



Andy Fetherman

«The virtual Inkjet Summit had several advantages»

Due to the corona pandemic, trade fairs are currently hardly possible. The traditional Inkjet Summit in the USA was therefore held virtually – a completely new and valuable experience for Andy Fetherman, Vice President of Sales and Technology of Muller Martini North America.

This year's Inkjet Summit, a four-day event under the motto „All from the Comfort of Your Home or Office“, was held in virtual format for the first time in its nine-year history because of the corona pandemic. While such a virtual event will never be as good as a live conference, it had several advantages. For example, the live event was limited to approximately 130 attendees but the virtual event allowed another approximately 800 individuals to attend the various sessions.

It also allowed my entire sales team to join all of the sessions, giving them first-hand exposure to the various market feedback and technological discussions. I was also able to invite our responsible Regional Sales Manager to the various 1:1 customer meetings, which enabled them to hear directly from their customer about their future digital finishing and workflow needs.

We were able to highlight our Digital Solutions portfolio

The Virtual Inkjet Summit went beyond simply broadcasting content sessions by incorporating live educational sessions, panels, featured and on-demand case studies, and an interactive solution showcase featuring the latest in production inkjet print engines, software, feeding, finishing, services, and consumables. We decided to maintain our Gold Membership level

from the live event for this virtual summit, so that we had access to all of the main activities, including a case study during one of the session tracks and access to 25 different 1:1 customer meetings throughout the event. These activities were of course on top of the Solution Showcase, where we were able to highlight our Digital Solutions portfolio.

One of the highlights of the Inkjet Summit has always been the ability to preschedule many 1:1 meetings with potential customers. During the live event, this was limited to only 15 meetings at our sponsorship level, but this increased to 25 for the virtual event. The increase was mainly to allow the larger number of attendees from Muller Martini to schedule meetings with customers of interest to them. It is important to note that we usually schedule meetings with customers that we do not really know, for we can always call our familiar clients. This forum therefore allowed us to establish these new contacts and teach them about our advanced technologies.

My team received first-hand information from the various educational sessions

While it is hard to say at this time that we generated “hot” prospects directly from this event, we surely increased the awareness of several customers about the many features and benefits of our digital finishing and workflow solutions. We have various key follow-up activities that came directly out of the event, which we believe will ultimately generate sales revenue for our organization.

The virtual format – that was one of the most positive aspects – allowed more members of my sales team to attend the summit and interact with the larger group of attendees as compared to previous live events. My team also received first-hand information from the various educational sessions, which is certainly better than the second-hand data provided in my summary report distributed to them after past live events.

The advantages did not fully compensate for the direct person-to-person contact

The previously mentioned advantages of the virtual event did not fully compensate for the direct person-to-person contact of past events. There were so many informal senior management connections made at this type of exclusive summit, which allowed you to get to know your customers better and establish stronger bonds for future sales activities. After each day’s sessions, you still had dinner and afterhours events to continue to form these long lasting bonds.

With the virtual event, you never really knew if the customer was always paying attention and did not have any extracurricular activities after the event ended each day. We also could not enforce the 1:1 meetings, for customers could easily make excuses to miss them. This never happened at the live event because they felt obligated to attend each one.

I expect to see a more “hybrid” format for future shows and conferences

In the end, the advantages of the virtual event did not outweigh the disadvantages. It was of course a good event in light of our current circumstances, but I would hope to return to a live event next year. Overall, I was nevertheless satisfied with the end results of the summit.

Do I see such online formats are also an option in the post-corona time? Since there are some inherent advantages of a virtual event, I expect to see a more “hybrid” format for future shows and conferences. This would contain live events supplemented by virtual activities, so that more customer employees can benefit from gaining access to educational seminars, machine demos, etc.

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