IBM

"Re-Thinking" marketing events

RainFocus quickly pivots to a virtual format on the IBM Cloud®

by Kristin Fern Johnson

7-minute read

Everything was going according to plan. The event team behind IBM Think, IBM's annual flagship event, was gearing up for another successful round in May 2020. Venues were booked, hotels were filling up, marketing materials were in the final stages of preparation—and IBM's new RainFocus event marketing platform was primed to handle the 40,000 anticipated attendees.

Then, the COVID-19 pandemic struck, and all plans came to an abrupt halt. It quickly became apparent that the IBM

Think event wasn't going to happen—at least not in a physical venue in San Francisco. Rather than cancel the event entirely, the IBM and RainFocus teams made a bold decision: to shift from an in-person format to a virtual one. The catch? The event was a mere 46 days away.

Both teams went into action, working days, nights and weekends. Much of the technical preparation for the physical event was close to complete. Many aspects had to be reworked.

The race was on.

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JR Sherman, Chief Executive Officer, RainFocus

Scaled from 40,000 expected registrations for a physical event to

122,000

registrations for a virtual event

Migrated from a physical event to a virtual event format in

46

days

From physical to virtual in 46 days

Fortunately, in 2019, IBM had launched a plan to migrate its event marketing systems—a disparate assortment of homegrown proprietary tools and vendor point solutions—to the RainFocus software-as-a-service (SaaS) platform, hosted on IBM Cloud technologies. A scalable platform using IBM Cloud capabilities not only made a speedy transition to a virtual format possible, but also provided novel opportunities for innovation.

The cloud strategy for the platform was still right on target. RainFocus and IBM were in the midst of a phased rollout, initially running the platform in a hybrid
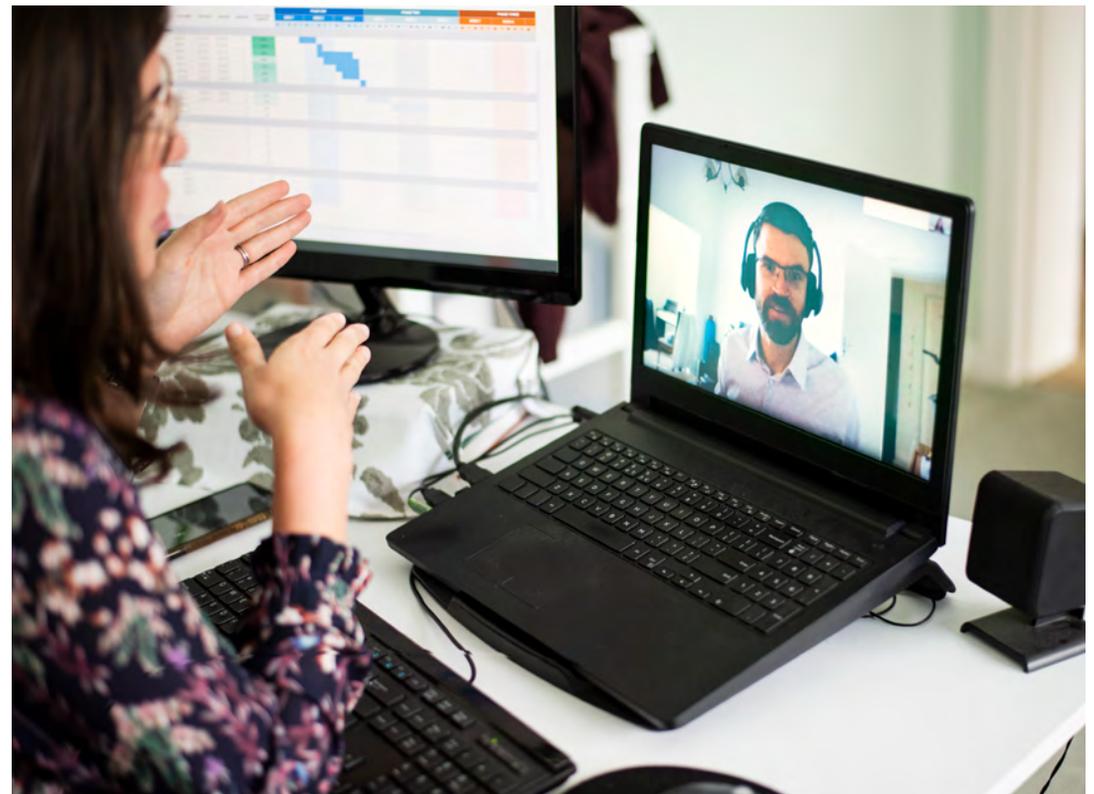
environment on IBM Cloud and other cloud-hosted technologies, with plans to migrate fully to IBM Cloud in mid-2021.

