

The logo for UNseminary, featuring the word "UNseminary" in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The "UN" is in blue, and "seminary" is in black. To the right of the text is a graphic of a cluster of blue dots of varying sizes, arranged in a roughly circular pattern.

**UNseminary**

A photograph of a man in a purple checkered shirt sitting at a desk, working on a laptop. He is looking at the screen. In the background, there is a window with blinds and a desk with a mug. The image has a soft, warm glow.

# **3 KEY LESSONS**

**FOR YOUR CHURCH FROM A STUDY  
OF 20,000 ONLINE EVENTS**

BY RICH BIRCH



Recently, a report entitled [The State of Virtual Events 2021](#) was released, which looked at the experiences of 100 leading brands that ran over 20,000 online events in the last year. **This study explores these brands' thinking around online events as they have made the "great pivot" to utilize this option more and more.**

Like your church and mine, **we are all trying to figure out how this new online world will impact our organizations moving forward.** As I delved into the report, I found there were a number of lessons that we could pull out to apply to our own operations as we look to the future. The report examined 100 leading brands and the lessons they have learned from running online events of various kinds over the last year. The events included webinars, online summits, online conferences, and various virtual sales, marketing, and communication efforts.

The types of brands that were included are household names such as:

- **Nestlé:** A producer of baby food, medical food, bottled water, breakfast cereals, coffee and tea, confectionery, dairy products, ice cream, frozen food, pet foods, and snacks. 29 of Nestlé's brands have annual sales of over \$1 billion, including Nespresso, Nescafé, Kit Kat, Smarties, Nesquik, Stouffer's, Vittel, and Maggi. Nestlé has 447 factories, operates in 189 countries, and employs around 339,000 people.
- **Condé Nast:** This company's media brands attract more than 72 million consumers in print, 394 million in digital and 454 million across social platforms. Titles include Vogue, The New Yorker, GQ, Glamour, Architectural Digest, Vanity Fair, Pitchfork, Wired, and Bon Appetit among many others.
- **Volkswagen:** Who for over 80 years have been putting more *volks in wagens!* Their brands include zippy cars like Golf, Jetta, Passat, Atlas, and Tiguan. The company is worth \$141 billion and has a sprawling operation that includes a huge presence in its largest market: China.

One of the things that jumped out at me in this report was that **51% of the respondents reported that they had attended their first virtual events in the last 12 months.** [ref] This made me lean in, because so many churches across the country have made their pivot to church online for the very first time since the pandemic rolled out in March 2020. The entire world is figuring out how to work more online, and while some of us have been leading churches online for ten plus years, many churches are experiencing this new online reality for the first time.

**58% of the people surveyed in this report believe that they will invest more in online events as they look to 2021 and beyond.** [ref] That is probably due to the fact that **91% of respondents say that these experiences were successful.** These two statistics together led me to conclude that we need to extract lessons from the marketplace to apply to what our churches are doing online.

As we continue to work out what it means to be a “hybrid church”, which many of us are leaning towards in this current culture, it really does feel like we have all made the pivot to online; but now we are asking ourselves, what next?

In those few days in March 2020, we jumped in and implemented a tremendous amount of infrastructure to work out how to present church online. Many churches started by adding midweek content, communication, and connection events, but have since dropped those or have experimented with new things. **However, we are now at the stage where we are looking up over the horizon and trying to assess how to navigate the world into this next reality.**

In the last week alone, I have held multiple conversations with church leaders around this issue.

Recently, I was talking to a senior leader who **wanted to get back to a world where they did not have to worry about church online.** After serving the church for multiple decades, this leader finds the recurrent nature of preparing timely messages for a mid-week video shoot unsettling, and even after a year has been unable to settle into the rhythm of creating online content.

I have also received feedback from an **executive pastor who is attempting to balance the staffing and financial resources required to successfully present both online church and in-person services.** As the pastor was trying to reorganize their team and think through priorities, they found it difficult to make effective leadership decisions in this intra-COVID-19 time.

I recall speaking to a staff leader who was **passionate about the early gains they have seen in their particular ministry area because of their online offerings.** Although the ministry was reaching more people than ever before and seeing people take steps closer to Jesus, the staff leader was afraid that the church leadership was going to drop these learnings and new areas of ministry prematurely.

So, what can we learn from these 100 leading brands and the 20,000 events that they have hosted over the last year?

Here are three lessons taken from this report that I believe are particularly applicable to your church and mine.

