

# Tips For Bringing Your Live Event Online

Gregory Caswell, AEF Executive Director

The venue's booked. The caterer's hired and their menu approved. The host and entertainment signed their contracts. And a global pandemic has hit, throwing all of your well-laid plans out the window.

With the onset of COVID-19, some element of this experience is likely all-too-familiar to many live-event planners. For the Alberta Emerald Foundation (AEF), a nonprofit charity dedicated to showcasing and inspiring our province's environmental achievements, it became our reality in mid-March of 2020. With two major live events in the upcoming months, the Emerald Speakers Series and our signature event, the Emerald Awards, both that were going to be held in venues that were suddenly closed indefinitely, we had some big decisions to make.

Like most, we were presented with three options: cancel, postpone, or be creative. Our board decided that cancelling would be the wrong move as we had an opportunity to lift the spirits of our audience when they needed it the most. Postponing seemed like an attractive solution, until we took into consideration: "Until when? What if the venue was booked for another event? Will we have to cancel anyway?"

So, we decided to be creative.

As someone with a background in theatre, where "the show must go on!" is a way of life, I was proud of the decision – but also had no idea how we were going to pull it off. I'm also what I like to call "a realistic optimist," something that definitely helped me identify some silver linings when I needed them the most.

Now that we're on the other side of our two online events – now that we've lived through it! – our Foundation and how we hold our events has been transformed for the better. Here are some of the best practices we learned to transition a live event to an online platform – and they go way beyond just putting it on Zoom.

## The viewer experience is different.

If you have ever tried to watch a prerecorded play, you already know this as fact. Something mysteriously happens when the performance passes through the camera lens that changes it from riveting to just kind of – meh. Of course this excludes performances like Disney+'s





recording of Hamilton, but even in those instances, they have incorporated dynamic camera shots to keep their audience engaged.

Reimagine your live event from one for a large audience in a theatre to an audience of one, maybe two, in front of their laptop or television. What would you change?

For the Emerald Awards, we took into consideration everything from the program order to what was being shown on a screen at a certain time.

For years, the Emerald Awards followed the same program – host welcome, dignitary greetings, awards, entertainment, and good bye. It was very tempting to stick to this format; however, we realized that we didn't need to follow the same logistics for our online version. One major update we made was when we showed greetings from our dignitaries. Rather than lumping them all at the start, we decided to spread them out throughout the show, placing many after categories that featured people and organizations from their communities.

Attention spans online are way shorter than at a live event, so we had fun with what we showed on our viewer's screens. Our host, Rapid Fire Theatre's Julian Faid, incorporated funny slides into his opening monologue. We showed dynamic videos about each of our finalists, and patched each of our recipients in through Zoom for their acceptance speeches. We tuned into live painter Giselle Denis as she created her latest masterpiece in honour of our event. And we had a special video created by our guest poet, Audrey Lane Cockett, that wrapped up the show perfectly. Our audience felt like they were part of the action from the comfort of their own spaces.

## **If you can afford it, hire the experts.**

For our Emerald Speakers Series, we decided to handle the webcast in-house. I mean, how hard could it be?

The [Emerald Speakers Series](#) is our version of TEDTalks where our Emerald Award recipients are invited to share their work with a live audience. This year, with the support of City of Edmonton's Change For Climate, we launched what we hope is an annual event in honour of Earth Day.

But because of the challenges presented by COVID-19, we had to quickly update a live event featuring eight speakers to an online event with only three. We hired our friends at Hoopla Media to record the talks in advance, and the results are beyond our wildest dreams. Through



their expert film making, not only do we showcase our speakers, we have content that people want to watch. Hooray, silver linings!

We decided to host the event on a Zoom webinar (different than a Zoom meeting) and had our speakers as “panelists.” Because Zoom isn’t the greatest for video sharing (or at least it wasn’t when we hosted the event) we decided to use another online service called Watch2Gether to share the videos in the moment with our audience.

I would host from my home office, and our Communications & Outreach Manager, Emma Crandell would manage the streams. Based on our rehearsal earlier that day, we had it all figured out and nothing could possibly go wrong...right?

Wrong.

There’s probably a whole other blog post I could write about the things we learned from that experience. But where I went wrong was, in my best intentions of trying to keep the event afloat amidst a crisis, I did not acknowledge the pressure I had put on Emma who was new not only to the systems we were using, but to managing live events, period. A Communications Manager does not a Stage Manager necessarily make.

The Emerald Awards were a much smoother experience because we brought in FMAV, a national audio-visual company, to help us figure out the logistics behind the online event, and then manage it for us on the day. Of course, like any live event there were hiccups and technical difficulties on the day, but we had the pros on our side to handle them as they came up.





Additionally, we worked with Niesa Silzer from Details! Convention + Event Management who filled the role of stage manager. Emma was very happy with this update. And I'm happy we had an amazing team that could manage the many moving pieces that went into that hour and fifteen minute webcast. As a staff, we were able celebrate alongside our community.

Not everyone can afford the experts. In fact, we only brought them in because the Emerald Awards are our signature event and we needed it to be right. If you're going about this alone, I recommend rehearsing your online event multiple times before you put it in front of your audience, and having a game plan in place for if, and when, things don't go according to it.

