

# 4 Ways to Promote Diversity & Inclusion with Virtual & Hybrid Events

As companies strive to foster respect for all individuals, those embracing digital events are positively impacting customer and employee engagement, while strengthening brand and corporate culture.



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Diversity and inclusion (D&I) can be explained with a helpful analogy: “Imagine you are invited to a celebration. ‘Diversity’ is receiving an invitation to the party, while ‘inclusion’ is feeling comfortable attending and empowered to fully participate.”<sup>1</sup>

D&I policies in the business world help showcase different perspectives across race, gender, and lifestyles, leading to creativity and innovation. They foster greater respect for individual differences, increase customer loyalty and employee engagement, and serve to positively impact corporate culture.<sup>2</sup>

Incorporating D&I initiatives into your event strategy can deliver many of the same business benefits, increasing the perceived value of the event by attendees and sponsors. So why are 61% of event professionals still struggling to successfully foster diversity and inclusion at events? According to a recent MPI study, the majority of these respondents cite a lack of information, followed by an insufficient budget to plan inclusive event experiences.<sup>3</sup>

This guide seeks to address these issues by informing event organizers and marketers of how webinar and event technology solves for diversity and inclusion, specifically through hybrid and virtual events. In addition to cost savings, these event formats provide benefits such as attendee safety, increased reach, advanced data collection, and targeted marketing opportunities — supporting the overall goal of delivering a positive impact to underserved groups and your business.

## In-Person Events Come With Safety Concerns

Fifty-five percent of event organizers report that safety is their biggest obstacle.<sup>4</sup> There’s no doubt that the global pandemic has significantly impacted this statistic as attendees and organizers fear the potential of contracting and spreading COVID-19 — especially as mask restrictions lift. Eventgoers must also navigate local public health policies and airline travel restrictions, including testing requirements and mandatory quarantine timeframes, all of which can complicate in-person attendance.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://blog.pcnametag.com/how-to-make-events-inclusive>

<sup>2</sup> <https://joshbersin.com/2015/12/why-diversity-and-inclusion-will-be-a-top-priority-for-2016/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.mpi.org/docs/default-source/academy/inclusion-report-final.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://meetings.skift.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/SOEI2021-v3-1.pdf>

In addition to health concerns, natural disasters are also on the list of safety concerns preventing many from traveling. Eleven percent of American travelers say that natural events, hazards, or disasters have impacted their travel in some way in the past year, with the most common being wildfires, heatwaves, floods, and winter storms.<sup>5</sup> Weather was also one of only two areas to see significant increases in risk from 2019-2021, as perceived by respondents to a Gallup World Risk Poll.<sup>6</sup>

## **Virtual and Hybrid Events Allow for Increased Attendee Safety**

Virtual and hybrid events promote inclusion by allowing more attendees to feel comfortable about the event and by empowering them to participate fully. Incorporating hybrid and virtual events into your event or marketing strategy will reduce health risks since immunocompromised or concerned attendees can enjoy your event online from the comfort of their homes or offices. And barring a significant natural disaster or weather event in the attendee's hometown, safety becomes a non-issue for those who can log in remotely. Additionally, today's webinar and event technology enable participants to have a virtual experience comparable or complementary to a physical event.

## **In-Person Events Present Barriers to Attendance**

Face-to-face events offer valuable and memorable experiences for attendees, but they don't come without costs. A common barrier is, of course, the expense. A typical trade show attendee can easily spend a few thousand dollars between airfare, lodging, meals, event registration, and activities. When multiplying that cost by several employees, travel to in-person events can quickly become prohibitive for many companies.

Arranging childcare is also a hurdle but necessary for many working adults who attend trade shows, retreats, or other in-person gatherings. However, this can be complicated when both adults work and juggle priorities. The challenge is amplified as a single mother without a partner at home to care for the children. Childcare becomes an additional expense; in some cases, unwillingness to leave very young children with a sitter is a source of stress.

Lastly, some professionals may have to forgo travel due to time restrictions and competing priorities at work. A trip from the east coast to the west can eat half a day or more easily, leaving less time to complete important work. Similarly, attendees who work a full-time job but aspire to

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.hotelnewsresource.com/article122899.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbeshumanresourcescouncil/2022/09/27/the-impact-of-natural-disasters-on-your-workforce-and-how-to-prepare/?sh=6b125c4f3d2b>

change industries or start a business may not have accrued enough personal time off to make the journey to an in-person training.

## Virtual and Hybrid Events Help Remove Barriers to Attendance

Offering a fully-digital format or a digital option instead of an in-person experience can support inclusion by eliminating the above-mentioned problems. Costs are significantly minimized without a travel component, and time that would otherwise be spent commuting can now be dedicated to other tasks. Given the costs for organizers is also low, about 80% of virtual events are free.<sup>7</sup> And since most virtual or hybrid events typically follow a regular workday schedule, families do not have to make special childcare arrangements or choose between work and personal lives.

## In-Person Events Have Struggled to Embrace Diversity

Although the events industry has made strides toward implementing diversity policies, there is still work to do. From gender and race to age and professional level, opportunities exist for event professionals to choose diverse speakers and attract a variety of attendees.

