

# SOPHE

COVID-19  
TRANSITION  
CASE STUDY



CLIENT:  
**SOCIETY OF PUBLIC HEALTH EDUCATION**

INDUSTRY:  
**HEALTH EDUCATION**

EVENT:  
**VIRTUAL SOPHE ANNUAL CONFERENCE**

REGISTRANTS:  
**OVER 800**

# Industry Changes

The COVID-19 pandemic caused the event industry to go into a tail-spin. As we entered into the busiest time of year for on-site events and in-person conferences, organizations all over the world were forced to cancel and postpone their events. Many non-profits and associations use conferences as a time to assemble members, celebrate accomplishments, generate revenue, and learn together. Some organizations did not want to miss out on these opportunities and have taken advantage of Virtual Conference platforms. The Society of Public Health Education is one of those organizations.



# 71st Annual SOPHE Conference

The Society of Public Health Education, or SOPHE, was preparing to host their 71st Annual Conference in Atlanta when health protocols required them to transition their conference from an on-site event to a virtual one. Typically, the conference lasted three days and consisted of plenary sessions with 45 concurrent sessions. It also included additional events like an award ceremony, an exhibit hall, and several networking and chapter events. Organizers also hoped to include health-focused events like self-care and yoga sessions and walking challenges.

Within her first three months with the organization, Maricela Arias-Cantu, MS, MHA, Director of Professional Development for SOPHE, had to transition the entire conference to the virtual world. Luckily for SOPHE, this is not her first experience with virtual events. Maricela had practice with virtual exhibit halls and live streaming from past roles, which gave her an edge at the task at hand.

When choosing a Virtual Conferencing platform for SOPHE, Maricela looked to the past again. After remembering a recommendation from a former colleague paired with endorsements from association networking sites, Maricela had found a home for SOPHE's Virtual Conference with CommPartners.

# 1 Week Transition

SOPHE and CommPartners staff had one week to transition the 71st Annual SOPHE Conference into the Virtual SOPHE 2020 Annual Conference. For typical contracts, CommPartners prefers about eight weeks to plan a Virtual Conference of this scale, but considering circumstances, timelines had to be adjusted. As soon as SOPHE's Executive Committee made the decision to go virtual and sat down for their first meeting with CommPartners, Maricela and her team were ready with all the necessary information to get the process rolling. Maricela's familiarity with virtual events kicked in, "as far as having all those different steps in place and what kind of information you need to provide to build the site, making sure we have our certificates, our database, all of that was not new."

Maricela attributes the success of the transition to two strong teams working together, "everything was moving so quickly, but it had a rhythm to it – we were all in sync." CommPartners staff consistently maintained priorities for Maricela's team to focus on while Maricela's team adapted to changing circumstances and roles.

“ *I don't think we could have done it in that short period of time if we didn't have teamwork* ”

The SOPHE Virtual Conference was a unique case as states were beginning to ban large gatherings and a rapid response was required. CommPartners staff requests at least 4 weeks notice during these changing times.





# Virtual sophe

annual  
conference



- Earn mo
- Engage
- Connect

## Going Virtual

Some accommodations were made for the transition. For example, what was supposed to be a three-day conference, was expanded to cover four weeks. That also included content. Due to the short timeframe, some of the original conference content was tabled to be offered at another time. You may see the postponed health-focused events offered virtually, soon. Instead, the team decided to focus their attention on a few key events, like the Oral Sessions, the Exhibit Hall, and the Poster Promenade. The Poster Promenade became Poster Promenade Oral Sessions and the traditional poster hall was transformed into e-posters, uploaded to the site where attendees could view them at their leisure.