## ONLINE EVENTS DRIVE BOTH ENGAGEMENT AND AWARENESS

**45.3% of the respondents believe that these online events create deeper engagement** with their particular audience. Making up the second-largest category, **18.9% believe that these online events build stronger awareness in their market.** [ref] Engagement is critically important when thinking about online events. We have all realized that the vanity metrics of Facebook likes or YouTube views do not ultimately tell us if we are creating a deepening commitment with users.

We are attempting to drive engagement by encouraging people to take further steps like joining in the various chat environments or downloading a free resource. We want people to move beyond participating only as a passive viewer and to actively connect and engage with our online offerings. The businesses in the study saw this as a measurable way to continue engagement.

These businesses also believe that online participation is an important tool for building awareness. Building community awareness is not something that church leaders give much thought to. But in an increasingly online world, **we must think very carefully about how we ensure that people are simply aware of who we are.**

If people don't know that we exist, they won't take those first steps into our community.

Our online church experience has always been a great way to build community awareness in the halo of people around our church. This will continue to be the case in the coming years as our churches look to reach people who are not yet connected with us.

Over this last year, many churches have reported to me that they have connected with new people who previously would not have come through their door, whether local or on the other side of the world. Part of the reason for this is that their online experience is driving more awareness in the community at large. As we look to the future, how can your church's online experience build more community awareness through deeply engaging experiences?

## EVOLVING TECH PLATFORMS FOR CHURCH USES

**50.3% of the businesses surveyed said that Zoom was their primary tool for running an online event.** [ref] Likewise, many churches across the country have used Zoom as a tool for small groups or training, or maybe even for the weekend service itself. However, a fascinating aspect of this study is that beyond Zoom, there is an incredibly diverse array of software technology platforms used for online events.

Each one of these platforms, whether it be YouTube, Microsoft Teams, Facebook Live, Instagram Live, GoToWebinar, On24, or WebEx (and the list goes on), represents opportunities for your church to **reach new audiences and to engage people in fresh ways.**

One of our new realities, as we continue to deal with the online space, will be the need to consistently explore the latest platforms as they evolve so that we can expand our message to further locations. Like a tech startup, we should be consistently looking to the horizon, capturing those emerging platforms that might present opportunities for us to reach new people.

I have been particularly impressed with the work at [Sandals Church](#), where they have taken an omni-channel approach to church online. They use a multiplicity of online platforms for posting their church experiences, and either build channel-specific content or customize the content to resonate with each platform. Whether it is Roku, Facebook, YouTube, or a panacea of other solutions, Sandals is finding a way to connect on multiple platforms.

The future of our church online experiences will not be locked into a single environment but will reflect an omni-channel future. Sandals is already pointing the way towards this future.

## ONLINE IS HERE TO STAY

One of the strongest findings to come from this study of 100 companies is that **85.3% of the company leaders surveyed believe that online events are here to stay.** [\[ref\]](#)

Rather than being a blip that arose during the pandemic and that will later be dropped, these marketers, communicators, and leaders believe that online events will remain and become a part of their future.

This is astonishing when you consider that a year ago, half of these leaders were not running online events at all. This reflects the experience of many churches across the country. However, I still run into church leaders who are thinking about dropping their church online experiences as fast as they possibly can. ***Please don't do that.***

The future of your church and mine is a hybrid model where some people will engage with us only online and have a full-orbed experience that will help them step closer to Jesus, while others will also continue to attend our in-person experiences, much as they did prior to the pandemic.

### **How can we take the best of one to improve the other?**

What can we do to make our in-person experiences leverage some of the great benefits of our online experiences? **What have we learned from our community about our online experiences that can make our in-person experiences even better?** And vice

versa, how do we continue to push towards an online experience that incorporates some of that human touch that comes more easily and naturally from an in-person experience?

Online experiences are here to stay, and we must continue to find ways to leverage them as we look to the future.

## LOOKING FOR MORE HELP AS YOU THINK

## ABOUT THE ONLINE HYBRID FUTURE OF YOUR CHURCH?

Pull your team together to discuss how these lessons apply to your church. [Click here to download two files to help extend the learning beyond this article.](#)

- **The State of Virtual Events 2021:** A study of 20,000 events run by 100 top brands, from which this article has drawn useful lessons. This report provides insight into what marketplace leaders think about online events.
- **160+ Online Event Examples:** A spreadsheet of actual events that have been hosted in the last year. Perfect for helping your team think outside the box!