



Washington School Public Relations Association | Mark of Distinction

Entry Section II: Special Focus Area

Topic Area: Professional Development/PR Skill Building

Title: WSPRA Virtual Professional Development 2020-21

Summary

Due to COVID-19, WSPRA transformed its professional development program. Rather than hosting three in-person conferences, WSPRA offered monthly virtual professional development events, culminating in a day-long virtual annual conference. An average of 64% of WSPRA members registered for the PD events and \$21,500 was secured in sponsorships.

Research

The COVID-19 pandemic forced WSPRA to cancel its annual conference in April 2020. The board closely monitored COVID updates from Governor Jay Inslee and the Washington State Department of Health. It was very apparent that in-person events would not be possible for the foreseeable future.

At the same time, the WSPRA board closely watched updates from the Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI). OSPI provided ongoing updates about COVID and the budget impacts on our school systems. It became clear school districts were spending large amounts of money to launch virtual school programs overnight and such spending would have lasting negative impacts on district budgets for the years to come.

The board quickly launched a 60-minute virtual professional development event on June 5, 2020. The goal was to test the waters. Here are some data points the board needed to identify:

- If Zoom was the right platform to host virtual professional development events.
- If members were interested in participating in virtual professional development events.
- If professional development can be just as robust in a virtual setting versus our traditional in-person setting.

A total of 104 people registered for the event—more than what WSPRA typically sees at its annual conference. Members were engaged in the chat from start to finish. Members also effortlessly asked questions and interacted with the presenter—just like they do at in-person events—but within the Zoom platform. In a survey following the event, 100% of responders reported the event met their expectations and that they wanted more virtual learning opportunities in the future. Members also reported that they

were feeling isolated and stressed with the strict stay-at-home order and increased demands in the workplace.

Analysis

Based on guidelines from public health officials and survey data from our virtual event in June, the WSPRA board determined it needed to provide professional development during the 2020-21 school year in a virtual setting. The board also felt it was important to provide for members ongoing professional development, rather than a few times a year, and offer virtual programming at low or no cost to members. The board recognized that districts are facing budget deficits in the coming years. WSPRA did not want members to miss out on critical professional development and collaboration with peers due to budget restraints.

Goal

Establish a virtual professional learning program.

Objectives

- WSPRA will offer one professional learning opportunity per month to WSPRA members between August 2020 and April 2021.
- At least 100 people will register for each monthly professional learning event.
- WSPRA will secure at least \$15,000 in sponsorships for the entire 2020-21 year in order to offset the low-to no-cost programming offered to members.
- At least 80% of attendees rate PD with a 4 or 5 rating.

Timeline and Implementation

Research began in May 2020, following the cancellation of the WSPRA annual conference. After testing a virtual event with members in early June and collecting survey data, the board began initial planning at the end of June during the board retreat.

At the board retreat, WSPRA began planning eight virtual professional development events that would be held monthly starting in August 2020. The monthly events would be a free benefit for members. For non-members, events cost \$25 each.

In July, WSPRA identified themes for each monthly webinar, based on survey responses from members. The board also developed and approved new sponsorship levels. Communication about the new virtual series was launched to members in July. Initial communication previewed the monthly themes, dates and times for each event for the year. WSPRA also developed a brand for the monthly sessions and called them *Coffee & Communications*.

In August, WSPRA held the first monthly Coffee & Communications event. After each event, WSPRA began marketing the next month's event with emails, website updates and social media posts. In August, WSPRA also started securing sponsorships for the monthly virtual event sessions. Sponsors were charged

\$1,500 per professional development event and \$1,000 per evening networking event. WSPRA did not secure a sponsorship for the August event, but secured sponsorships for all other events.

Here is a list of Coffee & Communications sessions by month. Click the links to view the slide deck and/or video recording from each presentation.

- August: [The Therapist and the Publicist: Self-Care in Our Crazy School PR World](#)
- September: [Creative Connections with School PR Peers](#)
- September: 2020 Virtual Awards Program (networking event)
- October: [Curating Content in a Virtual Environment](#)
- November: Tools & Tactics You Can Use (Gold Mine)
 - [One-Person PR Shop](#)
 - [Instagram Stories](#)
 - [Digital Storytelling](#)
 - [Be Live Marketing Campaign](#)
 - [Social Media Analytics](#)
- December: [Holiday Communications & Cocktails](#) (networking event)
- January: [Cultural Awareness Through Communication](#)
- February: [Supporting Employees with Family Communications](#)
- March: [What Districts Miss in Attracting Talent](#)

In November, the board began planning its annual conference scheduled for April 2021. WSPRA started by building an agenda outline for a virtual conference. The board landed on a virtual networking event on the evening of Wednesday, April 28, followed by a day-long virtual event on Thursday, April 29. Thanks to sponsors and careful budgeting early in the year, the cost for members to participate in the annual conference dropped significantly, from \$225 to \$50.

In December and January, WSPRA began securing speakers and sponsors to fill the agenda outline. In February, the board began marketing the event to members with email newsletters and social media. The conference was previewed during the remaining virtual monthly PD events. The board also distributed email marketing to superintendents in Washington.