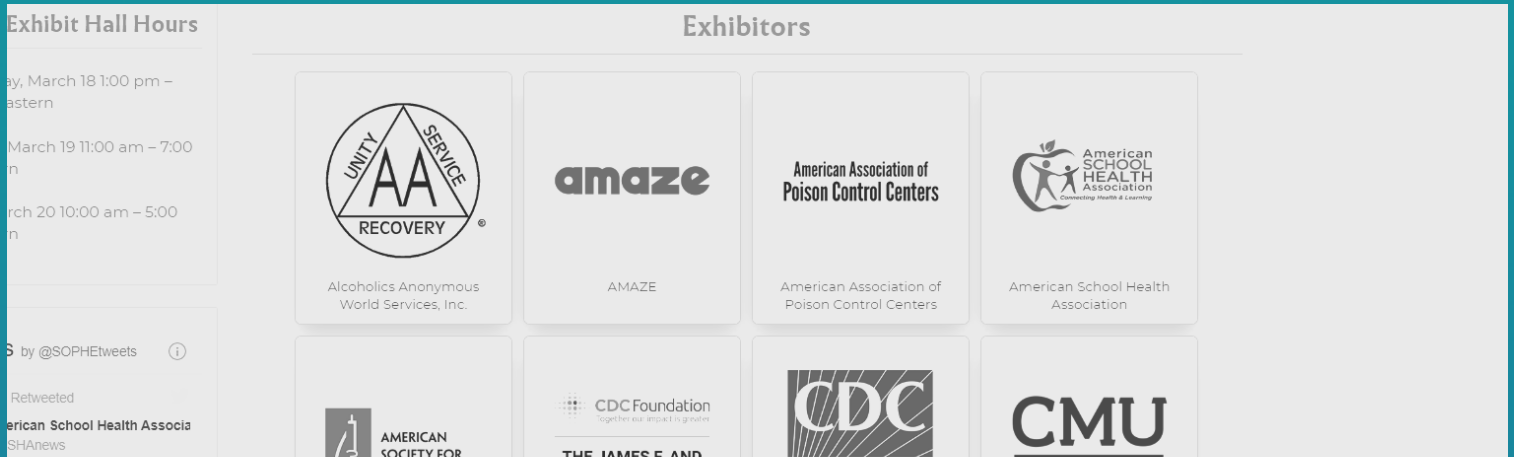
The SOPHE Virtual Conference featured a Virtual Exhibit Hall. To demonstrate the value of the hall, Maricela says look at the data, “it’s the second most viewed page on the Conference site, behind the home page.” In the hall, each exhibitor had a branded booth, where they uploaded a company description plus any other media they desire, such as PDFs, videos, or links. There was also a chat feature so attendees and exhibitors could converse.

Other features of the SOPHE Virtual Conference site Maricela was excited to use:

- Conference Evaluations: SOPHE had never included evaluations as part of their conferences previously. "People are responding and giving us instant feedback".
- Resources Page: This page was a hub for information for things like COVID-19 updates and the SOPHE app.
- Custom Agenda and Session Layout: The presentation of the speaker bios and session summaries added to the experience.

While the SOPHE Virtual Conference agenda did require adjusting, registration fees did not change. "I think it's important not to devalue the price of the content, just because it's virtual", says Maricela, "the content is still the same." With fees remaining the same, registration reached just over 800 and 18 registering through Elevate, the Virtual Conference website.

*“ I think it's important not to devalue the price of the content, just because it's virtual ”*



Attendees and speakers adjusted well to the transition, especially since many of the presenters teach online, giving them an advantage in the eLearning platform. For those that may not have been at ease, they had SOPHE Session Contacts. Session Contacts were SOPHE staff trained by CommPartners staff to sit-in during sessions to ensure presenters had everything they needed before and during a presentation. Maricela credits her strong team once again, as SOPHE staff that were not part of the Professional Development team willingly jumped in to train as Session Contacts.

Once the SOPHE Virtual Conference was running and Maricela's team was comfortable working as Session Contacts, Jen Livingston, Operations Manager, was impressed with their ambition to take the next step, "they started doing things like [...] playing exhibitor commercials, they found unique ways to market their membership in their pre-conference time, those are all things they took upon themselves." Jen believes anyone getting involved with Virtual Conferencing should be comfortable with the technology they are using.



# Looking Ahead

Are more Virtual Events in SOPHE's future? Maricela hopes so. She believes virtual events enhance live conference events as well as reach an entirely new market. She believes virtual events can be a resource that builds a larger learning community, "not just to help our members, even engage new members, even reach out to non-members..." 12 registrants of the SOPHE Virtual Conference were non-members.

While the Virtual SOPHE 2020 Annual Conference may be a unique case, CommPartners knows many organizations have similar situations. Virtual Conferences are a viable solution for organizations that want to maximize the great opportunities an in-person event can provide but can no longer enjoy.

Consider eLearning as part of your long-term solutions as your organization becomes more prepared.