Cvent Special Edition

Virtual Event Strategy

For dummies®

A Wiley Brand

- Develop effective virtual event strategies
- Design and execute engaging virtual events
- Maximize virtual event ROI

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Virtual Event Strategy For Dummies®, Cvent Special Edition

Publisher's Acknowledgments

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Introduction

E vent organizers have planning down to a science. They're highly experienced event professionals who know how to tie in all facets of an event — from the location to the promotion, content to networking opportunities. They leave attendees coming away gushing about how they had a great time, learned so much, and made a bunch of new connections. And in so doing, they deliver real value to their organizations.

As organizations embrace the potential to exponentially increase their reach, and as technology allows for new levels of digital engagement, virtual events and hybrid events will become fixtures in most organizations' marketing mix. For a growing number of these "online" attendees, the technology itself will become the new venue.

Virtual events are very different from in-person events and come with their own sets of challenges. The draws that come with an in-person event (the location, the in-person networking, and the chance to get away from the office) are on pause for a moment. Planners have to adjust their mindsets and get more creative about making sure the attendees get and stay engaged when they're surrounded by everyday distractions.

But people can adapt, and adapting means adopting a new mindset and starting from square one. You can't simply make an in-person event into a virtual one. But you can create a memorable and successful virtual event using parts of in-person events, just tweaked a bit for virtual use.

So, toss out your tried-and-true event planning checklist because this book will help you create a new one. Empty out your in-person event planning tool kit to make room for the new tools you'll need to become a highly efficient, successful virtual event planner.

About This Book

Virtual Event Strategy For Dummies, Cvent Special Edition, discusses this new world of virtual event planning in seven chapters: "Deciding Your Virtual Event Strategy" (Chapter 1), "Designing Effective Virtual Events" (Chapter 2), "Building Virtual Events" (Chapter 3), "Promoting and Producing Your Virtual Event" (Chapter 4), "Realizing Attendee Engagement and Sponsorship ROI" (Chapter 5), "Maximizing Event Value" (Chapter 6), and "Ten Tips for Successful Virtual Events" (Chapter 7).

Icons Used In This Book

REMEMBER

The information marked by this icon is important enough to be emphasized. In other words, don't forget it!

TIP

Look for this icon when you want a few tricks of the trade to guide you on your way to successful virtual events.

WARNING

Though we don't think it's our place to tell you *not* to do something, we'll point out instances where you should tread carefully! You'll see this icon if that's the case.

Chapter **1**

Deciding Your Virtual Event Strategy

Virtual events aren't a new concept, but when the global pandemic struck, organizations found themselves having to forgo in-person events for virtual ones. At that time, research showed that virtual events were up 1,000 percent, but event planners were still playing catch-up. Though 76 percent of event planners were going virtual, only 40 percent of those said they were knowledgeable about how to plan and execute these events. Planners were forced to adapt quickly, and the adjustment was challenging.

As the months passed, virtual events became the norm. Even when in-person events are an option, virtual events will remain a part of an organization's marketing mix. After all, there *are* numerous benefits to hosting virtual events. It's just a matter of getting out of the mindset that virtual events can be planned the same way as in-person events — or that you can take any old event and flip a switch to make it an effective and successful virtual one. That couldn't be further from the truth!

This chapter gives you the lay of the land in regard to virtual events. We take you through the different types of virtual events and how to decide which one fits your needs the best. Finally, we discuss the importance of nailing down the objectives of your

event, so you know if it was successful or not, and how to make adjustments so you can ensure that your future events knock it out of the park.

Understanding the Virtual Event Landscape

Has your organization ever held webinars to establish thought leadership or demo a product or service to a group of people? If the answer is "yes," then you've already held virtual events.

Historically, the technology landscape had three, mutually-exclusive categories of events: virtual conferences, webinars, and in-person events. Although virtual conferences have been around for a long time, they didn't grow much in scope over the years. Webinars served their purpose when it came to things like on-boarding employees or generating leads for your marketing department.

