



INNOVATION

EDUCATING AND REACHING A SIZABLE AUDIENCE



The COVID-19 pandemic produced a shift in ophthalmic education.

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Humans adapt to their environment. The COVID-19 pandemic catapulted the world's population into Zoom meetings, virtual congresses, live webinars, and FaceTime family reunions. The pandemic brought about a virtual age of communication and education, and social media became most people's social outlet. The changes were highly visible in the field of ophthalmology.


ONLINE EDUCATION


As lockdowns and travel restrictions swept the world, ophthalmologists found their clinical commitments replaced by educational ones. Webinars and online congresses began drawing increasingly large numbers of attendees, mainly because it became easier for speakers and audience members from all over the world to participate.


Social media platforms—even among those of us who previously had not been avid users—became an important means of connecting with colleagues, family, and friends (see *A Closer Look at Social Media*). Posts promoted webinars and online congresses. Key opinion leaders and well-known participants were used to attract an audience. The same people began appearing all over the virtual world for educational offerings, giving rise to a form of a phenomenon known as the *Starbucks effect*.¹ These


A CLOSER LOOK AT SOCIAL MEDIA

The best choice of platform depends on how you want the post to be perceived.

 **TikTok.** This short-form video-hosting service provides a quick, casual approach to sending nonverbal information to a mass of people, more than half of whom are estimated to be under 35 years of age.¹

 **LinkedIn.** This business- and employment-focused social media platform is an appropriate choice for sharing professional achievements and scientific findings. The platform allows users to curate posts and share appreciation through tagging. This can increase visibility because tagging people encourages them to repost material, which expands viewership.

 **Instagram and Facebook.** These social networking sites, both owned by Meta, fall somewhere between TikTok and LinkedIn. Instagram caters to a slightly younger audience than Facebook, but the latter is the biggest social network worldwide. Posts on both sites can be divided into two categories: (1) verbal and professional and (2) quick and casual.

 **Twitter and Threads.** Under the new ownership of Meta, Twitter is now viewed as a politically charged opinion platform. Due to the polarization that its owner causes, another similar platform has emerged. Threads functions in a similar way to Twitter.

1. Ceci L. Distribution of TikTok users worldwide as of January 2023, by age and gender. Statista. Published February 6, 2023. Accessed July 20, 2023. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1299771/tiktok-global-user-age-distribution>

individuals attracted the masses, and the less well-known speakers who followed them—often ophthalmologists earlier in their careers—received increased attention as a result. Many of the latter now stand at the podium at prominent congresses.

The size of webinar audiences was also increased through language. Many viewers rearranged their schedules to

tune in to presentations by key opinion leaders in their native languages. Later, presentations were recorded and subtitles added, which increased their accessibility and popularity.

A RETURN TO IN-PERSON LEARNING

The popularity of webinars and virtual congresses in ophthalmology started to fade in mid-2021. Industry

desired a return to in-person meetings because these opportunities to interact with customers—to display new technology and provide hands-on demonstrations—are essential to company success. A drop in sales revenue, moreover, was decreasing industry’s financial support of webinars and virtual conferences, so there was an incentive for societies to attempt a return to in-person meetings. An additional factor for societies to consider was the value of direct social connection to training activities and interpersonal interactions.

What followed was an approximately 1-year transitional period of live-streaming meetings to individuals who wished to attend virtually rather than in person. The strategy achieved

the dual goals of educating large numbers of attendees and providing a platform for personal exchange and discussion, but it generally proved too expensive to sustain. The format was replaced with an on-demand approach that has helped drive society membership. Virtual attendees use a members-only online platform to access prerecorded presentations, which are cheaper and less labor-intensive to produce than live-streaming.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated humanity’s ability to adapt. The field of ophthalmology developed different ways to address the demand for continuing education. The lifting of travel restrictions and availability

of vaccines has made in-person meetings more popular again, but many new best practices have been learned. ■

1. Vishwanath V, Harding D. The Starbucks Effect. *Harvard Business Review*. March/April 2000. Accessed July 20, 2023. <https://hbr.org/2000/03/the-starbucks-effect>

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