

Seeing opportunity in cancellation

Rethinking keynote content after coronavirus.



Joe Lazar
President

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Live events are literally against the law. Now what?

Building keynote content for corporate events is a cornerstone of our business, and while the coronavirus-driven cancellations are nerve-wracking for us, I'm also excited to change things up. We have seen much of the industry — clients, agencies, speakers, etc. — accept the typical playbook for keynotes as a given, and now is the perfect time to challenge some of that.

One (HUGE) assumption we'd like to challenge is that attendees love the content. After all, the houses are packed, events keep growing, and our clients have told us that audiences rate the content highly. *They love it!* Right?

Not exactly.

Let's do a thought experiment under these new circumstances: if you take the exact same keynote content and put it online, would you have the same engagement? Would people “love it?” Our clients' consensus is no, they wouldn't, because every single client has told us that a virtual keynote can't have the same content — it has to be more “engaging.” This is all the evidence we need to consider switching things up.

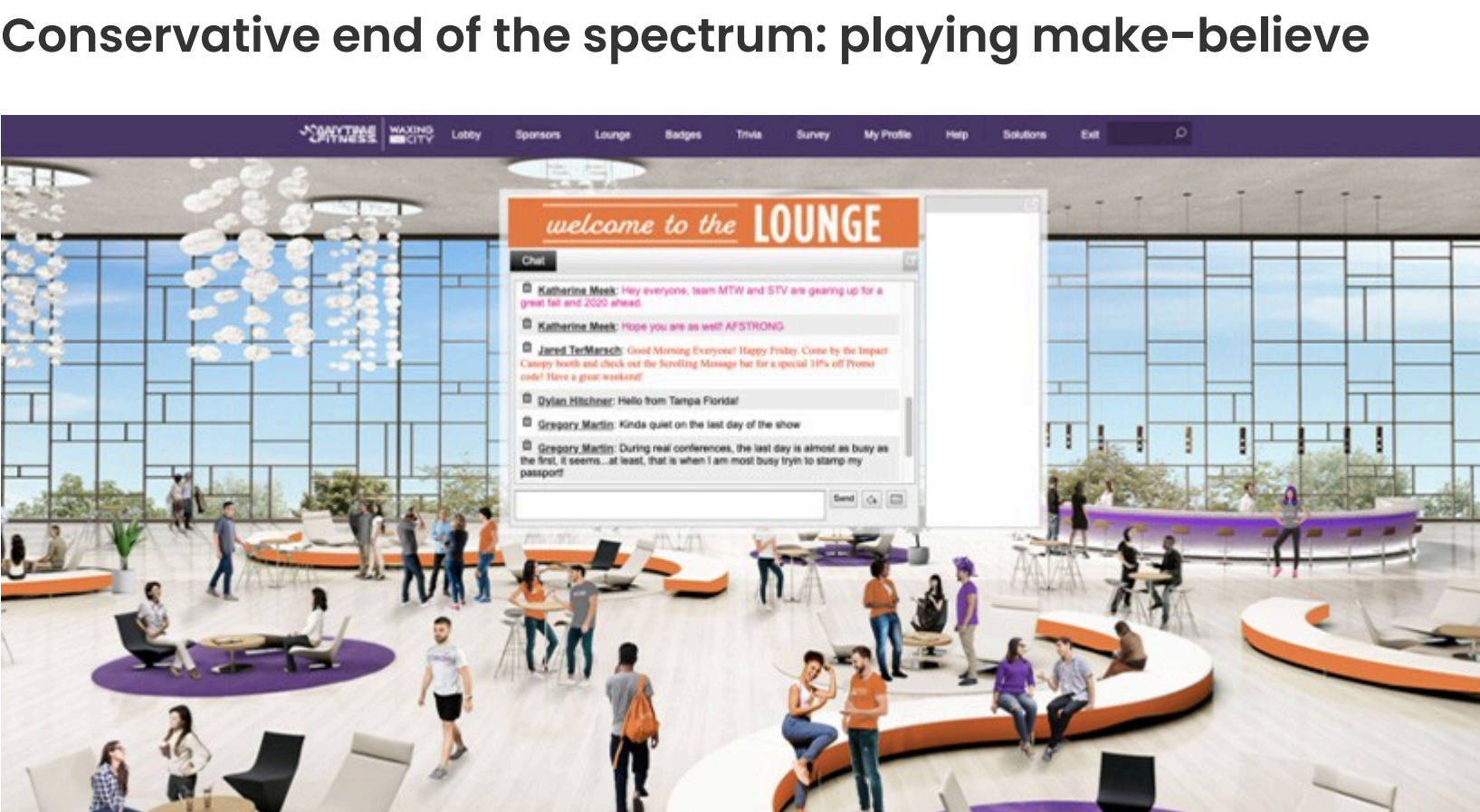
And I have to admit, as someone who has been in this game for a long time, I'm intrigued by the prospect. Of course, we need to remember our fundamentals — who it's for, what we want them to remember, and what our business goals are. And I'm not addressing any of the plumbing underneath events in general, like lead generation and capture. All of that aside, we may actually end up doing *better* content because of this change. When events come back (and they will), the industry could have more useful and compelling events.