Then, seemingly overnight, virtual events went viral. At first they were stopgaps until in-person events picked back up. But once it was clear that wasn't happening as quickly as originally thought, event planning professionals began to devise multi-year road-maps around virtual events. Except that this time around, they knew what they wanted — fully-branded, end-to-end, interactive experiences that immersed attendees.

In response, a new player in the virtual landscape is emerging, one that moves beyond the flat, passive experiences of a webinar and pulls in the interactive and engagement elements that make in-person events so compelling. Some call this new space Live Digital Engagement. Whatever you call it, it's something that every organization should have a strategy around.

REMEMBER

It's important that you don't run virtual events in a silo. Be sure to include these events in your overall event and marketing strategy and don't treat them as one-off activities.

Uncovering the challenges of virtual events

Unfortunately, virtual events have challenges that you don't encounter with in-person events. One of the biggest is that virtual events lack the face-to-face interaction that is one of the main draws for in-person events. With virtual events, you lose the networking happy hours and the one-on-one sales meetings that can crop up thanks to a chance meeting in the hallway. One result is that you risk losing a big portion of the lead generation benefits that naturally come with in-person events. The same goes for non-profits. Fundraising events are also missing out on the benefits that come from in-person events.

In addition, there's the challenge of keeping attendees engaged when they have so many distractions on their side of the screen. For example, though in-person attendees would likely stick around for the Q&A session at the end of a presentation, it can be more tempting at a virtual event to wander away, resulting in the engagement rate dropping between attendees as well as between attendees and presenters.

Speaking of engaging attendees, how do you not only draw in attendees, but also keep their attention throughout the event? A huge part of that answer is *content and its delivery.* Virtual events are all about the content. You can't entice attendees with a fun location, and you can't promise they'll get a Rolodex of physical business cards, so you have to reel them in with the promise of interesting and useful content. (We discuss content in more detail in Chapter 2.)

Another common challenge event planning professionals must overcome is attrition. Even though more people tend to register for virtual events, fewer typically show up. Organizations need to develop strategies that maximize the "yield" from registrant to attendance.

The final challenge, one primarily felt by virtual events whose purpose is to deliver revenue or membership, is conversion. Sure, virtual events tend to have higher registration numbers, but how well do these registrations convert? Do attendees ultimately become customers? A great conversion rate hinges, in part, on how well qualified the virtual audience is, how well the event engages them, and how successful the post-event follow-up is.

Celebrating the benefits of virtual events

Chances are, no one could've predicted that pretty much *all* corporate events would have to be virtual at any point. Event professionals work hard to develop successful event strategies all year long, and those strategies may not have included many virtual events, or maybe none at all. That's okay! Your work won't go to waste . . . you just have to look at it through a different lens.

Though planning and executing virtual events presents challenges, it offers benefits as well:

>> **Cost savings:** Virtual events tend to be less expensive than their in-person counterparts, avoiding expenses such as lodging for staff (and potentially some attendees), room rental, food and beverage, and the like.

Of course, those savings are just related to event organizers. Attendees and vendors also realize a significant cost savings because they don't have to travel to the location, pay for ground transportation, or pay for overnight child care or pet boarding.

Though you'll save money on certain things, you may incur new expenses for virtual events. For example, you may need higher-quality audio-visual capabilities to ensure all attendees have the best technological experience possible. After all, for virtual events, the technology *is* the venue.

>> **Potential for exponential reach:** With virtual events, attendees don't have to be located in (or travel to) a different region, so the potential registration counts and attendee pool grow considerably, as long as attendees have a reliable Internet connection. It isn't uncommon for virtual events to drive eight times or more registrants over their in-person equivalent.

>> **Attracting new segments or buyers:** Without the cost and time of a ticket to an in-person event, virtual events can reach segments that aren't good candidates for your in-person event. For example, someone who is early in a buying cycle would be less likely to attend an in-person event. The same is true for someone with a senior-level title who is too busy to be away from the office for an event.

>> **Expanded event repertoire:** We mention at the beginning of this chapter that 60 percent of event planners who responded to a survey reported that they weren't knowledgeable about virtual events. That can change! Now you have the opportunity to learn things you may not have had the opportunity to learn otherwise. (It's a great resume builder, too!)

