



Virtual is the new reality – for now

The nursery industry's power trade shows go virtual in the age of COVID-19

BY JON BELL

VANESSA FINNEY CAN SAY something about the Mid-Atlantic Nursery Trade Show (MANTS), one of the industry's largest annual shows, that just about no one else can. She grew up with it. Literally.

Finney's father, Carville Akehurst, was the first executive vice president of the show, which had its inaugural opening in Virginia in 1971. Finney remembers being 6 or 7 and going to the show every year. She and her sisters would run around the aisles and stock up on pens, candy and other trinkets. Later, they worked at the shows, typing up name badges and helping out in other ways.

Finney officially joined MANTS almost two decades ago and still serves as its executive vice president today.

"I've officially been with the show for 19 years," she said, "but unofficially, I grew up with it."

So Finney, perhaps more than anyone associated with MANTS, knew a big shift was in store for the annual show once COVID-19 reared its ugly head in early 2020. And it hit home even more when the state of Maryland decided to convert the Baltimore Convention Center, the home of MANTS for nearly

four decades, into a COVID field hospital and testing center that would operate at least through the end of December.

Seeing as how MANTS is held in early January every year, the prospect of an in-person show in January 2021 seemed

dim at best.

Armed with that information, Finney, who's also executive director of the Maryland Nursery and Landscape Association, and her team at MANTS could do little else but throw up their hands and, for the first time ever, cancel the in-person show.

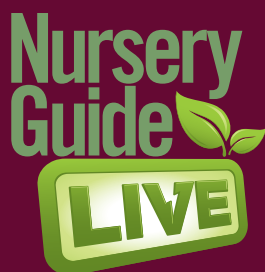
But Finney also knew that they didn't want to just cancel the show and do nothing in its place. MANTS has too much history, and the nursery industry counts on trade shows far too much, to do that. So for MANTS 2021, they went virtual, launching the MANTS.com Business Hub, an online platform that gave buyers and exhibitors a chance to do business in real time even if they couldn't do it in person.

"When COVID hit in 2020, a lot of us were like, 'Whew! We got through our show (in January 2020) just in time,' and we thought the world would be OK by a year later," Finney said. "But a year later rolls around, and here we are faced with the exact same decision: Do we pull the plug and pause, or do we try to have a purposeful event?"

The MANTS.com Business Hub shows that Finney and her team decided to go for the latter. And they're not alone.

Throughout 2020, longtime nursery industry trade shows grappled with whether or not their shows would go on. Many didn't, and those that did went into some kind of virtual mode. Now, at the beginning of a new year – one still plagued by the virus and strained by extended bans on large gatherings – the nursery industry is adapting to the new world of the virtual trade show. Ultimately, virtual events won't replace the traditional in-person happenings that have helped the industry thrive for decades, but they will help bridge the gap until it's safe to convene in mass again.

"I just hope that people will go into these shows with an optimistic attitude and a willingness to at least give it a try,"



February 17-18
www.NurseryGuideLive.com

said Cassie Larson, executive director of the Minnesota Nursery & Landscape Association, which took its annual show, Northern Green, virtual in January as well. “Change is scary for everyone, from an association perspective and an industry one, but change can also be exciting and interesting.”

Not-so-real world

Though not an entirely new idea, virtual trade shows have yet to make significant inroads in replacing the tried and true in-person shows. Exhibitors and attendees, especially in the nursery industry, see annual shows like the Farwest Show, Cultivate, MANTS and others as key to their businesses in large part because of relationships built face to face.

“People look forward to MANTS every year,” Finney said. “It kicks off the new year. It’s electrifying. You’re meeting new friends, making new connections and seeing people you haven’t seen in a year. That’s what our industry is. Physical connection means something.”

With COVID-19, however, the virtual show has been elevated out of mere neces-

sity. Modern platforms offer a range of features, from virtual tradeshow booths and hubs for commerce where vendors can sell and attendees can buy, to video and chat options for interacting. Most allow exhibitors and vendors to create profiles that can then be matched up based on similar interests, products and services. Some platforms also provide opportunities for keynote presentations, morning coffee sessions and even happy hours.

