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**JOURNAL**

# It's Showtime!

Innovation explodes across every workflow as technology emerges from the pandemic.



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# THE RISE OF VIRTUAL EVENTS

And the new online tools built to support them



By Eric Rosset, VP, Business Development, CineSend

**ABSTRACT:** With the cancellation of in-person conferences, festivals and other media professional gatherings, 2020 saw the emergence of virtual events in the film and TV industry. NAB offered its first all-digital conference, Sundance pivoted to host an online streaming film festival edition, HBO launched a series on Zoom and CineSend, and in March the London Screenings largely took place online. In the future, we're predicting hybrid events — a combination of in-person and online — to emerge. R&D will be invested to make virtual events more suitable to drive business and sales outcomes, with enhanced interactivity and relationship-building opportunities.

It's March 15, 2020 and the Cleveland International Film Festival (CIFF) starts in a week. The festival has thousands of tickets and passes sold, an 8-plex cinema fully booked and 480 digital cinema packages carefully quality-controlled and ready to ingest, representing one of the largest annual presentations of film on screen. The only problem? Ohio's governor announced a lockdown amid the beginning of a global pandemic that would soon consume 2020.

CIFF could have followed Austin's South by Southwest (SXSW) example and canceled entirely. But they say in Cleveland as they do in Hollywood: the show must go on.

Within two weeks, CIFF completely pivoted to an online event. They swapped patrons' printed tickets for digital vouchers, and engaged with CineSend to launch OTT apps across Roku and AppleTV for redemption. CIFF called and emailed their 480 content providers and received the green light from 80 percent of them to convert their DCPs to MOVs and transcode them in the cloud to stream to patrons at home.

The high uptake of these solutions on the part of studios, distributors and filmmakers might come as a surprise, given the astronomical value of movies at

film festivals. The festival window is pre-theatrical and any piracy or leak at this stage could be devastating to downstream sales opportunities. CIFF successfully negotiated with studios in part because the platform they chose supports all the bells and whistles: multi-DRM, visible watermarking, forensic watermarking, device restrictions and single-IP restrictions.

What's more, an entirely new security feature was engineered and launched within a matter of days to support the unique role played by regional events like Cleveland's: granular geo-blocking. Studios offer regional premiere status to partner events (think: "East Coast premiere" vs. "West Coast premiere") — easy to achieve when events involve people in seats. But how would the festival circuit accomplish this in the digital world? The answer: to build geo-blocking accurate to the ZIP code or state-level, using data gathered either at the point-of-sale, based on credit card address information, or at the point-of-connection, based on registered IP-address. Pulling this off in 2020 was a challenge, to say the least.

With 400-plus films ready to stream and audiences trapped at home, this landmark online-only film festival was a major success. "We were thrilled by how well it went," said Mallory Martin, CIFF's director of operations. In the ensuing weeks and months, every major festival eventually announced that it would pivot online (including those who originally pledged it would always be cinema screen or nothing).

It wasn't long before other screening events followed suit. Arthouses dabbled in what is now called "virtual cinema," teaming up with mini-major distributors who license top content but who don't have the distribution budgets to compete in the direct-to-consumer streaming space with Netflix, Disney+ and the like. Arthouse cinemas and mini-major studios shared in the marketing expense and split the box office revenues 50-50, with audiences streaming from a plethora of newly launched localized "arthouse at home" mini-platforms.

As for the Motion Picture Association (MPA) members? The concept of premium VOD (PVOD) looked a bit differently. Universal's *Trolls* was first to skip theaters and went directly to home entertainment platforms, including iTunes, where Apple gave the film

## STREAM-ALONE-AT-HOME fatigue is real. The affliction calls for innovative approaches to keep audiences engaged.


major spotlight status to welcome the move.

Over a year into the pandemic, studios and mini-majors are still exploring and tinkering. In February 2021, A24 built an online PVOD screening room to premiere the film *Minari*. Sold-out shows streamed live at 7 p.m. ET daily to \$20 ticket holders. *Minari*'s online success proved that audiences expect more than just the film: they expect an experience. A24 successfully generated social media buzz in the leadup to the event and scheduled showtimes with pre-roll before the film and exclusive bonus content following the movie.

### STREAM-ALONE-AT-HOME FATIGUE IS REAL.

The affliction calls for innovative approaches to keep audiences engaged. HBO pushed the envelope with its "The Flight Attendant" invite-only experience targeted predominantly at press, influencers and superfans, to drum up buzz around the new show. Guests of the event were delivered fancy coffee ingredients and participated in a Zoom-like brewing course. But there was a twist: the host was kidnapped and not moments later guests received a bang at their door. Scary stuff! Naturally those invited — press, influencers and superfans — hurried off to post, Tweet and YouTube about their experience.

In the future, we're predicting hybrid events — in-person and online — to emerge. Innovators will invest in R&D to make virtual events more suitable to drive business and sales outcomes, with enhanced interactivity and relationship-building opportunities. CineSend and other innovative streaming companies have already launched "watch party" add-ons, "timed event" setups, and offer food delivery to pair with a dinner-and-a-movie-at-home experience. What next does the future bring?

One thing we know for sure: the show must, and will, go on. 



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