

No 27 / Cologne, 15 December 2020

## How Koelnmesse saved the Christmas party

**Kim Brake, Julia Caspari and Laura Enderes of Koelnmesse sat down together in October and mulled the matter over. Their mission: Please organise this year's Christmas party - despite of ongoing trade fair cancellations, in spite of short-time work, and with numerous colleagues working from home. Doesn't sound feasible. If possible, it shouldn't cost a cent, either.**

But then, what happened on Thursday night, 3 December, beginning at 5:00 p.m., is something they never would have expected. Honestly, no one at Koelnmesse would have expected it. Optimism may be a mandatory part of the trade fair landscape at the moment. After all, things have to get moving again at some point. But if creativity has no outlet, it simply erupts. And that is what happened - this time, in the digital space.

"I've got goose bumps right now", one person wrote in the chat before the party got under way on the brand new digital event platform at Koelnmesse - which, working full steam, had actually been designed for trade fairs in the digital space and was already in use at DMEXCO@home. "I want to wish everyone a Merry Christmas", another wrote. Appearing alongside the chat is a freeze frame: "This is where the Koelnmesse Christmas party begins". And then the video starts, as if by magic. Gerald Böse, President and Chief Executive Officer of Koelnmesse, opened the evening: "In this year, an exceptional year in every respect, we are meeting digitally and are ready for a joint year-end report of a special kind."

Then everything came in quick succession: One colleague is seen cooking food. "We should book him some time", someone wrote in the group chat. "Gladly" was the immediate reply. Sales Manager Dennis Kelpot pre-produced the video. But it had the flavour of a live video feed. His colleagues remained online. There were up to 500 of them constantly online on the digital event platform from 5:00 p.m. to 8:30 p.m., the official end of the programme, and some even stayed around a bit longer. In addition to the pre-produced programme, there were virtual cafés. "We approached our colleagues in advance to see who would like to appear live on our event platform for the Christmas party", said Julia Caspari, who represented the organisational team but usually works in Personnel Development. The call resulted in 21 live offers. From a hearth room with an 'ugly sweater contest' to a Christmas bakery for hazelnut treats, a handicrafts room or a bar called 'The Mule' to several Secret Santa rooms and a gambling casino, there was something for everyone on offer.

"Now we're getting feedback on how these great ideas could be transplanted to a physical Christmas party", says Kim Brake of the organisational team, Sales Manager Services.

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The Christmas readings by Katrin Schön, for example, Director of h+h cologne, and by Jochen Lorenz, better known to the workforce as Team Leader Stand Construction Services, were simply too extraordinary. Ms Schön had sat down and written a story about 'How Koelnmesse saved Christmas'. Dressed in finest tweed, Lorenz told hilarious stories with a stoic face. In the chat, the applause was expressed in enthusiastic cheers - digitally. Schön and Lorenz had an opportunity to read the reactions live.

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Things were no different in the numerous live feeds. By colleagues for colleagues - that has always been the motto for Christmas parties at Koelnmesse. As Gerald Böse summed it up: "But this year they left me speechless."

That may be because the workforce is used to creating encounters and constantly re-envisioning them. "And digital meetings aren't as sterile as you might think", one participant noted at 10:30 p.m. in one of the digital bars. "A positive outlook for the hybridisation of our trade fairs", another colleague replied. The official programme was long over. In the virtual rooms, there were still more than 200 colleagues sharing ideas via video conference, toasting one another and laughing. "Hey, we don't even know each other yet", someone shouted. "But next time let's do this with a live DJ!", another added. In recent years, the dancing has always continued deep into the night at the Koelnmesse Christmas parties. Perhaps the Christmas party will be a hybrid affair in 2021 - just like the trade fairs. "Our colleagues are certain to come up with lots of ideas - the digital event platform offers plenty of room for creativity", Laura Enderes said with confidence.

By that time, Santa Claus will have completed his rounds in Katrin Schön's story, too: "Then he took a star from the sky, crumbled it, and blew the stardust over the earth. And at that very moment, the best scientists in the world looked up into the dark night sky and said, 'Oh! I think I've got the solution'".