There are some limitations to virtual shows, but they have their appeals, too. For example, virtual shows can happen any time of year. They don’t have space constraints, and companies can save money by not having to pay to send employees to physical shows around the country. Attendees of virtual shows also don’t have to choose between educational sessions to sit in on, since virtual offerings are usually available on demand.

“The flexibility of a virtual show really is wonderful,” said Jen Cafferty, founder of the Nourished Group and also the virtual show platform Showmetry. “All you have to do is make time to go on the site.”

On the floor

Mark Leichty, director of business development for **Little Prince of Oregon Nursery**, said he had been prepping to exhibit in-person at Cultivate’20 last summer, but then it switched to a virtual show. He set up a virtual booth on the Cultivate platform, which he said was somewhat complicated and took some learning. It also required quite a bit of content creation, but Leichty said Little Prince is still using a lot of that, so it was worth the effort.

During the virtual show, which ran July 13–16, visitors would virtually enter the Little Prince booth to see what the nursery offered. Rather than have to write down contact information for each visitor, Leichty said that information was automatically logged, which made it easier than an in-person encounter. He said Little Prince was able to convert on sales leads just as staff usually does after a live event, and now that he’s been through the virtual process once, future ones won’t have the same learning curve.

One thing he did miss? Hanging out with people at the end of show days.

Supply chain expert to speak at Nursery Guide LIVE

Dave Malenfant, an expert in supply chain management with the Texas Christian University School of Business, will be a keynote speaker at Nursery Guide LIVE which takes place February 17–18. The exact date and time are yet to be announced; watch www.NurseryGuideLIVE.com for an announcement.

Malenfant is the director of outreach and partnerships at TCU’s Center for Supply Chain Innovation. His topic will be “Future Trends in Logistics: Partnering for Success.”

The complex system of supply chain management is in the midst of a transformational digital ecosystem change. Advances in technology, shifts in consumer behavior and the “Amazon effect” have all drastically altered the logistics of supply, changing the way people buy, sell, and transport products. The green industry faces unique challenges when it comes to shipping and logistics. Understanding the factors that will impact supply now is essential to keeping up with the demands of the future.

Malenfant will discuss the trends that he’s observed throughout his career, predict the future of supply chain management, and provide insight as to how businesses can prepare for the challenges ahead.

Malenfant has more than 35 years’ experience in driving change and performance improvement across the supply chain. He now builds partnerships with the Center and TCU Supply Chain through outreach with the business, academic, and association communities. He also serves as executive vice president, industry liaison and talent development, for the Biotech Supply Management Alliance. He holds a bachelor of arts in economics and political science from the University of Windsor in Canada.



“One of the big advantages of the in-person show is you get to interact with people, especially socially in the evenings,” he said. “They did have quote-unquote happy hours, but everyone was using Zoom. I prefer the socialization in-person, but they addressed it the best they could.”

An innovative move

The sharp demand in high-quality virtual trade show platforms has led to some innovation that’s making virtual experiences better for exhibitors and attendees alike.

Cafferty’s company, the Nourished Group, helps connect gluten-free brands with customers. Pre-COVID, that happened largely at a series of annual shows. When the pandemic set in, Cafferty had to find a virtual option for the shows, something that proved frustrating at first.

“I searched and searched for a platform that met my needs, but they were either too expensive or just didn’t do what I wanted them to do,” she said. “They all try to mimic like you were going to a show. There’s this avatar moving around. I’m like, ‘Why do you need that?’”

Cafferty’s response was to create her own platform, Showmetry. She said it was created by show organizers for show organizers and can be customized to meet specific goals and needs. It’s primarily a marketplace, but there are also networking features, scheduling opportunities and other components.

“The attendee has to have a great experience, the exhibitor has to have a great experience and the show organizer has to have a great experience,” Cafferty said. “If those three don’t come together, it just doesn’t work.”

Forced to cancel the popular Farwest Show last August as a result of COVID, the Oregon Association of Nurseries, like MANTS, wanted to be able to offer something to hundreds of exhibitors and thousands of attendees who usually show up. OAN turned to Showmetry and has created an online marketplace called NurseryGuideLIVE! will run from February 17–18.

Allan Niemi, director of events >>

Virtual booth best practices

BY ZEN LANDIS

COVID-19 has changed the way almost everything is done, and trade shows are no exception. While we all miss in-person shows, there are many advantages to the virtual marketplace that exhibitors can leverage to stand out in the crowd.

