



Ten Strategies for a Successful Virtual Benefits Fair

A guide for beginners and seasoned pros



If you've struggled to engage employees in the benefits and programs your organization provides, you're not alone. Even during annual enrollment season—when benefits *should* be top-of-mind for everyone—HR pros still find themselves wondering how to get their employees to pay more attention.

- ▶ *Why do I work 60 hours a week during annual enrollment?*
- ▶ *What can I do differently this year?*
- ▶ *How do I convince leadership to give me the resources I need?*

And, new for 2020:

- ▶ *How am I going to do this in the middle of a pandemic?*

This guide can help.

Contents

New Normal, New Opportunities.	3
What is a Virtual Benefits Fair?	3
What Do Today's Virtual Benefits Fairs Look Like?	4
Getting Started.	4
Ten Strategies	
▶ One: Imagine what your fair might look like.	5
▶ Two: Establish SMART objectives.	6
▶ Three: Make the business case to leadership.	7
▶ Four: Avoid shiny object syndrome.	9
▶ Five: Plan and pivot around the employee journey.	10
▶ Six: Call your partners to greatness.	11
▶ Seven: Get interactive.	12
▶ Eight: Promote, promote, promote.	14
▶ Nine: Ensure you have strong analytics and reporting tools.	15
▶ Ten: Report and celebrate your achievements.	16
In Summary.	17
Learn More.	17



New Normal, New Opportunities

For HR professionals, adapting to changes in the economy, labor market, regulations and worksite conditions is nothing new. The ability to pivot quickly is in their DNA.

The most forward-thinking HR pros are making the most of the pandemic by looking at annual enrollment 2021 as an opportunity to do things differently. **And, maybe doing them better than before.**

In fact, 77% of employers report they are adopting a [full digital approach](#) for annual enrollment 2021.¹ This includes holding virtual benefits fairs in place of in-person events.

What is a Virtual Benefits Fair?

At organizations with multiple worksites, those with a significant portion of remote employees or those with workers on different shifts, virtual benefits fairs are not new. In fact, they've been around since the technology began to support the delivery of benefits information in multi-media formats through interactive applications.

Just like an in-person event, a virtual benefits fair aims to:



Educate employees about their options



Provide employees a safe environment for asking questions



Connect employees to carriers and employer-sponsored programs



Instill confidence in taking the next step—enrollment



Create a sense of urgency before and during annual enrollment

Virtual benefits fairs also help reduce costs. In-person events can be expensive in terms of staff time, event space rental, travel expenses, etc. However, [89%](#) of businesses using event technology reported that they saved roughly 200 hours per year. And, 20% of respondents saved 360 hours or more per year.²



89%
of businesses
using event
technology save
roughly 200 hours
per year.

¹ Aon COVID-19 Impact Survey, as reported at Annual Enrollment 2021 Benefits Planning in an Uncertain World Part 2 webinar. July 2020.

² Event Marketing 2020: Benchmarks and Trends Report. February 2020.

What Do Today's Virtual Benefits Fairs Look Like?

That's a fair question (pardon the pun). **But the answer is really up to you and your partners.** Virtual benefits fairs are not a “thing.” They are an experience—an experience designed to meet employees when and where they like, and empower them to make the most appropriate choices for themselves and their covered dependents.

As such, today's virtual benefits fairs are delivered through a central digital hub, such as a website and/or mobile app. The most successful hubs have the following attributes:



A theme that reflects your employer brand and your employees' values



Live and on-demand webinars



Easily accessible and easy-to-understand content



Online connections to carriers and service providers (e.g., live chat options)



Videos configured to highlight your benefits, programs and consumer account offerings



Social channels for employees to engage with one another



A direct link to your benefits enrollment platform

Getting Started

First, don't be intimidated by the list above, especially if you're hosting your first virtual benefits fair. It's okay if you're unable to incorporate all these best practices during your inaugural event. **Even those experienced in delivering virtual benefits fairs find opportunities for improvement each year.**

Whether you're a beginner or a seasoned pro, there are some strategies you can adopt to ensure that your virtual benefits fair meets your employees' needs while achieving your unique business goals. **In this guide, you'll find 10 such strategies to keep in mind as you plan your next event.**

Virtual benefits fairs are not a “thing.” They are an experience.



1

Imagine what your fair might look like.

