Stepping into 2D: Moving the Publisher Exhibit Online

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A post from Feeding the Elephant: A Forum for Scholarly Communications. This is the first of a series on how scholarly societies, publishers, and attendees are coping with the challenges of the virtual conference.

A guest post by Hajni G. Selby, Director of Programming and Conferences, Organization of American Historians

To say the events of 2020 were unexpected is a significant understatement. During the summer and fall of 2019, the 2020 OAH Annual Meeting was shaping up to be one of the most robust and engaging meetings in recent years. The conference was to take place in Washington, D.C., during a critical presidential election year, on the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment and the 150th anniversary of the 15th Amendment. The conference dates corresponded with the height of the cherry blossom season, the exhibit hall was sold out, the new Hub Fair, which connected attendees to agencies, consultants, and firms who hire historians outside the academy, had finally come to fruition, and pre-registration indicated a record number of attendees. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, brought everything to a hard stop less than three weeks from our scheduled start date. We were thrust into crisis mode and looking at ways to salvage 18 months of work and expectations.

As the Zoom platform became more mainstream in education, we knew it could be utilized to present sessions, but what we needed to determine was a way to bring value to our exhibitors. They had purchased space where they expected to present new titles, sell books, and connect with potential authors. We had very limited resources—essentially our website and a web developer—and no previous experience in presenting a virtual exhibit hall. We browsed other virtual exhibit halls, but many mimicked our standard exhibitor list—simply linking the name of the exhibitor with their website—and we wanted more. What we wanted to provide was a virtual booth, navigable from an exhibit hall that gave a sense of entering exclusive space. After extensive web searches, we identified several beneficial features we could utilize, and with our web designer, created the new template for our virtual hall.

The OAH Virtual Exhibit Hall is arranged by sponsorship level, presenting the higher level sponsors with the largest real estate. Each exhibitor who falls below those levels is presented equally as a smaller booth. We determined that this layout visually represented the level of exposure various exhibitors would have received at the conference. Each exclusive “booth” offers the same choices. Just as in-person booths come with a drape, tables, and chairs, each exhibitor has the opportunity to post a description, a direct link to their sales page, direct links to their social media or other pertinent pages, images, videos, logos, and contact information. The depth of information that an exhibitor can post is entirely up to them. Some chose to take advantage of all offerings, while others did not.
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We knew we had to market the site in a manner that would appeal to OAH members. We worked with some volunteer exhibitors to record a Buzz Panel where representatives from seven publishers highlighted some of their newest titles, which were then offered in an accompanying raffle. The link to the raffle information appeared in the session as well as in the sidebar of the exhibit hall. Using social media and email marketing to publicize the opportunity and the hall in general, we alerted OAH members, who then responded, resulting in a significant increase in views. We ensured social media buzz by retweeting posts by exhibitors highlighting their booths and sales deadlines. The link to the exhibit hall was presented as the first sidebar option on the session directory, and it also appeared on all session pages.

Many of our exhibitors have responded very well to the options we made available to them. They appreciated the speed in which we provided an alternative and the level of detail they could present. Though our platform offered a lot of advantages for exhibitors, it did not compare to the face-to-face networking of an in-person experience. If we were to move to an online format in the future, we would consider using an off-the-shelf platform. The need for virtual conferencing has spurred an influx of technology that would benefit both the exhibitor and attendee, and includes technologies that far surpass the resources of a small in-house IT department. Options include 3D customizable virtual booths, video welcomes, ability to upload booth representative avatars, and most importantly live chat features, where both exhibitors and attendees can see who is sharing their virtual space, allowing for group chat, and one-on-one video chats. Essentially, the in-person experience is mimicked as closely as possible via the two-dimensional screen. The downside to an off-the-shelf product is cost, but if an association is offering this option, it should be a very viable alternative to the in-person experience. However, exhibitors do need to be committed to staff their booths and engage those visiting them.

