

Brave, bold and big: Hosting a virtual event

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Event organisers need to "go big or go home" in order to keep their events and businesses alive at a time when social distancing regulations and masks make it impossible to follow tried-and-tested formulas.



To go big, one needs to be bold. Events ranging from exhibitions and concerts to charity fundraisers like the Algoa FM Big Walk for Cancer presented by the Eastern Cape Department of Health, have taken a decision to spread the geographic footprint by going virtual.

Quite literally, people around the world will be walking in pink T-shirts for cancer awareness on the morning of 31 October, 2020.

For the Algoa FM marketing team and our partners in the annual Algoa FM Big Walk for Cancer – this was a brave decision because none of us had any experience in organising or running virtual events.

Our motivation? Get it right for ourselves and it automatically adds a fresh and important communication product to the mix offered by Algoa FM as a media company, which already includes radio, online, social media and physical communication platforms.

We started by breaking down the challenge. There are essentially two elements to successful events: The first is for all the infrastructure and systems to be in place and to work on the day or days. The second is for there to be participants. Without people there is no event.

Virtual events – as we have discovered through an extremely steep learning curve in the staging of the first Virtual Algoa FM Big Walk for Cancer – come with unique challenges to both these elements.

When it comes to sporting events such as the Big Walk for Cancer, the physical aspect is the simplest to adapt. In our case it was to ask participants to create their own five-kilometre course near where they live.

Due to the fun and family nature of the event, there are no winners and we do not have to record times, so it was not

necessary to introduce a special app for participants to record a record of their performance or completion. All we want our participants to do is to post on social media, in order to show their support for those affected by cancer.

One of the advantages of a virtual event is that participants can be anywhere in the world, and are not confined to a specific physical venue. It is an element which may well be included in any future events we run both for our clients and the station.

Virtual events should also be less costly to stage than their physical counterparts. From an organisational point of view, you do not require the infrastructure, extra staffing and a myriad of rights, permissions and other elements.

It also costs less to participate – you do not have to travel, book accommodation or struggle to find parking. Family and friends can enjoy participating in a more intimate and safer environment. This makes it easier to involve everyone, including the very young, the old and the infirm.

They participate because of the fun and camaraderie on the day – sharing their experiences via social media.

Marketing and communication considerations have to also go virtual, in the same way that the event is virtual.

Here we took full advantage of Algoa FM's digital platforms, which are already very successfully integrated into on-air campaigns as used by our clients.

It has already been our experience that a virtual event also benefits from "physical promotion". Our starting point was the use of radio advertising and targeted interviews. Being able to leverage the popularity and connection the presenters share with their audience and fans, provides a huge boost to an event or brand.

In addition, we have included a combination of related online platforms, radio and physical outdoor marketing – a billboard and posters in Port Elizabeth – and a digital billboard in East London. The messaging drives people to the Algoa FM website to register for the event and to find out more about cancer.

We also designed digital flyers for the running clubs, schools and our beneficiary, the Igazi Foundation, to distribute to their contacts.

Special packages were created for the sponsors to ensure that they obtain the same exposure as they would at a physical event.

The lessons we are learning and the skills that have been developed are now available to clients wanting to stage their own virtual and physical events targeting consumers in Algoa Country.

We will gladly share our experiences with client and event organisers in order to help craft the appropriate communication package required.

In brief, the process we follow is:

Have a plan:

Agree on the objectives and from those, develop a strategy and transform it into a plan. The strategy should focus on communicating with your target market, and always relate to the objectives. The Algoa FM approach is to develop detailed plans with timelines and responsibilities. Regular meetings ensure that everything is kept on track and that we can adapt where necessary if something is working better than expected (or not at all). Our plans are also informed by budget.

A single message:

All participants and stakeholders should use the same theme and underlying message to promote the event. This includes the partners, sponsors and clients. There should be a common theme across all platforms. In Algoa's case this included radio, the media house's website, social media and out of home marketing.

Measurement and evaluation:

"The new normal" has become an annoying cliché, but virtual events are new, and there is a strong case to be made for them to be included in the "normal" mix in order to extend the reach beyond the physical.

We are constantly measuring and evaluating the way we are communicating the event, and these lessons are being shared with our sales team to assist in crafting virtual events or a combination of physical and virtual activations for our clients.

The Virtual Algoa FM Big Walk for Cancer Presented by the Eastern Cape Department of Health is being held on Saturday, 31 October 2020.

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