



SISO/UFI Deeper Dive: Case Study on Connect Marketplace

What do event planners want more than anything in 2020? To meet in person. While that has largely been unfeasible due to COVID-19, one independent show organizer, Tarsus Group, found a way to produce a hybrid hosted buyer program and trade show in October in the U.S.



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Overview

For most independent show organizers, 2020 has been a roller coaster of ups and downs with postponements, rebooking, more postponements, and cancelations for many. For the Tarsus team that produces [Connect](#) Marketplace and [BizBash](#), it meant two postponements and three different cities over a three-month timeframe.

“Canceling would have been the easy thing to do, but we were determined to get our industry back to business,” said Stephanie Davis Smith, VP of Content and Marketing, Connect Meetings. “We knew all eyes were on us.”

Connect, an event for meeting planners and those in the travel and tourism industry, kicked off 2020 with a live event in late February, when 2,000+ attendees packed the general session to see former U.S. President Barack Obama. It marked the third time that Connect had secured a presidential speaker.

While this strategy has worked well for Connect previously, the team knew it had to rethink entertainment and speakers and shift its budget to health-related costs, including cleaning, security, temperature checks, and in-house physicians on site. “One of the most expensive investments we made was having physicians and a medical team on-site for three days,” said Davis Smith.

They also knew: Event planners want to meet in-person, if at all possible, even in a pandemic. “The No. 1 reason why we came is to support the industry and to show our customers that you can put on events even during a pandemic,” said

Connect attendee Yvette Campbell, Meeting Broker for Meetings Made Easy, a global hotel and venue sourcing provider. “We need and want to have live face-to-face events come back. Since the pandemic hit, our thought process has been to provide educational information to show association and corporate clients that you can safely put on events during the pandemic.”

With that goal in mind, the Tarsus team shifted the event location about one month out because of gathering limits in Las Vegas and then successfully produced Connect Marketplace, held

Highlights of the Daily Schedule

Monday, Oct. 19

- Mask-erade Opening Reception: 6-7:30 p.m.

Tuesday, Oct. 20

- Coffee and a prepackaged breakfast were served at 7:30 a.m. in the prefunction space.
- Trade Show Hours: 8:30 a.m.-5 p.m.
- Prepackaged lunches were available on the show floor.
- No planned events for the evening.

Wednesday, Oct. 21

- Coffee and a prepackaged breakfast were served at 7:30 a.m. in the prefunction space.
- Trade Show Hours: 8:30 a.m.-5 p.m.
- No lunch served. Hotel restaurants were open.
- Closing cocktails: 5 p.m.

[Click here](#) to view the show guide including the full schedule of events.

Oct. 19-21 at the [Orlando World Center Marriott](#) in Florida. With 1,000 attendees in person and 175 online, Connect featured 58 exhibitors covering 39,000 net square feet.

Needless to say, there were no celebrity keynotes in October. The focus instead: “Let’s get back to business and the economic recovery for events, destinations, hotels, and other suppliers,” Davis Smith said.

How did Tarsus produce one of the industry’s first hybrid hosted buyer programs and trade shows in the U.S. since COVID-19? The Tarsus team shares insight on moving the event three times, redesigning registration, implementing new health protocols, and learning lessons from the experience. To get the full picture, SISO and UFI take a deeper dive by including perspective from show management, attendees, and exhibitors.

The Backstory

At the beginning of the year, Connect Marketplace was scheduled for August in New Orleans. Once the pandemic shut down the city in March, the Tarsus team worked closely with the New Orleans Convention & Visitors Bureau and the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center for months, but they eventually postponed to Oct. 19-21 and moved to the Wynn Las Vegas because of the ban on gatherings in New Orleans.

Wynn Resorts was one of the first major hotel chains to outline its plan for reopening safely. On Apr. 19 — only one month after Las Vegas went

into lockdown — Wynn Resorts introduced its health and sanitation program, which includes thermal cameras for temperature checks and points of entry; strict physical distancing throughout the casino floor, check-in and pool areas; and more signage reminding people how to properly wear and dispose of masks and gloves.