Even after in-person events start back up, you'll have the skill set and experience to continue having virtual events. For example, it's a great way to strengthen relationships between marketers and event planning professionals, and that proves return on investment (ROI) long after the events are over. It's another tool in your organization's event strategy toolbox. And as the saying goes, variety is the spice of life!

>> **Become more tech savvy:** If your organization hasn't taken advantage of the benefits of an event planning software platform, now is a great time to jump on board. These solutions are primed and ready to assist you with your virtual event planning and execution. They'll cut down on a lot of the learning curve you'll experience when pivoting from in-person events to virtual ones.

Selecting the Best Format for Your Virtual Event

Now that we've set the stage around the virtual event landscape, this section gets into more detail about the events themselves.

Virtual events are held for the same reasons as in–person events — for example, to deliver your company's message to drive leads and revenue, for training purposes, or to build loyalty and lifetime value. That doesn't mean all online events are created equal, however. Two main types of virtual events play separate and important roles in your integrated marketing plan. They are:

>> **Webinars:** These events are one-time, short-lived, or packaged as part of a series and are typically between 45 and 80 minutes. They rely on video conferencing tools that allow Q&A, the ability to present live or a pre- recorded

video, and more often than not, the option to be offered on demand after the event. You may choose to charge for a webinar if the content can be considered high-value (such as a training) or offer it for free if it's a thought leadership or brand introduction presentation. Webinars have always been held virtually, so the concept is well known and well established.

>> **Virtual conferences:** These are live events and have complex, usually multi-day, agendas that can include keynotes, breakout sessions, exhibitors, sponsors, and more. Virtual conferences have multiple sessions and can utilize community engagement tools to get attendees involved and interacting with each other. Virtual conferences are live and allow attendees to interact and engage with presenters and other attendees in real time.

REMEMBER

Although hybrid events, events that are running in person and virtually simultaneously, have their own unique considerations, the virtual component of these events can follow the recommendations laid out in this book.

Those are the main types of virtual events, but how do you know which type to go with? The answer depends on what you're offering your audience.

Are you planning to have multiple speakers and sessions with high-value content? Are you counting on networking to be a big draw for attendees? Do you intend for this be a multi-day event? If your answers to these questions are "yes," then you'll likely want to consider holding a virtual conference.

WARNING

Don't fall into the trap of thinking that any in-person event can quickly and easily be converted to a virtual event. Furthermore, don't approach the planning and execution of a virtual event the same way you approach the planning and execution of an in-person event.

When you think about your in-person events, there are key things to consider when determining if it would be a good fit for a virtual event: event goals, budget, the tech acumen of both your audience and your team as well as what additional technology you need, and audience engagement, all of which we cover throughout this book.

Defining Your Virtual Event Objectives

As with in-person events, virtual events should have clearly defined objectives. After all, companies don't put on events for the sake of putting on events! The value to the organization and the value for the attendee may be different, but they're both important.

If you decide that a virtual event is the right option, the goals you establish ahead of time will dictate the structure of your event and the technology you choose.

REMEMBER Event goals don't just apply to the business. It's also important to have goals for attendees and vendors.

Business goals

These are the goals your organization is looking to accomplish. Examples of business goals are brand awareness, lead generation, immediate revenue, product adoption and lifetime value, consumer appreciation, loyalty, and membership growth. These goals can apply to both the company hosting the event and the vendors who participate in the event.

In addition to laying out the overall goals of the event, it's important to decide how success will be measured. Although goals such as lead generation, immediate revenue, and membership growth may be easier to quantify, consider how you're going to measure the more qualitative goals like consumer appreciation, loyalty, and brand awareness. (We discuss the analytics of virtual events in Chapter 6.)

TIP Don't forget to take note of — or *benchmark* — the starting point of your goals. Make sure you're paying attention to where your numbers are before the event takes place. Otherwise, you won't know how successful the event was when it's finished! Keep in mind that the goals and results of your virtual event may be different for the same event in person, so although you should compare, make sure you define goals specific to the virtual event. Don't rely on your goals of the in-person event.

