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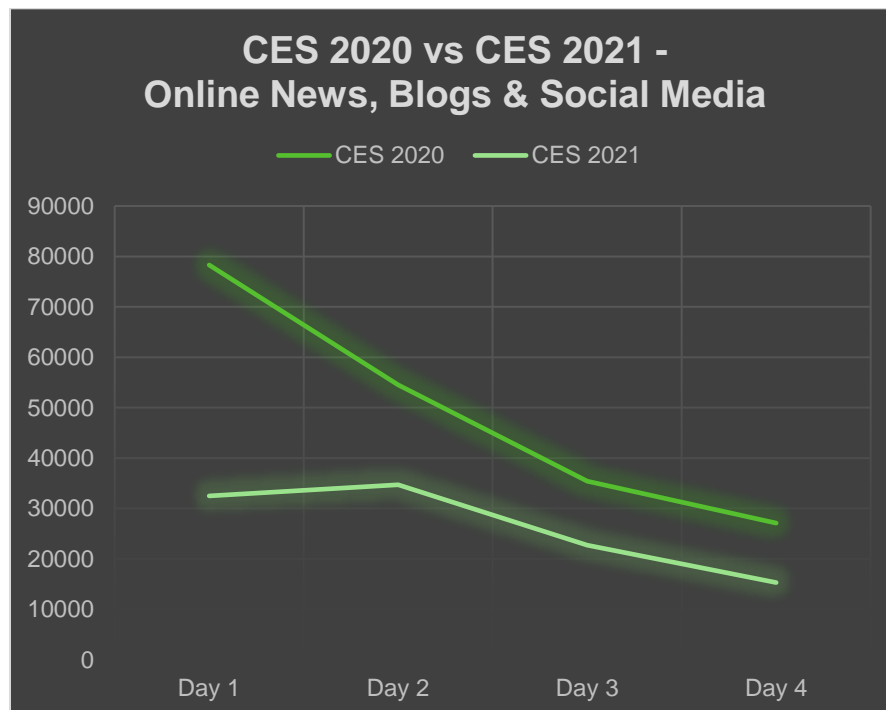
Six Key Learnings from the First Virtual CES

CES looked very different this year. The keynote stage was beamed directly onto our screens; casino floors gave way to living rooms and kitchen tables; and taxi lines were replaced by endless video calls.

At Ketchum, we set out to answer two questions: how deeply did the necessary changes made by the CTA to keep attendees safe impact the outcome and value of CES? And what can we learn for future events through 2021 and beyond?

1. Even the biggest event in the tech industry calendar struggled to break through

Both media coverage and social conversation took a huge hit compared to 2020. Over the four days of CES in 2021, we saw **HALF as many online news, blogs and social media posts** in North America related to the event and a similar trend in coverage worldwide. In 2020, there was a steady decline in volume of coverage from Day 1 to Day 4 of the event; however, this year, CES saw a small uptick in interest on the 2nd day of the conference, likely driven by a passionate gaming community responding to product launches, new platforms and device specs.



2. Media attention was fractured by world events

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It was CES last week! Because, you know, there's nothing else going on.

There's no denying that CES faced more competition from the macro news environment than ever before. But the impact was compounded by the lack of a "captive audience" on the ground in Las Vegas.

The stats bear it out: while the overall technology conversation in global media actually expanded from 2020 to 2021, the share of that conversation focused on CES shrunk. CES accounted for just 17% of the broader technology media conversation during the four days of the conference, compared to nearly 40% in 2020. Confined to the home office and faced with an historic debate about free speech and deplatforming a still-sitting President, reporters turned attention away from the latest gadgets and executive keynotes.

The impact of the macro environment was so seismic that it would have affected CES even in a "normal" year. But our hypothesis, backed up by conversations with reporters, is that the virtual environment made it easier for them to cherry pick the moments, sessions and announcements they "tuned into," and that they were more comfortable "tuning out" as the conference went on.

3. The balance shifted away from auto tech, in favor of health and wellness, robotics and... ice cream?

For the last several years, we've talked about CES being as much an auto show as a tech one. That changed in 2021, with **auto tech mentions down from 23.2K in 2020 to just 6.5K this year**. Much of this can be attributed to the challenge of experiencing an autonomous vehicle from a virtual setting, as well as the major chip shortage that has been hamstringing the entire industry.

In its place, it's no surprise that health and wellness coverage, with a keen focus on staying safe through the pandemic, was on the rise. Among the hottest items at the show were smart masks, disinfecting UV lights, touchless toilets and small Star Wars-like robots with autonomous mobility capabilities and sterilization tools. Household robots designed to help with the chores we've been neglecting while working from home also captured media attention and broke through.

On the more frivolous end of the scale, a 90-second ice cream maker was one of the few standalone devices to drive its own news cycle, perhaps a sign that we're all looking for a little CES-themed light relief – and reminding us of the value of broadcast affiliate syndications and product round ups to build mindshare.

4. Top-billed speaking opportunities are a hot commodity, but not as impactful as in the past

Gary Shapiro, chief executive of the Consumer Technology Association (CTA) and host of CES, noted it was much easier for him to book marquee speakers for keynotes and programming, since executives didn't need to travel to the event. We've heard similar perspectives from programmers across a variety of media organizations—from Bloomberg to The Atlantic to MIT Technology Review – who report getting access to higher level speaking execs than ever before.

But even with those marquee execs, news coverage was not as dominated by formal CES programming this year. Discussion of CES keynotes in online news and blogs nearly halved year-over-year; on social, the channel that drove the vast majority of keynote engagement in 2020, **declined by 77%, signaling the need to shift how we measure the efficacy of such engagements.**

5. Conversation shifted from privacy to regulation

Privacy was a major area of focus at CES 2020, and a divisive one at that. This year, even as technology leaders seemed to come together in a “united front” to align on the priority of progressing privacy regulation at the federal level, the conversation had shifted. No doubt driven by the macro news climate seeping into CES coverage, coupled with ample speculation about the impact of the Biden administration on Big Tech, attention turned to the interplay between technology and regulators. **Eyes are on not only the substance but also the tone of Silicon Valley's interactions with DC in this new era.**

6. Enthusiasm for getting back together in person in 2022 is high

For all the talk of sore feet, travel disruptions, and long lines for mediocre food, there was an **overriding nostalgia** for the days when we were able to get together and meet in person. CES 2021 was an exceptionally well planned and executed interactive experience, but **reporters still noted that the virtual format limited the serendipity of on-the-ground networking and discovery**, let alone the ability to touch and test the gadgets for which the show is best known. Only time will tell whether this enthusiasm for in-person events gives way just as quickly to the nostalgia of 2020's virtual events!

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