



Everything We Learned About Hosting a Virtual Event

We took our annual conference online in 2020 - **here's what worked, didn't work, & tips for success**

How do you capture the energy and usefulness of an in-person event, and share some of the magic with hundreds or thousands of people staring at screens?

It's a tough question that we at Higher Logic — along with so many other organizations — were forced to grapple with in 2020.

In February of 2020, we started promoting **Super Forum**, our annual in-person fall conference. Well, you know what happened next. Organizations with decades of experience hosting in-person conferences suddenly had to scramble to create a virtual experience.

Here at Higher Logic, the best part about our annual Super Forum event has always been the way it brings our customers, employees, and partners together in the same place. But when large gatherings were no longer a possibility, we didn't want to sacrifice that feeling of community. We knew it wasn't possible to duplicate the feeling of face-to-face connection. But we firmly believed that virtual engagement could still create an engaging experience for attendees.

Here's the thing: It wasn't easy. Most of our revamped Super Forum was planned in a little over eight weeks. Throughout that experience, we learned some valuable lessons about how to organize an effective virtual conference.

As you plan for your own virtual events this year, we'd like to share a few tactics we picked up from last year's Super Forum experience. We'll share tips you can implement before, during, and after your event — and we'll also offer some words of encouragement to help you stay positive during inevitable challenges.

GET OUR EVENT PLANNING & ENGAGEMENT TIPS

We know firsthand how difficult planning a virtual event and making it engaging can be. For Super Forum, we needed to create a sense of connection among 2,500 attendees hunched in front of their screens, hundreds of miles away from each other.

Here's how we worked to bridge that gap, **by harnessing the power of community.** We hope our Super Forum experiences help you create a virtual event that builds anticipation and excitement, and keeps people buzzing about it, long after the last Zoom session has ended.

Before we talk tactics, let's create a little more context for virtual events. Based on our experience with Super Forum, here's an upside — and downside — that we observed for online conferences.

UPSIDE: IT'S MORE INCLUSIVE

Unlike in-person events, virtual events are accessible to more people. They're not just for your customers who can afford to leave work and pay for a hotel and flight. As a result, your conference can be more enriching by allowing broader attendee perspectives.

DOWNSIDE: YOU'RE COMPETING FOR ATTENTION

For in-person events, attendees are completely immersed in the experience, sometimes for more than 12 hours a day, from the breakfast keynote to cocktail hour. They're away from the office, away from their family. That's not the case with virtual events. There are many distractions, like incoming emails, other household members, or a big pile of laundry in the next room.

You can't expect people to have the same attention span for virtual events vs. in-person. You can't take the content from an in-person event, for example, and expect to cover all of that in a two-day virtual event. That's why we knew we'd have to spread out the format for Super Forum, so we held the 2020 event over two weeks. We did receive feedback suggesting two weeks was too long — next time, we'd probably shorten it to one week, but we're still happy with the decision to spread it out.

BEFORE



DON'T UNDERESTIMATE THE TIME INVOLVED:

Start prepping early, says Alex Mastrianni, Product Marketing Manager at Higher Logic. “It’s so much more work than you might originally anticipate,” she says. “It can’t be overstated. Although it’s virtual, it doesn’t mean it’s less work. Even though you aren’t handling some of the in-person hurdles – like food and beverage, room assignments, etc. – there are a whole different set of challenges you face with virtual events.”



INVOLVE PLENTY OF COLLEAGUES IN PLANNING:

“There was a core working group that probably didn’t sleep for a couple weeks, in order to get everything done,” says Shannon Emery, our Higher Logic Community Manager. “If we did our 2020 planning over again, we’d bring in more people to assist and give them specific roles and responsibilities. Consider the stuff you need to do, who needs to get involved, and how they can help with specific tasks. That doesn’t mean you need to pull everyone into the planning process from beginning to end but having more hands to help is a good thing. For example, we started to plan in-person Super Forum in February and didn’t need to enlist the help of some employees until the summer. At that point, they were able to confirm we were allocating the right resources – but it would have been inefficient to involve them in the whole planning process.”



PROVIDE TRAINING FOR YOUR SPEAKERS AND SESSION LEADERS—NOT JUST FOR TECHNICAL STUFF:

If your speakers feel relaxed and confident, that affects how your virtual audience will feel and react. Training can help with that. You want your speakers to be prepared and secure so they can focus on being authentic and relatable. To that end, we provided detailed guidelines for speakers, and conducted prep calls for speakers and session leaders. The point of training is not just to highlight technical aspects, like how to record on Zoom. We also provided speakers with tips for how to make everybody feel welcome, how to strike up a conversation and create engagement if nobody's talking, and how to guide attendees to the community after the session ends.



