

[Virtual Conference Exhibits from the Publisher's Point of View](#)

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A guest post by Ann Bingham, Exhibits and Awards Coordinator, UNC Press

“How many conferences do you think will be canceled this spring because of COVID-19?” One of my colleagues in acquisitions asked me this in late February, and I didn’t have an answer then. That question was the first time that I began to consider the possibility that our spring conference schedule might not happen as planned. Now, months later with multiple virtual exhibits under my belt and knowing it will be at least a year before UNC Press attends a conference in person, that question reminds me of how far we’ve come.

We put together our first virtual exhibit in just a day or two. Days before we were supposed to go to San Antonio for the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP), the city declared a state of emergency after the release of a patient who had tested positive for COVID-19. As a result, we pulled out of the meeting.

This decision caused a little bit of a logistical nightmare that was further complicated by the question, what do we do now? My colleagues in acquisitions were able to move their appointments with authors to a virtual platform, but we also had books that needed to be promoted to conference attendees.

Our virtual exhibit for AWP was born out of a conversation with our digital media coordinator, Anna Faison. As I was discussing options with her, we realized the most effective way to use social media to promote our books would be to set up a page on our website where we could direct people. It was a simple webpage. There was a brief message about our decision to pull out of the conference, our conference promo code, and the covers of the books we had intended to display linked to individual book pages. It worked for that meeting, especially considering the timing, but as we decided not to go to more meetings, we realized we needed more.

In thinking about expanding our virtual exhibits, we kept coming back to the following questions: What is the purpose of our in-person exhibits? And how do we translate that to a virtual setting?

One of the biggest challenges has been connecting our editors to current and prospective authors. Our editors can meet with people virtually, but they first have to connect. With our virtual exhibits, we've been sure to link to our editors' profiles to make them easier to find. We've also encouraged our editors to make introduction videos, welcoming people to the booth and telling them a little bit about what the editors are interested in. And although it has been a challenge, one of the things we are excited about is the chance to connect some of our newer editors, who due to budget constraints might not have been able to attend some of these conferences, with conference participants.

Promoting and selling our books was considerably easier. Adding our conference promo code and

linking the books we were planning to display to our virtual exhibit was something we figured out with the first event. And once we had time to plan, we started thinking about ways to engage people with our content. At the suggestion of several of our marketing colleagues, we put together mock booths in our conference room, then took photos of them to share on both our virtual exhibits and our social media. We also photographed book series that we wanted to highlight, award winners, and even all of our new-in-paperback titles to draw attention to them for course adoption.

The last piece we considered were all of the questions we get at our booths. How do you submit a manuscript? How do you request an exam copy? Who should I be in touch with? All of those answers are on our website, but not all of them are intuitive to find. So we put together a comprehensive FAQ designed to answer those questions and point people towards more information.

[Our virtual exhibits](#) have had a great reception. We've heard lots of good things from our staff, our board, our authors, and those who know and support our press. And looking at the most frequently visited pages on our website, our virtual exhibits are among the top.

Pieces are missing, though. We promote our virtual exhibits on our social media accounts and to our email lists, and we ask our authors to do the same. But we can't help but wonder who we are missing. Are there people who would normally have come by our booth who don't see our virtual exhibit, either because they aren't as tech-savvy or because they simply didn't notice? And even when we do connect virtually, I think we all miss the human connection of it: being able to strike up conversations with the people who stop by the booth, hearing people talk about their research, or celebrating accomplishments with our authors.

Despite that, our virtual exhibits have been a valuable tool in this time of social distancing. And we think they have the potential to be valuable even when we resume attending conferences in-person. Setting up a virtual exhibit is easy enough now that we've done it multiple times. A lot of the work that goes into preparing them—generating a book list, thinking about what we want to highlight, and promoting our exhibit to our mailing lists and social media—are all things we would do for an in-person exhibit. Using the two together, we have the opportunity to point people to one place if they lose the sheet of paper with our conference promo code or if they didn't have a chance to stop by the exhibit hall. Virtual exhibits also offer us a chance to reach conferences that we wouldn't normally have been able to attend due to location, budget constraints, or time.

I don't think virtual exhibits are anyone's ideal scenario for a conference, but they've been effective during this pandemic, and going forward I think they have the potential to enhance and expand our exhibits program.

Ann Bingham is the Exhibits and Awards Coordinator for the University of North Carolina Press.

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