

A New Perspective on a Virtual Conference: 2021 Ohio Housing Conference

Ohio Housing Finance Agency
Communications: Special Event Marketing

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SUMMARY

The Ohio Housing Conference is the state's premiere event in the affordable housing industry. For 27 years, it has provided an opportunity for industry professionals to discuss the challenges and trends in the affordable housing industry through collaborative and innovative discussions. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, conference coordinators quickly pivoted from an in-person to a virtual experience. Despite the learning curve, the 2020 conference drew nearly half of the attendee base of an in-person conference with 783 attendees. Equipped with feedback from 2020 virtual conference attendees and pre-pandemic conference best practices while adapting to new health guidelines, conference coordinators aimed to increase attendee engagement in 2021. A comprehensive marketing campaign to highlight dynamic sessions, speakers, and resources was implemented for the 2021 Virtual Ohio Housing Conference, which drew 727 attendees. As most the workforce had been at home all year attending meetings, conferences, and trainings, all while battling Zoom fatigue, the overall 2021 conference was still deemed a huge success compared to the 2020 conference as:

- Reception attendees grew nearly 5x from 40 to 215
- Session ratings increasing from 4.66 to 4.75 out of 5
- Finance and Banking attendees nearly doubled from 40 to 70
- Reception attendees rated the event as Good to Excellent, increasing from 60.71% to 83.33%
- 87% of survey respondents rated the conference overall as Good to Excellent in both 2020 and 2021

In 2019, the annual conference, co-hosted by Ohio Capital Corporation for Housing (OCCH), wrapped up in early November with nearly 1,600 attendees, the average for this event. Conference planners gathered feedback and began to outline the 2020 in-person conference. However, the strategic planning for sponsorships, outreach, registration and speaker management, networking receptions and more, inevitably moved to a virtual event for 2020. The quick pivot allowed the 2020 conference to go on and housing industry professionals that include local, regional, and national developers, property managers, investors, syndicators, architects, real estate professionals, lenders, accountants, attorneys, government officials, and nonprofit leaders to continue their collaboration and education during the height of the pandemic.

For the 2021 conference planners wanted to increase engagement, should the event need to be virtual again. With that in mind, they surveyed attendees to gather feedback on what worked, what did not, and what attendees were now looking for in a virtual event. Many were not comfortable attending in-person or their companies had in-person conference participation and travel restrictions. The results highlighted that attendees wanted an event to fit into their new work from home lifestyle, but also allow time for networking, as well as an event platform to share their innovative ideas with peers. This feedback led to a series of changes to improve the flow of the conference, and modifications to marketing and engagement provided a more rich experience at no extra cost. The 2021 Ohio Housing Conference was titled, "Moving Forward with New Perspective," to call attention to the fresh ideas, adaptability and resiliency found in all of us as well as in the affordable housing industry (*Figure 1*).

The goal for the 2021 conference was clear: to give attendees more of what they want and less of what they do not, while reflecting the ever-changing environment. This meant engaging sessions and knowledgeable speakers focusing on topics attendees requested such as professional development. It also meant limited in-person events, and the ability to participate in the conference at their own pace with session recordings posted online with on-demand access. With all of these planned changes, conference planners prepared for a post-pandemic conference.

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IMPLEMENTATION

With looming uncertainty due to the ongoing pandemic and shifting attendee preferences, it was determined a virtual conference with an in-person reception in 2021 would meet all needs requested. Conference planners updated their marketing tactics to cut through the barrage of messages conference attendees were receiving about various online events. One key item was an engaging [2021 Ohio Housing Conference brand](#). From the Save-the-Date before the conference to the overall survey sent after the event, captivating branding was utilized on all marketing materials (*Figure 2*). Email blasts were sent and social media content was posted with enticing subject lines and fun opportunities were offered to promote the conference. These communications were sent once per month beginning in July and increased in frequency as the conference approached.

A social media post thanking sponsors on LinkedIn had the greatest reach with over 1,120 impressions, 72 clicks and 27 reactions (*Figure 3*). Prior to the conference, the most engaging email blast announcing that registration was open, including a [Teaser Video](#) from executive leadership, had a 26% open rate from over 11,000 recipients (*Figure 4*). During the conference, daily agenda overviews reached the most attendees with the agenda for day 1 reaching a 63% open rate with a 47% click rate out of 650 registered recipients at that point in time (*Figure 5*).

