



Kathy Morris

My First Virtual Meeting



Don Hargeler
Laval Light Galleries

That was a great rehearsal. Now let's do it for real!

As a veteran producer of nearly 100 in-person sales and leadership meetings for audiences ranging from 20 – 2,000, I was confident that my skills would seamlessly transition to the Virtual Meeting world. But I was concerned that hours of Zoom calls and Teams meetings had dulled my senses and lowered my expectations. When the Nightly News is conducting interviews with experts in their bedrooms, multi-billion-dollar corporations are recording their executives over Teams to pitch new business and celebrities are hosting concerts from their barn, it is hard to know where to set the bar.

From explaining why a virtual meeting was not just a Zoom call...to the applause in the studio as the last award winner was pushed to the Livestream and passed a heavy glass trophy around like the Stanley Cup, the 4-month journey resulted in an enthusiastically well received Virtual National Sales Meeting (*under the circumstances*); learning how meeting production is both the same and different in the Virtual World; and the realization that—after nearly (**) decades in the communications business—there are some fundamental truths that transcend time and technology.

The image shows a landing page for the Medacta 2021 Virtual National Sales Meeting. The page has a blue background with a mountain and forest illustration. At the top left is the 'FIND A WAY NATIONAL SALES MEETING 2021' logo. At the top right are navigation links: 'Welcome | Your Agenda | Registration | FAQ' and a 'Livestream' button. The main heading reads 'Welcome to Medacta's 2021 Virtual National Sales Meeting' followed by 'FIND A WAY' in large white letters and 'January 8 & 9, 2021'. Below this are three circular call-to-action buttons: 'FAQ' (Click here to find FAQs about preparing for the NSM), 'Register' (Deadline is December 18, 2020), and 'Agenda' (Here's our meeting at a glance. Details to follow.). At the bottom left is the Medacta USA logo with a red cross icon.



A Virtual Meeting Is Much More Than a Zoom Call

Although I vigorously denied it for four months, a Virtual Meeting really is a Zoom call, but it is so much more.

In March of 2020, when the country “sheltered in place,” the Zoom team recognized the opportunity and stepped up. They made their platform easy to access, addressed security concerns and kept businesses, friends and families connected.

So how is a Virtual Meeting different from a Zoom call?



Control of the way presenters are being viewed

Presenters can, and do, originate from anywhere. But behind the scenes, there is a production team in Master Control that decides what the viewer sees (like a director in a television newsroom does).

One presenter at a time or two or more presenters interacting with each other, the Technical Director decides if the viewer sees only the person in the group who is speaking or all of the presenters in the group simultaneously.



Quality of the supporting visuals

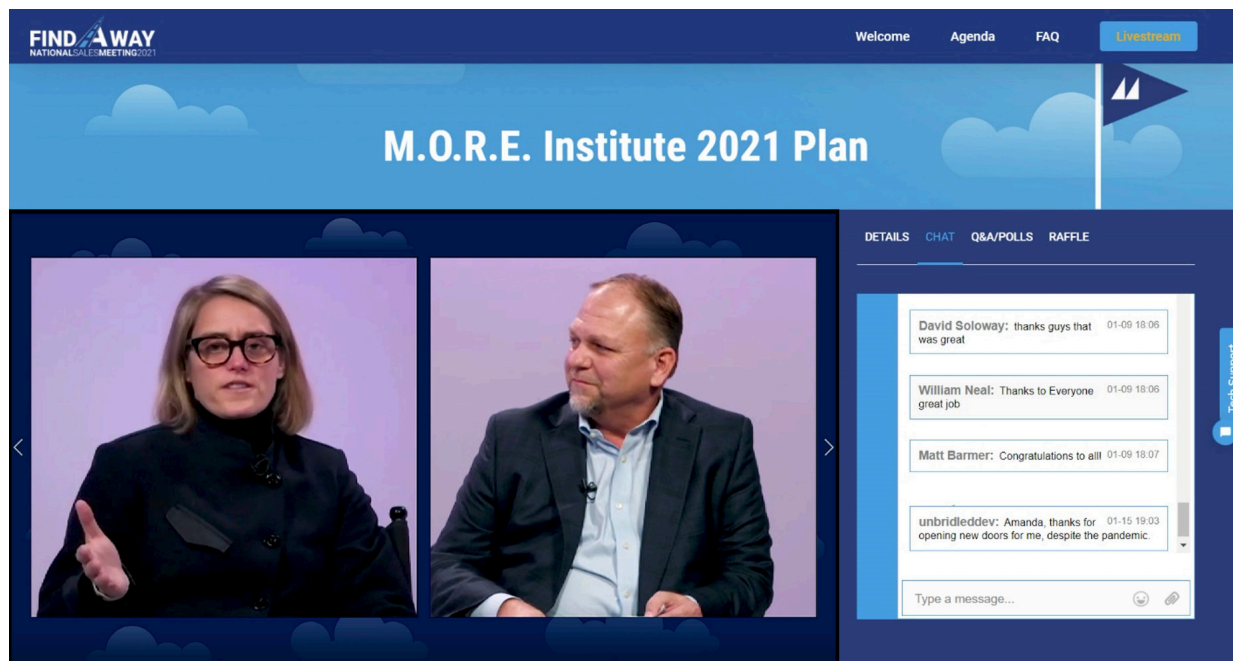
On a Zoom call, a participant can share their screen and show (most typically) slides or video. The slides, going through multiple compressions, are often fuzzy; video, jumpy or out of sync.

