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MANAGEMENT & CAREERS

The Virtual MCs Charged With Saving Company Morale in 2020

Meet the pros businesses and other organizations are turning to so employees stay engaged from afar during the pandemic

By *Cordilia James*

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As a seasoned Las Vegas headliner, Jeff Civillico was used to entertaining hundreds of people, telling jokes and juggling bowling balls onstage.

But when he gets in front of audiences now, he rarely hears applause or laughter. As a virtual MC, he's had to learn how to connect with hundreds of viewers online through things like magic tricks he learned during quarantine. With time, he warmed up to the written laugh reactions viewers would type into chat boxes.

“You now have to get used to the fact that it's just a different medium and people can be rolling on the floor laughing in their various homes in these silos at an event, but you're just not going to feel it in the same way, or experience it, and that's OK. You just need to learn to adjust and tweak what you're doing,” says Mr. Civillico, 37.



Jeff Civillico used confetti while hosting a June event for the American Heart Association after it reached a fundraising goal.

PHOTO: CHRIS JOHNSTON, TRUTHFUL STUDIO

The job of a master of ceremonies, or MC, is straightforward: Host an event and keep things running smoothly. The best MC's have a certain flair, holding the audience's attention with humor and finesse.

For some, captivating audiences at conventions or pep rallies was a livelihood upended by the pandemic as event cancellations and postponements swept the country. Now that remote functions have become the norm, many MC's have ventured into new territory: entertaining viewers in the virtual space. But without the energy of an audience, the job can be harder.

The virtual gig requires the public speaking and audience engagement skills necessary for a live event, but digital MC's face other hurdles: A lot more work goes into planning, technical setup and keeping the energy high when online disruptions arise. Plus, they must keep digital crowds happy just as Zoom fatigue has reached a tipping point.

James Taylor, an international keynote speaker and virtual MC based in Edinburgh, Scotland, has learned a few tricks since he started hosting virtual events in 2016. He likens shifting from live to virtual events to an actor moving from performing in a theater to the silver screen.

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“You’re using your eyes much more. You’re using your facial movements, smaller body movements a lot more. You have to bring in things like behavioral psychology, communication techniques,” Mr. Taylor says. It’s why he films from the waist up when he hosts events: Showing the audience his hands helps him build trust a lot quicker, he says.

William Gilbert goes by his stage name, DJ Will Gill, and has done everything from performing at corporate functions to warming up the audience of “The Kelly Clarkson Show.” He was hosting a virtual Halloween party in October for a Wisconsin elementary school from his Los Angeles apartment. After he hyped up the crowd of students dressed in their costumes and explained the games and prizes they had in store for the evening, someone in the audience began sharing their screen.

Worried someone was trying to troll the event, Mr. Gilbert worked to keep his cool, making jokes while trying to get an assistant’s attention to act fast. They disabled the screen-sharing function before anything inappropriate appeared for the 250 young viewers to see.

“You have to be ready to flip on the fly,” says Mr. Gilbert, 36. “I’m always learning with every event. I’m learning that there’s funny things that can happen, but I need to keep the comedy going and keep a smile on my face.” Once you lose the trust from a virtual audience, it’s hard to get it back.

zoom

Tartan Game Night



William Gilbert, aka DJ Will Gill, broadcast from his Los Angeles home for Carnegie Mellon University's virtual homecoming event on Oct. 17.

PHOTO: DJ WILL GILL

MC's are also often responsible for their own technical setup. Some speakers say more companies are expecting high-quality production as the pandemic drags on.

Amy McWhirter is used to engaging audiences, having spent years presenting at trade shows and hosting live events. Back then, she could usually get by hosting with not much more than a laptop, while lighting and audio were provided by A/V companies clients worked with.

Since she started doing virtual events from home this year, the St. Joseph, Mich.-based MC and event host has become her own tech support. She turned a spare bedroom into a makeshift studio complete with about \$22,500 worth of cameras, microphones and more, most of which her husband had on standby. More clients are requesting that she film using her green screen for the prerecorded events that she hosts.



Amy McWhirter works in her St. Joseph, Mich., home studio. For most events, she manages all of her equipment herself, from her lighting to her teleprompter.

PHOTO: AMY MCWHIRTER

The extra equipment costs don't always add up for performers. On average, clients pay virtual speakers and MC's about 30% less than they would if they were presenting an event in-person, according to the London Speaker Bureau.

"The clients think it's so much easier for speakers to do virtual, so we should have a big discount. In reality, it's actually almost harder for a speaker to do a virtual event than an in-person event," says Executive Speakers Bureau co-owner Angela Schelp.

Still, the gig has its perks. A recent member survey by the National Speakers Association found that 14% of members said that MC/facilitation became their top source of revenue this year, up from 3% in 2016.

While they're paid less per gig, less travel time means MC's can fit more events into their schedules. At the Executive Speakers Bureau, speakers who used to host one event a day now can host two or three.

For someone like Mr. Gilbert, the cost difference balances itself out. Before, he would charge about \$2,000 for a four-to-six-hour event, often having one of those a week. Now he charges about \$750 an hour for shorter, virtual events, often hosting at least four events in one week.

"Even when we go back to in-person, you're going to see so much of a combination of the in-person and virtual going forward," Mrs. Schelp says.

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