Months before the conference began, the [Ohio Housing Conference Landing Page](#) was created to be the centerpiece of the marketing campaign, a place to not only provide historic conference information but where attendees could find conference updates, session descriptions, and registration information. Marketing materials drove potential attendees back to the website, creating a one-stop-shop. In 2021, conference planners added the conference branding to the email signatures of Ohio Housing Finance Agency (OHFA) staff in an effort to increase awareness of the event. The brand image linked to the conference website, providing potential attendees an effortless way to learn more about the 2021 conference (*Figure 6*).

During the 2021 Ohio Housing Conference, a new mobile-friendly virtual lobby was utilized to engage our audience. This lobby kept all conference information right at attendee's fingertips, with quick access to the agenda, personalized attendee calendars, speaker biographies, session resources, surveys, and more. Private messaging, polling questions, gamification and social activity walls were also included to further boost attendee, partner and sponsor connections. To assist attendees with navigation, a [Virtual Lobby Demonstration Video](#) was created which illustrates lobby features. With safety at the forefront, conference planners pre-recorded as many sessions as possible to reduce exposure risk, which also reduced expenses, technical difficulties, and speaker anxiety and produced much more cohesive sessions.

The event platform also allowed the sponsorship process to move entirely online in 2021. A separate [Sponsor Portal](#) was created, allowing returning and new sponsoring partners to view sponsorship tiers, upload marketing materials and make payments. This more efficient online system replaced previously printed packets and manual tracking system for recording and executing sponsorships, and allowed staff to reallocate time once spent on tracking sponsorships to other aspects of the conference.

An Ohio Housing Conference tradition, attendees always received a promotional gift during the conference such as a t-shirt, speaker, blanket or another kind of branded item. Conference planners added the option to receive a gift mailed to the attendee's home with free shipping. Most gifts arrived during the month prior to the conference along with a thank you card (*Figure 7*), providing a small taste of what the actual conference would be like while reminding attendees of the upcoming event.

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To satisfy the need for social interaction and seeing partners face-to-face after a year of isolation, an in-person networking reception was planned with safety protocols in place in downtown Columbus the night before the conference began (*Figure 8*). When the conference concluded, a list of attendees were posted on the conference website as well as in email blast to allow attendees to follow up with others to continue collaboration. This enticed those who did not attend to plan to attend the following year so they do not fear missing out on important information.

What else catches almost anyone's eye? Pictures of family and/or pets. Conference planners knew that attendees were always up for a good challenge, especially if there was a prize involved. To encourage attendee interaction and connections, a SNAP and WIN photo challenge was launched which encouraged attendees to submit photos via an online survey. Attendees were asked to capture a new memory or search their cell phone photo gallery to submit one or more creative and/or funny photos from the last two years of their work from home experience, their family, pets, hobbies, coworkers, vacations, etc. Nearly 100 photos were submitted and displayed during the conference. Each photo was an entry to win a gift card. Winners were selected anonymously and contacted via email after the conference.

To produce more focused content and accommodate for natural breaks, distractions and other workfrom-home related tasks, session lengths were reduced to one hour and were scheduled to end in the early afternoon instead of early evenings. The 2021 conference hosted two plenary sessions, where key topics regarding the current state of affordable housing were discussed "Rapid Fire: State and Federal Housing" and "Toward a More Perfect Union: Housing for Equity and Inclusion." Both plenaries were launched with welcoming remarks from Ohio Senators Sherrod Brown and Rob Portman and were the most popular sessions, drawing up to 345 attendees viewing live during the conference with up to 48 on-demand views after the conference. Attendees were also looking for something meaningful to their personal and professional lives, so the "Inspire Us: Quick and Impactful Stories to Motivate You" session featured short inspirational messages from famous Ohioans (*Figure 9*). Remarks included tips on being more intentional and empathetic, prioritizing strengths and time, and how this can influence life pathways.

RESULT

In the end, more than 700 attendees were satisfied with their 2021 Ohio Housing Conference experience which provided more than 25 sessions and nearly 30 hours of content. Sessions remained available for 60 days after the conference for attendees and for those who were unable to attend during the two-day event. This permitted access to the same information for a reasonable registration fee of \$150. In addition, a [Conference Wrap Up Blog](#) was posted to promote the most successful aspects of the conference. The in-person networking reception drew more than 200 attendees smiling from ear-to-ear. This conference provided attendees with flexible opportunities to explore topics in the affordable housing industry as well as the chance to revisit topics they may have missed during the conference. We hope to see you this year at the 2022 Ohio Housing Conference, held in-person on November 29-30 in Columbus, Ohio. Sign up for updates to stay in the know [HERE](#), you won't want to miss it. See you then!