At the time, RainFocus was using IBM Cloud for Kubernetes Service for the cloud implementation, enabling the company to take an industry-standard cloud-agnostic approach. It was also using IBM Cloud Object Storage to store the multitudinous assets required to run an IBM event, IBM® Content Delivery Network to deliver those assets with speed and consistency, and IBM global load balancers to maintain high availability, hosting the platform in IBM data centers in Dallas and Washington, D.C.

With the cloud infrastructure in place, the two teams focused on reconfiguring the RainFocus platform to run an

online event. The platform provides a remarkable set of features perfectly matched to IBM's event marketing needs: a single, integrated interface; an open, scalable architecture; a user-friendly front-end; integration with IBM's back-end systems; and robust reporting and analytics capabilities.

First, the teams restructured the conference around areas where digital events could do well—such as delivery of session-related content, skills development through technical education and labs, and networking opportunities.

From a technical perspective, the teams tackled such issues as how to collect attendee information at registration, track attendance and engagement, enable single sign-on and integrate the exchange of information between the platform and IBM back-end systems.

The challenge of scalability loomed large. Registrations typically occur somewhat predictably for physical events, gradually climbing in the weeks prior to opening day. But no one could anticipate a virtual event's registration cadence and volume.

To prepare, RainFocus and IBM conducted scaling tests of the RainFocus platform's registration features and its integrations into the IBM infrastructure. RainFocus created a lobby feature—a waiting room that kicked in when registrations reached a threshold—to handle overflow traffic, configuring it and conducting load tests to make sure it could meet demand.

And then, after 46 days, all was ready – and the true test began.

Breaking barriers in virtual events

The RainFocus platform, hosted in the hybrid IBM Cloud, performed flawlessly throughout the conference. Ultimately, more than 122,000 attendees registered—up from 30,000 registrants for the 2019 in-person event. It was a landmark achievement. "IBM Think 2020 was one of the largest online conferences to date," says Sherman. "It was the first of its size and was converted midstream from a physical event to a virtual event—amazing!"

