<u>Planning Virtual Meetings and Conferences</u>

Coffee/Lunch Roundtable (8.12.2020)

Chat Box Discussion Notes

<u>Online Resources Shared</u>:

- [Hosting Virtual Events](#) (River Network publication)
- [Virtual River Rally-Making Your Live Session Interactive](#) (video)
- [Virtual River Rally-Recording Your Session with Zoom](#) (video)
- [Training for Change: Leading Groups Online](#) (publication)
- [Virtual Software Comparisons](#) (resource shared by a roundtable participant)

<u>Section One: Planning a Virtual Event/Conference:</u>

1. **Question:** What third party platforms did River Network explore (Note: Hopin was a popular choice for many)?
   Answers:
   - River Network explored a variety of options but ultimately went with vConference - we weren't entirely happy with it.
   - Kiko Barr from California Association of Resource Conservation Districts shared [this document](#) where they have compiled their research of different platforms.
   - Another participation shared their experience here: "I just contracted with Voice Thread as a platform for users to record lightning talks, upload posters and host interactive discussions related to uploaded media for a GLEON virtual meeting. It has a Zoom integration, if needed, to post content from concurrent sessions back to the Thread Box (or you can just do it manually). They provide price quotes, but for our meeting of 250 media users (unlimited participants) is $999 for set up and $2 per user who need to upload media files ($500 for 250 presenters): [https://voicethread.com"](https://voicethread.com)

2. **Question:** (Related to River Network's experience broadcasting films during our 3-week Virtual River Rally event.) How did you broadcast the films?
   Answer: Films were provided by the [Wild & Scenic Film Festival](#), one of our sponsors. They provided us with password-protected Vimeo links to each film program. The Vimeo links and passwords were provided to conference attendees at a pre-designated time and the films remained available for 5 days following each film night.

3. **Question:** Were registrant credentials built into conference platform? Did you send out emails with the Zoom link? And did you have any issues between managing Zoom meetings vs Zoom webinars?
   Answer: We had attendees register through our website (a version of our donation form) and sent attendees their login credentials the day before Rally began. This worked well because we didn't need to implement and learn a new payment processor ahead of Rally. We encouraged attendees to join live sessions (either meetings or webinars) via the conference platform to limit security risk. Links were only provided in the conference platform. Linking out to either a Zoom webinar or meeting worked the same way and we didn't have any issues.

4. **Question:** Would "miscellaneous engagement" be different than scheduled activities like happy hour or film viewing?
   Answer: Yes, by "miscellaneous engagement" we mean ways for people to engage outside of scheduled workshops and social events. This included photo contests, Rally bingo, virtual litter pickup contests and a virtual birding activity.

5. **Question:** Did you consider any kind of virtual/mobile tours as part of Virtual River Rally?
   Answer: Yes, but the virtual tour didn't come together in time.

6. **Question:** Did you prefer Zoom Webinar or Zoom Meeting format?
   Answer: Each has its strengths and weaknesses; it really depends on what level of interactivity you want to encourage. Zoom Webinars don't allow for breakout groups; whereas the meeting format does. Webinars allow you to send reminder e-mails and ask questions of your registrants, Meetings don't. We used Webinars for panels and Meetings for workshops and peer calls.

7. **Question:** Based on your experience with Zoom fatigue, how long should gaps be between sessions?
   Answer: Virtual fatigue was real! Participation dropped off from one week to the next, around 20% from week to week. The justification for our decision to

spread the program over 3-weeks was related to our 6 themes and assigning staff to each theme – in retrospect, the 3-week length was too long and difficult to deliver on with our staff capacity. Our rule of thumb is to include at least a 20-30-minute break per 90 minutes of content. If you are doing a one-day event, you would want to factor in at least 5 breaks, varying in length for folks to walk away from the computer, grab food, decompress, etc. We have heard of a virtual conference that is incorporating one session block for "walking sessions" - or workshops that don't include visuals and can be joined via phone while taking a walk.