Matt Johnson, President of BizBash, said: “We were so impressed with what the Wynn did, being the first major resort to invest in a safe and clean experience. We couldn’t think of a better partner. They moved mountains — even to the extent of taking every other room in their hotel, turning it offline and into a private meeting space, and giving us full access to the entire campus including indoor and outdoor space.”

Planning continued to move forward in the hopes that Las Vegas would lift the 50-person limit on gatherings. Then on Sept. 13 in Henderson, NV, President Donald J. Trump held an indoor rally that attracted thousands of attendees, many of whom were not masked or socially distanced. The city of Henderson, a suburb of Las Vegas, fined the venue’s owner, and city officials said the gathering violated COVID-19 prevention mandates imposed by Gov. Steve Sisolak.

With 50-person limits still in place, there was no way the event could be held in Las Vegas. Tarsus was left to either cancel or move again. On Sept. 17, Connect officially announced its move via email: “We at Connect were so excited to hold our event in Las Vegas. Unfortunately, due to group size limits, we have to move the location of Connect Marketplace 2020 and have chosen

[Orlando World Center Marriott](#). We were anticipating to meet within the current Nevada state guidelines, but it has become clear in recent days that we are not going to fit those guidelines moving forward.”

Site Selection 3.0

Since Florida slowly began reopening in June, the state has hosted a number of in-person events. For example, the Orange County Convention Center in Orlando, FL, hosted the [Amateur Athletic Union \(AAU\) Junior National Volleyball Championships](#) with 9,600 attendees in July and the [Together Again Expo](#), which drew 1,400 live industry professionals, 8,225 virtual attendees, and more than 250 exhibitors. In Fort Lauderdale, Informa produced the Fort Lauderdale International Boat Show, a five-day consumer event held Oct. 28-Nov. 1.

Selecting a venue in Florida made sense for Tarsus because the state has been open and has gained experience with hosting events during COVID-19. Plus, Connect was held at the Orlando World Center Marriott in 2004, so the team was familiar with producing an event at the hotel and convention center.

With 338,306 square feet of total event space with 74 breakouts, the hotel offered more than enough space for physical distancing at Connect. The Cypress Ballroom, which seats 10,000 meeting attendees, features a state-of-the-art conference space. The property also includes plenty of outdoor space for receptions and gatherings by the pool or the 18-hole golf course.

As part of the hotel’s new protocols and elevated practices in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Marriott International requires face masks for all guests and associates. Orange County also has an order in place requiring face-covering consistent with the current CDC guidelines while in any public space.

All Marriott associates are required to have their temperature taken prior to work. Any associate with a temperature above the standard and/or exhibiting any known COVID-19 symptoms, per CDC guidelines, will not be permitted to work.

Attendees could check in to the hotel via a mobile app to receive a room key, but they had to stop at the front desk to show their ID before the key was activated. Marriott has enhanced its protocols to thoroughly clean all surfaces with hospital-grade disinfectants. Housekeeping will not enter a sleeping room while a guest is in the room, and housekeeping service for a guest room was available only upon request.

[Here’s more](#) on what guests could expect at the hotel.

Registration and Temp Checks

To minimize touchpoints on-site, Connect mailed attendee badges, along with a safety kit, before the event. The kit included a mask and disinfecting wipes. To make it easier to recognize masked attendees, badges included color photos. If attendees forgot their badges at home or needed a new one, there were registration desks set up on site.

Previously, on-site registration looked different. “For us, it’s historically been a regi-ception with an open bar and a DJ,” Johnson said. “It’s typically three hours of networking and reminiscing, but we knew that was not going to work. We couldn’t have 50 people arriving at once standing in line waiting for a name badge to print. We sent as many as possible before the registration cut-off, as an attempt to say ‘come prepared.’ If an attendee needed a reprint, it was contactless with a QR code.”

Connect spent significant time and resources on designing its registration experience and on the HealthShield program, Johnson said. “It was radically different than what you would typically see at a Connect event,” he said.



