

How Marketers Can Adapt to Event Cancellations Brought on by Coronavirus

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In-person events are a cornerstone touchpoint for many B2B companies, but as [the outbreak of the newest strain of the coronavirus progresses worldwide](#), major business events have been canceled or postponed. This will come at great cost to marketing budgets and can have a lasting impact on revenues and sales.

Recode reported that “the direct economic loss” from these canceled events will surpass \$500 million, citing data from PredictHQ. And new research from [Demand Gen Report](#) shows that in-person events are crucial to many B2B companies’ business: More than half of US B2B marketers said that in-person events and tradeshow were an effective channel for driving conversions. Events were seen as more effective than digital channels like email (48%), product demos (39%) and the company website (34%).

Effective Channels for Driving Engagements vs. Conversions According to US B2B Marketers, Jan 2020

% of respondents

Engagement	
Email	49%
Website	47%
In-person events/trade shows	39%
Search	27%
Social	25%
Conversions	
In-person events/trade shows	53%
Email	48%
Phone	48%
Product demos	39%
Website	34%

Source: Demand Gen Report (DGR), "Demand Generation Benchmark Study: Quality Over Quantity Takes Center Stage For Demand Marketers," Jan 30, 2020

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From the same survey, 41% of respondents would increase their event marketing budget in 2020.

Event changes and cancellations began in earnest February when organizers nixed Mobile World Congress and has only continued since: Facebook cancelled its marquee F8 event, Google said it will be holding its Cloud Next 2020 event virtually, and Adobe scrapped its annual Las Vegas summit. Other midsize B2B tech companies like SalesLoft, Qualtrics and Demandbase announced similar plans to postpone or cancel their annual user conferences.

SXSW is expected to continue from March 13-22, despite concerns from thousands of Austin residents who signed a petition to cancel the festival. Still, several major vendors and sponsors have pulled out including TikTok, Amazon, Vevo and Twitter.

For the organizers, sponsors and attendees of these events, these disruptions represent potential business losses down the road. The potential awareness usually garnered through speaking opportunities and media exposure cannot be regained. Critical prospect and customer meetings have been canceled—this lost touchpoint could stall pipeline velocity for B2B companies. This isn't just a dent in marketing budgets, but potentially can have lasting affect on sales.

Companies will have to be creative on how to continue engaging event attendees without an in-person engagement. Marketers need to

remember the fundamentals of good marketing and devise next steps that account for the target audience and what the event's goals were.

- **Go digital and be nimble.** As more events get canceled, the likelihood that replacement touchpoints will be digital is high, which is what we saw with several companies that canceled physical events and opted to host virtual conferences instead. The challenge for companies will be being nimble enough to move away from their event strategy—often months in the making and fully paid for—and pivot to produce digital content or engagements that can still influence the intended audience.
- **Consider direct mail.** Direct mail pieces could be a unique option that still offer a personal, in-person touch. However, with manufacturers in China being affected by the outbreak, other supply chains may need to be considered.
- **Measure everything.** These cancellations can provide a great opportunity for marketers to A/B test whether their events are as crucial as they presumed: Money is invested into marketing and holding events under the assumption that they will nurture business opportunities and engage current customers, but what happens if cancellations don't have a major impact? Will that prove that the events were not as necessary as previously expected?

For now, companies need to make sure they are prepared to ensure continuity of business in the eventual likelihood that there will be further restrictions placed on work and travel. Early data already shows that business travel—and to Asia in particular—has already been disrupted: According to the [Global Business Travel Association](#), more than eight in 10 (84%) travel professionals surveyed said they've canceled all trips to China, with 54% and 35% saying they no longer plan on traveling to Hong Kong or Taiwan, respectively. However, one-third said they haven't canceled any international trips, and a vast majority (93%) said they haven't canceled any domestic travel.

Impact of Coronavirus on Business Travel to Select Countries and Regions According to Travel Professionals Worldwide, Feb 2020

% of respondents

	Cancelled all trips	Cancelled most trips	Cancelled some trips	Cancelled few trips	Cancelled no trips
China	84%	11%	1%	2%	3%
Hong Kong	54%	19%	8%	4%	15%
Taiwan	35%	19%	10%	6%	30%
Other countries in Asia-Pacific	22%	23%	16%	14%	26%
Middle East	4%	4%	6%	9%	77%
Europe	3%	5%	15%	12%	65%
North America	1%	1%	3%	5%	90%
Latin America	1%	2%	3%	4%	91%
Total international	2%	5%	36%	24%	33%
Total domestic	0%	2%	1%	4%	93%

Note: according to GBTA members, broader industry metrics may vary; numbers may not add to 100% due to rounding

Source: GBTA, "2020 Coronavirus Poll," Feb 27, 2020

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In the US, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released [guidance](#) in February for employers and encouraged companies to cancel non-essential business travel to countries that have widespread or sustained transmission of the new coronavirus.

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Report by Jillian Ryan Feb 28, 2019

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