Attendee goals

These are the goals your attendees are looking to accomplish. Examples of attendee goals include networking, learning or training, entertainment, and celebration.

Although learning and education are the number one reasons why people attend virtual events, networking is one of the top reasons people attend in-person events. Enabling networking in some fashion and ensuring you have compelling content are vitally important to the success of your virtual event.

We talk about the importance of content in more detail in Chapter 2, but it's also a top consideration when setting your virtual event's goals. If education or training is the purpose of your event, a webinar may be the best option. Whichever format you choose, ensure that attendees take away lots of useful and helpful knowledge.

Another benefit of providing your attendees with an educational experience, if that's the goal of your event, is that they can share that knowledge with their coworkers. Shared knowledge can lead to new and repeat attendees in the future.

Now that we've given you a glimpse into the virtual event landscape, Chapter 2 gets into the design and setup of the event. Be sure to read on!

Chapter **2**
Designing Effective Virtual Events

I t's time for some tough love . . . you should throw your tried-and-true formula for successful in-person events out the window. Although some in-person components may translate well to virtual events, you'll be doing yourself a disservice if you think you can copy your in-person event format and paste it into a virtual container. You're better off starting with a clear-eyed view of your goals and a clean slate on how to achieve those goals in your new virtual format.

The good news is that you'll be forced to think outside the box, and this is a good thing! The new skills you learn when planning virtual events will also translate to planning successful in-person events, making those richer and more dynamic than ever!

In this chapter, we give you the lowdown on the fundamentals of virtual events. We start with the importance of having the right team members and skill sets in place and how you need to reframe your thinking when considering the attendee experience. Then we get into some challenges you'll run into when trying to build attendee engagement and collaboration. Finally, we dive into the importance of having the right content in place, since that's what's going to pull attendees in, keep their attention, and make your event memorable long after they log off.

Learning the Parts of a Virtual Event

We'll start at the beginning. How are virtual events the same as in-person events? Well, planning and promotion are largely the same. You'll need an event website, promotional plans, a registration process, and so on. (We talk about promoting your event in Chapter 4).

Then there are the fundamentals that every event — whether in-person or virtual — should encompass:

>> Delivering great content that meets (and exceeds!) your attendees' expectations

>> Ensuring your attendees are kept engaged

>> Delivering value and leads for your exhibitors and sponsors (if your event has them)

>> Capturing and acting on data and insights gathered from the event

The trick is designing a virtual event that successfully delivers these components. Unfortunately, many event planning professionals struggle to do so.

But that's why you're reading this book, right?

Designing a virtual event may take a different skill set and mindset than in-person events. So, we'll start this journey where most great event design starts . . . with the team and expertise you need to assemble.

Assembling the Right Team

So, you have an existing team of pretty amazing event planners, huh? That's great! But do they have the additional skill sets that are needed to plan and execute virtual events?

The good news is that many traits that experienced event planners already possess translate well into the virtual event world, albeit with a few minor tweaks.

Determining the right skillset needed

Your team may already have a number of skills that will serve you well with virtual events. These include attention to detail, contingency planning, project management, and multi-tasking.

If a team member isn't particularly experienced in a skill needed for virtual event planning, don't assume they can't learn it!

Acquiring new skills

Although it may sound obvious, it's worth restating that virtual events are fundamentally on online medium. As such, here are some important skills needed to plan and execute successful virtual events:

>> **Technology acumen:** Successfully planning and executing virtual events means you need to learn new technologies. Not only do you have to pick up on how to use the technology utilized by the events and production teams, but also the virtual technology platform the attendees will use. It's also a good idea to be comfortable enough with the technology that you can jump in and help attendees with the more straightforward challenges they may encounter.

You may consider appointing a team member to be the resident "technologist." This person will learn the technology in depth and be able to troubleshoot and fix issues.

