

Moving the Maryland Sheep & Wool Festival to an Online Virtual Event

Introduction

Several people have contacted me asking for advice or guidance towards setting up a virtual event. I am not sure I have a lot to offer, as I was basically making it up as I went along. Here is a little information on what we planned, although it certainly did not go according to plan!

The 47th annual Maryland Sheep & Wool Festival was scheduled for May 2 & 3, 2020. Just at the time preparations for the Festival were reaching high gear, COVID-19 was declared a pandemic. The decision to cancel the Festival was made on March 18. Recognizing that sales at the Festival are an important part, if not the primary source, of income for many of our vendors, we conceived of a virtual online event as a way to help them replace some of this lost income. The Virtual Online Festival was announced on April 9, to be held at the same time the live festival would have been.

The focal point of the online festival was meant to be the following pages on our website:

- [Virtual Festival Landing Page](#)
- [Virtual Vendor Marketplace](#)
- [Virtual Fleece Sale](#)

I will talk in more detail about the latter two further on.

We also took advance orders for 2020 “Apart Yet Together” festival gear through an online sales channel we already had in place. Committee member and past Maryland Sheep Breeders Association president Bob Dinsmore and his staff at Sheepman Supply take care of the online store for us as part of their Sheepman Supply website, for which we are profoundly grateful. Since none of the merchandise had been printed prior to the cancellation of the festival, printing to fulfill these advance orders will be done when non-essential businesses are allowed to reopen in Maryland.

Planned as an adjunct to the website was a brand-new Facebook Group that I set up, called the [Maryland Sheep & Wool Festival Online Community](#), hoping to allow space for the kind of person-to-person interaction that normally happens at the festival, albeit in a virtual setting.

By the evening of Friday, May 1, everything was ready to go. The official start time was 8:30 a.m. Saturday, but with no tickets and no gate, as soon as the pages were up on the website for all intents and purposes the virtual festival was open. By 6:19 a.m., response time had already slowed, and by 9:20 the site had crashed, and people were getting “internal service errors”. Our web host eventually suspended the account, probably thinking this was some kind of denial-of-service hacker attack, which resulted in anyone trying to access the website getting a message saying “your account has been suspended”. This resulted in a flurry of panicked emails and private messages on Facebook for me to deal with. The website remained out of commission all day Saturday and Sunday, finally becoming available early Sunday evening. (Lesson #1: Be sure you know in advance how much traffic your hosting plan will support.)

Because of the website debacle, the Facebook Group for all intents and purposes became the venue for the online festival. We were able to cobble together at least partial information from the Vendor Marketplace and Fleece Sale pages and make it available as pdf files, first on Google Drive and eventually in the “Files” tab of the Facebook Group. (Lesson #2: Have a paper backup of the information on your website.) People adapted quickly to these workarounds and it appears a fine time was had by all.

Implementation Details

Virtual Vendor Marketplace

What we did for this was really pretty rudimentary. We had a short listing for each vendor, with a photo or other image at the top, which contained the following information, when applicable:

- Category of goods/services sold
- Link to website
- Link to online shopping site, or information on other means of making purchases if no shopping site was available (e.g., email, phone call, text, Facebook message)
- Link to a video offering a virtual booth tour
- Any discounts or special offers for the virtual festival weekend
- Information on any festival exclusives (e.g., special yarn color, special pottery mug design, that is only available through the virtual festival)
- Links to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Ravelry accounts

These were presented as one big listing with buttons at the top to let people filter by category, letter of the alphabet, or both. All shopping was done on the vendors' own website/online store.

Since we did not have this level of information already at hand, we created a survey in the form of a Google Form to collect the links, etc. I have included our message to the vendors as Attachment A, in case it might be helpful. We also asked each vendor to send an image to use at the top of their listing.

We use WordPress for our website. I created a "post" for each vendor, and manually copied and pasted the data from the Google Form into WordPress, one vendor at a time. For those vendors who did not send a photo, I helped myself to photos from their Facebook page or website. As a last resort, I used generic line drawings that we had previously used as icons on our website. Our WordPress designer did the necessary magic to unite the posts as a single entity and add the filter functionality.

There are much more sophisticated ways of doing this. Here is one example:

<https://issuu.com/elainegarvey/docs/final?fr=sYTUwZTEhNTkxNzA>. Another option I saw somewhere (but can't find anymore) had all of the shopping occurring in central marketplace so shoppers could buy from an unlimited number of vendors in one transaction, and then the purchase details would be sent to each vendor so they could fill the orders. That was much too ambitious for us to pull off in the time we had available, so we kept it simple.

As this was meant to benefit the vendors, we did not charge them for the listings.

