

PIVOTING TO NON-SHOW REVENUE STREAMS



Independent show organizers are innovating as never before.

BY REGINA MCGEE

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The coronavirus outbreak has upended the global economy, with exhibitions alone accounting for a \$14 billion to \$22 billion loss to the economy, according to a preliminary projection released in early April by the Center for Exhibition Industry Research (CEIR). CEIR's projection is based on cancellations reported to the organization by exhibition and event organizers, and does not include data from shows that have been rescheduled for later in the year.

It's no surprise that show organizers are exploring alternative revenue streams and new ways to connect with customers as the world continues to cope with both the health and economic consequences of COVID-19. "We're looking for revenue opportunities around existing business, including online medical education," Douglas Emslie, Group Chief Executive, Tarsus Group plc, said. "This is not a silver bullet for raising revenue, but to add value for existing customers."

Emslie was one of four newly installed SISO officers who spoke at the March 31 virtual town hall presented by the Society of Independent Show Organizers (SISO),

which represents companies involved in the for-profit show sector. SISO Executive Director David Audrain was the moderator. The town hall discussion ranged over a number of topics (see page 15 for a recap), but a good deal of the conversation had to do with alternative ways to keep connections with attendees and exhibitors in this time of emergency — and afterwards.

HERVÉ SEDKY
President, Americas
Reed Exhibitions

Sedky prefaced his comments on this topic by asking the exhibition industry to use the term "physical distancing" instead of "social distancing" because the latter term is "not appropriate for our industry, while physical distancing clearly is something we need to continue to have."

He said Reed Exhibitions is looking at its business as a platform, "whether it's a platform to do a marketplace, or a platform to do the things our customers want to do — this could be brand extension, education, generating leads or creating connections.



Hervé Sedky
President, Americas
Reed Exhibitions



Greg Topalian
CEO
Clarion Events North America



Douglas Emslie
Group Chief Executive
Tarsus Group PLC



Cassandra Farrington
Co-founder and Chair
Marijuana Business Daily

So, how can we change the experience, so instead of being a pure-play live experience company, how can we offer a platform that is online and offline, with the offline being our high-impact events? How can we supplement events with year-round online touch points? I think we can, and those are the things we are looking to do.”

He pointed to one other new area that the company is exploring: “Building out an activation unit for non-endemic brand sponsorship, which can apply to live and online opportunities.”

GREG TOPALIAN
CEO
Clarion Events North America

Topalian said Clarion is experimenting with a number of approaches. Where there is a strong media business (magazine and digital/online presence), he found that topic-centered, sponsored webinars “are creating good money and stickiness. We’re seeing live delegate participation of over 1,000 [in some cases], which is 10 times as many as we might have had otherwise. ...

Our greatest strength is where we have topics of high attendee interest.”

Clarion is also exploring options for connecting buyers and sellers with online product demonstrations. The goal in this case is not to monetize the opportunity, but to keep the dialogue going and to add value, Topalian said. “Overall, we’re thinking about what do attendees need today? And we’re putting it out there in front of them. It doesn’t mean we won’t sell it [at some point], but I always believe in a more attendee-led strategy.”



Virtual meetings have great possibilities for now and for the future, he added. “All of us have had the experience, over decades, of people who register for our shows and then can’t make it to the show — and that value is lost for everyone. How to engage those people in this moment of emergency — that is going to be valuable when we get back to normalcy. To me, this is an opportunity to focus on.”

DOUGLAS EMSLIE
Group Chief Executive
Tarsus Group PLC

Emslie said Tarsus is planning a hybrid meeting for one of its fall 2020 shows. This would include a virtual component, in addition to the in-person event. Explaining the reason for this approach, Emslie said, “Unfortunately, we expect some of our key buyers not to physically come to the show, so we want to offer them a virtual meeting with some key exhibitors to keep that interaction.”

Tarsus is also looking at potential revenue streams from online exhibitor listings. Emslie noted that there are a lot of companies offering online products in this space and that some of them are “pretty clunky.” EasyGo’s EasyFair is one digital service that his team is checking out. “We’re experimenting, and we’re exploring what other people are doing,” he said.

CASSANDRA FARRINGTON
Co-founder and Chair
Marijuana Business Daily (MJBizDaily)

Farrington looked to the long-range impact of the pandemic on exhibitions and events. “Unquestionably, there is going to be some shift to a new normal,” she said. “Some people will be eager to get

ASSOCIATIONS, MORE THAN EVER, MUST BROADEN THEIR REVENUE MODELS

While for-profit show organizers are seeking new revenue streams outside of live events, so are many membership associations. The coronavirus outbreak has dealt a swift financial blow to many of these organizations by curtailing their predominant revenue generator: the annual convention.



Susan Robertson
President and CEO
American Society of
Association Executives

The American Society of Association Executives (ASAE) and its members lobbied Congress for its relief package to include \$25 billion in aid for associations experiencing financial losses from canceled meetings and events, but that aid was not included in the massive \$2.2 trillion CARES package passed by Congress in late March, according to ASAE President and CEO Susan Robertson. In a statement in early April, she applauded Congress for taking swift action, but said it wasn’t enough.

“We have made some very specific asks of Congress to assist associations suffering due to COVID-19-related event cancellations and other losses,” Robertson said. “We understand there is an additional relief package under consideration after the passage of this third stimulus package, and we will continue to make the case that associations need and deserve additional aid during this crisis.”

on a plane, others, just as after 9/11, will not want to fly — they don’t feel safe and secure, the experience has changed too much. So, we’re going to have a range of responses, with the new normal settling in over time.”

The lessons and best practices that the industry is learning during this very tough time can be applied going forward, Farrington said. “By doing that, we are disrupting ourselves rather than being disrupted from the outside. We’re being forced to innovate in some very interesting ways, and there is a whole lot of opportunity to make [our events] better for a

larger audience going forward. We just have to figure it out along the way.”

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