A spectrum of keynote possibilities

As Article Group has worked through post-coronavirus events with our clients, a spectrum of possibilities has emerged for keynote content. On one side, you have the “virtual keynote.” Here's where we take the expectations of a keynote and, well, just make it virtual.

On the other end of the spectrum you have something that's not like a keynote at all, but closer to entertainment. And then, of course, you have the space in between.

Conservative end of the spectrum: playing make-believe



It's like you are there! Except you aren't.

As events were canceled, many of you may have seen or attended a “virtual event.” Many of these events have everything a real event would have — a conference center, lobby, breakout rooms, expo hall, keynote hall — except it's all digital. Fake. Like a video game, but not fun. We all had to make-believe like we were there.

Make-believe makes sense, especially in the immediate aftermath of the quarantine orders. There just wasn't time to create something else, so they had to roll with what they had and adjust as nimbly as possible.

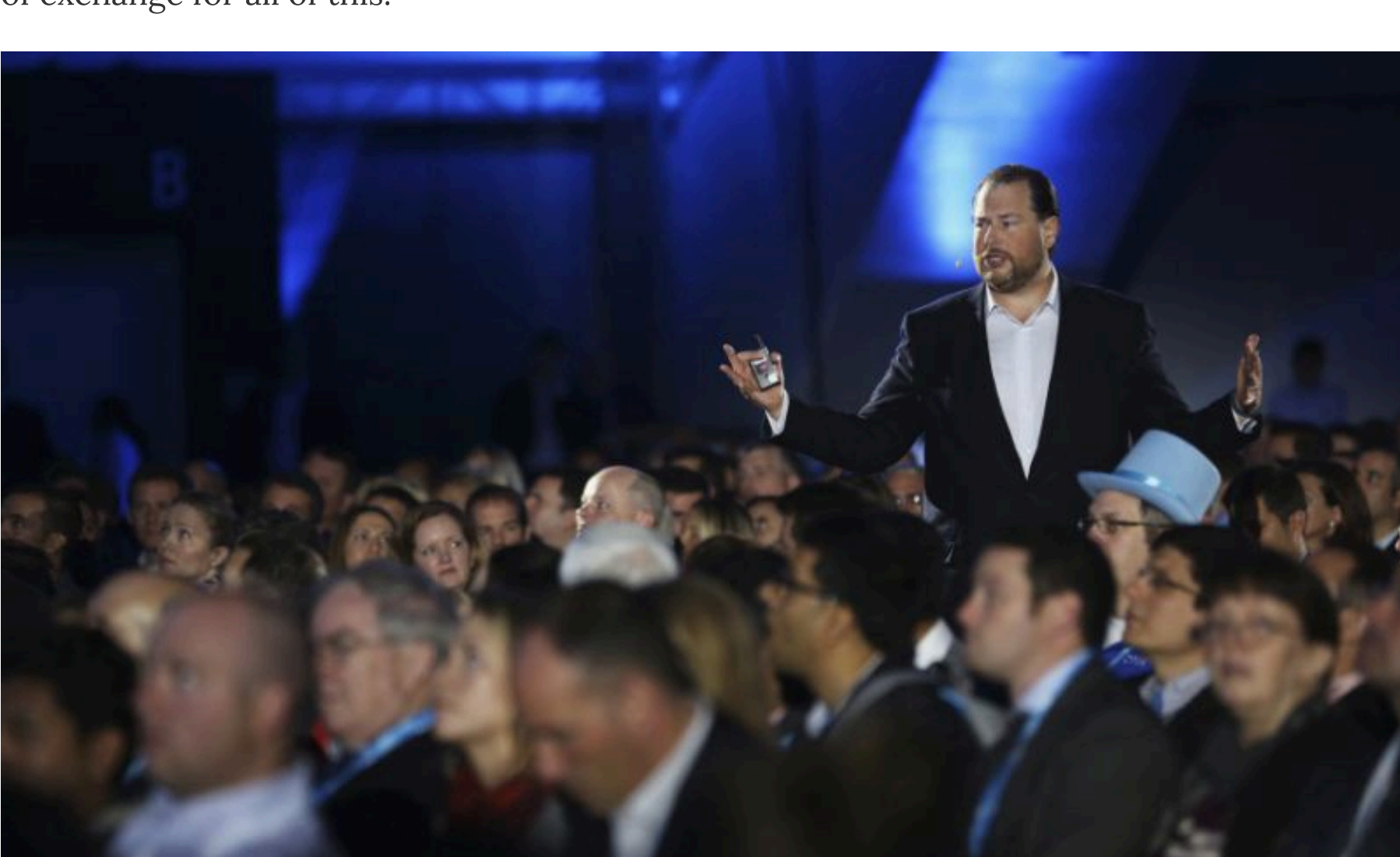
At the events that I attended, the content in the keynote looked and sounded like the content we expected in the past. Familiar topics, lots of talking, some slides. And while what I saw was recorded, it *felt* live. It wasn't spontaneous, exactly, but had the definitive feel of a keynote address, at least in terms of the immediacy of the speaker. And at around 20 to 30 minutes long, it didn't have the opportunity to become embarrassingly dull.