Virtual Fleece Sale

The virtual fleece sale echoed what we did for the vendors, but without photos and with additional information about the fleeces available (fleece type, breed and color). There was one listing for each producer. We did not display information on individual fleeces. Again, all shopping was done on the producers' own website/online store or other means indicated. We did not charge for these listings either.

By this time, I'd had the bright idea of doing a mail merge in Word so that the label/tag and the information provided by the producer were together for one copy/paste operation into WordPress. (For the vendors, I had been pasting in the labels first and then going back in to paste the associated information for that vendor).

Facebook Group

Ahh, the Facebook Group. Created on March 30, it now has almost 11,000 members. To date, there have been 2,412 posts, 24,396 comments, and 175,845 reactions (likes, etc.). Anyone is welcome to post in the group. However, to post about items for sale or promote a farm or business, the person posting must be a current Maryland Sheep & Wool Festival vendor or be a participant in the virtual fleece sale.

Vendors posted information about what they had to sell, buyers posted information about what they had bought, everyone answered questions for one another and helped each other with the workarounds when the website crashed. The group was our savior when the website crashed, and it continues to be active more than a week later as people post photos of their purchases as they arrive, in many cases prompting more people to seek out that vendor and setting off another wave of purchasing.

The downside is that there are people in this world who do not Facebook (or out-and-out refuse to do Facebook) and they will be excluded if you choose this platform.

If you do decide to go this direction, here are some recommendations:

- Thoroughly research Facebook Groups and their associated settings before you start.
- Become acquainted with all of the “tabs” beforehand. I had to learn about “Announcements” and “Files” on the fly. Announcements are extremely useful, but they do differ from pinned posts on a Facebook Page. Know the difference.
- Find the setting that allows “Pages” to join your group. I never was able to locate it. All of our vendors had to join the group and make posts under their personal profile name, and not their farm page or business page. I have since joined another group as my farm page, so I know it can be done.
- Group moderation (approving membership requests and pending posts) can be time consuming, especially during peak times. Make sure to have plenty of help, and to have a schedule for meal and potty breaks.

Other Aspects

We already had a seldom-used YouTube channel set up. Using that, I was able to create a playlist of all of the vendors’ virtual booth tour videos, which was extremely popular with “attendees”.

Some vendors did livestreams from their shop, farm, or studio, which were also very popular. I know some were done via Facebook live, although there may have been other platforms as well. I had hoped to publish a schedule in advance of who would be streaming when, but that plan kind of fell apart. Fortunately, the vendors were able to take the initiative to make this happen.

Unlike the live festival, the virtual festival did not close at 5:00 p.m. on Sunday. In order to provide the most benefit to the vendors and fleece producers, we are going to keep the Virtual Vendor Marketplace and Virtual Fleece Show pages up on our website until the end of December. I suspect the Facebook Group has become a permanent fixture, although traffic will probably slow down after a while and then pick up as next year’s festival draws nigh.

What Got Shortchanged

The Festival is so much more than just a sales venue – it includes fiber arts seminars, cooking demonstrations, sheep shearing and sheepdog demonstrations, sheep shows, a sheep sale, indoor competitions (skein & garment, fine arts, photography), a sheep-to-shawl competition, and much more.

Thankfully, members of the Facebook Group took up the slack and shared their own videos of sheepdogs working and sheep being shorn, which definitely added to the live Festival atmosphere. We also managed to hold our Junior Spinning Competition and Saturday Night Spin-In on Zoom. With a little more time, we probably could have used that platform for more of the things that were absent from the online event, like fiber arts seminars and cooking demonstrations. There are probably ways to have people submit competition entries online for remote judging, too, but we ran out of time to make that happen.

In Conclusion

The sense I get (from the Facebook Group, at least) is that the online festival was a rousing success. I think this is in large part due to the fact that over our 47-year history we have amassed a large fan base of fiber fanatics who all suffer from fear-of-missing-out. All we did was point them in the right direction.

We plan to survey the vendors to find out how it worked from their perspective. I suspect that vendors that were active in the Facebook Group and had some form of shopping cart functionality did better than those who did not.

We also need to find out from the vendors how they would like to see us move forward. There has been a clamor from buyers on the Facebook group (especially those from living outside the area or who do not have the physical ability to attend the live event) to hold an online festival each year in conjunction with the live festival, but that decision will need to be guided by the vendors themselves. I suspect there are quite a few vendors who bring their entire inventory to the festival and could not maintain an online shop at the same time.