At Businessolver, we've discovered that our clients' approaches to holding a virtual benefits fair usually fall into one of three categories:



Socially driven, where the focus is on replicating a live event by helping employees connect with one another through social channels, speak directly with carriers, and earn prizes by participating in games or other fun activities. This option maximizes employee freedom to “move about” the fair at their own pace, as if they were at a trade show.



Education-driven, where HR teams are primarily interested in providing employees with an interactive learning experience (e.g., webinars, FAQs, videos, etc.) as they explore things like coverage options, costs and carrier support. Compared to the socially driven approach, this model facilitates a more linear and guided employee experience.



The hybrid approach, which incorporates components of the other two models based on employee expectations and strategic HR goals, combining interactive engagement opportunities with social features similar to those found at in-person events.

2

Establish SMART objectives.

Like many HR projects, success starts by establishing SMART (**S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**elevant and **T**imebound) objectives. This allows you to have productive conversations with your partners (e.g., IT department or external vendor, participating carriers, team leaders, etc.) and decision makers within your organization.

Your primary SMART objective might look something like this:

- ▶ *By the close of annual enrollment, fewer than 2.3% of employees will have missed the deadline for selecting benefits—an improvement of 0.5 percentage points over the previous year.*

Then, create at least one SMART objective for each stage of the employee journey described in [strategy #5](#).

Examples include:

- ▶ *One week prior to launch, deliver at least one message announcing the dates of the fair to employees using their preferred communication channel (e.g., email or text message) with fewer than 15% bouncing back as “undeliverable.”*
- ▶ *Within three days of launching the benefits fair, drive at least 460 unique site visits (25% of our employee population) to the digital hub online or through the mobile app.*
- ▶ *During the two-week AE period, reduce benefits-related calls to the service center by 3.5% over the previous year.*



S

Specific



M

Measurable



A

Achievable



R

Relevant



T

Timebound

3

Make the business case to leadership.

First, consider your audience. In 2019, [85% of executives](#) believed in-person events were “critical to their company’s success”—double the number from the previous year.³ While they’re probably open to alternatives to an in-person benefits fair due to the pandemic, the current economic environment has made many decision makers very budget-conscious.

As you make your case, advocate for your employees at every opportunity. Even if you’re not introducing any new plans next year, recognize that employees are facing a great deal of uncertainty these days. From May to June 2020, [44%](#) of employees said they “did not know” how they would pay for a large, unexpected expense, compared to only 16% the year before. And, among those who responded they would “use cash savings,” only 34% claimed this was an option in the first few months of the pandemic, compared to 63% the previous year.⁴

If you had a large, unexpected expense, how would you pay for it?



I'd use retirement funds

I'd go into debt

I'd use cash savings

I don't know

PRE-COVID

MID-COVID

2%

2%

19%

20%

63%

34%

16%

44%

³ *Event Marketing 2020: Benchmarks and Trends Report*. February 2020.

⁴ *MyChoice Recommendation Engine*, as reported at Annual Enrollment 2021 Benefits Planning in an Uncertain World Part 2 webinar. July 2020.

3

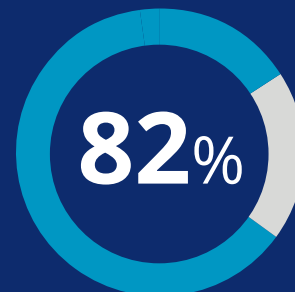
Make the business case to leadership. (continued)

Employees are not only anxious; most also lack the level of benefits literacy necessary for navigating such a complex topic. Data gathered in 2019 shows that 82% of employees are “confused” about benefits.⁵ This includes hospital indemnity, critical illness and other coverage options they may have never considered prior to the pandemic.

Clearly, employees need more, not less, education and confidence about the coming plan year. Both can be enhanced through your virtual benefits fair.

Leadership will, of course, expect some budget numbers, especially if this is your first virtual benefits fair. To facilitate this, prepare a side-by-side cost comparison of a virtual solution versus the expenses associated with an in-person event, such as HR staff time, travel expenses, event space rental, printing, etc. Depending on the size of your organization and the number of worksites at which you typically hold benefits fairs, you may find that a virtual solution is less expensive.

⁵ 2020 MyChoice™ Recommendation Engine Benefits Insight Report, Businessolver. July 2020.



of employees are “confused” about benefits.



4

Avoid shiny object syndrome.

