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Scientific Meetings Are Going Virtual and Reaching the World

When scientific meetings go online, their audiences, as well as their potential for knowledge-sharing, grow exponentially.

Authors: Barbara Palmer
Casey Gale



Two groups, the Genetics Society of America (GSA) and the American Society for Human Genetics (ASHG), reported an audience size of their 2020 scientific meetings that went

The Stanford Institute for Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence had planned an in-person conference in April that would have drawn "a few hundred attendees," the institute's associate director, Russ Altman, M.D., Ph.D., told Science, the magazine published by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, earlier this year. Instead, the institute pulled together a virtual conference — and 30,000 people around the world tuned in.

That scenario is one that has been repeated again and again over the last few months. The American Society for Nutrition (ASN) also switched its live meeting to an all-virtual one last spring. Originally scheduled for late May in Seattle, the three-and-a-half-day meeting typically draws around 3,500 attendees — the virtual

version, like the AI conference, attracted approximately 30,000 attendees, far surpassing ASN's expectations, said Mary Pat Cornett, CAE, CMP, the association's chief strategy and operations officer.



Complimentary registration for the American Society for Nutrition's first virtual event contributed to its explosive attendee levels.

registered participants, said Suzy Brown, CMP, GSA's senior director of meetings. In addition, people participated from 79 countries in the virtual event versus 46 countries represented at the 2016 meeting.

Those numbers are revealing to meeting organizers the potential for growth in their audiences when constraints such as travel time and cost — and factors like the ability to get a visa — disappear. That translates not only into greater access to knowledge and collaboration for participants, but an infusion of ideas from new places. Innovation "is not happening only in Silicon Valley or Boston," Sarah Pedroza, co-managing director of Hello Tomorrow — which produces the Hello Tomorrow Global Challenge in Paris, inviting founders of early-stage startups to pitch their ideas — told *Convene* in 2018 in a story about meetings and the startup culture. "There are amazing projects," Pedroza said, "coming from Africa, from Pakistan, from India, and many countries."

When GSA surveyed participants after the conference, a number said they were only able to attend because it was virtual, due to travel bans as well as costs, Brown said. The impact of the increased access, which nearly doubled the number of countries with participants, "is huge," she said. "We want everybody to be able to share their science, regardless of where they're located geographically or what kind of funding they may have available to them."

And when the Genetics Society of America (GSA) made the move to digital from a planned in-person conference this spring, attendance at The Allied Genetics Conference (TAGC) in April more than quadrupled — from roughly 2,650 registrants for the in-person meeting to more than 14,000



The Genetics Society of America quadrupled attendance for The Allied Genetics Co

Targeted Audience Extensions

About 85 percent of participants at the GSA meeting were members, but the large majority of those who attended the ASN meeting were not, Cornett said. Their newly discovered audience has inspired her and her team to conceptualize targeted, virtual extensions of their annual event. For example, the virtual event drew approximately 7,000 registered dietitians who were new to ASN. And while she doesn't expect the 30,000 attendees who tuned in to the digital conference to show up in Boston at next year's in-person event, scheduled July 11–13, she does think "we have a good chance to continue to serve some of these new people that we've reached," she said.

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- READ MORE about the [Nutrition2020 virtual event \(https://www.pcma.org/free-registration-virtual-event/\)](https://www.pcma.org/free-registration-virtual-event/)
 - READ MORE about the [Genetics Society of America online conference \(https://www.pcma.org/digital-event-powered-app-genetics-society/\)](https://www.pcma.org/digital-event-powered-app-genetics-society/)
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"Like everybody else, we've always known we should do something virtual, and we've dabbled in it," Cornett said. "But pretty early into the planning, we realized there's no going back from [going virtual]. As much as we love the live [events] and the wonderful benefits that come from that in- person experience, there are completely different benefits to the virtual. I really now firmly believe they don't conflict with each other — they actually really complement each other."

The constraints on meeting face to face have accelerated discussions about how virtual meetings can address problems like improving diversity and equity and reducing the carbon footprint, the Science article said. "Whether we like it or not," Stanford professor Altman told Science, "the scientific community is going to very quickly come to expect this."

Barbara Palmer (mailto:bpalmer@pcma.org) is deputy editor and Casey Gale (mailto:cgale@pcma.org) is associate editor at Convene.

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