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VISUAL AIDS

Figure 1. 2021 Ohio Housing Conference Theme Design



Figure 2. Marketing Campaign Materials

[Save-the-Date](#)
[Sponsorship Opportunities](#)
[Teaser Video/Registration Open](#)
[Reception Registration](#)
[Conference Gift](#)
[Session Spotlight](#)
[SNAP and WIN Photo Challenge!](#)
[Scholarship Opportunities](#)

[Full Conference Agenda](#)
[Preconference Agenda](#)
[Agenda Day 1](#)
[Agenda Day 2](#)
[Overall Survey](#)
[Overall Survey Reminder](#)
[Virtual Lobby Registration](#)
[Virtual Lobby Reminder](#)

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Figure 3. Sponsor Thank You LinkedIn Post

A screenshot of a LinkedIn post from the Ohio Housing Finance Agency. The post header shows the agency's profile picture, name, 2,424 followers, and a post from 5 months ago. The main text of the post reads: "Special thank you to all of our 2021 Virtual Ohio Housing Conference sponsors! The Ohio Housing Conference is hosted by the Ohio Housing Finance Agency and the Ohio Capital Corporation for Housing. There's still time to #r ...see more". Below the text is a large graphic with a purple and blue background featuring a wireframe globe and stylized houses. The graphic includes the text "MOVING FORWARD WITH NEW PERSPECTIVE" and "2021 Virtual Ohio Housing Conference December 1 & 2". It also lists the hosts: "OHIO HOUSING FINANCE AGENCY" and "OHIO CAPITAL CORPORATION FOR HOUSING". The bottom half of the graphic is a white box containing a grid of 30 sponsor logos, including Huntington, Lument, PNC, First Financial Bank, Barnes & Thornburg LLP, The NRP Group, Enterprise, FHLB Cincinnati, NeighborWorks America, Park Financial Bank, Squire Patton Boggs, US Bank, CHN Housing Partners, City Architecture, The Community Builders, MVAH Partners, National Equity Fund, plantec moran, RDL Architects, PDAH Communities, Tidwell Group, Tallick Communities, Atlas, Chase, CohnReznick, ERS, First Commonwealth Bank, ncb, NDS, Novogradac, and Pirhl. At the bottom of the post, there are 27 reactions, 4 shares, and buttons for "Like" and "Comment".

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Figure 4. Registration Open and Teaser Video Email Blast

OHIO HOUSING CONFERENCE

MOVING FORWARD WITH NEW PERSPECTIVE
 2021 Virtual Ohio Housing Conference
 December 1 & 2

HOSTED BY: OHIO HOUSING FINANCE AGENCY | OCCH

We're excited to bring you the same quality content with leading experts and thought leaders in a virtual environment.

Early bird registration is just **\$99 until November 12**; the fee increases to \$150 after November 12.

JOIN US

Ready to support the Virtual Ohio Housing Conference?

Our sponsorship has now moved entirely online. [Pick your sponsorship level and pay online!](#) Become one of our valued sponsors and showcase your organization to hundreds of housing industry professionals.

[f](#) [t](#) [i](#) [v](#)

Figure 5. Agenda Day 1 Email Blast

OHIO HOUSING CONFERENCE

MOVING FORWARD WITH NEW PERSPECTIVE
 2021 Virtual Ohio Housing Conference
 December 1 & 2

HOSTED BY: OHIO HOUSING FINANCE AGENCY | OCCH

HOME | AGENDA | SPONSORS

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 1, 2021

To access the virtual lobby and to join the conference, please use our [VIRTUAL LOBBY LINK](#).

You will use your email address and last name to log in.

9:00 AM - 10:30 AM EST

Rapid Fire: State and Federal Housing and William J. Graves Ohio Housing Excellence Award Presentation

11:00 AM - 12:00 PM EST

Difficulties Brought On by Rising Construction Costs for Multifamily Developers	The Evolving Role of Technology in Housing to Improve Health Outcomes for Vulnerable Populations
Building Trust: National Housing Trust Fund Compliance for Property Managers	Boosting Black Homeownership with CONVERGENCE Columbus

1:00 PM - 2:15 PM EST

Equity Markets and Investor Forum	Expanding and Developing Initiatives at the Crossroads of Health and Housing
Avoid Noncompliance Pitfalls and Challenges with Multiple Subsidies	Show Me the Money! Saving Money through Partnerships

Last chance to win a \$100 Visa gift card!