>> **Content strategy:** All events need great content. But many virtual events may have less content that their in-person counterparts in order to accommodate attendee attention spans. So you need to carefully manage the content at your virtual event to ensure your key messages get across. You need to thoughtfully craft what content will be presented and how it will be presented.

>> **Data savvy:** Virtual events can produce tons of data. The simple fact that organizations can increase their attendees in a virtual setting by a factor of eight to ten times over in-person attendees means that data overload can be a real issue. Data savvy individuals can help you separate signal from noise, putting together scoring methodologies that help you understand and smartly activate your data after the event.

The ability to analyze event data carries across in-person and virtual events. What is different is how some of the engagement points are tracked. For a virtual event, you need to speak the language of a digital marketer and understand click tracking, downloads, watch time, and other digital metrics.

Not being able to visualize whether or not something will transfer well into the virtual world can have a negative impact on the attendee experience.

» **Presenter management:** With in-person events, planners often just brief the speakers ahead of time and let them do their thing. When an event is virtual, you face some additional considerations when interacting with speakers. For example, just because a person is comfortable speaking in front of a live audience doesn't mean they'll be as comfortable in front of a webcam. Or, when a speaker is on stage and the microphone is acting up, it's easy for the planner or helper to jump in and help. Virtual events aren't that simple. Some speakers may not be technologically savvy, so if their microphone or other technology is acting up, they may not be able to fix it. Knowing what to watch out for and how to prep the speakers for potential virtual event issues is important.

» **TV/video production experience:** This skill set is important to virtual events because what's happening is essentially a TV production! If an in-person session goes over its time, for example, attendees typically hang around or start heading toward the next session. If that happens at a virtual event, you risk losing the attendee entirely. If an attendee is physically present at a conference, they're less likely to leave the premises.

TV/video production experience also means the team member can create visually compelling, dynamic content experiences. In a virtual setting, static camera angles, lingering too long on one presenter, and boring transitions risk putting your attendees to sleep. Part director, part cinematographer, this skill set is essential to making your content come alive and keeping your audience engaged.

Reimagining the Attendee Experience

A challenge with virtual events is that attendees make less of an upfront investment. They don't have plane tickets and hotel rooms to book. That's why it's important to build up anticipation from the get-go via email and social media. These methods also help keep your event top-of-mind, so when the day arrives, attendees are more likely to have kept their calendars clear.

The attendee experience at an in-person event begins even before they step into the event venue. It starts with the first communication they get from you about the upcoming event, typically sent by email or some other form of electronic communication.

None of that has changed with virtual events, though you'll need to build excitement a different way. With in-person events, you can talk up the beautiful locale or the networking events that translate into new business connections. Since neither of those are options with virtual events, you have to make the event enticing in other ways.

Early on, whet the attendees' appetites by announcing the speakers and topics. Draw them in with your offer of high-quality speakers and content.

Once an attendee signs up, keep the lines of communication open as you would with an in-person event. Instead of sending information about the area or venue, send them the information they'll need to join the event virtually.

Consider creating a guide or recording a video for attendees explaining how to access the event, sessions, and more. Even better, allow attendees to practice launching sessions or sending messages before the event starts. When the day of the event arrives, they'll feel more comfortable interacting with the presenters and other attendees.

An added benefit of allowing attendees to practice ahead of time is that you can gather information on common issues and trouble spots. Then create an FAQ document to be sent with the rest of your communications.

Event apps are also a great way to enhance an attendee's virtual event experience and take the event experience with them where they might be. An app is the place where attendees can stream content, reply to polls, take notes, read speaker bios, and download content. Apps personalize the event, which means attendees can be a part of the event, regardless of location, and can access the event from any platform (mobile or desktop). These capabilities can lead to more people staying online for the event longer.

Networking and Collaboration Challenges Affecting Engagement

One of the top challenges that virtual event planners have to mitigate is the lack of networking and collaboration opportunities that naturally come with in-person events. The first step is to let go of the idea that you'll be able to retain the magic of in-person interaction in a virtual setting.

All the breakout rooms and virtual happy hours in the world can't make up for the inability to shake the hand of a prospect or share a laugh over cocktails. And even with some people opting for "virtual" business cards, nothing replaces sitting down face-to-face in an appointment.

