

Adapting Abilities



When the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic canceled Abilities Expos for the year, event organizers had to find a way to connect disability community members with the products and services they need.

For over a decade, thousands of people with disabilities have packed convention centers to attend an Abilities Expo in large cities stretching from Los Angeles to New York. But this year looked a little different.

When the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic eliminated mass gatherings last March, Abilities Expo chairman Lew Shomer says it was necessary to create an alternative for the events, which showcase the latest prod-

ucts, resources and technologies for people with disabilities, their families, caregivers and health care professionals.

“We started looking at virtual and trying to see how we could get into virtual without having to spend a fortune so we could at least get our exhibitors and our attendees back together again,” Shomer says. “And we decided to go global rather than regional because once you’re on the internet, anybody can pop in anyway.”

Planning The Expos

But planning for the Abilities Expo in any normal year is no small feat, either. Shomer says the Abilities Expo team hoped this would be their banner year.

“If somebody has a spinal-cord injury [SCI], the first thing they think of is, ‘This isn’t going to bother me. I’m going to walk again,’” he says. “So, they’re in denial for a period of time, and once they actually realize they’re not going to be able to walk, then they’re looking for, ‘How can I make my life easier and

what kind of products are out there for me?’ And they come to our show, and they can see 50, 60 products in three hours, which would take them a year and a half if they had to go from place to place to place.”

This year, there would have been six Abilities Expos in the U.S., including Los Angeles, the New York City metro area, Chicago, Houston, Phoenix and Dallas, and one in Canada (Toronto).

With the locations chosen based on population density, this year’s sole in-person expo,



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Abilities Expo staff had to adapt physical events to a virtual platform this year because of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

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In-person Abilities Expos require at least 100,000 square feet of exhibition space for workshops, demonstrations and thousands of attendees.



held in Los Angeles last February prior to the pandemic lockdowns, attracted about 9,000 adult attendees over three days.

Once an expo city is chosen, Shomer says organizers look for a venue with at least 100,000 square feet of exhibition space, accessible parking in close proximity to the site and accessible hotels nearby. Then, they hire about eight or nine people with disabilities through an agency to help with registration, data entry and crowd control, as well as about six security officers and emergency medical technicians.

Shomer says about 60% of the vendors participate in most or all of the expos throughout the year, and 80%-85% of the companies return year after year, making it convenient for those who buy a particular product to upgrade or have repairs performed.

“We look for companies that have products that meet the show, whether it’s a converted van, whether it’s wheelchairs, whether it’s catheters and everything in between,” Shomer says. “We get a lot of people who basically built things because [for example] their child has CP [cerebral palsy] and couldn’t get into a chair, or their child couldn’t



do this, and the parents, either mother or father, come up with an idea that solves their child’s problem,

and then they say, ‘Boy, if our child has this, then there must be other people out there with the same problems,’ and then they come up with a new product. And we’re an ideal place for those people to really test the market because they’re dealing with the buyer.”

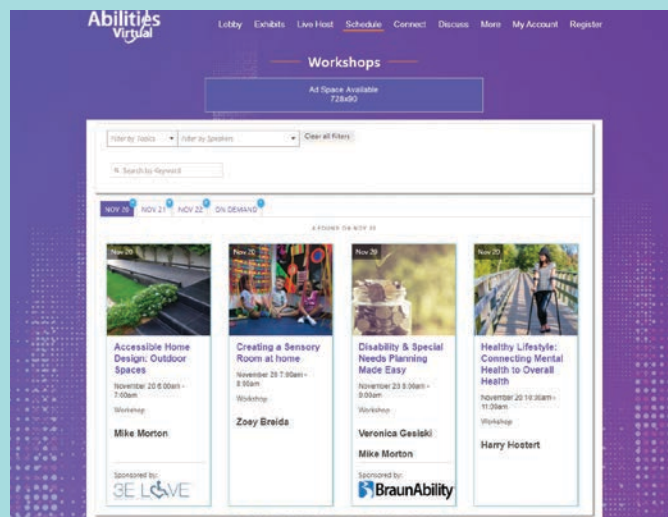
But the expos aren’t just about seeing and trying new products. There are workshop sessions, activities and performances, too.