This is basically a webinar: utilitarian content, with simple production value, for a very targeted audience. We don't think (nor do our clients) that this rises to the level of “executive keynote.” There needs to be more sparkle for top-level leadership. We can and should be more creative and engaging.

Cutting edge end of the spectrum: bring the audience on location

With more time, our clients could be more ambitious. Article Group is planning an event now, for the fall, that takes the concept of a keynote and turns it on its head. Let me explain.

Keynotes are where smart people take what they have learned and bring that experience to an audience. They can be iconic, inspiring, and impactful. Not to mention a great rallying point for a company's employees, customers, and partners. The keynote hall is the medium of exchange for all of this.



We can't connect in person anymore. It's time to think differently.

But if there is no keynote hall, the medium of exchange is gone. You *can't* bring the content to the live audience, because there is no live audience. It's just a camera on one end and an isolated viewer on the other.

The project we're working on changes this dynamic. We're not taking a luminary out of his/her/their element to meet an audience. We're taking viewers on location, giving them a direct connection to the content. Think about it: It could be an incredibly interesting journey to have a thought leader be our guide at the robotics lab, creative studio, or factory floor.

It takes some ingenuity to do it this way (not to mention a little easing of social distancing). But it also makes sense to completely rethink content that used to be reserved for an onstage keynote. It's a fundamentally different context that lets us leverage the medium as much as we can, without any regard for what happened in the old conference halls.