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“Normally, we would have 15 ambassadors from our company greeting folks as they come down the escalator. We removed all of that and strategically placed people away so that it could be a beeline to grab your badge.”

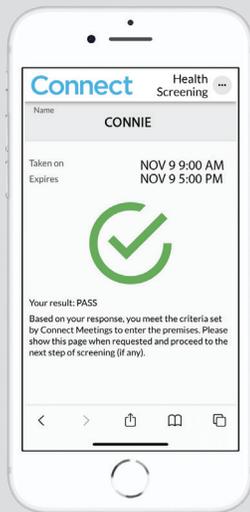
Connect worked with 42Chat to provide HealthShield, a COVID-symptom screening tool. Before the event, attendees received an email explaining the health-screening process, which needed to be completed online or on-site before they could enter the event. On the morning of the first day of the event, attendees received a text on their cell phones with a link to a three-question symptom survey. In about 15 seconds, users signed a waiver attesting to their health, completed the screening questions, and received a valid green checkmark to enter, or a red or yellow mark restricting their access or referring them to additional steps they needed to take prior to entering.

Screenings were time-stamped, so Connect has a digital audit trail that could be provided to local health departments, stakeholders, or even attorneys if needed, said Alyssa Mallory, customer success director, 42Chat. Organizers determine how long screenings are valid before attendees need to be screened again. Connect opted for daily screenings.

Upon completion, attendees would show a code to a staff member and then get a temperature check. If they had completed both successfully, they would get a sticker to put on their badges. Security monitored access points for the stickers and would deny access to anyone who did not have a sticker.

“It set the tone for the marketplace,” said Davis Smith. “It’s not about us. It’s about fighting for the industry. We were the first group business at the hotel since COVID-19, and they were so supportive and thankful for our business.”

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Attendee Motivations and Experience

“I came to this meeting to reconnect with my colleagues and my hotel partners and to try and get a pulse of the industry,” said corporate event planner Cathy Schrock, Marketing Events Manager for PACCAR Parts. “Where are we going? What are other meeting planners doing? What are hotels doing? Which vendors are GBAC-certified? What’s working? What’s not? Are people following the rules? How are they doing temperature checks?”

Typically, Schrock produces 10 to 15 events each year for her company and oversees her company’s exhibits at major trade shows. This was her first trip since COVID-19, and she traveled from Seattle to Orlando on Alaska Airlines, which she gave high praise for its safety and security measures, including empty middle seats.

How was her experience at the event? “The temperature checks and health attestation forms were fast and easy to complete,” Schrock said. “But there was no line to check-in before attending the opening reception. I’m interested to see how quickly the line will go in the mornings when everyone is coming down at the same time. As a planner, I want to see how they are going to manage that. Is there going to be a bottleneck?”

Meetings Made Easy, which has sent a number of employees to Connect for many years, sent its A team of about five planners, while some also participated virtually. “We are a full-service meeting services, hotel site selection and virtual events company,” said Mike Ferreira, Owner and Founder of Meetings Made Easy. “We represent more 300 accounts and booked \$70 million in convention room revenue in the past three years. The largest event we produce has about 7,000 attendees.”

Before coming to Connect, his company had produced five smaller, regional events since COVID-19. “There’s a strong push to host in-person and hybrid events in 2021,” Ferreira said. “A lot of our clients are waiting for us to share the information about this conference and give them ideas about what

to do. On Day 1 of Connect, I had a conversation about how to package things for a client whose next event is in San Antonio, TX, and we connected with the right people at the event to help her do that.”

The Meetings Made Easy team was thrilled to be attending a live event, however, there were a few challenges. “The No. 1 barrier for me personally has been knowing who is walking past me in the hallway,” Campbell said. “I’ve been doing this for 25 years, but it’s more difficult to approach people now! I question myself, do I know the person because I can’t see their face hidden with a mask! This has been the biggest obstacle for me. When you finally do connect with somebody, it’s amazing. Being able to create

that connection is more difficult than it has been at shows previously due to no scheduled team activities. I do like that the show added photos to the badges, however, I wish they were a little bigger.”