In a Virtual Meeting, Master Control has copies of the media being presented and synchronizes with the presenter to push the visuals to the audience. Slides maintain the quality of the originals, complete with transitions and animations. Video being delivered from Master Control plays as smoothly as it would from YouTube or Vimeo.



Control of the timing of the event

Much like the Voice of God (or the Goddess) in a ballroom, Master Control can, politely, end a session or let the audience know what time the next session will begin (when presentations run short.)





Building Your Ideal Platform

Zoom feeds the Livestream. The Livestream sits on a Platform.
The Platform is a website that can be as simple or robust as the event demands.

The ideal Platform guides the Virtual Event from registration to post-meeting feedback

Pre-event Promotion and Registration

Before your Virtual Meeting, the Platform can be a promotional tool. With a unique URL created for the event, the Platform is the destination where:

- Attendees can review the agenda
- Speakers, their topics and bios are listed
- Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) are answered
- Sponsors can reserve a booth
- Attendees can register for the event, selecting which sessions they will attend

A familiar meeting structure is General Session for content relevant to all. Additional or optional sessions (Breakouts) are offered based on participant areas of interest. These are selected during registration.

Personalized Agendas

The greater the number of types of attendees, the wider the variety of sessions offered, the more valuable the Personalized Agenda becomes. Because the Platform is smart, it knows where the attendee belongs and pushes them into the right place at the right time. You don't need to check your calendar and log in to the next session. With a personalized agenda, the Platform simply sends you there.

Options for Audience Participation

During the event, modules can be added to the Platform that provide participants with links to supporting material. Attendees can interact with one another through chat, ask questions, take polls, enter raffles and more.

The main Platform can link to other Platforms that enable networking, creating the feel of the familiar cocktail reception where attendees "bump into each other" and engage in one-on-one or one-to-many conversations.

Visit the Exhibit Hall

If Sponsors are participating and time is allocated in the agenda, attendees can "enter a hall" and visit sponsors—viewing videos and printed material, talking with representatives, collecting information—and you don't have to worry about carrying it home. (*Of course, the family won't be treated to the pens, post-its, logoed hats and shirts, drawstring backpacks, travel mugs and stress balls or gifts from the hotel or airport gift shops. But there are online alternatives.*)

On-demand Replay Available

If you had to take a call (walk the dog, check your daughter's math assignment, explain the Civil War to your son, bring the grocery delivery in off the front porch) during the President's keynote address, the Platform can make sessions available for viewing on demand.

Reports. Reports. Reports.

Every second, every mouse click throughout the event delivers data about who is watching, when they joined, how long they stayed, if they chatted, what they said, if they asked questions, what the questions were, if they answered polls, participated in raffles, etc. You can learn a lot about your attendees from the data.