WSPRA's annual conference is typically held in Leavenworth, a Bavarian-themed town located in central Washington. The town is known for its German beer, brats and pretzels, architecture and music. To bring Leavenworth to our members, the board laced themes of Leavenworth throughout the conference.

The evening virtual networking event was called *Happy Hour* (a nod to Leavenworth's beloved outdoor beer gardens). Yakima Chief Hops, a local hops distributor, walked members through an interactive hop and beer sensory experience. Learn more about the event by reading the [event flyer](#).

To open up the day of learning, the board worked with the Leavenworth Chamber of Commerce to develop trivia questions. The Chamber recorded the trivia answers on video, which we played for members. See the [trivia questions along with the video answers](#).

WSPRA broke the day of learning into two parts. The morning was spent learning together as an entire group. The afternoon was spent in choice break-out sessions. Below is a list of sessions offered at the annual conference, along with links to view the slide deck and/or video recording from each presentations. View the [entire agenda](#) for the day.

- [A Complaint-Free World](#)
- The COVID Pandemic: How Communicators are Leading the Way (*the slide deck will be available after the 2021 NSPRA Seminar*)
- [Keys to Amplifying Your System's Story](#)
- [Go Live: Tips & Tricks for Facebook Live and Reaching a Larger Audience](#)
- [What Everyone Gets Wrong About Creating Advocates](#)
- [Pandemic Funding Panel: Explaining the Roller Coaster](#)
- [35 Tips & Tricks for Low-Budget Video Production | Slides](#)
- [Increase Stakeholder Engagement & Student Enrollment](#)

To avoid *Zoom fatigue*, WSPRA built longer-than-normal breaks into the conference agenda to allow attendees to stretch their legs, grab a snack and use the restroom. During the breaks, members were also encouraged to visit break-out rooms for a few minutes, hosted by our sponsors. Typically members spent in-person breaks visiting sponsor booths. The break-out rooms were WSPRA's solution to create the sponsor booths in a virtual setting and provide valuable opportunities for members to connect with sponsors.

Attendees also received an interactive conference box in the mail prior to the conference. Boxes included premium WSPRA swag, Hoppy Hour sensory kits, sponsor goodies, snacks and other materials to enhance the virtual experience. Every detail, from the design of the box and tissue paper, to how the boxes were organized inside, was mapped out.

Conference boxes also included raffle tickets. Throughout the conference, WSPRA drew raffle prizes to ensure engagement and participation throughout the day. View [photos of the boxes](#).

Results & Impact

- WSPRA held one virtual professional development event per month between August 2020 and April 2021.
- Registration for the virtual events was high. WSPRA had more people attend virtual events than any in-person events in previous years.
 - An average of 131 people registered for WSPRA's monthly Coffee & Communications series—that's 62% of members.
 - A total of 139 people registered for WSPRA's virtual annual conference—that's nearly 66% of members.
 - By drilling down on the data, WSPRA found several members who were engaged in virtual PD this year that had never attended an in-person event previously. Survey data

found these members had wanted to attend in-person events but did not have the budget or staff support to do so.

- WSPRA secured a total of \$21,500 in sponsorships over the entire year.
 - \$10,500 in sponsorship was secured for the Coffee & Communications sessions.
 - \$9,500 in sponsorship was secured for the annual conference.
 - \$1,500 in sponsorship was secured for the virtual awards program scheduled for May 20, 2021.
- Feedback from attendees was strong throughout the entire year.
 - 96% of attendees surveyed rated the monthly Coffee & Communications events a 4 or 5 (out of 5) for both quality of presentations and meeting member expectations.
 - 88% of attendees surveyed rated the Hoppy Hour a 4 or 5 (out of 5).
 - Annual conference sessions received a 4 or 5 (out of 5) on average 72% of the time.
- Here is some qualitative feedback:
 - “In a lot of ways WSPRA has been more supportive and present than it ever has. That’s leadership—figuring it out when things are not as planned.”
 - “You all had a big mountain to climb. Enjoyed it greatly and so proud to be a part of WSPRA. Thank you! I always take a couple great "I can use this now" ideas back. And reminds me I am not alone.”
 - “Wow I am SO IMPRESSED with the welcome boxes! They were AMAZING. Congratulations to this year's board. The boxes were very well thought out and I appreciated every single detail. I am proud to be a WSPRA member!!”
 - “I really enjoyed the opportunity to learn without leaving my office. And the presentations were all really great.”
 - “The diversity of speakers and topics helped my team and I to reflect on our current practices and develop new and improved strategies for 2021. Thanks, WSPRA!
 - “I really like these monthly virtual learning sessions. This is way more accessible for a rural district than a session that I have to drive a few hours to get to. I really hope WSPRA will consider keeping some virtual learning sessions in the future.”
 - “I know there's been mention of it already, but I just want to express my interest in being able to continue some level of virtual seminars/presentations even after we are able to once again gather in person.”

Next Steps

Based on feedback from members, WSPRA plans to keep an element of virtual learning after the COVID pandemic. Members have indicated they wish to learn together between in-person events and that for some, it’s the only way they can participate. The board is considering moving from three in-person events to two in-person events per school year, as well as offering three or four virtual events throughout the year, between the in-person events. More work to finalize these plans will take place in June 2021 at the WSPRA board retreat.