topics by sending an email to the google group email address, and others in the group can respond and send information. To learn how to set up a Google Group, [click here. https://groups.google.com/forum/#!overview](https://groups.google.com/forum/#!overview)

Microsoft Teams: Allows teams of any size to chat (one-off or in groups), video conference and collaborate and share Microsoft documents seamlessly. This is a good option if your team primarily uses Microsoft products.

Slack: An increasingly popular internal messaging tool used by organizations large and small. Teams can collaborate around different topics or work streams, and it encourages openness and transparency, as members can see how conversations have evolved over time. For a helpful guide, see the Sunrise Movement's [Slack Guidelines](#) for how they have built an engaged slack community of members and volunteers.

WhatsApp: A universal messaging tool that can be on phone and desktop. WhatsApp groups allow communities to share information and media. It is especially useful for ongoing engagement after the event – a way for people to keep in touch and continue to share resources and experiences. WhatsApp has encrypted messaging, which makes it safer than many other messaging tools. It is, however, owned by Facebook which makes it less trustworthy to activists who may be in higher risk environments.

Signal: An alternative messaging system to WhatsApp, often seen as more secure than WhatsApp. Also available on phone and desktop.

TRAININGS

The following are useful platforms (in addition to the tools above) to hold a training or series of trainings:

Big Marker: This is an all-in-one training platform that allows people to participate in live trainings which can be recorded and put into specific files on the platform, along with handouts, worksheets and other information. This is useful for one training or if you plan to host a series of trainings so all the information is in one place.

WebinarJam: A highly rated and user-friendly platform, designed specifically for webinars with many interactive features. Consider this option if you are hoping to host a mass audience of 2000 or more.

Alternative to a training platform: Use a video conferencing platform + a Google Drive folder to store files, worksheets and recordings.

OTHER IDEAS

Petitions: If you have more of an advocacy strategy, launching an online petition has never been easier. Many organizations have online petitioning applications, most notably [Change.org](#). Others include: [Avaaz](#) and [MoveOn](#).

SMS: To text a number of people at once, there are a ton of tools that can be used to help your organization do more engagement in this way. SMS messaging tools are now being used as an email substitute (or enhancer) to get the word out about an event or action. Here is a guide on free and cheap texting platforms for non-profits.
<https://www.wholewhale.com/tips/free-cheap-mass-texting-nonprofits/>

Google Calendar: While slightly complicated to set up, a community calendar of events can be extremely helpful for crowdsourcing the many events that will be happening in your community and for tracking others around the world!

Streaming Party, Options: Want to hold a more uplifting event that could even possibly double as a fundraiser? Stream an online party! You can do so on any of the livestream platforms. Here's a guide on how to set it up.
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Wv3f6HD5hjOoPuGO64reTxVbkFOXwd7V_D_L4W40_CU/edit#heading=h.iw0q7exm6ipg

IMPORTANT NOTE

The technology platform you choose should depend on your organization's or initiative's capacity to set it up and test it [and for some, maintain it afterwards]. This will take an investment of time, energy, and resources. Your virtual event will only be as good as the preparation work you put into setting up and testing the platform before the hosted event.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Helpful Tips for Hosting Online Meetings: <https://medium.com/journalismthatmatters/tips-for-hosting-online-conversation-306c0451354d>
- Video Conferencing: A great step by step rundown on hosting video conferences [Video Conferencing Etiquette for Everybody](https://www.azureleadership.com/news/2020/3/9/video-conference-etiquette-for-everybody): <https://www.azureleadership.com/news/2020/3/9/video-conference-etiquette-for-everybody>
- Free Self-Paced Course: [Tools and Tactics to Bump Up Your Online Organizing Game](https://courses.socialmovementtechnologies.org/p/top-tools-tactics-to-bump-up-your-online-organizing-game): <https://courses.socialmovementtechnologies.org/p/top-tools-tactics-to-bump-up-your-online-organizing-game>
- [The Stages Of Self Organizing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1jwqgxiqddUIBzbcXY-CYNNwGNsEwgvyMEwQbu_uvdI0/edit): How do we build grassroots, decentralized mass movements that can quickly scale up to address immediate basic needs while fighting for long term social transformation? Find the worksheet [here](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1jwqgxiqddUIBzbcXY-CYNNwGNsEwgvyMEwQbu_uvdI0/edit). https://docs.google.com/document/d/1jwqgxiqddUIBzbcXY-CYNNwGNsEwgvyMEwQbu_uvdI0/edit
- [Decentralized Organizing: An overview](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2740&v=s8tY7BqZ-ag&feature=emb_logo): [00:45 - 1:00] https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2740&v=s8tY7BqZ-ag&feature=emb_logo
- Digital Resources Library: Resources digital strategy and skills [The Digital Plan](https://community.thedigitalplan.com/resources/) <https://community.thedigitalplan.com/resources/>

During this most challenging of times, we wish you safe, engaging, and enlightening connections ... even if virtually.

- Steven
Steven Rivelis, CEO
Campaign Consultation, Inc.
C. 443.253.5444 RivelisSteven@gmail.com
 - Wash hands.
 - Reduce physical proximity.
 - Increase social connections.
 - Support and strengthen the fabric of community.