That degree of success translates into a powerful proof point for the impact marketing technology can
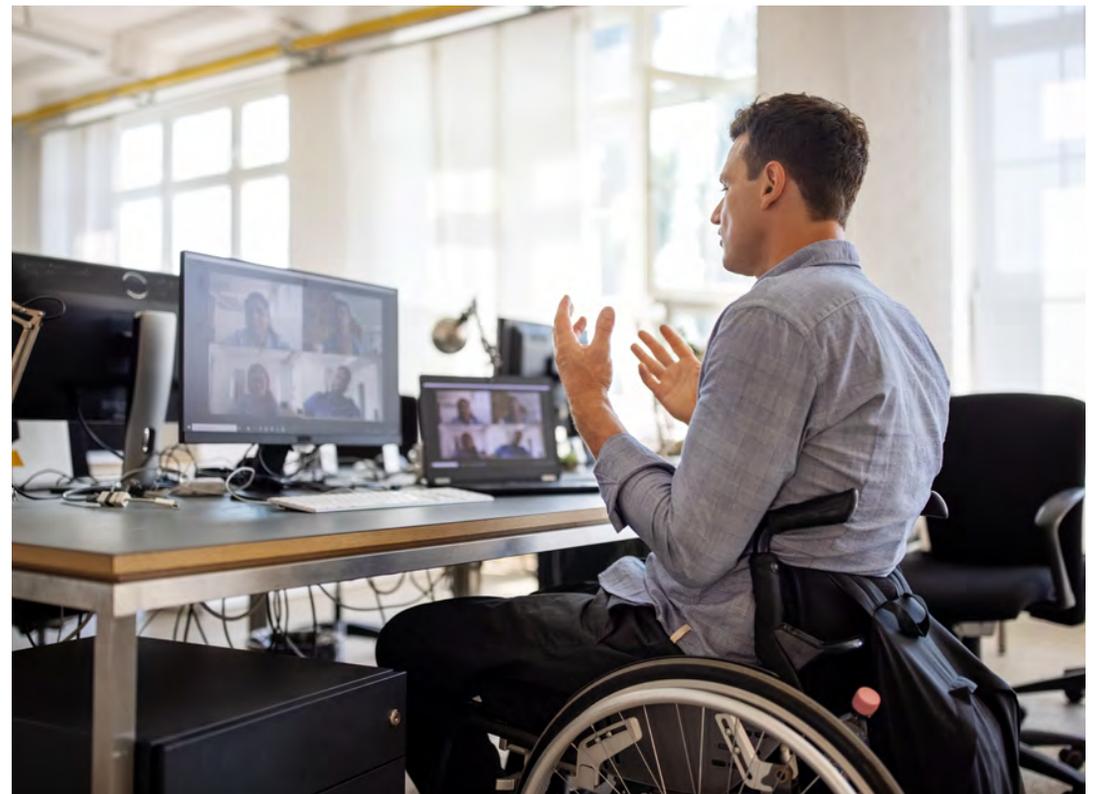
have on a company's bottom line. "If you are the CIO of a big corporation and are assessing an event marketing platform to deploy globally, you want serious credibility in that platform," says Sherman. "To offer a platform that can be cloud-agnostic and run fully in the IBM Cloud—and to have this type of SaaS environment with the redundancy and capabilities we've built as a result of this collaboration—just sets us so far apart from anybody else in our space."

One of the most exciting aspects of the virtual format is the personalized experiences it offers attendees, providing recommendations along the way for content, sessions and meetings,

and opportunities to collaborate. The IBM Think experience, for example, was honed to the interests and activities of each attendee—essentially resulting in 122,000 individual Think events.

Together, RainFocus and IBM also achieved a critical project goal: to create an event template during IBM Think 2020 that could be scaled for IBM's 600+ annual events. The template eases the burden on IBM's 300 regional event managers, providing a single centralized event platform with preconfigured capabilities they can use for their own events.

The relationship between IBM and RainFocus continues to thrive. The

migration to a 100% IBM Cloud environment is still in progress and is slated for launch in mid-2021, following the IBM Think 2021 virtual conference. Both companies continue to drive each other to ever higher levels of innovation. "IBM really upped our game in terms of passing data in near-real time to third-party systems," says Sherman. "Although in this case, it's not a separate vendor but IBM's various IT, marketing and data systems." As the two companies join forces for another IBM Think virtual conference, they look forward to showcasing the latest achievements of their teamwork.

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About RainFocus

Founded in 2013, RainFocus (external link) is a next-generation event marketing platform built from the ground up to capture, analyze, and harness an unprecedented amount of data for significantly better events and conferences. As a true SaaS platform, RainFocus simplifies event registration, content management and exhibitor activation seamlessly across physical, virtual and hybrid experiences, all from a single dashboard. The company is based in Lehi, Utah.

Solution components

- IBM Cloud® for Kubernetes Service
- IBM Cloud Object Storage
- IBM® Content Delivery Network