Crowdsourced Wisdom from Planning Virtual Events/Conferences - The following statements or ideas were shared by our participants and relate to the question: *What other elements of planning virtual events have you found helpful?*

- Regarding Virtual River Rally, participants from the Roundtable who had attended Rally appreciated the following:
    - The breakout chats in the lectures really helped with networking and connection
    - I really enjoyed how interactive the River Rally sessions were. In all the breakouts I went to, presenters used the chat, polls and breakout sessions to get us involved.
    - I liked visiting the Exhibit Room!
- Polls, breakout rooms, etc.
- Use Slack or other IM for staff/backstage chatter
- Ask people how they want to engage virtually- do they prefer pre-recorded, break out rooms, webinar format with just a question box, etc.
- I think this is a brilliant insight: "Keep your audience so engaged in your session that they don't have time to multitask."
- Knowing ahead of time the level of engagement expected for participants. (Are there breakout sessions? Will we need to be prepared for that?)
- Ground rules/meeting expectations are a good way to address the focus issue head on - set a group expectation around being "present" and not multi-tasking.

Section II. Finances/Sponsorship

1. **Question**: How did you determine conference "worth" i.e. registration cost?
   Answer: In setting the registration cost, we looked at a few things:
   a. Online conference cost norms: what are other entities charging for comparable multi-day virtual conferences?

b. Original cost for our in-person event: What value did we maintain in the virtual space? What value did we lose? What new value did we gain by going virtual?

c. What was the total budget of the virtual conference, and what did we need to bring in to offset expenses?

2. **Question**: What was the most valued benefit for your sponsors during the virtual conference?
   Answer: We did not survey our sponsors. Sponsors were, overall, very impressed by River Network's commitment to move the conference to a virtual format and wanted to support that. Anecdotally, we received good, strong feedback on our sponsor booths. Sponsors also expressed their enjoyment of the conference, with many attending who would have otherwise not attended if it were in person.

3. **Question**: How much did you reduce your registration costs by?
   Answer: We reduced our pricing from $899 (full conference, in-person) to $279 for non-members. For premium members, we reduced the cost from $498 to $199, and even further for workshop presenters.

4. **Question**: Overall, was hosting a virtual event more/less experience than hosting an in-person Rally?
   Answer: Virtual River Rally was cheaper, however our revenue reduced as well, with some lost expected sponsorship and registration revenue. Overall, our net revenue gain was largely unchanged from the original target.

Crowd Source Wisdom: *What are other ways to acknowledge or engage sponsors?*

- Giving them time during a "commercial break" to talk about their services?
- Putting it on the schedule as a set time for a specific sponsor seems like a clever approach.
- They can also sponsor a networking session / happy hour for extra recognition

Section Three: Implementing the Event

1. **Question**: How do you engage people in Happy Hours and Social Events?
   Answer: River Network wasn't very successful at getting people to engage in evening happy hours (the people who did attend were wonderful and fully present!), but the "peer calls" during Rally served as a kind of networking

space. The key here is to ask how people want to network & provide the opportunities for them!

2. **Question**: What is a Peer Call?
   Answer: A "peer call" is more of an open discussion with short "framing" presentations from a few attendees/hosts and lots of breakout groups to foster peer discussion!

Crowd Source Information: *Share your tips for building interactivity into virtual sessions & events*

- Regarding Virtual River Rally: I really valued the breakout chats during Peer Calls and Lectures. Those provided opportunities to learn from and network with other groups around the US. One of my favorite pieces. I did love having the ability to also go back to the on-demand to review anything I missed. Something that is not normally able to happen during a "normal" Rally when we have to simply choose our highest priority session to attend. So we were able to get the best of both worlds while being able to afford attending during a tough year. Definitely blessings in disguise.
- To combat Zoom fatigue, we are planning to do nature breaks, encourage attendees to go outside. Also, format some content as audio only (like a podcast) and encourage folks to take a walk and listen
- I loved when a speaker would challenge us to share something about ourselves that had nothing to do with Water- it made us all feel more human and multi-dimensional
- I think it might be helpful to invite participants- especially those interested in building partnerships- to give a 5-minute presentation on their project ideas and share their contact information for those interested in working on the project to get involved.

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