Running Effective Remote Events

With the public response to Coronavirus disrupting in-person team gatherings and conferences, many of our customers are adapting to remote communication at scale for the first time. Even InVisioners, who are used to day-to-day remote communication, are having to learn on the fly as we move our IRL moments to a remote environment.

We know that working remotely requires changes from how we communicate in person. The same is true for transforming large IRL events into virtual experiences. However, we've learned first hand that large remote gatherings can be successful—and this is an exciting opportunity for us to lead.

This practical how-to guide will cover everything you need to know to create fun, productive, and inclusive remote gatherings.

Before the event

A remote event requires planning like any other. Logistically, you should place more weight on up front organization because it's harder to adjust in real time in a remote setting—people aren't co-located in a backstage environment and it's more difficult to judge the mood of the room. A plus for remote events: you'll definitely save yourself stress from wrangling speakers!

Here are our recommendations to set yourself up for success.

Run a check
Making sure all attendees can access the content is *critical*. Bias toward tools and settings that allow for face-to-face communication and open dialogue—like video

and live chat. You may want to ask everyone to check that they can access the technology before hand, perhaps though office hours or a pre-event remote cocktail hour.

Video conferencing

This is your conference hall, so be mindful about how you use it! At InVision, we use Zoom Webinars for our bi-weekly all-company meetings, since it minimizes disturbances and allows us to focus on the presenters. Conferences and summits are more interactive, so when we ran our Customer Team Kickoff, we used the normal meeting where all attendees could share their voice and video.

Seeing the faces of participants and allowing for ad hoc interaction made the entire experience feel more intimate and comfortable.

Chat

Set up a Slack channel for people who are speaking, where organizers can drop notes or make schedule adjustments on the fly. If it's a multi-day event, consider creating a separate Slack channel for each day.

Also make sure you are planning for open dialogue between participants for the main event. While it may feel counterintuitive, we've found that encouraging active chat can actually help your event feel smaller and more intimate—but be sure to keep the chat focused on where the action is. That means asking your team to turn off tools like Slack in lieu of actively using the chat window to interact with the speaker and respond in real time to what they are hearing. As a speaker, it's a pretty great signal to see a slew of "+1"s pop up while you're making a point!

Scheduling

Talks, breakouts, transitions, and breaks should be timed down to the minute where possible, and leave yourself some wiggle room in case things go over. Even though your schedule will probably break down after the sessions start (let's be honest!), this degree of detail will let you adjust on the fly more easily. Make this schedule available to all speakers, and include details like the cue into each session (if you

have an MC or host), links to decks (just in case there's a technology snafu), and other notes for organizers.

Feedback

One thing we found worked really well was incorporating different methods for attendees to provide feedback. At least one presenter used polling software (PollEverywhere, Slido, or Zoom's polls feature all do the trick) to ask the audience to contribute questions and then upvote them in real time. We also sent out a Google Form survey at the end of each day to gauge how well attendees understood the presented content and capture lingering questions, which will inform future learning. Make sure you have access to this software, and take the time to set up the end-of-day forms ahead of the event so you can send them out immediately following.

Day of

The day of the event, ask your speakers to hop into a pre-event call to test their mics, backgrounds, and presentations. Remind them that they have access to the Slack channel, and make sure their questions are answered. Pro-tip: encourage them to have water on their desk since you won't be able to run onstage with a water bottle if they get a dry throat (it happens)!

Tips for remote presentations

Presenting to a remote audience can be tricky. Long talks often lose people's attention, and once your audience trails off into Slack and their open tabs, it's hard to pull them back. Here are some tips we recommend sharing with your speakers:
- Try to keep talks to 40 minutes maximum plus a few additional minutes for Q&A. While some speakers may feel like this limits them, forcing this constraint helps them get to the point faster, likely keeping the attention of their audience.
- For breakouts and workshops, make sure there is a break at least every hour, and encourage facilitators to share a detailed agenda and revisit it so the team knows where they are at in the content.
- Encourage interaction! Some speakers may wish to keep an eye on chat or switch to a Q&A from a long talk. Others use polling software to get live

responses. The best way to keep your energy up as a speaker is to borrow from the energy of the folks on the call. Instead of a raise of hands, there's nothing like asking folks to drop a word or +1 in the chat to emphasize your point.

- Like live presentations, limit the amount of text on your slides. Remind people that you'll share them and your speaker notes afterwards. Because your face and body language won't resonate in the same way, your slides need to do some of that work for you in this environment. Gifs, images, short videos, etc. can bring up the energy.

Transitions and ice breakers

How do you keep people's attention for 4 hours when they are sitting behind a screen? Make it fun and interactive! At InVision, we used several small games and moments to keep people engaged and bring some levity to the day. Here are some suggestions you might try:

- **Music!** Create a playlist ahead of time. Or, if you want to make it even more interactive, make it editable and drop it in the team channel the week before. Or even open it up jukebox style so people can add music in real time! Whicheverway, playing music during breaks keeps attention and energy focused on your remote conference while people are running to the kitchen to grab lunch.
- **Guess the desk**. Have people take a picture of their desk and send it to you with a picture of themself. Create a deck where each slide has the picture of the desk and the person, but the photo of the person is hidden until you click. The game facilitator will advance the slide, and asks people to guess (in chat or with their mics off) who it is! When someone guesses it right, click and show their face.
- **Photo slideshow**. Create a Google Deck with a slide for each member of the team (or let them duplicate a template slide and add their own). Ask them to fill it with photos that tell a story about them. During breaks, put the slideshow on autoplay while sharing your screen. You could also feature photos of teams and big moments from the previous year.
- **Cribs.** Have team members film a video of their workspace and house to share in an MTV Cribs-style format.