The interface may be different but the primary goals are the same: connect with customers, showcase offerings, and network with peers.

Here are some tips on how to make the most of your virtual booth on the Nursery Guide LIVE platform February 17-18:



Make a good first impression with quality images

Rather than bringing your products to an exhibit hall, in Nursery Guide LIVE you show them off using images, graphics and videos. In many ways, this is a huge advantage. There are no costly shipping expenses or hours of back-breaking labor to arrange large plants. Instead, you show pictures of your products in their prime, no matter what season it is.

Helpful tips:

- When taking a photo of a plant or product, be sure to get the whole item in the shot. The image can always be cropped and edited later, but poorly-framed photos are hard to salvage with editing magic.
- Invest in a photo editing software such as Photoshop, or use an online service. This will allow you to quickly and easily re-size any image to fit.
- When all else fails, stock images can save the day! There are plenty of free stock images online that you can take advantage of to show off seasonal features such as fall color, flowers or fruit.

Captivate your audience with informative videos

Make your booth engaging by adding videos to the booth’s header space or in the individual products.

Helpful tips:

- Short and sweet videos are best! Try to get your point across in two minutes or less. Think of it as an elevator pitch.

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- You don't need expensive equipment or a fancy studio. Candid and casual videos filmed on-the-job by your team are a great way to familiarize your customers with your employees.



Save time by pre-populating products from Nursery Guide

Exhibitors with a [NurseryGuide.com](https://www.nurseryguide.com) account can simply log in to the site and check a box next to the listings you want us to transfer over to Nursery Guide LIVE for you. It's an easy way to populate all of your listings — or just a few — right into your virtual booth. You can add more details and images later if needed.

<input type="checkbox"/>	Listing	Priority	Nursery Guide Live
<input type="checkbox"/>	Acer campestre 'Carnival' (Carnival Hedge Maple)		<input type="checkbox"/>

Connect with potential buyers using conveniently scheduled private chats

Unlike an in-person show when you have to physically be there the entire show, you can schedule specific times when you are available to chat in an online marketplace. Anyone who enters your booth will know what times you are available for a face-to-face conversation. Using a phone or tablet, you could meet with potential clients from anywhere — even offer tours of your facility or product demonstrations at your convenience.

Monitor your metrics from the exhibitor dashboard

With built-in analytics, you can see where your customers are visiting from, how many people have visited your booth and which products they checked out. You can easily collect emails to follow up on future sales..

Gain extra visibility with show specials

If you want to maximize your exposure on a specific listing, upgrade to a show special! For just \$50 each, your product will be emblazoned with an eye-catching red banner and get extra exposure on the homepage and the Show Specials page.

for OAN, said the goal of the marketplace is to give buyers and sellers an opportunity to, well, buy and sell.

"We decided we would not try and quickly squeeze in a virtual event to replace Farwest in August," he said. "Instead, we wanted to use the opportunity to create a virtual trade show marketplace that would best serve the needs of our members."

Niemi said the focus of Nursery Guide LIVE! is largely on the marketplace. Whereas Farwest always has a large educational component, he said Nursery Guide LIVE! won't have that, mostly because organizers wanted this first go-round to focus on business opportunities. It will, however, have some keynote addresses as well as live video and chatting tools so attendees and exhibitors can connect directly.

Hybrid horizon

With vaccines just being rolled out, the likelihood of in-person shows returning later in 2021 is still unknown. Eventually, they will return. The OAN still hopes to hold Farwest in August.

And while trade shows will likely be very similar to what they were before the pandemic, there's a good chance many of them will be a tad different, too. With all the advances in virtual platforms and the broader acceptance of them, trades shows in the future are bound to offer a virtual component to cater to a bigger and broader audience.

"I think a hybrid model of some sort is the wave of the future," said the MNLA's Larson. "We all miss the face-to-face, but we'll get back to it. When we do, though, I think we'll start to see it be some in-person and some virtual. That's just going to be the expectation moving forward." ©

Jon Bell is a freelance journalist based in Oregon who writes about everything from craft beer and real estate to the great outdoors. He can be reached at jontbell@comcast.net.