Organizers book between 50 and 60 workshop sessions a year, with topics chosen based on attendee surveys from past expos, as well as written requests from potential speakers and current world events.

The Virtual Experience

Taking events of that scale onto a virtual platform presented a bit of a learning curve, Shomer says.

The first virtual experience ran June 19–21 and was planned in just six weeks, which Shomer says was much too short. The Abilities Expo team looked at several platforms and chose



Workshops were a part of the Abilities Expo Virtual Experience.

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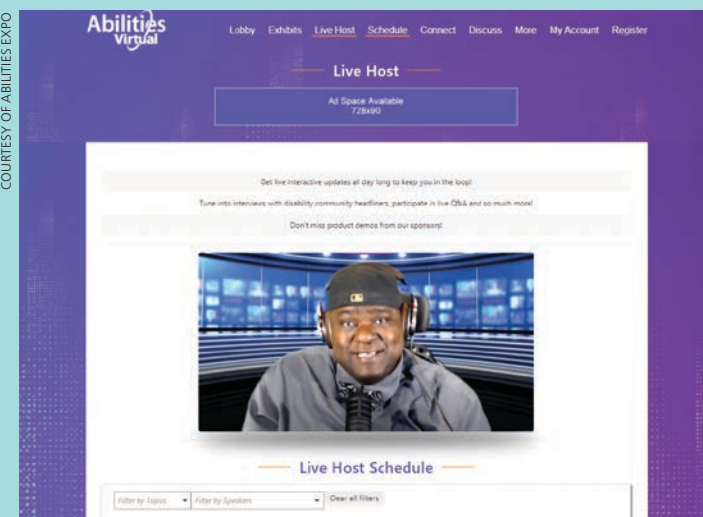
one by Expocad, which offers interactive event floor plans and virtual exhibitor marketplaces.

He says of the 82 vendors at the virtual experience, between 50 and 55 vendors had attended past live events. Vendors were given a raw virtual booth and could choose a feature package to post their branding, product information and other resource links.

Virtual attendees could preregister and admission was free, just like the physical expos. Attendees could click on a vendor’s booth and fill out a contact information form. In some cases, the vendors were live online to chat directly with customers.

The virtual experience included access to prerecorded workshops, such as traveling with a disability, how to make a home accessible and knowing when it’s time to get a service animal. While there wasn’t an opportunity for live question-and-answer sessions following the workshops, the recordings were posted online for all three days of the virtual experience, so visitors could watch them all and contact the speakers afterward. Attendees could also watch various interactive events, such as yoga and wheelchair dancing.

Shomer says of 19,000 preregistered attendees, 9,500 created some kind of activity on the platform, such as going to product vendors’ virtual booths or attending workshops.



Paul Lane emceed the Abilities Expo Virtual Experience.

COURTESY OF ABILITIES EXPO

“We found that we reached a significant number of people that had never been to a physical event and would never be able to go to a physical event, even if they lived in the same city, because of their disability,” he says. “But we also had people coming in from 43 different countries, so we had this global reach that we just never anticipated.”

That global reach was a perfect opportunity for vendors like Omeo, a hands-free, self-leveling mobility device with off-road capabilities, to continue to promote the product and interact with potential customers.

Spring Adamo, an agent representative for Omeo, says representatives have attended a handful of live Abilities Expos since 2018, including New York and Dallas once and Los Angeles twice. But participating in the virtual experience has changed their way of thinking about doing business. It took their team about two weeks to set up their live broadcast virtual booth.

Once technical glitches were adjusted, Omeo representatives could interact with people in real time and answer their questions using a Zoom video room. They also had



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Omeo representatives have had booth spaces at both physical and virtual Abilities Expos.



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Canada's Tecogics Scientific Limited, the makers of Ex N' Flex, planned on exhibiting at the live Boston and Toronto Abilities Expos this year but opted to participate in the first virtual show in June.

moderators who collected visitors' contact information if they wanted in-person trials. For the Zoom event, Adamo says about 75 people came through, but about 3,000 people visited their booth overall.

