

## Plant Biology Annual Meeting: International Events Can Excel in a Virtual World



**Large international events bring together the best of the world's minds on a given topic.**

For the plant biology community, Plant Biology Worldwide Summit provides a venue to exchange ideas, review the latest research and explore tools. With travel at a standstill, American Society of Plant Biologists (ASPB) needed to create the space for its global community to connect virtually. Event Strategists **Conference Managers** and **Sponsorship Boost** designed an experience that drove active participation for a diverse set of attendees and sponsors from around the world and across time zones.



### **The Plant Biology Worldwide Summit 2020**

PB20 Plant Biology is a large annual international conference that caters to the leaders of the global plant biology community. From university students to professionals with 20 years of experience in plant biology, participants experience a blend of research, education and networking opportunities. An active exhibit hall showcases many companies in the plant science industry.

This year, ASPB changed the typically in-person event to a virtual conference allowing participants to access both synchronous (live) and asynchronous (on-demand) conference content over five days.

The virtual event, now named PB20 Plant Biology Worldwide Summit, was carefully and strategically designed by ASPB, Conference Managers and Sponsorship Boost to emphasize interaction between attendees, speakers and sponsors while catering to an international

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audience across many time zones. Program content included many features that attendees love in person—poster sessions, workshops, an exhibitor showcase and networking opportunities—reworked for a virtual platform and added a new virtual career fair. The content remains online for participants to access for one year.

## Challenge

As COVID-19 hit and labs closed, research was suddenly and unexpectedly halted. This made carrying on with PB20 even more important. ASPB wanted to build a virtual event that delivered the benefits of its in-person experience which include the interaction between attendees, speakers and exhibitors sharing the latest research and solutions. Interaction and engagement is easy to facilitate when everyone is in one location, but PB20 draws an international audience, so the association had to build an experience that would work across many time zones.

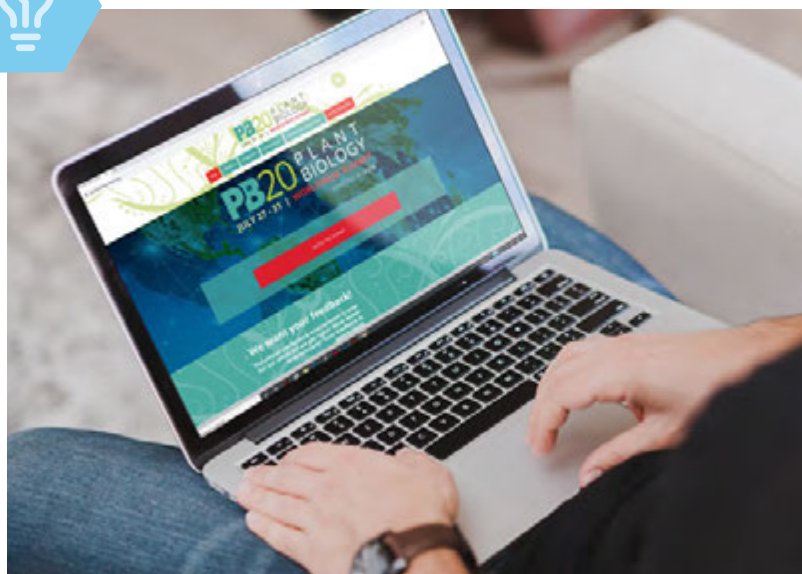
## Strategy

ASPB, Conference Managers, and Sponsorship Boost embarked on a strategic process in a very quick time period to create PB20 Plant Biology Worldwide Summit. ASPB used the expertise of Conference Managers and Sponsorship Boost to design a multi-layered virtual event that would allow attendees to consume content live and on-demand as their needs required and bring significant ROI for sponsors.

When the decision to go virtual was determined by a sub-set of the ASPB program committee Conference Managers played a strategic role in crafting the COVID statement, guiding ASPB through their knowledge of vendor platforms and taking the lead in managing the technology. Sponsorship Boost created a brand new set of sponsorship offerings then actively sold these opportunities.

Both Conference Managers and Sponsorship Boost acted as event strategists for the virtual meeting and were true partners with ASPB staff. Each week, ASPB staff, Conference Managers and Sponsorship Boost met to create and manage all aspects of this new virtual event. All perspectives were considered in making decisions and all perspectives were considered equally.

Conference Managers and Sponsorship Boost acted as true partners with ASPB to collaboratively build this new virtual event.



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## Reformatting the Program Content

Since the event was originally scheduled to be held in person and planning was well underway when the switch was made, Conference Managers worked with ASPB to revamp the scheduled content into a format that made sense for virtual. This included shorter sessions, longer breaks and even accommodating speakers who didn't want to give their talk virtually. The team also determined the best formats in which to present the various sessions in order to maintain strong interaction between attendees during sessions, and with speakers through Q&A, while addressing time zone issues.

In all, Conference Managers worked with 170 speakers to help them pre-record talks, join live chat discussions and answer questions through the Q&A tool. To give the international audience a chance to interact with headlining speakers it rebroadcast Plenary Sessions with the speakers live in the chat room and Q&A options. Similarly, poster sessions had audio overviews of the posters and opportunities for Q&A.

**Conference Managers  
revamped 170  
speaker sessions**



**ASPB saw a 75% increase  
in virtual attendance  
from their live meeting  
average attendance**

## Attracting New Faces

In addition, the team worked hard to reach new attendees who hadn't previously participated in the event when it was held in person. It created a special new group rate, giving organizations a chance to send more people who wouldn't normally have the opportunity to attend. In fact, a high school student even submitted an abstract and attended the conference, which under normal circumstances would have been difficult. This meeting attracted a significant global audience.