I hope this information is of use,

Kris Thorne
General Manager
Maryland Sheep & Wool Festival
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Email to Vendors

Dear vendors,

As we mentioned in our message notifying you of the cancellation of the Festival, we are working on a Virtual Vendor Marketplace which we hope will help you recoup your lost sales in at least a small part. This will be part of a larger virtual online festival, which will take place during our regularly scheduled festival weekend on May 2 and 3. The virtual festival will be hosted in a new “Maryland Sheep & Wool Festival Online Community” Facebook group and other social media platforms. You can join the Facebook group at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/mswfOnlineCommunity/>. You're all invited to hang out with us during the virtual festival hours to show off more of your products, answer questions from shoppers, and take orders in your online shops (for those that have that option). If you have discount codes or special offers (including festival exclusive products or colorways), we'll be happy to include them.

Please read this message in full, then complete the Virtual Vendor Marketplace Survey.

You do not have to complete the survey in one sitting; you may modify your answers at a later date. However, giving us as much information as you already have available up front will help us avoid a last-minute crush to get everything updated to the website. **We need to have your final information by April 25.**

MSWF Virtual Vendor Marketplace Survey Link:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeEv7MtPhxeSRbKDdO-zgogZZVioXmE3_JGWZr9EX02HdeNsw/viewform

We will use your answers to create an enhanced vendor listing on the Maryland Sheep & Wool Festival website. Current plans are for this listing to be searchable by product category and to include filters for new vendors and Maryland vendors as well. In advance of the virtual online festival on May 2 and 3, we'll publish the basic listing with a link to your online shop as well as the other information provided in the survey. On Saturday morning, we'll share your discounts, promo codes, and information about products/colorways exclusive to this year's virtual festival.

If you do not have online shopping already set up, here are some options to do so:

1. Square - <https://squareup.com/us/en/online-store>
2. Shopify - <https://www.shopify.com/>
3. Squarespace - <https://www.squarespace.com/ecommerce/sell-products>
4. Etsy - <https://www.etsy.com/sell>

Disclaimer - none of these options are free, and these are not your only choices; your webhost may have a built-in ecommerce solution. **We recognize that setting up a full online shop is a big project** but unfortunately the Festival committee is unable to assist with this. At a minimum, it would be a good idea to have photos of as much inventory as possible up on your regular site for shoppers to drool over. If you won't be able to get an online ordering system in place,

consider taking orders via Private Message and send PayPal invoices to your buyers. We do NOT recommend asking for credit card information directly on any social media platform.

If you are able to, **pre-record a short video telling shoppers more about your products, introducing your animals, or giving a quick demo of the things you make** and upload to YouTube or your own site or social media. We will post links to these videos in your vendor listing as your “virtual booth”, and also share them throughout the virtual festival period. If video’s not your thing, put together a slideshow or collage of photos instead. Feedback from other organizations who have done something like this is that videos got more views than photo albums. If you’d prefer to live stream (via Facebook live or the platform of your choice), we can schedule these during the festival hours, but we have 275 vendors and only 18 hours, so please consider that any longer interaction will draw shoppers’ attention away from the event. We do encourage you to stay online as much as you can during the virtual Festival and monitor comments in our Facebook group and other outlets - shoppers love to ask questions and this will be the next best thing to fondling yarn. Also, please send up **to four photographs of your products** to office@sheepandwool.org so we can use them in our promotional efforts.

Discounts are optional - we know this is a tough time financially - but they do help bring in sales. We recommend that everyone use the same promo code for the event so it’s easier for shoppers to remember: **mdsw2020** (we will also be using this as a hashtag throughout the event) but it’s up to you what kind of discount or offer that will be (percent off, BOGO, free shipping, whatever) and you’ll need to provide instructions for using the code on your own site or in your video. We will be officially kicking off the virtual festival on 5/2 at 8:30 am and will announce discount codes then, but you are of course welcome to continue them for as long as you’d like after the festival “ends”.

Remember that you are still responsible for submitting sales tax to the appropriate state authority on sales during the virtual festival. Please **comply with your own state’s regulations**. All transactions during the virtual event are solely between you and the buyer - **the Festival committee is not a party to these sales** and cannot resolve disputes. Similarly, we will collect no personal data on participants outside what is already shared with us by virtue of joining the Festival Facebook Group or following our other social media.

Attached is a postcard image you can share with your mailing list and followers to advertise the event. One great advantage of going virtual is that we can now reach shoppers far and wide so please invite everyone to join us! We will be using **#mdsw2020** and **#virtualonlinewoolfestival** across all of our social media and encouraging shoppers to do the same.

Finally, we ask for your **patience and enthusiasm** during the event. This is something new for all of us and we are figuring it out as we go. Special thanks to the gang at **Homespun Yarn Party** who already had to make the switch from an in-person event to a virtual party and generously shared with us how they went about it and what they learned; if some of you think this message sounds familiar, that’s the reason why!