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September 25, 2020 1:45 PM, EDT

Trucking's Trade Shows Go Virtual

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With the human and economic costs of the COVID-19 pandemic weighing heavily on the country and the world, 2020 has been anything but a normal year for the commercial transportation industry.

Trucking and logistics companies have implemented new sanitation and social distancing measures to help mitigate the spread of the coronavirus, while also adjusting their operations and shifting capacity amid volatile market conditions.

At the same time, this public health crisis also has greatly disrupted another facet of the transportation industry — trade shows and conferences.

 Seth Clevenger

Clevenger

These gatherings have long served as important venues for industry leaders to come together to share knowledge, exchange ideas, discuss policy and check out the latest trucking equipment and technology.

But with large, in-person meetings deemed impossible during the pandemic, many of the most prominent events on the 2020 calendar have been canceled, or have moved to an online-only format.

Some of the biggest cancellations include the annual Mid-America Trucking Show in Louisville, Ky., and the Transportation Intermediaries Association's Capital Ideas Conference & Exhibition, as well as American Trucking Associations' National Truck Driving Championships. Across the Atlantic, the biennial IAA Commercial Vehicles Show in Hanover, Germany, also was canceled.

But other major industry events are adapting to the pandemic by moving online.

ATA's Management Conference & Exhibition, originally set to convene in Denver, will instead proceed as a virtual event Oct. 19-23 and Oct. 26-28.

 iTECH Q3 2020 cover

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Some major trucking technology events also have been going virtual, including Trimble Transportation's in.sight user conference, held in August, and the McLeod Software user conference, set for Sept. 29-Oct. 1.

While it may be impossible to completely replace the chance meetings and conversations that happen in the breakout sessions or the hallways of an in-person trade show, it's more important than ever for leaders and managers to remain engaged with their peers and continue learning about what's happening across the industry.

And virtual events can still accomplish much of that.

Thought leadership discussions and educational sessions, even when they're online only, can be the spark of inspiration for virtual attendees to better understand an emerging trend or discover a better way of doing business.

Digital events can't fully replicate the experience of viewing a new truck model, component or technology demo in person, but they certainly can keep the industry's conversation going at a time when social distancing guidelines remain in effect and business travel has slowed to a trickle.

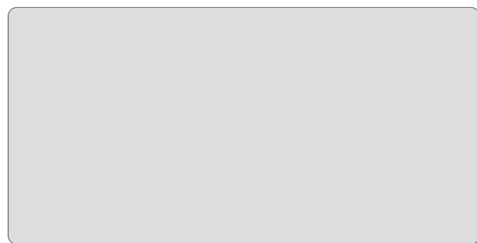
Although states continue to gradually lift coronavirus-related restrictions, it appears that it will take more time for the trade show circuit to return to normal.

Cancellations of in-person events already have extended into 2021. CES, the massive annual technology show in Las Vegas, normally draws more than 150,000 attendees from around the globe, but next year's edition will instead shift to an entirely digital event in January. The 2021 annual meeting of the Transportation Research Board also will be an online event.

Unfortunately these types of digital meetings will have to suffice for at least a while longer, but we can all look forward to the time when we can once again see our friends and peers in person at business conferences to chart the industry's path forward.

Until then, we'll just have to continue making the most of the challenging situation created by COVID-19.

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