BUILD EXCITEMENT FOR THE EVENT WITHIN YOUR ONLINE COMMUNITY:

Because our customers have access to the Higher Logic User Group (HUG) all year round, online engagement is natural for them. We created a virtual environment for our virtual event, based on our own community setup, and launched it prior to the event. This allowed people to talk about sessions and speakers they were excited about and drop in questions they had in advance.



TIP: PERSONALIZE ATTENDEES' EXPERIENCE BY APPEALING TO THEIR TASTE BUDS

This is an idea we've seen at other events. At in-person conferences, attendees usually enjoy complimentary food and beverages throughout the day. You can bring a bit of that to their virtual experience — for example, ask about their snack preferences and have some treats delivered right before the conference kicks off. Or email a Starbucks gift card to attendees about an hour before the keynote begins, as a cue to grab a cup of coffee and settle in to listen.

DURING



WARM UP THE CROWD:

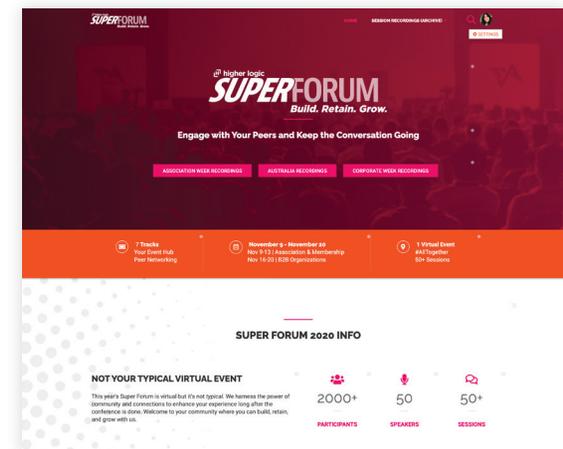
Have someone be the “social chair” of a session to welcome people in the chat. This way, you create more energy among attendees, instead of just having the moderator say, “Good morning, here are a few words about our speaker, and now she’s going to get started with the presentation.” It helps to have someone in chat saying, “Where is everybody calling from? Put your questions in here.” The goal is to get people talking and create enthusiasm and a feeling of connection. Otherwise you’ll end up with a session where people tune out after a few minutes and start checking email and their social media feeds. Another idea is to try playing fun or energetic music before keynote sessions to get the crowd excited.



GIVE THEM A PLACE TO LEARN MORE:

When attendees feel excited about a topic, they appreciate having an easy way to find the information covered in a session. At the end of each Super Forum session, we directed people to the event community to find resources like slides and recordings.

Our event engagement solution gives your attendees, sponsors, and staff a dedicated digital home where they can join tracks, ask questions, and access resources. **Want to meet our Event Engagement solution? [Find it here](#)**





POPULAR WITH ATTENDEES: ONE-ON-ONE, 30-MINUTE VIRTUAL MEETINGS WITH OUR SUPPORT STAFF.

We've done this for years at our in-person Super Forum events, and we decided to bring that experience online. Attendees see a lot of value in having a half-hour block of time where they can get help with some of their burning questions.



...AND THE NOT-SO-POPULAR: NETWORKING OVERLOAD.

We tried quite few methods for connecting attendees during Super Forum (virtual coffees, bingo games, topic pods). After the fact, we realized attendees probably had too many options to choose from. Next time, we'll probably limit the opportunities to one or two in addition to the online event community - and we'll communicate early and clearly about what networking opportunities are available, what the formats mean, and where to sign up.



AFTER



KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING:

Because the format of our virtual event was on-demand, attendees could just go to the community if they missed something and watch sessions after the conference was over. We were excited to see how many people would go to the community days after the session had been live — because they watched the recording and they had questions about the content. The conference speakers joined the discussion and answered those questions. That kind of interaction, days after the conference ended, is one of the beauties of a virtual or hybrid event.

OUR MOST IMPORTANT TIP: YOU MAY HAVE HICCUPS - DON'T PANIC.

Consider putting that one on a sticky note by your computer or embroidering it on a throw pillow. We are speaking from experience here: No amount of planning will allow you to host a flawless event, virtual or otherwise. “Things will always pop up that you didn’t anticipate,” says Alex.

Have a back-up plan, but know that something at some point will go wrong, and it’s okay. People aren’t looking for the glossy sheen of perfection. Your event can be a little rough around the edges at times. In fact, it may be preferable. Your attendees want useful information, but they’re also craving something genuine. Without that quality, engagement and meaningful connection won’t happen easily. Says Alex: “At the end of the day, it’s important to be real and honest rather than expect a flawless show. It’s all about being human and relatable and how you handle challenges.”

Want to meet Higher Logic and hear more about our event engagement solution?

LET’S CONNECT