## Networking

PB20 provided its attendees a variety of structured and ad hoc opportunities for small-group networking, group discussions and ways to connect with each other. Conference Managers created "hallway hangouts" in Zoom around topical areas to facilitate the type of connections that attendees might usually make over a coffee break between sessions.



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## Maximizing Sponsors' ROI

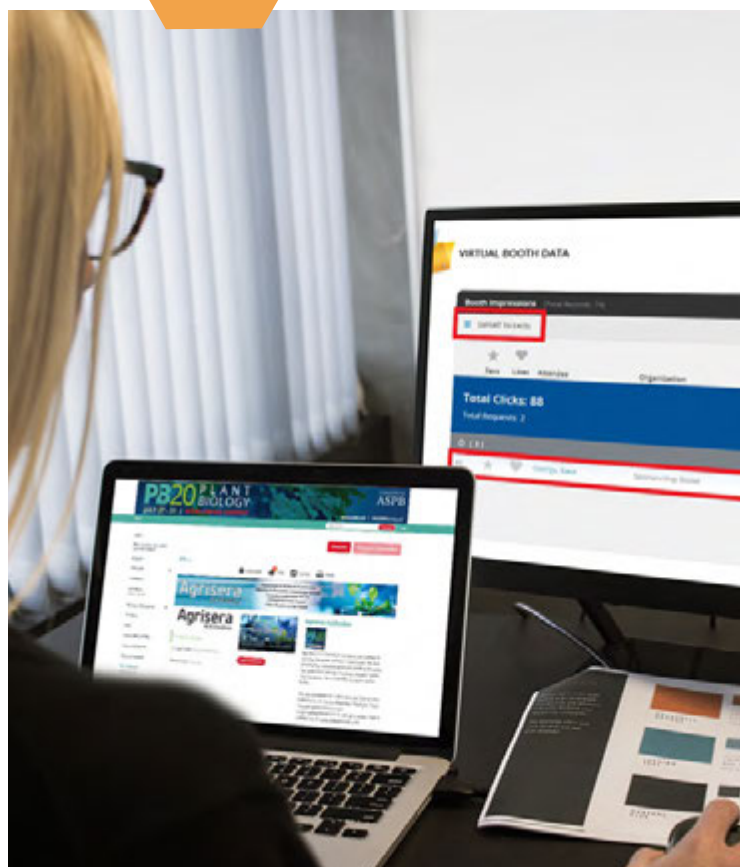
To achieve the sponsorship sales goal for ASPB, Sponsorship Boost created an innovative, new virtual event sponsorship prospectus. They designed brand new opportunities that fit the chosen technology platform and accounted for the current sponsors' marketing needs.

Sponsorship Boost then reached out to sponsors that were committed to the in-person meeting. Sponsorship packages were designed to increase networking and leads. Added features included resource links, a giveaway, and video chat features for all virtual booths.

Sponsorship Boost also then managed all exhibitor and sponsorship deliverables in the new technology platform. Without an official services contractor as in a live expo, Sponsorship Boost acted as the main liaison between exhibitors/sponsors and the technology platform.

Sponsorship Boost also carefully explained the additional analytics capabilities available in the technology platform. Analytics supported the sponsors' objectives. Content sponsors had nearly double the number of attendees for their virtual presentation or networking sessions than at an in-person meeting. Exhibitors/sponsors expressed that they were pleased with receiving analytics to help analyze ROI and quantify the benefits of sponsoring future events. Sponsorship Boost also continued selling in a short sales timeframe to past supporters and new prospects, explaining changing benefits and answering questions about the new format so that sponsors were educated about their investments.

**7,847 Exhibitor  
Showcase views  
to date and  
continuing to grow**



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## Results

Most significantly, PB20 was able to expand its brand by presenting a virtual event. It achieved record attendance for the event, powered by a 32% jump in first time attendees.

The format was also successful in providing value to attendees around the globe. They appreciated the on-demand content both during the event and post-conference. It allowed them to juggle re-opening of their labs, family needs, and other responsibilities to still have plenty of time to view the sessions and content. The on-demand format allowed participants to attend more sessions than during an in-person event. Finally, they could ask the speaker more questions, as Q&A time wasn't limited to 10 minutes at the end of a presentation. Rather, questions could be asked throughout in the chat.

Sponsors and exhibitors also gave strong positive feedback. Sponsorship Boost helped ASPB transfer its secured exhibitors and sponsors from the in-person meeting to virtual sponsorship opportunities at the new virtual event, minimizing the need to issue refunds.

Because of this successful experience, PB21 is likely to have some virtual components when it returns to its regular in-person event format.

**PB20 achieved a record attendance for the event, with a 32% jump in first time attendees**

“Agrisera has been participating in ASPB meetings for over 10 years. The current pandemic situation would have made us cancel our involvement for the first time. Participation in this virtual event made it possible to interact with plant scientists from around the world; support of this community is very important to Agrisera.

The PB 20 Worldwide Summit Virtual allows all content to be available for one year; we very much appreciated this feature. Even though this form of exhibition has its challenges compared to a live event, it has proved to be a valuable interaction for Agrisera brand exposure. We feel that segmentation of participant research focus could be a valuable feature for the future.”

**Agrisera**  
**PB20 Worldwide Summit Sponsor**

**Conference Managers and Sponsorship Boost can help event organizers deliver meaningful experiences and create innovative solutions for each event's unique situation. They also position events for success in the future as the concept of meetings shifts to hybrid models.**