Consider the following statistics and survey results:

- Sixty-nine percent of all event speakers globally are male.<sup>8</sup>
- Introverts and those with disabilities are the least-served groups in the events industry, while those who are extroverted or male are the groups that are best served.<sup>9</sup>
- When asked to answer “most of the time,” “half the time,” or “rarely,” it was found that event professionals *rarely* offer event materials in other languages, provide designated nursing mother spaces, or include registration fields to denote if an attendee will require a personal attendant.<sup>10</sup>

## Virtual and Hybrid Events Support Diversity

Virtual and hybrid events could be considered the unsung heroes of the events industry for their ability to support diversity and inclusion efforts. Just as the internet decentralized access to information and promoted shared knowledge, virtual and hybrid events level the playing field to provide equal attendance opportunities for groups of all types.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://welcome.bizzabo.com/reports/evolution-of-events-report>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.bizzabo.com/blog/event-gender-diversity-study/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.mpi.org/docs/default-source/academy/inclusion-report-final.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

Virtual events offer affordable training options — promoting upskilling across all professional levels. And instead of always sending in the most seasoned speakers, emerging speakers have more chances to rehearse their presentations and nurture their talents through online events. Plus, in the case of those with a disability or illness where travel would be difficult or impossible, virtual and hybrid events allow these individuals to participate fully.

As evidence, here are some conclusions from a study supported by multiple U.S. universities that compared in-person STEM conference attendance versus virtual event attendance:

- Virtual conferences broadened reach, participation, and engagement. Attendance by students at all levels of academia, as well as post-doctoral scholars, increased by as much as 344%.<sup>11</sup>
- Women’s participation in virtual conferences increased by as much as 253% compared to previous in-person conferences.
- The Harvard Business Review published an article in 2020 on the impact of virtual conference formats in the medical industry, noting that, “Learners may in fact be more engaged than they might have been at an in-person meeting because of the available interactive chat and Q&A functions. In years past, younger surgeons and those with language barriers have often been more reluctant than others to come to the microphone in a large auditorium, but this year they frequently engaged in the online discussion during presentations.”<sup>12</sup>

## **Advanced Event Tech Supports Successful Online Events**

Launching a successful online event is highly dependent on the underlying technology used for its execution. High-value and engaging virtual events that account for diversity and inclusion require more than a basic online conference tool. Advanced event tech platforms offer a host of features and benefits for attendees and organizers — delivering increased customer satisfaction and richer data for more strategic marketing.

### **Here are a few of these features and benefits:**

On-Demand Access: Attendees won’t have to miss out on sessions that occur simultaneously with on-demand access to session recordings and event materials. Likewise, attendees who have to step away for medical or religious reasons can pick up where they left off. Just these two features help maximize the event’s value.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://viterbischool.usc.edu/news/2021/12/can-virtual-academic-conferences-makes-stem-fields-more-inclusive/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://hbr.org/2020/12/reimagining-medical-conferences-for-a-virtual-setting>

**Personal Connection:** Virtual attendance offers unique methods to connect, such as AI-driven matchmaking for networking — promoting diversity by pairing individuals who might not otherwise meet. Additionally, chat, polls, and Q&A functionality can increase attendee engagement with the brand.

**Rich Data for Event Organizers and Marketers:** Cutting-edge event platforms can collect valuable attendee data, such as who downloads handouts or clicks on an offer, what sessions are most watched, and those that are the least viewed, plus the ability to send survey questions for feedback. This technology can also enhance the in-person experience and deliver useful data. For example, a custom mobile app can be used at the in-person portion of a hybrid event to help attendees plan their day, while organizers can track check-ins and the flow of booth traffic. This data is automatically sent to a marketing automation tool or CRM to build targeted follow-up campaigns that speak to an individual group's needs.

**Expanded Sponsorship Options:** Additional sponsorship opportunities for the online portion of the event can get advertisers in front of a larger audience — think digital banners, virtual booths, or sponsored online networking. These options help sponsors maximize their return on investment while providing access to concrete performance metrics and detailed attendee profiles.

## **The Impact of Hybrid and Virtual Events on Diversity and Inclusion**

In the past, in-person events may have accounted for accessible parking, wheelchair ramps, speaker diversity, or considerations for religious holidays. Today's marketers and event planners can provide even greater accommodations for their attendees by offering hybrid and virtual events that deliver diversity and inclusion and benefits such as safety, increased reach, and advanced martech capabilities through rich data collection. With the right event tech in place, D&I efforts can be incorporated organically at an affordable cost, while simultaneously creating a positive experience for underserved groups and positive results for your business.

### **About BigMarker**

BigMarker is the webinar, virtual and hybrid events platform rated #1 in customer satisfaction. Founded in 2010, we pioneered live video on the web. Today, we host over 3 million events per year, powering digital event experiences for some of the world's most innovative companies, including more than half of the Fortune 500. For more information or a live demonstration, please email us at [sales@bigmarker.com](mailto:sales@bigmarker.com).