With so many options to engage your employees in new and different ways, it's easy to get excited about today's technology. **Just make sure to avoid "shiny object syndrome."** The last thing you want to do is spend money on features that don't add value to your event or that you don't have the time or support to leverage

In the wake of the pandemic, virtual events vendors of all stripes have been aggressively marketing their technology and services. Some specialize in sales and marketing, and they do a great job at providing an effective (and potentially expensive) customer experience. Others focus on more educational endeavors. In fact, you may be familiar with some of them if your organization has a learning management system.

Your challenge is to find the one that helps you best achieve your vision for your virtual benefits fair, as discussed in [strategy #1](#).

To avoid shiny object syndrome, work with a vendor who knows you because they know benefits. Here are some questions to ask potential partners in three key areas.



Communications/Content

- ▶ Do you have a library of benefits-related content and event themes that can be configured based on our benefits offerings?
- ▶ How will you help my team conduct targeted and/or personalized outreach regarding our event?



Employee Experience

- ▶ What does your platform do best: replicate the environment of an in-person event, create an optimal learning experience with interactive features, or a combination of both?
- ▶ How can you facilitate a smooth transition from the fair hub to our benefits enrollment solution?



Security

- ▶ Does your platform offer a secure chat feature for confidential one-on-one dialog between employers and carriers that ensures the security of protected health information (PHI)?
- ▶ Describe the other security features of your platform, such as system integrity, disaster recovery plans, etc.

A smiling couple, a man and a woman, are looking at a laptop screen. The man is on the left, wearing a blue button-down shirt, and the woman is on the right, wearing a striped off-the-shoulder top. They are both smiling and appear to be engaged in a conversation. The background is a bright, modern office space with a white desk and a potted plant.

5

Plan and pivot around the employee journey.

Just as you have done for in-person benefits fairs, the focus for your virtual event should be on those you serve—your employees. As you develop your SMART objectives discussed in [strategy #2](#), put yourself in your employees' shoes. **Think of this as an employee journey.** It begins when annual enrollment is the last thing on their mind, to curiosity about their available options, to participating in your virtual benefits fair, to finally enrolling.

To help you prioritize and schedule your activities before, during and after your event, ask yourself employee-centric questions like these:

Content Planning (two months prior to enrollment):

- ▶ What are employees' most consequential gaps in understanding and how can we address them?
- ▶ Which benefits and employer-sponsored programs have been under-utilized this year?

Event Build Up (7 – 14 days, four weeks prior to enrollment):

- ▶ What do employees need to know about the transition to an online event?
- ▶ Which components of the event will build the most excitement?

Fair Duration (21 – 28 days, two weeks prior to and throughout enrollment):

- ▶ Are employees paying attention to the right content? How much time are they spending interacting with the content? Should we reprioritize?
- ▶ How many employees are returning to the fair? How can we increase repeat visits?

Enrollment Window (2 weeks)

- ▶ Which content on the event hub can best motivate employees to enroll today?
- ▶ How many employees have yet to visit the hub, who are they and how do I drive them there?

This is not an exhaustive list of questions to ask yourself. **As you think of others, be sure to make them employee-centric.** After all, it's all about their journey.

6

Call your partners to greatness.

As mentioned in the introduction to this guide, virtual benefits fairs are not new; they're just being applied more broadly. That's good news for two reasons:

- 1 Your carriers and vendor partners probably have significant experience with virtual benefits fairs already. And, they might even have an idea or two you could borrow to ensure the success of your event.
- 2 Considering the massive shift from in-person to virtual benefits fairs, these important partners are very eager to participate.

As you plan your event with your carriers and vendors, make sure they can help you achieve your SMART objectives, as discussed in [strategy #2](#). You know how they ladder up to your organization's overarching business goals. And, you know your employees far better than your partners do. **You are in the best position to call your carriers and vendors to greatness.**

Here's a checklist:

- ✓ Share your vision for your event as discussed in [strategy #1](#).
- ✓ Ask each partner for a dedicated resource you can call on as your approach evolves.
- ✓ Request access to their library of relevant content, such as webinar decks, videos, etc.
- ✓ Advocate on behalf of your employees if you see an opportunity for improvement (e.g., consolidating a five-page PDF into an easy-to-navigate web page).
- ✓ Consider how existing materials can be configured to speak directly to your employees, even if it's simply co-branding them with your organization's logo.

Remember, your carrier and vendor representatives are motivated to achieve or exceed predetermined sales targets. **By calling them to greatness, you take a step in their direction to achieve their revenue goals.** And, bear in mind, they likely have a budget for doing so—one that includes less investment in traveling across the country each week for in-person benefits fairs.

