



Mortgage ⌚ 6 minute read

Ready to go back to a live mortgage industry event? MBA, NAR, NAMB and others test the waters

But virtual events are also gaining steam

May 11, 2020, 3:39pm by *[Phil Hall](#)*

News > Mortgage

The old adage of “the show must go on” is percolating across the mortgage and housing world as trade event organizers are cautiously seeking to move beyond the coronavirus pandemic and welcome crowds back to their line-up of trade conferences.

The **Mortgage Bankers Association** cancelled its live conferences when the crisis began to spread in March and switched to online formats for the interim. MBA Chief Operating Officer Marcia Davies is hoping to bring back in-person attendance with the Risk Management, QA & Fraud Prevention Forum from Sept. 13-15 in San Diego, followed by the Regulatory Compliance Conference in Washington, D.C. from Sept. 23-25.

MBA's biggest event, its Annual Convention & Expo, is on target for a Chicago production from Oct. 18-21.

"Obviously, that could change if the states where we are holding conferences and the overall tone of being able to open up and travel and have large gatherings takes a turn that is counterproductive to bringing folks together," Davies noted. "So, we are monitoring it. We're working with the properties that we have contracts with, and at some point in time we're hoping to know how large gatherings are being viewed."

Davies added that the MBA has been reaching out to prospective speakers for the October national conference to determine if they were open to an in-person appearance, and the initial feedback has been affirmative.

Many MBA members also seem eager for the trade conference environment, with a poll conducted during a recent webinar finding 52% of respondents comfortable traveling to an event that would take place after Sept. 1 – although 47% of respondents stated they would not be traveling to a trade conference until 2021.

And while Davies admitted the webinar poll was "not scientific by any stretch of the imagination," it was helpful to gauge how mortgage professionals currently view the value of in-person conference attendance.

"I think everybody has their own level of comfort," she said. "Some people are comfortable still traveling as long as the airlines are taking all the precautions, and then there are people who are very uncomfortable with that. I don't think we know how our full membership would feel, but this poll gives us an idea that at least the folks who are on that webinar were thinking about when they'd be comfortable traveling again."

National Association of Realtors CEO Bob Goldberg is considering whether to return to live events with either the August leadership summit scheduled for Chicago or the November national conference slated for New Orleans. However, Goldberg wondered

if trade conferences can achieve the best of both worlds by having in-person and virtual components.

“I think the new norm is going to be a combination and a hybrid going forward,” he said. “You will have as many in-person meetings as you can because our industry is all about working with and meeting people – people love to hug and smile and be with each other. That’s where this industry is.

“But I think you’re going to also have a very strong combination of a virtual meeting that utilizes technology. We just did another meeting a couple weeks ago, what we call a ‘Leadership Live,’ and it was a Facebook Live event. We had 16,000 of our members real-time watching us engage in handling questions about where we’re going as an industry,” Goldberg said.

The **California Mortgage Bankers Association** is also eager to start up its in-person events schedule.

“The three pillars of our association are advocacy, connection and education,” said Dustin Hobbs, CMBA’s communications director. “Without conferences and events, it would be hard to fulfill these.”

CMBA’s next scheduled events are the Western Secondary Market Conference from July 8-10 in Orange County’s Dana Point and the Mortgage Innovators Conference Aug.16-18 in San Diego. And while CMBA is lining up speakers for the events, Hobbs pointed out many CMBA members are still in a wait-and-see mode about attendance.

“People are in a holding pattern,” he said. “This is based on their own sensibilities about attending large gatherings and the drive from government and companies on whether it is safe to travel to such events.”

Another trade organization looking to get back into live attendance events is the **National Association of Mortgage Brokers**. Rocke Andrews, NAMB’s 2020 president, stated his group is aiming to host its national conference in Las Vegas from Oct. 2-5. However, Andrews pointed out his group is not going full-speed-ahead in promoting the event.

“We’re not really pushing it right now,” said Andrews, broker/owner of **Lending Arizona** in Tucson, who added NAMB was monitoring the reopening of Las Vegas’

hotels and casinos to determine whether its schedule was still viable. “We’re going to kind of play by ear for the next week or so.”

Andrews conceded that NAMB’s members are also concerned about traveling in the aftermath of the pandemic’s peak and are watching the news to determine safety in a return to normalcy. But while NAMB is relying on digital technology to keep its event calendar in motion, Andrews questioned whether virtual alternatives are an adequate substitute for in-person events.

“At a regular conference, you’re out of the office and you can spend time there,” he explained. “If you’re doing a virtual conference on your computer, you’re always doing something else simultaneously.”

Still, virtual events are not going away in the foreseeable future. **William Mills Agency**, an Atlanta-headquartered public relations firm, has published “Virtual Financial Industry Event Guide” that catalogues the online events that have replaced in-person happenings.

“In January we published our annual show guide for the financial industry, ‘2020 Financial Trade Show Directory,’” said Scott Mills, the agency’s president. “In early March as events were being cancelled, we realized that most of the guide was going to be out of date – at least through Labor Day. We also noticed that a lot of events were going digital-only or virtual. In an effort to help people looking for education while sheltered-in-place, we created and published the Virtual Event Guide.”

Mills predicted that the industry will mix live and virtual events in the post-pandemic period, noting that “virtual events are helping people who would not otherwise be attending conferences gain access to more quality speakers and professional development opportunities.”

Also betting on a future with virtual events is **HousingWire**’s publisher Clayton Collins, whose third-annual [engage.marketing](#) event was scheduled for June in Irvine, California, but is now going to be online.

Collins acknowledged a bit of déjà vu was occurring across the industry – virtual events initially had a flurry of popularity after the 2008 economic crash when companies were forced to tighten their travel budgets, only to lose their luster when the economy improved. But he did not believe history would repeat itself in the post-pandemic era.

“I think we’re going to be able to stand up with a much livelier, more engaging, entertaining and educational event than the virtual capabilities allowed a decade ago,” he said. “Time will tell with execution and engagement – do we and can we step up to a product that people actually want to continue with, even after we’re able to get on planes again?”

“I certainly don’t think a lot of in-person events are done, but I’m certainly going to be more cautious as an individual and as a business leader about going to large-scale events and crowded trade shows. This just might not be as attractive anymore.”

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