

EdWeek Market Brief

Market Trends

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4 Ways Companies Are Being Forced to Rethink Customer-Facing Conferences

School Districts Are Demanding Intimate, In-Person Events With Curated Content

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The vendor-lined convention halls, the packed panel discussions, the lines for coffee.

After a few years in which pandemic upheavals relegated in-person events to virtual meeting rooms, education conferences are back, and many are bigger than ever.

But large-scale industry events aren't the only in-person gatherings that have returned in force. Individual K-12 providers are also ramping up their own company-run, customer-facing events — which play a critical role in those organizations' efforts to solidify relationships with district and school leaders and educators.

Conferences put on by companies in the education industry are typically aimed at providing educators with professional development opportunities tied to the company's products, and directly connecting the organization itself to its customers, partners, and stakeholders to gain feedback and boost relationships.

The ability to build those connections — and expand teacher and school leaders' product knowledge — is crucial for many organizations as they work to avoid winding up on the cutting block once federal pandemic relief funds end next year and districts grapple with a range of financial challenges.

At the same time, the COVID era changed the expectations for many attendees of those company events, pushing organizations to innovate and recalibrate their conferences for the post-pandemic era.

EdWeek Market Brief spoke with education company leaders and others who help organizations plan events about how they have adapted their customer-facing gatherings meet new demands from district clients — and what they've learned from their successes and struggles staging their events.

1. Education Companies Have Been Surprised by Customers' Demand for In-Person Events.

When the pandemic hit and upended the events industry, some thought it would lead to an industry-wide shift away from in-person events as the default option and into virtual and hybrid gatherings.

But that's not what happened, said Liz Caruso, a corporate event planner and CEO of Techsytalk, a community for event planners across industries. Overwhelmingly, her clients tell her they want to be in-person as much as possible, while some also crave supplemental hybrid options.

“People were dying to do that,” she said of face-to-face gatherings. “We’re definitely seeing a huge push from all of our clients wanting to be in-person as much as possible.”

Many companies in the K-12 space are doubling down on in-person events as well. Any hybrid and virtual experiences are largely separate, curated experiences with much smaller attendance.

This year at learning management platform provider Instructure’s annual conference, InstructureCon, some sessions, including all mainstage content, were recorded and provided for free as a post-event experience, said Heather McArthur, VP of brand, content, and campaigns.



If we went to this 2,000-person event, you would feel like a number, and not like a name anymore.

*Kasey Bratcher
Chief Services Officer, Carnegie Learning*

The company is still assessing what virtual options could look like next year, but the dilemma that McArthur, and event organizers across the industry, struggle with is how to provide virtual and hybrid offerings without diluting the value and experience of attending in-person.

“We just have to strike that balance,” she said.

When its National Institutes conference returned in-person for the first time two years ago, Carnegie Learning offered a separate virtual weekend as an option, and it worked to recreate a high-touch, intimate experience, said Chief Services Officer Kasey Bratcher. Afterwards, however, interest in a virtual option dwindled, and the conference is back to in-person only.

At the Center for Model Schools’ annual conference, less than 100 of its roughly 5,000 attendees chose the hybrid or virtual

Rethinking Customer-Facing Conferences: 4 Takeaways

option the organizers made available, said Josh Starr, managing partner of the Center for Model Schools, part of education giant Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

The organization — which offers leadership-focused consulting services to districts and sits under HMH's overall consulting services division — added the hybrid option since it didn't represent a heavy lift logistically to stream sessions, and the option offers attendees multiple points of entry into the conference.

The plan moving forward is to check in each year and assess demand for virtual options, he said, and see if it's worth continuing to make the minimal investment required to provide them.

The shift away from virtual and hybrid events has posed significant challenges to event tech companies, which saw rapid growth during the pandemic and have now experienced a sharp decline in business.

Many of those tech providers are now short-staffed and struggling to keep up with remaining customers' needs, said Caruso. That means organizations staging online events, such as education companies, might not be able to access on-demand support and troubleshooting if the applications or software that organizations rely on to support their in-person, virtual, or hybrid events go down.

Prioritize in-person gatherings.

Education company leaders said they've seen more interest in its fully in-person conference experiences than virtual or hybrid, leading some to downsize those options or create separate virtual events. Revisit the plan annually to ensure remote or hybrid options are still meeting demand.

Get engaged. Many conference-goers are tired of lengthy presentations and sitting in large audiences for hours on end, experts said, and they're eager to attend events that are smaller, interactive, and focused on hands-on learning. Offer a variety of engaging sessions to prevent burnout and provide attendees a greater return on their investment.

Manage growth carefully. Don't expand capacity or make drastic changes to a conference without taking stock of what attendees enjoy about it already, and whether or not those changes would alter its ability to have a similar impact in the future. Consider other options to expand access, like increasing the event's frequency.

Make it personal. Provide educators with a way to tailor their experience to their specific needs, especially if the conference has grown significantly and there are multiple sessions overlapping at the same time. One option is to offer an event-specific app, where attendees can follow curated learning tracks, another is to have organizers reach out to districts and educators who are planning to attend before the event to help them plan their schedule.

"We're finding even more reliable [event tech companies] are having service issues," she said. "They can't keep up or they're not innovating as fast as they were."