Networking Functions

“We are known for our receptions,” Johnson said. “It’s like a family reunion at a business convention.” But that obviously had to change during a pandemic. The Tarsus team worked with sponsors to come up with creative ideas that would promote safe networking.

On Monday from 4-5 p.m., the event kicked off with in-room Mai-Tai cocktail kits sponsored by Visit Oakland. Planner attendees could participate in a virtual cocktail contest streaming to the TVs in their rooms. After toasting to the beginning of three days together, participants were encouraged to post their cocktails on social channels for a chance to win \$1,000.

This year’s opening reception, called Mask-erade, was condensed to an hour and a half from 6-7:30 p.m. Sponsored by Visit Tampa Bay, the event was planned to be outdoors. “We rented out the entire pool deck, and they have a driving range that they were converting to outdoor function space for us,” Johnson said. Unfortunately, it was storming in Orlando, so “we called an audible early in the afternoon when we saw that the rain and storms weren’t going to clear up in time.”

Instead, organizers set up food and drinks stations inside with Plexiglass barriers and

All attendees and exhibitors were required to wear masks.



stickers on the floor to remind guests to stay distanced. Food stations were scattered throughout so long lines could be avoided. The same went for pre-made drinks, like margaritas, mojitos, Old Fashioneds, and Greyhounds, as well as White Claw Hard Seltzers, that servers set out for grab and go self-service to avoid crowding at bar stations.

While organizers did their best to encourage face coverings and distancing, it's not easy to do when people are eating and drinking. "Some people didn't feel comfortable being inside with others who weren't wearing masks when they were eating and drinking," Johnson said. "What we learned? We are going to have to be the mask police more than we expected. We sent out a series of alerts through our chatbot and reminded people as they came down the escalator about our health screening. We even tapped the Marriott security team to help enforce our mask policy."

"At the same time, others told us they felt safer at the event than they did at Target or their neighborhood grocery store," he said.

Organizers also planned a one-hour closing reception, sponsored by Visit Tucson, and produced a pre-recorded presentation for its 40 under 40 Awards. Last year, it was a dinner function.

Hosting Buyers

Hosted buyer events may work better in the short term because attendees don't need to have travel approved to cover costs, said one corporate event

planner. The hosted buyer program at Connect is the key attendance driver. Hosted buyers are grouped into four categories: associations, corporate, faith, and specialty.

How does it work? For example, hosted association buyers had 46 total, six-minute time slots with two-minute breaks between each appointment over two days. Digital screens displayed the current appointment number, and a chime rang to begin and end each one.



In 2019, 131,440 appointments were scheduled appointments on-site, compared with 36,290 in October.

Even with fewer appointments scheduled, the one-on-one meetings were spaced out into three different ballrooms. Tables were set up lengthwise, and conversations were had at 10 to 12 feet of distance. Planners also had virtual appointments with vendors who weren't able to be there in person.

Planners stayed seated at the same table, and

suppliers would come to them. Connect staff was stationed at help desks to assist attendees and answer any questions during the appointments. Suppliers were encouraged to scout the floor before, so they didn't waste time wandering around between appointments.

"One destination client, told me they received three RFPs for 2021-2022 on Day 1," Johnson said. "They weren't expecting any RFPs. Event tech companies said attendees came prepared to talk business."

Show Floor & Education

Connect Marketplace was held in the 39,000 square-foot Crystal Ballroom, with 16- to 20-foot aisles on the show floor. There were 58 exhibitors, including destinations, hotels, event tech, safety, security, and COVID-era companies with thermal scanning, masks, hand sanitizers, and more.

"This was the first event we have exhibited in since COVID-19," said David Trottier, Director of Event Production for Interactive Entertainment Group, which typically exhibits at 10 to 15 shows annually. "We exhibited because our customers are here, and we believe in marketing even during tough times. We feel strongly that in-person events need to come back."

