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EVENT TECHNOLOGY

## 8 Takeaways From the Democratic National Convention Virtual Event

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The Democratic National Convention (DNC) just wrapped up, and for the first time ever, it was in a virtual event format. Here is an analysis of what happened and what event planners can learn from it.



Credit: Alex Hanel/DNCC

This year, the DNC was different. Regardless of the political implications of the content, what the speakers said, and how they said it (which goes beyond the interests of EventMB), the event was a virtual event.

Especially looking at the decisions that the event planners made, the DNC was arguably more of a broadcast than an actual event.

But as **we've said many times before**, virtual events have to become a little bit more of a show rather than trying to become an avatar-based or virtual reality-based interaction. As attendees, what we need in the lockdown period is something that can be entertaining and watchable while people are engaged on social media, commenting and following hashtags. Virtual events are competing with Netflix, with TV.

It seems that the DNC planners and producers understood the impact of these decisions and how people want to watch and consume virtual events.



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So let's dive into some aspects of the production and some decisions that the event made.

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## 1 **Quality Production Matters**

One thing for sure is that, despite some hiccups from time to time, the production value was there. Having hosts that could actually be hosts was important to the event. Having actors, which was criticized by some, was actually a good move because they could keep the audience entertained in a live environment.

They knew how to react despite the lack of an audience and the feedback they normally provide. The absence of any sort of audience was the missing piece. Creating something more like the NBA games with a virtual audience would have allowed for a little bit of audience component.

But the production element with pre-recorded videos and live messages was very well thought out, and the content was key to the delivery of the event.

**Quality production is an important element we cannot do without. Nobody wants a Zoom call. Nobody expects that for an event with such a huge budget.**

Considering what's at stake, this should be a learning point for all planners. The takeaway is that we need to move away from referring to Zoom calls as virtual events. The production element was very successful. Production will become more dynamic as we move toward **hybrid events** and will be increasingly important going forward.

## 2 **Short Segments Are the Way to Go**


The second element that the event approached very well was the flow. They kept segments very short.

Obviously, they were able to access an incredible roster of diverse speakers with a lot of important topics to discuss. However, it is very easy to reach saturation quickly while listening to virtual speakers and, as a result, disconnect from the event. This is especially true for younger audiences with short attention spans.

Whenever the show became repetitive in terms of the content, it was very apparent, while the more dynamic aspects of the show were great. The event was successful when you could follow it as if you were watching a movie, a TV show, or a news program.



This is an indication for planners about not translating what happens offline, online. At live events, you'll see people around you, you're interacting with them. There are lights, noise, an experience around you.

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While physical distancing at home, we're in a sensory deprived environment. We need to be engaged, and we cannot afford sessions that are 30 to 45 minutes, or even one hour. It's asking a lot of the audience.

### 3 Session Formats Should Be Varied

Alternating between a live component, an emcee, a recorded video, or a performance kept the show engaging at all times. And once again, this was key to keep you there, hooked and eager to discover what was coming next.

The alternation of speaker type and messages was effective. The event controlled the pacing by going from a dramatic message to a lighter one, then to a bit of music.

Keeping the variety of formats is very important for sessions; we have experimented with it at EventMB. The audience has always responded extremely well.

Moving from a keynote to a panel is not a variety. Innovate with new formats.

### 4 Pre-Recorded Content Is an Opportunity to Be Clever

The event's pre-produced segments were very effective. Specifically, the attention that went into staging and the clever use of props delivered extremely well.

If you are working with performers that could not be there, recording them in their usual environment at home with just a camera on their computer doesn't cut it.

A good example of this done right was the subtle nod to Black Lives Matter during Elizabeth Warren's speech — the letters 'BLM' (Black Lives Matter) made out of blocks appearing just behind her.

Strategically placed props around your pre-recorded speakers can be used as surprise elements that catch the eye without distracting from the speaker's message, almost like an easter egg for the more attentive audience.

### 5 Speaker Diversity Matters

Events are about representation. We cannot afford to have events without representation anymore.



An important aspect of inclusion and diversity in performer line-ups is that listening to someone with a different background and story makes it challenging, stimulating, and sometimes uncomfortable to listen to.

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This is what moves the needle, elevating events from good to great. When a white American man in his 50s is listening to a young American girl with Mexican heritage speaking out about her mother being taken away from their family because of her immigration status, the event just switches on the attention lever. We are engaging a different part of our minds.

The takeaway for your event is to be as diverse as possible. Have more voices, new voices to create change in your attendees.

## 6 Hybrid Studio and Video Screen Works

Having a **hybrid studio** with an emcee and beaming in different speakers from around the world works extremely well. This is what hybrid events are going to look like — hopefully with a growing audience in the studio.

That interaction was well designed. It can be very powerful and very, very manageable on the technology front. The great thing is that it is very approachable. Therefore, if you're planning hybrid events, you can take a lot of those production elements and apply them easily.

That's the good news. The bad news is that it's not as easy as it looks to design something like that. There's a lot of design work that goes into that synchronization, making sure that every tool is working flawlessly.

## 7 Entertaining Moments Are Key to Decompress

The variety of formats and keeping the attention high are key, but sometimes you need to disconnect. Listening to Billy Irish perform provides you with white space for processing what has been discussed.

The diversity of your entertainers is also very important to allow different audience members to enter their white space, which may not be the same as someone else's.

Think about adding moments of entertainment during your events that cut the tension, especially when the event gets to very intense, dramatic, information-rich content.

## 8 It's Important to Build Anticipation and Drama

There was a lot of suspense built into the sessions and the lead up to different moments. The most significant element that created anticipation was how Obama **reportedly** made the choice to go before Kamala Harris.



He was originally scheduled to go on after her but decided to go before. He decided that the big moment of passing the torch was the ticket for the first black female Vice President. It was a great way to deliver that moment, and obviously Obama knew. Being very good at communication, he understood very well that the positioning of speakers is incredibly important.

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## The lesson here is that designing your agenda and using a storytelling arc is probably the single most important element that will keep the engagement high.

Virtual events are mostly about content. There's not a lot of interaction. There's not a lot of one-to-one other than the social media discussion.

### IN CONCLUSION

There are a lot of learnings from the DNC despite the fact that it was probably more of a broadcast than an event. In many respects, this is what virtual events will look like.

We like to think that virtual event platforms are also networking platforms, but the reality is that not a lot of people use their networking features yet.

But there is an opportunity to create more engaging experiences now by following some of the design and production decisions that are actually very approachable — even if the production level and budgets were high, the beauty of virtual events is that everybody can achieve something similar.

There are tools to do a lot of what was done at the DNC. Your event may not look as fancy as the DNC, but many of the same principles and approaches can be used to create an experience that keeps people engaged.

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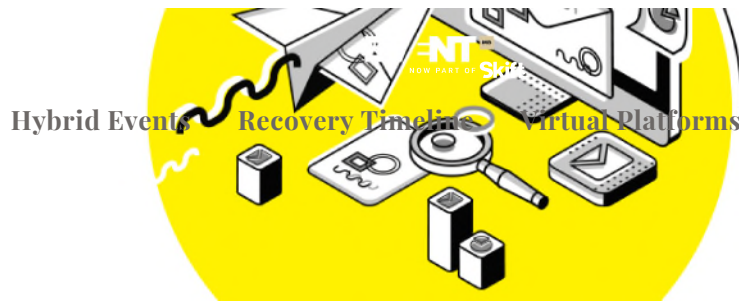
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