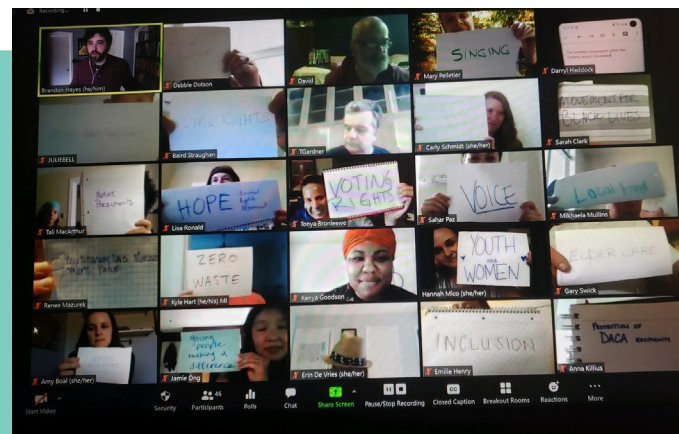
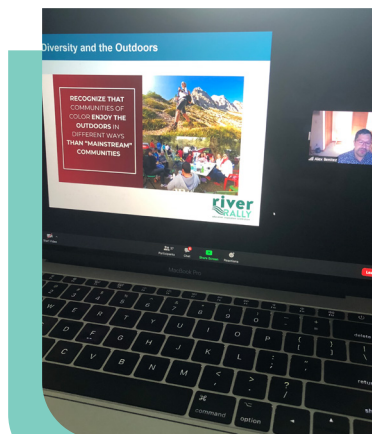


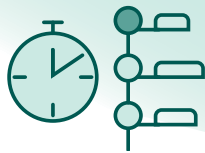
# HOSTING VIRTUAL EVENTS

## TIPS & INSIGHTS FROM VIRTUAL RIVER RALLY

Connecting people is a key element of how River Network and groups across the national network of water protectors carry out our missions. In 2020, COVID-19 forced many of us to move our long-planned meetings and conferences to a virtual space, introducing a steep learning curve to figure out how to plan and host digital events that are inclusive, engaging, and impactful.

We learned a great deal through planning and hosting Virtual River Rally 2020, a three-week long virtual conference that attracted over 500 participants. While your event will likely look different than ours, and there are many resources emerging in this space, we hope these recommendations and lessons learned can assist other groups in decision making, event and conference planning, and ensuring inclusion across digital programs.





# THE PLANNING PROCESS



## Identify Your Audience

**Start with a survey!** We highly recommend taking the time to learn what your audience is looking for in a conference and what additional social opportunities would be useful to them. Ask about their capacity to participate in a virtual conference, which will inform the length and time of day of the event, the frequency of live events, and the balance of live versus pre-recorded content.



## Define Your Goals

**Are you looking to create an event as similar to your in-person event as possible?** Do you want participants to interact with each other in unstructured ways? Different platforms and technology tools may be better suited for you depending on these needs.

**How much time and capacity do you have?** Do you need more planning time depending on what you hope to accomplish? Activities like presenter preparation, sponsor outreach and engagement, program development, and marketing and promotion may take more time than you anticipate.

**Consider what types of sessions you want to host:** pre-recorded sessions, live sessions where participants can ask the speakers questions in real time, live sessions where participants can interact with one another, etc. Make sure your virtual conference platform supports the sessions you plan to host.



## Prepare Your Staff

**Be clear about roles and responsibilities for staff, both in the planning and program development processes and during the live event.** This is likely new territory for everybody. Ensure staff have the support they need to prevent burnout.

**Where staff capacity and knowledge is insufficient, consider what kind of outside help you need.** What skills (technology, meeting facilitation, marketing, online engagement) do you need to support staff and carry out this event?



# TECHNOLOGY & BUDGET

**Your meeting and conference platforms are incredibly important as they will define the experience for attendees. Below are ideas to consider as you begin planning your virtual event.**



## Meeting Software

**Consider your meeting software (i.e. Zoom, Hangouts, Teams, etc.) your primary tool.** All other technology serves to organize these meetings. Don't overcomplicate if unnecessary!

**Overestimate the number of participants per session** to be sure your meeting software will accommodate all who want to participate. For example, River Network upgraded our Zoom account to accommodate more than 100 meeting participants.

**As you select your meeting software, consider accessibility for hearing and visually impaired.**

**Determine whether or not you will need a separate platform to help organize the workshop schedule, promote sponsors, and manage discussion boards or chat rooms.** If you decide a third party platform will be critical, record a video tutorial to introduce attendees to the platform and explain how it works.



## Budgeting

**Start by outlining the technical components** that are absolutely necessary for your event.

**Consider the cost of the most important components:** your meeting software (Zoom, Hangouts, Teams, etc.) and your speakers (if bringing in external presenters).

**Will you need help implementing or customizing your software?** Consider the cost of contractors.

**Do you need a virtual conference platform to organize multiple meetings and events?** Evaluate a range of options to find the best technology solution for your specific needs.

**When the total cost of the virtual event is laid out,** estimate attendance and set a registration fee to counterbalance expenses.