Did the show meet his expectations? "It was a great start to get the ball rolling in the industry," he said. "Connect went first, and there were a lot of learnings from the experience. The show met our expectations, but we altered our expectations in terms of attendees and impressions. We

already resigned for the show in 2021."

To draw attendees to the show floor, there were four education theaters — with about 50 seats that were spaced 6 feet apart. Over two days, organizers offered 40 sessions that featured timely topics ranging from "Contracting Strategies In & Beyond a COVID-19 World" and "Industry Update on Advocacy Efforts Dealing with the Impact of COVID-19" to "Conceptualizing and Executing Safe and Compliant Activations" and "The RFP Process: Reawakening From Pandemic."

In each of the four theaters, CORT Events provided seating that was oversize, comfy, and socially distanced across large spaces. At the "quiet" theaters on the show floor, attendees received their own headphones with individual coverings to go over the earpieces.

Lessons Learned

"We had one hosted buyer who did not want to adhere to the guidelines, so we had to ask them to leave," Johnson said. "That relationship may be soured forever, but we had no other choice. It was a loss, but we were strict about compliance with mask mandates and daily health screenings."

How do show organizers deal with positive COVID-19 cases that are reported after the event? Some organizers said it's best to simply follow public health guidelines for contact tracing. On Oct. 29, Connect notified all attendees via email about three positive cases. There was no RFID or beacon technology to track specific

attendee interactions, but attendees who followed the event’s guidelines did not meet the definition of a “close contact” under the CDC guidelines.

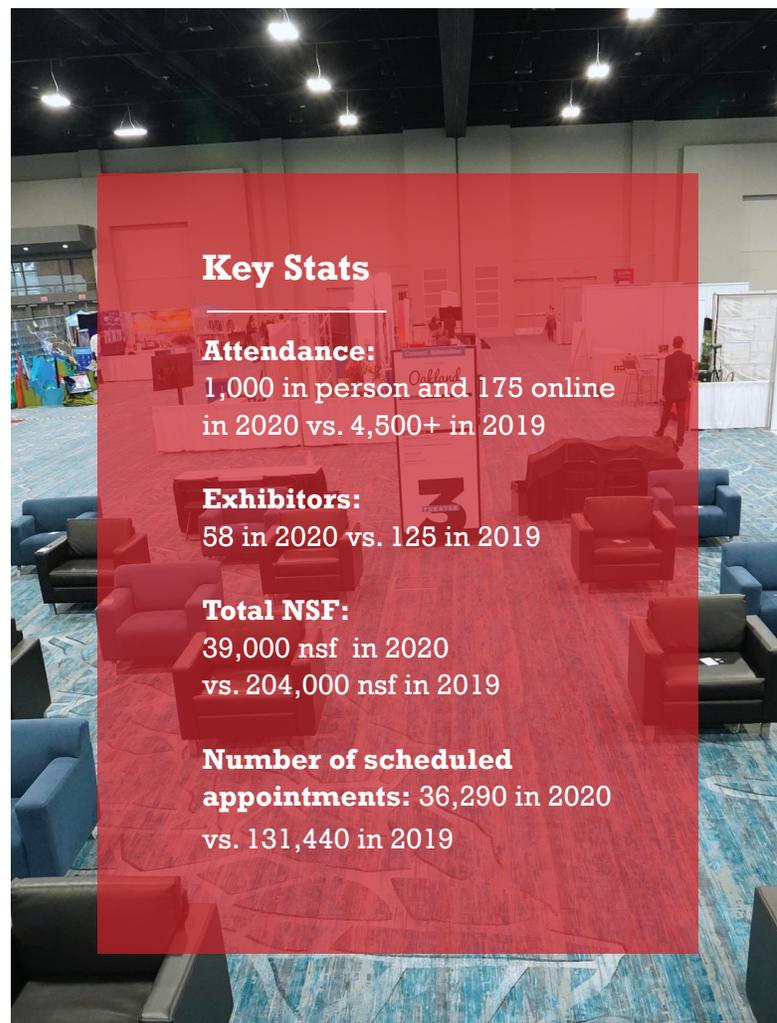
The email stated: “The health and safety of our event attendees is our primary concern. For that reason, we have implemented the [Safe + Clean Connect Plan](#) and have implemented extensive protections to create the Connect Safe Space. Those protections are designed to prevent access to anyone with COVID-19 symptoms or an elevated temperature and to ensure that all attendees do not have ‘close contact’ with one another, as that term is defined by the CDC guidance. As you saw during your attendance at the Connect Marketplace, we implemented several controls to achieve those goals, including: point of entry symptom screening and temperature checks, mandatory face masks at all times, distancing at all times during the event, including during one on one meetings where individuals were spaced eight feet apart, boxed meals, and handwashing and glove stations located throughout the event space. We are happy to report that no attendees reported any symptoms upon entry, or were denied entry based on a failed temperature check.