"... The benefit of the virtual is we got a certain amount of people who actually wanted to try the Omeo, so we knew those people were serious about it, whereas at a live event, we give trials all day long, but a lot of those people are just wanting to try something. They have no intention of buying," Adamo says.

For Canada's Tecogics Scientific Limited, the makers of Ex N' Flex, a motorized range of motion medical therapy device for people with limited or no mobility, the virtual event allowed engagement with a broader customer base than a traditional expo or trade show.

"A three-day event is very long, and you might not talk to the right person, or they'll

miss an aisle, or you won't be there when they came by," says Rob Clarke, a managing partner for Tecogics Scientific Limited. "And there's fatigue when you go to those also, on both sides, from both the exhibitors and the people walking around."

Clarke says the company was looking at going to Boston and Toronto for its first in-person expos this year when the lockdowns and cancellations came. No one was sure how the virtual experience would work, but Clarke says it was fun to be part of something new.

The company's virtual booth had two operational videos and photos of the products, along with a form people could fill out to receive a quote within an hour. Clarke says they received over 300 direct contacts.

The virtual experience was positive for workshop presenter Cindy Kolbe, too.

Kolbe is the mother of U.S. Paralympic swimmer Beth Kolbe and author of a book and blog called *Struggling with Serendipity*. The memoir, which was published last year, details how Cindy coped with depression and guilt, while also finding moments of serendipity, after she and then-14-year-old Beth

were in a car accident on May 20, 2000. While driving to their home in Tiffin, Ohio, Cindy fell asleep at the wheel, causing their car to flip three times and leaving Beth with a C6-7 level quadriplegic SCI.

Cindy and Beth started going to Abilities Expos as attendees in 2002, and last year Cindy gave in-person workshops in Chicago, at the San Mateo Abilities Expo in San Francisco and in Boston. Cindy says she loves the sense of community at the expos and had more in-person workshops scheduled this year before she was invited to record a presentation for the virtual experience.

"There's nothing like being in front of a big audience, and I was lucky that many of my workshops did have quite a few people who came to listen," she says. "That is always a positive experience also, I feel, and it's an opportunity for the speaker and the audience to interact with each other directly."

Cindy prepared a slideshow for her virtual workshop, which focused on her "Top 10 Tips for Sharing Your Story." She says about 800 people clicked on her page on the platform, and she received over a dozen emails and scheduled Zoom video calls with several people.

She's looking forward to presenting at more in-person expos, but she'd also participate in a future virtual experience.

"I think we need things like the virtual experience during the pandemic to support each other. Too many people are isolated at this time," Cindy says.

Looking Forward

The Abilities Expo received such positive feedback from attendees and vendors about the first virtual experience that organizers scheduled another virtual show Nov. 13-15.

One factor Shomer says was lacking in the first virtual experience was complete accessibility for people with hearing or vision impairments, so they moved to a new platform through Unity Events. This platform also offered more features, and Shomer says the content would be available for two weeks.

In addition, workshop speakers had the option to do a live presentation or upload a pre-

recorded video and be available online after the broadcast for a live question-and-answer session.

Looking toward 2021, Shomer says proceeding with the in-person expos as scheduled will depend on the pandemic's developments. The team hoped to add a show in Miami in 2021, but because they're uncertain if the Los Angeles show will go on March 12-14 as planned, they're leaving the dates open in case they have to postpone it again. They now plan to launch in Miami in November 2022.

They may consider doing more virtual shows next year, but at this point, they'd like the virtual events to be a complement to the live shows rather than a competitor.

"We find a more sophisticated buyer today than we did 12 years ago," Shomer says. "The buyers will go to the internet and find out what they're looking for, and then they'll come and seek the vendors that are at the show and have as much information as the vendors. We find that the group of different types of either injuries or diseases network much closer than they ever did before because we provide that as a feature of the show. So, we're finding that the community has expanded. And we're bringing more people into the community, and by bringing more people into the community, they know people."

For information on the Abilities Expo virtual experience or live events, visit abilities.com. ■



Cindy Kolbe, left, and her daughter, Beth, have presented workshops at live Abilities Expos, and Cindy presented one during the first Abilities Expo Virtual Experience in June.