Of course this isn't a panacea. For many of our clients, there is no literal “place” to take the audience. Not all R&D labs are interesting. Sometimes there are privacy issues. While the overall cost would be way, way, *way* lower than a traditional conference, budgets would need to be refactored to move resources from in-person requirements (e.g. catering for 10,000 people) to higher-end production. And, perhaps most importantly, brand new skills and workflows need to be developed. It's not perfect, to say the least, and most companies will need a great partner to pull it off.

A middle ground: the keynote show

A third flavor we've worked on bridges these two ideas. On one end is keynote content we're used to seeing. On the other end is leaning as far into video production as possible, going on location, and making something on the level of entertainment. The middle ground is to take the medium as far as it can go, while still delivering what is ostensibly a traditional keynote.

Most keynotes we work on have an executive talking about industry and company news, new product launches, some thought leadership, and, of course, that old chestnut, customer stories. This doesn't need to change. Record your speaker a few times, cut together the best footage, and you've got a good start. It's also familiar territory in a lot of ways, in terms of content and workflow, and there's comfort in that.

Now take that, and make it a show.

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TV talk and news shows are a good blueprint for new keynote content.

Firstly, the approach to the format can be tweaked to allow for a little more dynamism in production. Here we can take our cues from television. Have a second camera angle, add an OTS (TV speak for the “over the shoulder” graphic on a newscast), edit in cuts to keep the content moving. There are decades of examples from television, and we can and should borrow from that.

A second inspiration we can turn to, especially for complex ideas, is explanatory journalism. Cutting from a talking head speaker to a rich, animated explanation of what he/she/they are talking about is impossible on the keynote stage. Those explainer videos require *perfect* timing between voiceover and visuals, and that's too risky in a live show. But now we can fix any timing mistakes in editing.

And there's a huge benefit to leveraging this kind of communication. Splicing that style of video into a larger keynote address meets viewers' expectations of internet edu-tainment, varies up the content, and is more likely to keep viewers engaged. Perhaps most importantly, it has greater potential to land ideas more effectively, which is the point of the content in the first place.

Finally, those customer stories we're all so fond of? Those are their own cutaway videos, almost like a “special report” on a newscast, or a “digital short” on SNL (just nowhere near as funny). With proper introduction, they'll be a seamless part of a show and a nice change of pace.

The workflow is a little different from a traditional keynote, too. There's greater emphasis on storyboarding phases and editing cycles. It can be done efficiently, but it does add an extra tract of work to a keynote.

So what's a keynote to do?

Companies have a difficult decision in front of them. It's reasonable to feel comfortable in old workflows and, after all, events *were growing*. But we think it's a mistake to reuse old models in a new world.

Instead, let's communicate more interestingly and effectively. Yes, it may require new skills like editing and animation, but these skills are in abundance. Yes, it will require new workflows, but experienced partners can help produce content and share best practices.

So go for it. Get out of your comfort zone. Make a show.



Joe Lazar
President

Joe is an expert in branding, marketing, and communicating executive vision. He loves a good guitar, woodshop, and fly rod.

Joe Lazar



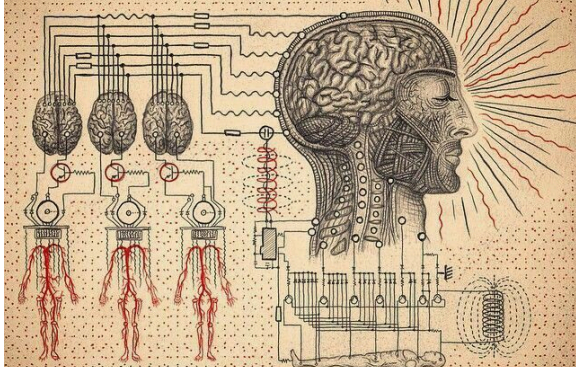
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