- **Games!** Pictionary or charades are fun games in a remote setting. Consider using whiteboard software like InVision Freehand to play pictionary, or have people act out a charade in front of their webcam.

Smaller breakouts

Zoom and many other web conferencing software allow you to create breakout groups without having to use a new link. Schedule 20 minutes through the sessions to create these small moments. This creates space for people to interact in a smaller setting and meet people they don't normally see. Here are some fun things you can do in these sessions:

- **10 things in 10**. Tell the group they have 10 minutes to find 10 things they have in common.
- **Name the team**. If the breakouts will be working together frequently throughout the day (such as in a workshop), ask them to create a name for their group.
- **Personal story**. If you used the photo slideshow idea from above, let each member of the group share their slide and talk about one of the photos they added.

Hint: At the end of the session, have someone from the group share something fun or interesting from the breakout back to the larger group. You can ask the group to adopt a speaker, or give them instructions ahead of time that elect someone more inclusively, like "the person whose middle name comes first in alphabetical order will be the group speaker."

Remote presentations 101

Remote presentations can feel daunting and different, but it doesn't have to be! At the same time, there are some basic things you can do to make the day more comfortable and to make sure your content runs smoothly.

Mics off during presentations, on during downtime

Ask everyone to check that their mic is muted when someone is speaking. As noted above, encourage people to react via the chat function of your communication tool. When the talk is over, ask people to come off mute. Leaders should encourage this open communication format by keeping conversation light and responding to people by name.

Videos on

If you were in a room, your face would be visible to your fellow presenters and attendees. Remote events are no different. Ask people to keep their cameras on and give them a reminder midday. If people need to step away for a bio break or to answer the door, ask them to turn their video off when they are away from their desk and switch it on once they are back.

Get up from your desk

During longer breaks, encourage people to step outside, refill their coffee, and stretch. Consider adding an impromptu stretching moment after a longer session to wake people up! This is also a moment to add whimsy and fun. At InVision, we had everyone change into cocktail attire for the last half of one of our days. Seeing people come on screen with their tuxes (and blue wigs!) injected a ton of energy into a long day (as well as a ton of joy)!

Experiment with different formats

Add some variety to the show to keep people engaged and stave off distractions. Consider pre-recorded video greetings from your peers or customers that you can play right after the breaks. Consider a mix of all-hands talks and breakout sessions with teams. Maybe make those breakouts random. Different formats help to recreate the different types of communication (conference talks, table talk, hallway talk, interactive exhibits) that you would experience at an in-person event.

Striking the right tone

Remote events can feel overly formal, less personal, and even exclusive, but they don't have to. While most of us would rather be holding our summits and conferences in person, lean into the remote environment by acknowledging that this is going to feel comfortable

and even a bit messy at times. Recognize that this is a moment for shared vulnerability—a time for us to come together and pull through as a group.

Start with vulnerability

Leaders need to set the tone for the day. Bring a positive, but understanding tone to your opening statements. Express your excitement for the content to come, and reinforce that enthusiasm throughout the sessions. Remember that people can feel pretty alone or invisible behind the screen, so keep your mic on and conversation rolling, contribute your reaction to talks in the chat, fill dead air if it comes up, and embrace unexpected moments as part of the show! (At one point, people started grabbing their instruments from around their house and we had an impromptu music session!)

Leave space for silliness

Anything you can do to engage people in fun and authentic ways will help break up the monotony of the remote talks. Ask people to change into a different outfit at key moments, like before an awards ceremony (give them a heads up though). Use InVision Freehand and other tools to let people get their creative juices flowing. Host a morning coffee hour before the day starts—whatever you can do to lighten the mood.

Incentivize participations

You might need to get creative to get people out of their shell. At InVision, we use Bonusly to celebrate and recognize our peers by awarding small monetary bonuses. Consider a random drawing for $25 Bonusly to people who fill in the post-day survey. You might offer prizes to games that you can ship to people. Never underestimate how engaged people might become for a chance to win some socks!

What happens next?

On a final note, large conferences of any type can leave people feeling a bit of a hangover a few days after the fact. This was great, but what happens next?

This is a time of uncertainty and change for many people, which may exacerbate this sense. So consider how you might keep the enthusiasm rolling. Share decks and recordings as fast

as possible. Celebrate highlights on social media and within the company chat. Ask people to document the days and tell the story. And most importantly, have a plan to ensure that the message of your content creates action through follow ups, action squads, and updates.

No matter how this experiment goes for you, it's going to be a learning moment. Acknowledge what went great, good, and even sideways—but most importantly, celebrate the experience together!

Tools InVision uses for remote communication

Video conferencing + webinar software: Zoom

In-event chat: Zoom chat

Company chat: Slack

Polling: PollEverywhere

Decks: Google Slides and Keynote

Whiteboarding: InVision Freehand

Video: Zoom video and Quicktime

Forms: Google Forms