7

Get interactive.

Just as each of us prefer certain county fair attractions over others (e.g., the ring toss, the tilt-a-wheel or cotton candy) we all have different ways of learning. Because the topic of benefits can be so confusing—and let's face it, dry—interactive content is a good fit for virtual benefits fairs.

Here are some ideas:



Live webinars.

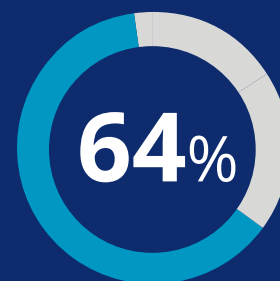
In addition to asking your carriers to conduct a webinar introducing their offerings, your HR team should consider one as well, especially if you're changing plan contributions, introducing an [active \(vs. passive\) enrollment](#), or aiming to increase participation in employer-sponsored programs such as wellness challenges. **To encourage participation during the presentation, have a team member monitor the Q&A panel of your webinar platform and alert the moderator to questions she can answer "on the fly" rather than at the end.**



Social media based discussion forums.

A recent survey of HR professionals revealed that [64%](#) believe their employees would appreciate a social media-based space like Facebook or Instagram to engage with one another and their employer. And, [39%](#) reported that they had already implemented or were planning to set up a channel to better serve their socially distanced workforce.⁶ Use cases include well-being initiatives and support groups for employees with [children studying from home](#).

⁶ Businessolver Client Webinar Findings, as reported at Vision Conference, Day Three. June 2020.



of employers believe their employees would appreciate a social media-based space to engage with one another.

7

Get interactive. (continued)

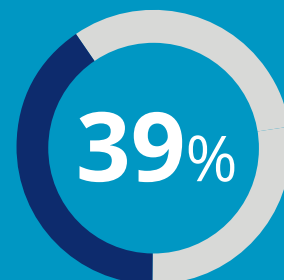
Using social media prior to, during and after your virtual benefits fair helps keep your event top-of-mind among your employees. Consider scheduling regular updates every day or two to announce new content on your hub, remind employees about upcoming webinars or recognize recent prize winners.



Live chats with carriers or HR during “office hours.”

Live chats offer employees an opportunity to efficiently ask carriers or HR representatives questions and get answers in real time. And like the webinars mentioned above, scheduling these sessions to occur on a certain day and at a certain time can help create a sense of urgency. **To ensure privacy, as discussed in [strategy #4](#), consider formats that offer both public chat rooms and private channels for one-on-one Q&A.**

Not all components of your fair need to be interactive. “Static” elements, such as FAQs, certainly have their place. The key is to strike a balance throughout your content so your event appeals to all types of fairgoers.



of employers have implemented or plan to set up a channel to better serve their socially distanced workforce.



8

Promote, promote, promote.

To stay relevant in today's hyper-connected world, HR pros must provide their employees with the same compelling and targeted messaging during their 9-to-5 that they experience during their 5-to-9. **This is especially important when delivering information that impacts the benefits they and their covered dependents rely on every day.**

As you plan your promotions leading up to and during your virtual benefits fair, you've got your work cut out for you. Unless you're very deliberate in promoting your event to your employees, your message may get lost somewhere in between grandma's voicemails, activity alerts on their banking app, and text messages reminding them of their upcoming pet grooming appointment.

Reach again for your marketing hat (or ask for help from your marketing team or event vendor) and consider the following:



Use your employees' preferred communication channels. Today's benefits technology solutions allow employees to select whether they prefer to receive benefits information through their personal and/or work email address, via text messages or through printed materials.



It's not a one-and-done proposition. Be prepared to send multiple messages before, during and after your event to influence the behavior you want to see during each stage of the employee journey discussed in [strategy #5](#).



Offer contests or door prizes. Consider alternatives to the swag employees are used to picking up from vendor booths at in-person benefits fairs. For example, you can offer prizes to those who attend a certain number of vendor webinars, or hold daily drawings based on criteria like completing checklists or quizzes. People will do almost anything for a food delivery gift card or the chance to win a tablet.

9

Ensure you have strong analytics and reporting tools.

A huge advantage of virtual benefits fairs over in-person events is data—lots of data. By keeping an eye on certain metrics during your fair, you can make small adjustments to your event hub and communications efforts to ensure your employees are getting the right information in the right place and at the right time. Data can also help you plan for future events.

If you have the right tools in place.