Why Register for a Virtual Meeting?

Although there are numerous nuances—there are basically two kinds of meetings; meetings you are required to attend (typically by your company) and for which you are not charged a fee and meetings for which attendees pay (often associated with learning or improving skills while earning Continuing Professional Education Credits.)

If attendees are being charged for the event, the need to register is obvious.

For My First Virtual Meeting, we had a captive audience—employees of the company and contractors who represented the company's products and would benefit from the information being delivered. All sessions were open to all (although, since most of the sessions were product-based, some were more relevant for some than others).

- Although the number of attendees in a session has limited affect on Platform performance, an accurate count is still valuable. Without it, you have to plan for maximum participation and provide bandwidth accordingly.
- Even in the Virtual World (and maybe more so in the Virtual World where you don't see the participants) it helps to know who's on the other side of the screen. If the audience includes both newcomers and veterans, knowing this enables the company to provide basic materials in advance to bring newcomers up to speed. It also enables the company to invite participating veterans to share their experience, increasing interactivity.
- Registration can confirm the address to which Swag should be sent.
- A little personal information (favorite musical genre, favorite sports team, names of family members) helps inform the selection of music being played over the Platform between sessions or enables personalization of comments during award presentations.

Any little touch that personalizes the event can make a lasting impression.



Virtual Meetings: The Intimacy of an In-person Meeting with the Production Value of the Nightly News

It is the execution that really differentiates a Virtual Meeting from a Zoom call.

Presentations don't have to be live

In a live meeting, it would be difficult to disguise the playback of a recorded presentation. In the virtual world, that is not the case. Whether it is for the convenience of the presenter, to provide a more complete view of the subject matter or to control the running time, presentations can be recorded in advance.

- A professional crew can be dispatched to a presenter's home, office or other subject-relevant location. Or a convenient studio location can be arranged.
- If budgets are constrained, a modest desktop tripod and microphone can enable a smartphone recording of the presentation.
- Or presentations can be recorded remotely over Zoom or Teams.

Any of these techniques address the travel restrictions and social distancing concerns we are currently facing (and will continue to face) for much of 2021.

One of the advantages of a recorded presentation is editing in (slides, other graphics and video) and out (mistakes). It helps control the length of the presentation and the presenter(s) can still be available for Q&A at the end. (And if they dress in the same clothes, the audience need not know that the presentation was recorded.)

Live presenters need to rehearse

All of the presenters could present remotely,

but when the marketing team for a product sees the meeting as an opportunity to get together, you find a way to facilitate that request.

You can turn their offices into a studio,

which was our initial plan until a site survey revealed that there was neither space large and quiet enough nor could we be guaranteed sufficient bandwidth for the stream. The decision was reinforced when their city became a COVID hot spot and the offices were shut down.

You can rent a studio,

which is what we did, complete with enough room for social distancing and a spacious Speaker Ready (or Green) Room where presenters could watch the Virtual Event while waiting for their turn to present.

Presenting in a studio can be intimidating

Familiar with sitting at their desk and smiling into their webcam, presenters now found themselves staring down the lens of a studio camera with a TelePrompter hanging in front of it.

Or, looking at it from an in-person meeting perspective, familiar with standing behind a podium or striding a stage and looking out across a ballroom at hundreds of familiar faces, presenters now found themselves staring down the lens of a studio camera with a TelePrompter hanging in front of it.

As with video recording, presenters had to learn to look past the lens and maintain eye contact with the audience—from whom they would get no approving nods, thunderous applause or quizzical stares.

In the hands of professionals, even a Zoom call can feel like the Nightly News

The **Studio** was close to the client's office in Nashville, TN, **Master Control**—to which I referred earlier—was in Denver, CO and the **Platform** was "in the cloud."

Audio and video streams converged in Master Control from the Studio and remote locations. Remote presenters originated from their offices, homes or wherever they happened to be. The Technical Director (located in Master Control) selected single shots (or pre-configured multiple presenter views), graphics or video and pushed them to the Platform.

