Embracing the challenge of taking IDEM digital

By Monique Mehler, DTI

Mathias Kuepper has extensive experience in trade fairs and exhibitions, including event operations, sales and marketing, project management, and strategic business development. (Image: © Koelnmesse Singapore)

Since July 2014, Mathias Kuepper has been working as managing director of Koelnmesse Singapore, where he, in addition to his other responsibilities, organises South East Asia’s leading dental show IDEM Singapore, which takes place every two years. Owing to the ongoing SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, the on-site IDEM 2020 was cancelled, and it will now be a wholly digital experience in order to ensure the health and safety of staff and visitors. In an interview with Dental Tribune International, Kuepper explained why Koelnmesse has decided to move IDEM online, shared insights into what it took to replan the event and attempted to answer the big question everyone is wondering about: how will SARS-CoV-2 affect the dental industry in the long run?

Mr Kuepper, at the end of March, it was announced that IDEM 2020 will become a wholly digital experience. What led Koelnmesse to this decision? Were there ever conversations about cancelling the whole show like others in the industry have done?

The decision to go digital in 2020 was, of course, driven by the SARS-CoV-2 situation. It became clear that we would not be able to go through with our initial plan to just reschedule the physical event from April to June, and further postponements were not taken into consideration owing to the escalating situation.

An outright cancellation would have led to a four-year gap with no international event for the dental industry in South East Asia. At the same time, the cancellation of events had led to a shortage of opportunities for dentists to earn sufficient continuing education points this year. With a conference programme already in place, it was therefore an easy decision for IDEM to go digital and offer our scientific content online.

It also provided an opportunity for our loyal exhibitors to be featured online and to network with dental professionals in a safe manner.

One of the main reasons why dental professionals from around the globe attend events is to connect with their peers in person and experience the showcased products first-hand. Now, with a purely virtual event, these important factors are missing. Do you think there is a way for the online version of IDEM to make up for this?

The value of live events and face-to-face meetings is irreplaceable, and we will not be able to replicate this with the digital IDEM. While scientific content can be relatively easily delivered virtually, the networking experience—an encounter during a coffee break and, especially, the opportunity for manufacturers to showcase and personally explain and demonstrate prod-

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ucts—will certainly fall short of a physical event. Thus, instead of trying to recreate these factors, our team will focus on creating new experiences within the digital event.

One advantage of the online event will be that attendees will be able to view and review conference sessions multiple times at their own learning pace. We will strive to introduce new ways for our attendees to engage and for exhibitors to feature their products and solutions. Participants can look forward to connecting with their peers through live chats, discovering new products and interacting with our exhibitors in order to understand how these solutions would assist them in their practices.

Taking the limitations into consideration, we made a conscious decision on our side to offer basic participation in the digital event free of charge to all our loyal IDEM exhibitors and to fully refund the participation fee for the physical event.

**What are the greatest challenges in putting the online event together, and how does the organisation process differ from planning a live event?**

As you can imagine, we have spent the last two years planning for IDEM 2020; thus, changing at the last moment to building an online event is not without its challenges. Creating a digital event is also new for our team, yet we are embracing the experience.

As many factors are considered when choosing a digital platform to host an event as when choosing a physical venue. The choice of convention centre can make or break a physical event, and in the same way, it was important to ensure that our digital system could support the event in order to provide a positive experience throughout. Some other key considerations were the suitable showcasing of our exhibitors’ products and services, and the provision of content accessible to anyone, anywhere at an affordable price.

To meet these requirements, an important change we have made in order to build a positive experience for IDEM 2020 participants is to have the digital event run for two months instead of the usual three days. This will allow everybody to access the conference sessions and explore the exhibition at their own pace and convenience. These changes to the organisation and format of IDEM are also reflected in our marketing approach, which we have shifted to focus on the flexibility and interactivity of the online platform.

**Thousands of working hours go into planning a large and prestigious event like IDEM. How did the change from a live event to an online version affect you and the organisation team personally?**

Naturally, we were disappointed not to deliver the event we had planned. We had spent a lot of time considering how to bring a fresh approach to IDEM 2020, and we were excited about introducing several new additions and changes to the usual format. One such change, for example, was to have workshops conducted on the exhibition floor.

Although we were unable to host the conference and exhibition in April as planned, we are grateful that we made the decision to move to a digital platform. Our primary purpose is to serve the dental community by providing learning and networking opportunities, and we are still able to achieve this in a reasonable way through our digital event. We are immensely grateful to the exhibitors, speakers and attendees who continue to support and demonstrate their commitment to IDEM.

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**The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has changed the world. What do you think are the long-term effects on the dental industry?**

There are still so many unknowns about SARS-CoV-2, and dentistry as a profession may have to adapt by learning to conduct business in a new way. While hygiene and sanitation has always been a priority, it is now of paramount importance. There will be more emphasis on infection control and the implementation of these measures across different levels.

Continuing education in dentistry will still be essential. As event organisers, it is important for us to continue to adapt in order to deliver relevant content in a timely manner and in various formats, such as online events. The new measures in practice and the restrictions relating to international travel may also be the norm for some time.

For the IDEM organising team, even as we plan to bring the event back to its physical format in 2022, we will continue to stay abreast of these challenges and seek to find convenient ways to ensure that our community is heard and can flexibly participate in the learning programmes. We stand ready, as always, to support the needs of the dental community.

Editorial note: More information on the event can be found on the official IDEM website: www.idem-singapore.com