As you evaluate virtual event vendors, social media channels, and your marketing/IT departments' capabilities, use the checklist below to ensure you have the data gathering and reporting tools you need to evaluate the success of your event.

- ✓ Email metrics, like total opens and click rates
- ✓ Unique site visits
- ✓ Average site visits per user
- ✓ Metrics to show how many minutes visitors spend on each page
- ✓ Document downloads
- ✓ Video engagement metrics, like watch times and likes
- ✓ Webinar registration, attendee and engagement data
- ✓ Questions captured during webinars
- ✓ Chat logs and aggregate data on targeted topics
- ✓ Social media metrics

As you learn more about the data points available to you, consider revising your SMART objectives or create new ones that help you demonstrate employee engagement and the overall success of your event.

10

Report and celebrate your achievements.

As the old saying goes, nothing succeeds like success. **That's why it's so important to celebrate your achievements, share your results and capitalize on opportunities for improvement.** This is especially important if you suspect you'll be asked to hold your benefits fair virtually the following year.

In the spirit of continuous improvement, consider the following tactics:



Ask for feedback. If this is your first virtual benefits fair, a small request for feedback can go a long way toward improving future events and your employees' perception of the HR team's investment in employee benefits. As soon as your benefits fair or annual enrollment period ends, consider sending out a simple employee survey or arranging small focus groups.



Be transparent. Nothing builds trust like transparency. As discussed in [strategy #9](#), you'll have a treasure trove of data following your virtual benefits fair. Some findings will be useful in planning future events and some may not. Your task is to share noteworthy data points—the good, the bad and the ugly—with leadership and employees to help your organization build upon its collective experiences.



Recognize your champions. To build support for future efforts, make sure to recognize your internal partners. These may include your marketing team who helped with promotions, team leaders who went above and beyond to promote your event, your business analysts who helped you make sense of the data, and executive leadership for allowing you to try something new.



Keep the conversation going. Benefits fairs often produce valuable content that can be repurposed for other initiatives, such as new hire orientation or mid-year reminders of the value your benefits provide to employees. Ask your virtual event contractor whether they can allow select content on your events hub to remain in place throughout the year.

In Summary

If you're old enough to remember the first time you sent a text message rather than call someone, you probably have a good appreciation for the pace at which technology moves. Had this pandemic occurred 15 to 20 years ago, the idea of a completely digital annual enrollment period would have seemed insurmountable.

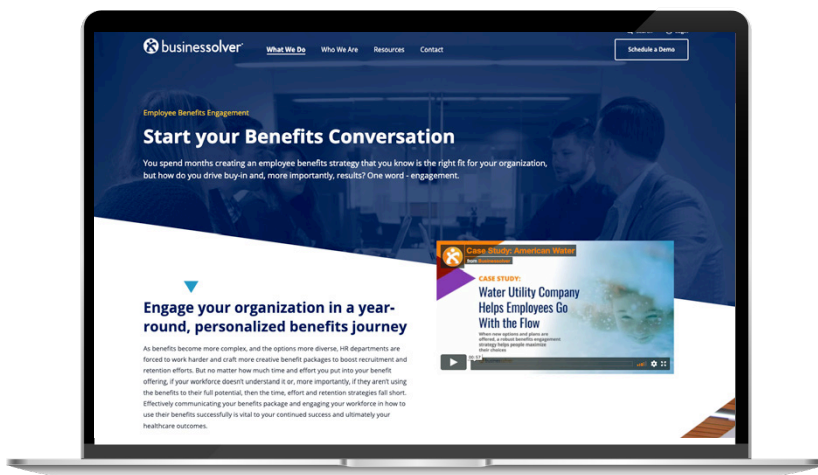
And, any attempt at a virtual benefits fair would look rather different than the one you're considering.

Regardless of how soon you'll be able to hold your next large in-person event, one thing is sure: your employees' expectations surrounding virtual engagement will have changed. No one is quite sure how. Nor can we predict the pace at which those expectations may evolve based on the technology available.

All we know is that annual enrollment 2021 presents HR pros with an opportunity to think differently—for themselves, for their careers and for the employees they serve.

Learn More

Ready to experience how a virtual benefits fair can help you empower your employees to make the most appropriate benefits decisions for themselves and their covered dependents? **Visit Businessolver's [Employee Benefits Engagement](#) page and request a demo today.**





Market-Leading Benefits Technology
+ Innovative, High-Touch Services

businessolver.com