- To the presenters, looking at the program output of the switcher in Denver on a monitor set between the two cameras in the Studio in Nashville, it felt like a Zoom call in real time.
- To the Virtual Meeting audience, that conversation was embedded in the Platform along with access to all of the information the Platform had been designed to provide.

Because audio was live in the Studio (so that studio-based presenters could comfortably interact with remote presenters and with Master Control) the studio crew had limited voice communication with the technical team in Master Control.

An app on the crew's cell phones allowed push-to-talk communication during the production. But the challenge of being 1,156 miles apart (instead of behind the curtain or on the other side of the glass in the control room) made last minute client changes a challenge.

Despite the challenges, we incorporated many of the production elements you would expect from the Nightly News.

- Videos had a consistent, theme-based opening animation.
- Each session had a recorded voiceover introduction and title slide.
- Each presenter was identified with an animated lower third name and title the first time they spoke.
- Platform graphics displayed next session start times.

The professional team in the Studio (producer, camera operators, TelePrompTer operator, audio engineer, encoding engineer) ensured that audio, video and the encode was optimal moving to Master Control and back into the Studio. The professional team in Master Control (producer, graphics operator, technical director, project manager) ensured that the feed going to the audience was synchronized and optimized.



So what are the fundamental truths that transcend time and technology?

When we went live Friday afternoon, I predicted that I would have a pretty good handle on how to produce a Virtual Meeting by the end of the awards ceremony on Saturday night. I was right. With this “rehearsal” out of the way, I am much better prepared to guide clients through this virtual world.

But I was also right that what I knew going in still applied.



Content is King

To the audience, many of the presentations felt like talking heads. But, as one of the pioneers in corporate television used to say nearly 50 years ago, “The most effective form of video communication is the talking head, as long as the head that is talking is talking about something the listener wants to hear.”

The client’s teams prepared well, practiced their presentations before walking into the studio, adapted to the environment, rehearsed efficiently, and were comfortable during the Live Event.



You Can’t Over Communicate

The initial announcement that a meeting normally held in person is going to be virtual should come through communication channels familiar to the participants. Let them know to look for follow-up communication from the Meeting Producer – then WHITELIST the producer’s URL to keep future communication out of Spam or Junk folder.



Leverage the Medium

We treated the Virtual Meeting like a Television Broadcast. Over the 11.25 hours of scheduled meeting time, we presented 22 videos, varied the styles of the sessions to include PowerPoint-driven presentations, informal dialogues, interviews with medical professionals, had sales leaders share the secrets to their success and enabled attendees to interact with each other during and between sessions through the Platform.

We limited session lengths, included breaks and planned enough time for lunch and dinner to allow attendees to walk away from the screen.



You Can’t Control What You Can’t Control

The Program Manager in Master Control monitored every minute of the Virtual Meeting, seeing exactly what the audience saw. They identified technical issues before they were reported, tracked them down and addressed them as quickly as they could—without disrupting the program.

But in the end, **the user experience was dependent on the bandwidth of the signal coming into the viewer’s computer.** Whether they were in an external office or in their office at home, if they were competing with others occupying the same space (colleagues, e-learners, gamers, binge-watchers), all of that could affect the quality of the Livestream and the responsiveness of the Platform.

I look at it this way.

Two years ago, the client met in person. They left their homes and travelled to the meeting destination where they checked into a hotel. Over a couple of days, they attended the meeting and when it was over, they travelled home.

This year, from a location of their choosing, they logged onto the Platform, got 11.25 hours of access to rich content, insightful medical professionals and successful colleagues, and they still got to interact with the other attendees.

While some might say it was the best that could be done *under the circumstances*, I like to think that we took advantage of the circumstances to give attendees more time with their families, give their families a unique view into the attendee's business and a chance to celebrate with Award Winners, still delivered valuable content—and sent a box with SWAG to their homes so they could share the pens, post-its, logoed hats and shirts, drawstring backpacks, travel mugs and stress balls with the family *without traveling or a trip to the hotel or airport gift shop*.

Nonetheless, I think we all still look forward to meeting face-to-face in 2022.



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Classic skills.

Future-forward ideas.

Virtually everywhere.

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