

DOWNTOWN DENVER PARTNERSHIP

INNOVATION

Denver Startup Week has always thrived in-person - with events spanning from sun-up to sun-down in the heart of downtown Denver. The pandemic meant that we would either have to cancel the event, or completely turn it on its head. We chose the latter.

We heard our community loud and clear – startups and businesses are strengthened through a deliberate focus on developing strong cultures & teams – especially in the face of disruption caused by the pandemic and economic uncertainty.

With that top of mind, along with the health and safety of our community as our #1 priority, DSW was the most accessible it's ever been. We enabled participants to watch from anywhere, network remotely, and engage with other like-minded people in a variety of virtual sessions and platforms, all delivered directly to attendees' devices. As we took the magic of DSW digital, accessibility, equality, and inclusivity remained core to the purpose for Denver Startup Week. This year, we provided closed-captioning and ASL translation for participants who are hard of hearing, deaf, visually-impaired, blind, and/or bilingual, and with the guidance of our first DEI Chair Dianne Myles, we focused on the ongoing process of infusing core DEI values into every aspect of our event.

OUTCOME

This year's events had far-reaching impacts, directly visible in the growth of our email audience from 80,000 recipients in 2020, to 98,000+ as we head into the session submission process for 2021. This year, DSW hosted a Pitch Competition, an expanded virtual Job Fair and Showcase, 1:1 Mentorship Sessions, Daily Happy Hours & Networking Opportunities, the Annual Puppy Panel, and much more. Along with creating access like never before, #DENStartupWeek 2020 got a new look. All DSW sessions streamed through Zoom, YouTube, and directly to the DSW website; and our community and the public can now enjoy DSW all year long – sessions and events were recorded and are on our YouTube page. As part of our first year recording sessions, we've been able to organize content into themed and timely playlists for email and social communications, providing fresh takes that spanned beyond the week.

The new format enabled us to level up and diversify our lineup of spotlight and featured content. In addition to Robert Smith, we featured impressive speakers including Arlan Hamilton, Founder of Backstage Capital, Jennifer Fleiss, Founder of Rent the Runway, Jesse Itzler, Serial Entrepreneur, Katica Roy, 2020 Colorado Entrepreneur of the Year, Imran Khan, Founder and CEO of Verishop, and Ben Higgins, Entrepreneur and star of 'The Bachelor.'

The increase in accessibility that led to greater geographic diversity also led to greater visibility and awareness of DSW, and will help maintain its position as one of the largest and best entrepreneurial events of its kind..

EXECUTION

To give our community the time to get creative and put their best submissions forward during the onset of the pandemic, and given the rapidly changing pandemic business environment, in 2020 we kicked off session submissions later than usual. As our organizing committee took great care in planning a safe event for our community, we involved multiple sponsors and stakeholder groups in conversations about strategy, project milestones, and overarching goals to ensure that we had a clear vision and set of metrics for measuring our success as we transitioned to a completely virtual format.

Working collaboratively with our partners, we piloted 30+ virtual platforms to mold the tools we would use to the needs of our event in the 'new normal.' Based on the metrics we set for ourselves, including sponsor, attendee, and stakeholder feedback, we exceeded many of the goals we set by providing 231 free sessions, events, happy hours, job fairs, workout classes, and celebrations; 10,000+ registered attendees; 18,000+ Zoom meeting participants; 23,000+ views on YouTube Live and counting; 49 U.S. states represented & 35 countries represented; and 341,000 distinct page views on the DSW website.

REPRESENTATION

As we took the magic of DSW digital, accessibility, equality, and inclusivity continued to remain a top priority for Denver Startup Week. This year, we partnered with ACS Captions and LinguaBee for their expertise and guidance to serve participants who are

hard of hearing, deaf, visually-impaired, blind, and/or for those whom English is not their first language. We are also proud to say that DSW 2020 attendance broke down to: 52% women, 42% men, and 6% other/decline to say, continuing our trend of making the entrepreneurial space welcoming to all.

Even with these moves in the right direction, we knew we needed to make some large strides forward when it came to our efforts for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). This started our organizing committee down a fresh path with renewed passion for DEI – removing the topic as a ‘cluster’, and infusing these core values into every aspect of our event with the guidance of our first DEI Chair, Dianne Myles.

DSW was honored to feature Robert F. Smith, CEO of VistaEquity and prominent Black investor, as our Kickoff Keynote Speaker.

REPLICATION

As we went virtual, many of the new tools and processes we worked through will likely be a large part of events into the future. Our virtual Job Fair on the Remo platform provided a virtual floor with company tables that attendees were able to hop between for conversations and provided great opportunities to be replicated.

Our ongoing themed session playlists for post-event content distribution are also a replicable takeaway that might be particularly relevant for others as we transition into a new phase of the pandemic. With 220+ recorded sessions in our YouTube library for the first time, since the 2020 event wrapped, we’ve shared a new playlist with 10-20 sessions packaged up two to three times each month. This is a unique post-event marketing component that allows DSW to live on afterwards, engaging participants with year-round content, brand exposure, and network connections.

COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY

Transitioning a 20,000+ person event to be entirely virtual (with no previous virtual aspects) was a complex undertaking for the organizing committee.

As we piloted many virtual tools and resources to see how we could make sure our week of events kept its high entrepreneurial energy, we soon found there was not a cover-all tool we would be able to use. We wanted to make sure access was easy and simple, and partnered with Zoom to host all sessions as webinars and meetings, and also utilized YouTube to stream all sessions to both our channel and directly to the schedule on our website. We also partnered with Remo for our virtual Job Fair and Showcase and happy hours in order to allow for virtual networking.

Managing these moving pieces was an effort that was much larger than just the efforts of our organizing committee. To mitigate this complexity, our teams did as much work as possible in advance of launching Denver Startup Week.