## Film things beforehand...

Even though your event is live, not all of your content needs to be. For both the Emerald Awards and the Emerald Speakers Series, a lot of what we shared was pre-recorded. Here's why:

- **Easier for many people to participate:** Two prerecorded elements for the Emerald Awards were our category presenters and our dignitary messages. By pre-recording these, we had the ability to include people from every corner of the province. Admittedly, this did increase our workload before the event, but it alleviated some stress on the actual day. We didn't need to worry about where our guests were, we already had their video. Interestingly enough, even though the greetings were prerecorded, they still felt live and in the moment.
- **Easier to share:** Audrey Lane Cockett, a Calgarian poet, provided a stunning video of her performing a poem she wrote for the Emeralds. Now, Audrey Lane really went above and beyond what we could have ever expected from her video – I honestly pictured nothing more than an iPhone video from her living room. We're so honoured to be able to share the video of her performance on social media and our website, something we couldn't do if she had performed live in a theatre.
- **Easier to manage things behind the scenes:** There are a lot of moving pieces to a live webcast. It's fascinating to see everyone kick into high gear when a video is playing so that they can prepare for the next moment. By having a video to play, you're giving yourself some breathing room to plan for what's next, or even take a quick breather.



## ...but make sure it still feels live.

While both of our events had prerecorded elements, we also wanted to make sure our audience remained engaged and that there was a sense of community. What better way to do that than to experience the same moment with them?

For the Emerald Speakers Series, we had our presenters participate as panelists in our Zoom webinar, and were available to answer our viewers' questions via chat.

For the Emerald Awards, we removed the chat element (see: "Online, not everyone is your friend" below), but we had a live host and live painter in the studio, and our recipients live via Zoom. All of these elements created a palpable energy around the event. Even when things went awry, as they sometimes did because it was live, and because we had an expert improviser at the helm, it showed vulnerability and offered memorable opportunities for humour and humanity.

Also, important to note is that by having a live element to your event allows the ability to respond in the moment to other issues. The morning of the Emerald Awards, we woke to a major movement happening on social media – #BlackOutTuesday. Because we were live, we were able to acknowledge and support it, where if it was prerecorded, we would have probably had to cancel or postpone the webcast.

## Online, not everyone is your friend.

I count myself lucky that, for the most part, we don't have to deal with haters at the AEF. We're the good-news storytellers for the environment in Alberta, what's to hate about that?

For the most part, it's pretty easy breezy and so when we receive backlash online, it's usually pretty unexpected, making it seem that much more extreme.

Without going into any details, in the weeks leading up to the Emerald Awards, we were dealing with a situation online that we never could have imagined. Silver lining: We realized that online, not everyone is our friend.

In a theatre, someone would have to go through quite the lengths to troll us live. They'd have to get a ticket, actually show up, make it past security, work up the courage to disrupt a live performance, deal with the aftermath from the surrounding audience after disrupting said live performance. It sounds exhausting! But online, anyone behind a keyboard can cause serious damage in a matter of seconds without having to take accountability for their actions.





Heading online has the double-edge sworded ability reaching a wider audience. Where before the Emerald Awards experience was limited to the people sitting in our theatre, this year's show were seen by people in every province across our country – we even had a few international viewers as well. It's important to acknowledge that yes, you can have a wider reach with your event, but you also need to understand and be prepared for the risks at hand.

Leading up to the Emeralds, we troll-proofed the event as best we could. We prepared statements if there were negative comments online. We removed the chat component from our live stream. We ensured that there was limited access to our livestream. And fortunately, we made it through unscathed.

As much as it's important to have a plan in place so that everything goes right, it's important to know what you're going to do if things go wrong. We never had to fight off any trolls that day, but I'm happy to say we were prepared in case they showed up.

### Other things to consider:

- If you're not willing to pay for royalties, make sure you're using royalty-free music. There are libraries of music available online for free or for a small subscription fee and not all of it is as bad as you think it is. The AEF uses royalty free music for all our content.
- Pick the right tools. We have used Vimeo, Watch2Gether, and Zoom to create our online events, and other than a few hiccups, they all worked well. But who knows what will be available by the time we get around to next year's Emeralds?
- Have a script, but don't sound scripted. You should absolutely have a plan in place as to what you're going to say, but nothing is more boring or inauthentic than reading to your audience. Also, having an idea of what you're going to say beforehand prevents the unfortunate circumstance of misspeaking and the backlash that can happen as a result.
- Thank your audience and participants for being open to the experience. For the next little while, online events will be new to most, and this comes with the new experiences of showing your living space, recording yourself, figuring out new technology – you name it, it comes with a lot of vulnerability. Acknowledge that everyone who participated made your event a success.

Transitioning our events online was an adventure. When we initially made the decision to go online, it was very much a “We're going to do this and we're going to figure out how as we go” situation. We made many choices in the moment because under the circumstances,





there was no other choice. There are a definitely a few things we will change moving forward, but by doing, we learned what those are.

We also saw major payoffs to this change, from a more inclusive audience to a smaller environmental impact, that make all the hiccups and growing pains worthwhile – so much so we’re strongly considering updating our future live events to have a webcast element, pandemic or not.

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