## Additional Support

**You may recognize that existing staff knowledge and expertise is insufficient and decide to hire a contractor to support new technologies.** Ask candidates whether they have prior experience with the technologies you plan to implement and clearly outline what support you need from them.

**Consider how you might support or continue conversations and networking following each session,** such as a conference chat room, Facebook group, listserv, or other communication tool.



# LAUNCHING AND IMPLEMENTING THE EVENT



## Marketing & Communications

**Don't try to do too much in terms of promotional engagement, and know your audience/what they respond to and participate in.** Your audience survey can help you determine whether or not you should include interactive components like photo contests, virtual bingo, or others.

**Determine the best method and frequency to communicate with your participants about daily activities.** Should you plan to send daily or every other day emails? Does your third party platform allow interactivity?

**Investigate whether using social media platforms for your program participants will provide additional opportunities to engage and connect.**

**Typically your in person event would have a photographer or a staff person responsible for capturing some highlights from your event.** With permission from your audience, you can take screenshots of participants that allow you to see the majority of attendees' faces (in the Zoom, this is called "gallery view"). Use these photos in your communications to encourage others to keep their videos on!



## Speakers & Scheduling

### Preparing Presenters

**Additional time is required to adapt in-person workshops for a virtual format and to get presenters familiar with any new technology.** Be prepared with suggestions and ideas for adaptation and remain open to ideas from presenters.

**Virtual River Rally included both live and recorded sessions, and each required a different preparation process and unique elements of presenter support.**

- **Live Sessions:** we set up planning sessions with all live presenters, averaging about two hours in length. During this time, we went over session design, ways to make virtual sessions interactive, use of the technology and coordination on preparing slides. Live sessions were 90 minutes in length.
- **Recorded Sessions:** once presenters had their presentation materials ready, most simply required a 60-90 minute meeting during which we went over the Zoom platform and recorded their session. Recorded sessions were 20-45 minutes in length.

### Facilitating Content

**We had at least one host and one co-host from River Network present for each live session, and others "on call" if needed.** One person facilitated the conversations and introduced the presenters, while the other launched polls, created breakout rooms, monitored the chat box, etc.

**During breakout rooms, consider using additional interactive components** like Zoom whiteboards or Google Docs that allow participants to write notes and then share with the rest of the group.

## Scheduling Content

**Avoid scheduling content during the same time slots** so attendees don't have to choose one presentation over another.

**Your audience survey should determine how long your conference will be** and how many hours out of a given day your audience will have the capacity to participate in.

**Keep the timezone of your audience in mind:** are you going to have nationwide organizations joining? If so, you may want to start later in the day so all your organizations can participate in the live content.

**Will you have multiple themes represented in your content?** If so, you may want to promote "a theme a day."

**Live sessions during Virtual River Rally were 90 minutes long, but did not always accommodate the time needed for interactive features** (i.e. breakout rooms were sometimes cut short). Wrap-up time after a discussion was also cut short or eliminated from the agenda.

**Consider "Zoom fatigue" when developing your schedule.** A good rule of thumb is to build in a 30-minute break between every 90 minutes of content. For a 90 minute session, include breathing or stretching exercises to break up the presentation and allow participants a moment to ground themselves.



## Sponsors

**Consider how you will thank and promote your sponsors** and how your participants can be made aware of who helped make your event possible.

**Think about where and how you can engage your sponsors in more active roles if possible,** and if this feels like a natural extension of your relationship.



## Educational & Social Programming

**According to Virtual River Rally evaluations, our highest quality workshop sessions utilized multiple interactivity tools, including polls, breakout rooms, whiteboards, sharing out, etc.** Make sure you encourage your presenters to incorporate interactive components into presentations.

**With breakout rooms, we noticed that sessions that announced breakout rooms in the first 10–15 minutes, had higher overall attendance and engagement.** Workshops that announced breakout rooms after 30 minutes saw a steep drop-off in attendance.

**We hosted two award celebrations during River Rally and streamed both on Facebook Live.** This allowed awardees' friends and family to participate in the ceremony and allowed for additional engagement with non-Rally attendees.

**Informal networking has always been a River Rally highlight.** We offered peer calls for a more professional, topic-based networking opportunity in the afternoons, and open social opportunities in the evenings. The peer calls were much better attended, though participants from all events indicated increased connection with peers. Determine your audience's needs and interests in your survey.



# POST EVENT



## Communications

**Thank everyone!** If you plan to continue access to your content post-event, have a plan for how to highlight your library of content to keep folks engaged.

**Allow participants opportunities for post-event connection** and follow up either through continued virtual events, social media, or online community development.



## Evaluations

**Consider what actionable feedback you want to collect** from attendees and how you can develop questions to inform and improve future virtual events.

**If you have a multi-day event, consider including individual evaluations for each session as well as one overall event evaluation.** We had more evaluation responses when we shared the session evaluations in the chat box before a given session ended, than from post-event emails.

**Evaluations can also be done during the presentation itself.** Zoom polls or Q&As allow attendees to share anonymous feedback in real time.



## Leveraging Recorded Content

**Virtual River Rally attendees expressed appreciation** that recorded content would be available for 90 days after live content concluded.

**Consider opportunities** (with presenter permission) to use the recorded content to promote your organization in fundraising and membership, or when promoting your next event.