Event Intelligence During COVID-19: Top Six Tips for Virtual Trade Show Intelligence

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I have attended several intelligence events lately and a major topic is the impact of COVID-19 on competitive intelligence, and within the event/trade show community its impact on the practice of event intelligence. This article will offer ideas on how to be "event intelligence effective" during COVID-19 and beyond, as the situation unfolds. The most important thing for intelligence professionals to take away from this article is that event intelligence is as important as ever, and opportunities to use your event intelligence skills still exist. However, it is necessary to adapt.

I will start with a reminder: events refer to any places where multiple people get together, whether physical or virtual. Past articles have looked at the event intelligence opportunities at trade shows, conferences, trade missions, webinars, parties, and even hockey arenas. While the last few months have been filled with many such events, all of them have been virtual.

For example, I have attended an intelligence conference in Germany, participated in a trade mission to Vietnam, attended trade shows, and served as a mentor at the Techstars Global Online Start-up Weekend. All virtually. From each of these events I gathered valuable information, made new connections, started new projects, and helped secure several business opportunities. I have learned several things from participating virtually that I'd like to share.

TIP #1: FOCUS ON FRIENDLIES

Now more than ever a warm introduction is needed, so this is perhaps the most important tip. When you profile those in attendance, identify the people you want to connect with and then identify points of commonality. The easiest way to do this is look for level one or two connections on LinkedIn. Think of these as your "friendlies" (see my 2019 article in CIM for more specifics on finding someone in your network to help you reach out to those you're not connected to). One extra benefit of virtual events: you can do quick research (via LinkedIn, Google, Owler, etc.) on a target before reaching out, far more easily than at an in-person event.

Let me share two examples of how this works in practice. For the event in Germany, we used emails and Zoom chats to connect, with the best results coming when we established some commonality with friendlies. On the trade mission to Vietnam, we had trouble connecting with a potential partner until we found a friendly to reach out on our behalf. We quickly got a response and connected virtually. When stress levels are high and people are legitimately concerned about their family, health and economy, they are less willing to connect with strangers, but still want to pursue business opportunities. Friendlies can help bridge that gap.

TIP #2: NETWORKING AND INTERVIEWING VIRTUALLY IS DOABLE, BUT BE FLEXIBLE

Organizers of virtual events are working hard to create meaningful opportunities for participants to network, see who is attending, and have virtual conversations. Here are three examples of how to capitalize on this:

1. **Use private chat to contact a speaker**: At a recent virtual conference, a speaker who was not part of my event collection plan said something that I wanted to follow up on. Since his comment suggested an interesting opportunity, I needed to pivot and be flexible. While connecting with a speaker at an in-person event can be difficult, it was easy at the virtual event. I sent him a private chat message, we had a great conversation, and are now working on a project together.

2. **Skip the awkwardness with private chat**. Initiating a conversation at an in-person trade show can be awkward. For example, what is a good opening line? What is the best body language? However, at a virtual show it can be easy. I typed a message in the chat box and simply waited my turn. The booth person got back to me, apologized for the delay, and we had a great and informative conversation.

3. **Check the participant list for unexpected opportunities**. At a recent webinar, I unexpectedly "bumped" into a friendly and had a great conversation. Even with the best plans, people you do not expect can show up, so it's important to be flexible and seize the moment when they can help with your intelligence efforts. It's a good reminder to always check the online participant list, and then connect via private chat.

TIP #3: FOCUS, FOCUS, FOCUS

My experience is that in a virtual event I am able to accomplish about 50 to 70 percent of what I can in an in-person event. It is not just developing a relationship with a target that can be challenging in an online environment; it is the technology itself. Chats can be slow, video or voice conversations can have buffering or lag issues, and we all are more easily distracted. For example, at one event I had a discussion with four people at a booth. All were at different locations and most of the conversation was each of us repeating, "Can you hear me now?" In an environment like this, we need to be realistic about what we can accomplish. Therefore: focus, focus, focus.

