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In the Crosshairs of Covid-19

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Who would have thought a few short months ago that many industry consumer and trade show dates would topple like dominoes, or be zapped into virtual or hybrid formats? Or that major league sports, the Summer Olympics, sold-out concert halls and Broadway musicals would all go dark?

Such was Covid-19's swift kick to the \$325 billion events, trade show and conference industry. And the questions that Covid creates keep on coming: When will showgoers feel safe to travel and mingle in crowds? Will a vaccine come, and will the masses embrace it? Will tradition return, or are we catapulting into a whole new norm?

The only thing we know for sure is that no one has answers or can really grasp the pandemic's long-term ramifications. And yet, despite the uncertainty, industry pros are working feverishly to help us navigate through this remarkable disruption.

Early to the dance was the National Marine Manufacturers Association, whose Progressive Northwest Sportshow morphed from a live to a virtual event, debuting on its opening date of April 2 and running the entire month of May.

According to senior vice president of NMMA shows Jennifer Thompson, the show attracted more than 10,000 unique visitors who consumed more than 86,000 online pages, many of them with educational content. Time spent on the virtual show site "blew industry standards out of the water," she said, while social media reach and engagement topped 52,000 Facebook users and generated more than 24,000 engagements.

"We are currently working on a digital element to complement or replace a physical show if necessary in 2021," Thomson said. "We have been surveying our customer audiences for what they would like to see in any type of digital or virtual event and have gained great insights, with more exciting updates in the coming months."

Informa owns and operates many of the world's leading boat shows and yacht events. According to vice president of marketing for U.S. boat shows Lana Bernstein, the company pivoted from a live Palm Beach International Boat Show to a virtual platform over a four-week period with results that far exceeded expectations.

"The virtual show demonstrated that there is a clear interest in the virtual boat show experience, which we will likely incorporate into future shows as a teaser to the live event," she said.

Presently, the Fort Lauderdale International Boat Show slated for October 28 through November 1 is still scheduled to go forward. However, sweeping changes will be in effect in keeping with Informa's newly adopted AllSecure health and safety standards, along with government guidelines and regulations.

On tap are enhanced cleaning protocols before, during and after events, overnight disinfection, electrostatic sprayers, specialized disinfectants, continuous sanitation, a focus on high-touch areas, dedicated hygiene hosts and more. Physical distancing will be enforced with no-contact ticketing and registration, designated floor markings and social distance ambassadors. Face masks and screening measures are also anticipated, including possible temperature checks or thermal scanning of attendees.

Also moving forward is Trawlerfest, slated for October 6-10 at Baltimore's Harbor East Marina. According to Julie Jarvie, vice president of marketing and events for AIM Marine Group, social distancing measures are planned with seminar-spacing protocols and mandatory face coverings.

AIM has postponed its 41st Annual Dania Flea Market in Florida and is currently on hold for its AIM VIP Pavilion at FLIBS, as Jarvie says Bahia Mar has banned all large gatherings in meeting room spaces.

In response to Covid-19, AIM's editors, in partnership with brand partners and industry experts, launched its own digital boat show, boosting its engagement by 28 percent over the previous year. AIM is the parent company of *Soundings Trade Only*.

"Now more than ever, our audience is looking to stay informed," Jarvie said. "Our digital boat show fills the boat show information void, and our audience of active boaters can still enjoy boat tests, product reviews and interviews, to name a few elements."

Newport International Boat Show director Nancy Piffard recently announced cancellation of the mid-September show until 2021. Rhode Island's event restrictions, coupled with staff concerns, led to the decision. Other contributing factors included strong boat sales with resulting lack of dealer inventory, and consumer concern about illness.

"With a past audience of thousands clamoring to see the latest and greatest in new boat and product offerings, we are currently developing a digital platform to allow our exhibitors to engage our showgoer database," Piffard said.

Show manager Anne Dunbar announced the cancellation of September's IBEX show in Tampa. She waited until June to make the announcement. That's when Covid-19 cases in Florida spiked.

"Since March when the Covid situation began, I told my team that we had nothing to worry about as IBEX was more than six months away," she said. "It seemed realistic at the time that by end of September all would be fine, and IBEX would be the light at the end of the tunnel, bringing our industry together after a very difficult time and sparking the much needed business to get everyone moving forward again. We held on to that vision, perhaps too long, until June, when cases in Florida spiked, and day by day got worse. In the end, we really had no choice. Our primary concern, and any show's primary concern, is the health and safety of our visitors, exhibitors and partners."

A virtual IBEX is in development, with the goal to "create great opportunities to engage the industry, including many who haven't attended IBEX previously," along with emerging professionals and newcomers.

Marine Retailers Association of the Americas president Matt Gruhn and his team cranked out more than two dozen educational webinars from March through June to assist dealers during the crisis. They recorded the highest engagement in association history.

Simultaneously, the MRAA has focused on its signature event, Dealer Week: the MRAA Conference & Expo, which is still scheduled to run December 8-11 in Austin, Texas. A new mini-Dealer Week digital event is also on track to debut in late October, coupled with a hybrid virtual experience slated for January 12-15.

"While the situation with the health concerns in today's marketplace makes us consider various scenarios, the truth of the matter is that the insights, advice, best practices, tools and resources we share are really platform agnostic," Gruhn said. "They can be shared with just as much effectiveness in a virtual environment as they have been in an in-person environment."

Should the live event cancel, the virtual experience will be ready to roll out on the original dates.

"A big part of the Dealer Week virtual event will be about incorporating the ability to interact into the experience," he said. "The platform will prioritize it in a way that attendees won't miss out on that part of the experience. That will come through roundtable discussions, virtual booths, interactive chats and live elements."

Bernstein says it's key, even with a virtual show, to excite the attendees so they can make appointments in advance. Thompson envisions virtual and hybrid events continuing to evolve, thus challenging the industry to ask questions about how consumers want to shop, the types of experiences they want to have, and how they want to interact with products.

While IBEX's Dunbar supports the virtual boat show effort, she is quick to recognize the magic of the live event.

"We might be able to launch an exciting virtual show, but the real thing is the best," she said. "The best memories from any live event are the unexpected and surprising moments of running into an old colleague, discovering new partners or seeing an incredible new product you didn't expect to see as you stroll down the aisles of IBEX. That just can't be duplicated online."

I'm impressed by the flexible, forward-thinking attitude of our show and event leaders, and their readiness to embrace the new reality. There is a huge expectation for show producers to create a unique experience coupled with compelling content in the virtual environment. Hopefully, the plans being laid now will attract and engage qualified attendees, deliver technology mechanisms to generate response, and ultimately deliver measurable ROI to show advertisers.