2. At Company Events, There's a Premium on Engaging, Interactive Sessions

Across industries, many conference attendees are wary of long presentations and panel discussions where they don't feel engaged, Caruso said. She's seeing an increased interest, especially since the pandemic, in breakout sessions that incorporate experiential learning into them.

"People are really wanting that small-group interaction," she said.

Nonprofit curriculum provider EL Education has been holding its Elevate conference for nearly 30 years. But the need to go virtual and get creative during the pandemic also prompted it to shake things up once the event returned to being held in-person, said Natalie Taylor, managing director of professional learning products at EL. That meant including more engaging sessions focused on group work and solving real issues educators face.

"There is no longer an expectation of sit-and-get professional learning. Attendees want the immersive experience. They want hands-on learning. They want to be engaged with the professional capital that they bring into a room and to be able to utilize their own talents and expertise to help others grow in their practice," Taylor said. "Our conference is anchored around that premise."

Next year the organization is looking to pilot more immersive scenarios that include gamification and potentially artificial intelligence technologies, she said.

"Imagine a session where an educator can grapple through problems of practice with other educators, but the classroom is simulated," she said. "We're thinking about those type of real-time learning experiences for our next conference offering."

The pandemic pushed EL Education to leverage technology as an enhancement to its national conference, Taylor said, and the organization is excited about the opportunity to experiment with technology to "better serve our diverse customer needs."

3. Companies Are Weighing Growth Against Fears of Events Losing Intimacy

As demand for products to help with academic support, and later, learning recovery surged during and after COVID, many education companies experienced rapid growth.

For companies like Carnegie Learning, growth meant a surge of interest in the company's professional learning conference, the National Institutes, as well. The pent-up demand for in-person events in the wake of pandemic lockdowns only added fuel to the fire, but the company wanted to be careful about expanding the event, Bratcher said.

The Institutes' close-knit sessions and programming are what makes it unique, she said, and the organization was worried that expanding attendance would take away from the experience.

"If we went to this 2,000-person event, you would feel like a number, and not like a name anymore," she said.

The company found that the event works best when it's capped at about 300 people and a 4:1 staff-to-attendee ratio, she said. To stay within those limits but still provide access to people who wanted to attend, Carnegie expanded the number of Institutes, and this past year grew to offering two weeks of math institutes and one week of a literacy institute. The company plans to add a third math week in 2024 as well.

"Our goal is still, how do we keep it this kind of small-ish intimate group, where they feel like people know their names, they can get to know us as Carnegie Learning folks, they can learn things themselves," she said. "And then hopefully they leave feeling super excited," she said.

4. Personalized Conference Experiences Are the New Norm

As education organizations and their professional development conferences have expanded in recent years, so has the need to help attendees manage their time and prevent them from getting overwhelmed by options.

At EL Education's Elevate, which drew 1,250 attendees in 2023, the nonprofit offers an app to help users navigate the conference's 80-plus sessions. The app also helped alert attendees when sessions they signed up for were almost full and message other attendees they're looking to network with.

For the first time this year, attendees were able to use it to follow specific learning pathways depending on their role in their school system, whether they're a classroom teacher or a district leader.

At the 5,000-person Model Schools Conference, Starr, a former K-12 schools superintendent said his team reaches out to districts and schools that are planning to attend so they can help create the type of experience educators are looking to have and ensure they meet their professional development goals.

For long-term customers that regularly send dozens of educators to the conference, Starr said they work to find sessions that will fit into the overall improvement strategy customers have already formulated with the Center. For newer attendees who aren't existing customers, they reach out proactively to talk about their district's goals for attending.

"It's a big conference, and it's a lot to get through. If we know you're struggling with Tier 1 supports or MTSS, or you have a new superintendent and need a strategic plan, or you're working on personalized learning, we want to point you in the right direction," he said.

Being able to help attendees craft their schedules is increasingly standard in the conference industry overall, said Caruso, of Techsytalk.

"People really expect that level of curation at this point," she said.

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While company conferences have gotten bigger, some attendees' capacity for social interaction has decreased overall as well, she's found.

"In the industry, we talk a lot about people's social meter running out a lot faster than [before the pandemic.] People are feeling super burned out at these big, multi-day events," she said.

The dwindling energy for all-day events has created more interest in tools like apps to help conference-goers connect with each other digitally at their own convenience, she said.

At this year's InstructureCon, the company created specific summits and meetups for attendees to help them focus their networking and learn from the people they're looking to connect with, McArthur said, including a partner summit, executive summit, and artificial intelligence meetup.

Topic-focused meetups at the event can help bring together attendees who share interests, even if they're coming from a range of backgrounds, she said. The AI meetup discussion included Instructure's chief technology officer and a lead product manager, who shared their thoughts and experiences on working with AI tools.

"We wanted to just facilitate a conversation," McArthur said. "A big lesson learned is that being able to facilitate the right conversations with different people and create an environment where they can do that is really a key driver."

This past year, InstructureCon sold out at 2,500 attendees. For next year's conference, which will be held in Las Vegas, the company's goals are even bigger: It's expanding capacity and wants to have 3,200 attendees.

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