TIP #4: ADD PEOPLE FROM YOUR NETWORK TO YOUR EVENT TEAM

One of my past columns was titled "Who Should You Bring to Events?" The key message in that column was that there are great benefits from bringing functional experts and specialists to events (for example, your R&D staff are great at discussions about technology). While bringing extra people to in-person events can stretch budgets, there can be a substantial payback. Since budget is generally not an issue for virtual events as there is no travel cost (although there is a registration cost), there is a great opportunity to expand your event intelligence program simply by bringing others to the online event. This "open intelligence" concept holds enormous potential for virtual events. By inviting other members of your organization, customers, suppliers and even stakeholders into your intelligence process, you stand to gain a great deal.

TIP #5: MAKE A GOOD IMPRESSION USING THE TECHNOLOGY

Networking is generally enhanced when you make a good first impression. How you look and how you come across has a major impact on the effectiveness of your event interviews. This also holds true for virtual events. Unfortunately, between poor lighting, technological hiccups, and improper digital etiquette, we are often not making the best impression virtually. Here are two tips to make a better virtual impression:

1. **Talk standing up**. You look more honest and approachable when the camera is at eye level (this is a TV tip). When you are standing, you are typically more energetic which creates a more positive impression. To make this happen, place an external webcam on a tripod (an ironing board will work in a pinch). If you do not have an external webcam, then put books under your computer. Just make sure they're stable and straight.

2. **Ensure a high-quality connection**. It's a simple thing, but plug your computer into the modem via a hard line, rather than WiFi. This typically makes a connection more stable, and faster. It's a small thing but it helps make a better impression.

I could devote an entire column to ways of making a better presence for networking online. With the help of a Hollywood producer/director friend, I now have an event "set" that includes production lighting, slider, wireless microphone, a big TV, and more. Feel free to email me if you have any questions about my setup.

TIP #6: GET TO KNOW THE TECHNOLOGY PLATFORM

In the last week alone, I have attended virtual events using several different platforms, including Brella, Slack, YouTube, Webex/GoToMeeting, Zoom, and even a proprietary system. While each show had opportunities for virtual chats and meeting rooms, each show's communication system operated differently, and each show had a different look and design.

On the positive side, several booths had more company personnel (including R&D) than I'm used to seeing at in-person events, which is an advantage of a virtual show. That can create a far richer intelligence environment than in-person events. However, in many shows it can be a challenge to navigate the "floor", finding people and even figuring out how to talk to them. At one show in particular, the initial discussion with booth staff had to be held in a very public chat box, which was a big downside. I wasn't alone in having difficulty navigating a virtual floor. Two colleagues said that they either couldn't find the booths they wanted or couldn't figure out how to engage with the booth personnel. Both eventually gave up.

Therefore, my final tip is to **get the lay of the virtual land as early as possible**. If the event allows it, enter early. Find out what tools the event has to help you find out who is at the show (not every show lets you do this). Look at the menu layout and figure out how to find all the event activities. Find out where the trade show floor is and how you find a specific booth. Figure out how to talk to booth personnel, panelists, speakers, and attendees. If there is a help function, find out how it works and what it covers, and how to contact someone for help. Another way is to find out what platform they are using and check if there is a video that shows the platform in use (maybe on YouTube?). I have found that the basic structure of the event remains similar, show to show, on the same platform.

Bottom line: do not hesitate to reach out to the event organizers well before the event starts to find out how to navigate their trade show virtual environment. Navigating and using these virtual platforms is the biggest issue I'm seeing compared to in-person events. If you don't figure it out, and early, you won't get much of a chance to use your event intelligence skills.

CONCLUSIONS

As this article has pointed out, regardless of the changes arising from COVID-19 to trade shows and events, event intelligence remains an important and powerful tool for intelligence and insight professionals. The article has pointed out how some elements of event intelligence practice can benefit from online events, while recognizing that other elements from our event intelligence toolkit can't be used or will need to be modified. Regardless, there is enormous opportunity for successful event intelligence practice, even during COVID-19 times.