SNAP AND WIN!

Enter to win by sharing a photo of a great memory with us by **1:00 PM TODAY!**

IM UP FOR THE CHALLENGE

For questions, or for assistance during the conference, please contact occhevents@occh.org

WE LOOK FORWARD TO SEEING YOU!

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Figure 6. OHFA Staff Email Signature

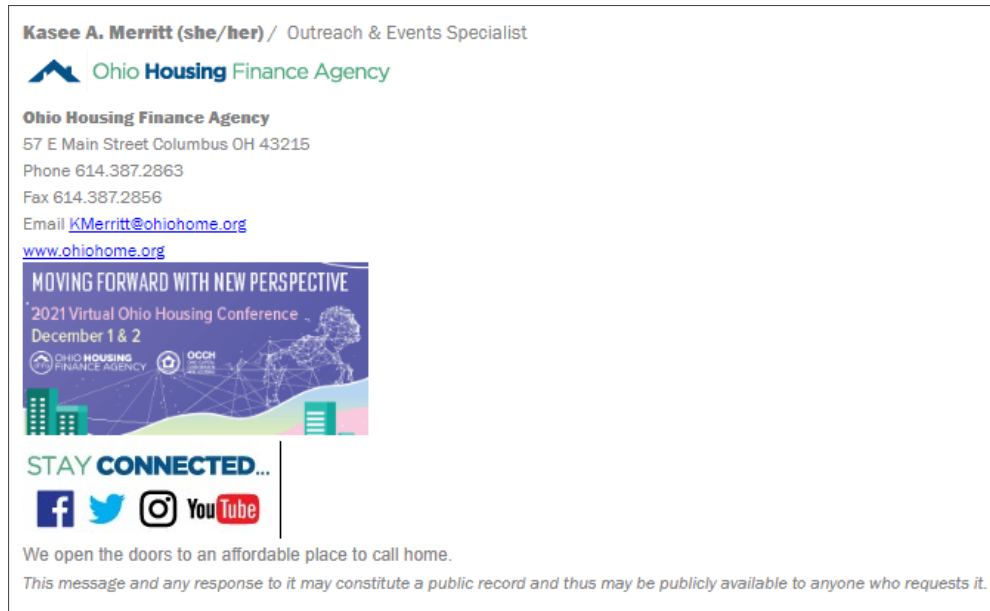


Figure 7. Conference Gift Thank you Card



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Figure 8. Networking Reception Invitation

The invitation graphic is a vertical rectangular card with a white background and a dark green border. At the top, there is a photograph of a man and a woman in professional attire, both wearing blue surgical masks and looking at each other. Below the photo, the text is centered and reads: 'OHIO HOUSING CONFERENCE' with a house icon logo to the left; 'IN-PERSON NETWORKING RECEPTION' in large blue letters; 'TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 30, 2021'; '4:30 PM - 7:00 PM'; 'MARRIOTT COLUMBUS OSU'; '3100 Olentangy River Road'; 'Columbus, Ohio'. Below this, several lines of text provide details: 'Join us for cocktails and appetizers at our first in-person networking event of the year!', 'The reception will be held inside and outside (with heaters).', 'The reception is limited capacity and will follow CDC guidelines (mask should be worn).', 'Guests are encouraged to be vaccinated.', 'You must register to attend.', and 'Complimentary parking available.' At the bottom of the card, a dark blue banner contains the text 'MOVING FORWARD WITH NEW PERSPECTIVE', '2021 Virtual Ohio Housing Conference', 'December 1 & 2', and logos for 'OHIO HOUSING FINANCE AGENCY' and 'OCCH'.

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Figure 9. Inspire Us Session Speakers

MOVING FORWARD WITH NEW PERSPECTIVE
2021 Virtual Ohio Housing Conference
December 1 & 2


DR. DEBBIE PHILLIPS, PRESIDENT
The Quadrillion


TORI BOGGS
World Champion and
Professional Jump Rope Athlete


CHINEDUM NDUKWE
Kingsley & Company,
Former Cincinnati Bengal


LANCE ALLRED
Author/Speaker,
Former Cleveland Cavalier

HOSTED BY:  **OHIO HOUSING
FINANCE AGENCY**  **OCCH**
OHIO CAPITAL
CORPORATION
FOR HOUSING