Viewers primarily used the Virtual Exhibit Hall as an in-depth resource. The hall provided them with a collection of relevant publishers and service providers that they could conveniently access and explore.
a collection of relevant publishers and service providers that they could conveniently access and explore. The platform was used to find information on the latest publications, offerings, and supplemental material, and to purchase books at deep discounts. The pages listed specific contacts, which opened the way for communication. If attendees have the opportunity to access a virtual hall, they should take advantage of the nature of the platform and explore all the links, videos, and images provided at their leisure. Attendees often miss information at in-person booths due to heavy traffic or disengaged booth personnel. The online platform allows each attendee to fully explore the contents of a booth in either one or many visits without the burden of interruption or awkward encounters. If the exhibit hall platform includes a chat feature, however, attendees should not shy away from connecting with the booth representatives. The exhibitors are taking part to meet, connect, and engage with attendees; specifically they are looking to meet new authors, discover new topics, and share new information. Exhibitors will often gauge their relevance to a specific audience and conference by the level of interaction they encounter, so if attendees are interested in certain exhibitors, they should let them know.

What can publishers do to get noticed online?

The events of 2020 have opened up uncharted territories that are brimming with opportunities. Publishers should not shy away from the virtual platform. Although the in-person conference may feel more engaging, an online conference can put them in front of a much larger and more diverse audience. By maximizing the tools the virtual platform provides, publishers have the opportunity to express themselves in various ways and grab the attention of those they might otherwise miss at an in-person conference, including new attendees who were formerly unable to attend the in-person event.

Publishers will be required to look beyond the standard print ad template and perhaps outside of their comfort zones. In order to get noticed, publishers should diversify their advertising media, develop items such as a welcome video, quick videos with authors highlighting their books, explore trivia games, or book competitions. If live chat is available, publishers should be the first to engage their viewers. Most live chat features will show who is viewing a booth, so it is important to ensure that there is a live representative during show hours and say hi first! Just as in the in-person conference, engaging the attendee may make the difference between a brief browse and a vital connection. Marketing teams should create bright and attractive banner ads, easy links to purchase books, and booth personnel profiles. Let viewers get to know you. There are so many opportunities to engage attendees within the virtual booth space that are fun, interactive, and leave a lasting impression. If budget permits, publishers should consider getting in front of viewers in different online spaces. This can be done by purchasing banner ads within the conference platform, exploring email blasts, or sponsoring digital happy hour receptions.

Most conference planners are very open-minded and willing to try new things in order to ensure a great experience for their exhibitors and attendees. Publishers should feel free to contact them with suggestions or requests.
Publishers shouldn’t be afraid to explore different ways to engage their audience. The Buzz Panel, organized by the University of South Carolina Press, was a great way to highlight new titles and drive traffic to the participating press pages. Most conference planners are very open-minded and willing to try new things in order to ensure a great experience for their exhibitors and attendees. Publishers should feel free to contact them with suggestions or requests. You may have seen things that worked great...or not.

With so many in-person conference cancellations this past year, the online conferencing industry is booming, and with it opportunities for online engagement. Many associations are exploring new platforms, even if they are not planning to cancel any conferences, as an opportunity to expand their network and reach. Publishers—and event planners for that matter—need to take the time and not shy away from the unfamiliar, but embrace it and maximize its potential. Instagram anyone?

Hajni Selby is the Director of Programming and Conferences at the OAH. In partnership with committees and affiliated associations, she develops the educational programming of the OAH Annual Meeting and designs, plans, and implements all conference activities and events, logistics, and marketing strategies. Hajni's main focus over the last several years has been on increasing accessibility to the conference and making the contents available to a wider audience. Hajni has an Honors Bachelor of Science in Archaeological Science from the University of Toronto, and a Masters of Arts in Egyptology from the University of Liverpool. She can be reached at meetings@oah.org.

Have something to say on this topic? Reply to this post or email the Elephant about writing for us. We welcome submissions from stakeholders on all sides of scholarly publishing.