“We are writing today because we have received information indicating that three Connect Marketplace attendees tested positive for COVID-19 three or more days after returning from the event. As noted above, because of the protections that were in place at the event, none of the attendees, including you, should meet the definition of a ‘close contact’ under the CDC guidelines, however, we wanted to provide you with this notice as a courtesy. We encourage

you to take all precautions that you believe are appropriate, which may include self-monitoring for symptoms, and seeking out testing.”

What’s Next

Cyber Connect, an education conference and appointment-only trade show will be held Dec. 15-17, 2020. The event was originally scheduled to be held in-person in Washington, DC. In 2021, Connect will be held Aug. 30-Sept. 1 in Tampa Bay, FL.





Stephanie Davis Smith
VP of Content and Marketing,
Connect Meetings

“Canceling would have been the easy thing to do, but we were determined to get our industry back to business. We knew all eyes were on us.”

Connect

Highlights of what was different in 2020

- Tarsus mailed an attendee care package that included badges with color photos, a mask, and disinfecting wipes.
- Daily temperature checks and symptom screening through 42Chat were required for all attendees and exhibitors prior to entry. Visitors received color-coded stickers to put on their badges each day.
- Alerts about masks, social distancing, and other safety protocols were pushed out to attendees and exhibitors via the Chatbot.
- Prepackaged breakfasts (muffins) and lunch (sandwiches and chips) were served during the event.
- Drink and food stations at reception featured one option (no ordering). There was plexiglass between the server/bartender and the guests.
- 16- to 20-foot aisles on the show floor.
- Signage, stickers, public address announcements to remind all to wear masks, social distance and wash hands frequently.
- Tarsus hired additional security to assist with maintaining safety protocols.
- Offered full refunds for attendees and exhibitors.
- Tables for one-on-one appointments were set up lengthwise, and conversations were had at a 10- to 12-foot distance.
- Show management hired InHouse Physicians to staff an on-site health clinic. Rapid COVID-19 testing was available to anyone who had an elevated temperature or reported/exhibited symptoms.





About SISO: SISO members include companies, corporations and other for-profit entities that own, produce or provide full-service management of “face to face” trade shows, consumer shows, expositions, conferences and events. SISO membership is a combination of large corporations and small entrepreneurial enterprises that do business around the world. SISO’s almost 200-member companies produce thousands of events around the world. SISO’s Mission is to meet the common needs of our members by providing peer networking opportunities, education, industry information, streamlined business processes and best practices in the industry.



About UFI – The Global Association of the Exhibition Industry: UFI is the global trade association of the world’s tradeshow organisers and exhibition centre operators, as well as the major national and international exhibition associations, and selected partners of the exhibition industry. UFI’s main goal is to represent, promote and support the business interests of its members and the exhibition industry. UFI directly represents more than 50,000 exhibition industry employees globally, and also works closely with its 60 national and regional association members. More than 800 member organisations in 83 countries around the world are presently signed up as members. Around 1,000 international trade fairs proudly bear the UFI approved label, a quality guarantee for visitors and exhibitors alike. UFI members continue to provide the international business community with a unique marketing media aimed at developing outstanding face-to-face business opportunities.

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