Just because the opportunity for a networking lunch or happy hour is gone doesn't mean that the opportunity to network is gone with it. Consider setting up dedicated networking time and encourage attendees to connect. You can facilitate these connections by using registration data to match attendees with similar interests and set up group chats or breakout sessions.

REMEMBER

Although it may be a bummer that in-person networking isn't an option at virtual events, many people are introverted and more likely to utilize virtual networking opportunities. Not everyone likes to "work the room," and virtual networking gives those folks a chance to shine.

Chances are you've been utilizing social media to promote your event right from the start. Don't stop now! Set up a customized hashtag, share it with your attendees, and ask that they include that hashtag when posting about the event. Another way to facilitate conversations and networking on social networks is to set up

dedicated groups on sites such as LinkedIn and Facebook. You can make these events hidden or private so you can control who joins the conversation.

Set up and announce the social media groups in your communications before the event and get the conversations started early! It's a great way to break the ice before the event starts.

Since many organizations utilize Slack for their instant messaging needs, you can set up a Slack workspace for the event where you can post polls and answer questions. Consider setting up separate channels for different topics to help keep the conversations organized.

If you're utilizing Slack, don't forget to regularly monitor all channels in order to answer questions or moderate conversations.

One other option to assist with networking and collaboration is to arrange for interactive entertainment such as fun or relaxation sessions. Instead of expecting your attendees to sit at their computer or mobile screens listening to speaker after speaker, you may want to arrange for non-business-related sessions such as mindfulness or even a trivia session with prizes.

Speaking of prizes, you may want to add an element of gamification to your event to encourage networking. When you're planning sessions (business and non-business alike), think of ways to use a point system to achieve better engagement. For example, attendees must network with a set number of people to unlock access to discount codes or swag from exhibitors.

People have gotten used to living their business lives virtually, so they're more open to getting creative when connecting with other attendees. You'll likely find that your attendee retention rates don't drop when you offer a variety of options for people to take a breather from the great business-related content you're presenting.

Devising Your Content Plan

Content for in-person events doesn't always translate into content for virtual events. You should assume it won't, and start from the beginning when planning the content for your event. Here are some points to keep in mind when strategizing the information you'll be presenting.

Remember the importance of content. Your event objectives drive the types of content you'll feature and the topics you'll cover. Start by answering questions such as these:

» **Content-specific questions:**
- Why are we presenting this event?
- Who is it for?
- What do we want to gain?
- What do we want our audience to learn?
- Do we want to share knowledge and information, build brand awareness, or run demos?

» **Content delivery-specific questions:**
- Will your event be totally live, totally recorded, or a mix of both?
- If it's a mix, which sessions do you want to record, and which sessions do you want to do live?
- Where do you plan to film?
- Do you need to rent a studio?
- Are you using remote speakers?
- If so, do you want to send them "speaker kits" with the supplies they need for their presentation?

When you have clear, established objectives, they will guide you in creating your content agenda and help you determine the right timing, format, structure, audience, and hosts. Objectives give you the information you need in order to decide which online platform is best suited for your event or which live elements need a virtual add-on, like live polling or virtual breakout rooms.

Being able to communicate clear objectives to your internal stakeholders, as well as to your intended audience, ensures that everyone knows what to expect from your event.

Knowing your audience

This is where partnering with the marketing team, or at least having someone with marketing experience involved, comes in handy. Marketers are well versed in determining the right content for the audience you're looking to target.

You can approach this concept in a couple of ways. If you already have an idea of the content you want to present, then you know the audience to invite. Alternatively, if you have the intended audience in mind, then you know you have to tailor your content to match. Here are some ideas to keep in mind when determining the types of content and delivery format to utilize for your virtual event:

» Is this content suitable for all of my target audience, or just portions of it?

» Is this the type of audience that enjoys games and competition?

» Will this audience want straight information, with no casual, informal sessions added in?

Selecting content

It's a good idea to begin by performing a content audit to see what's available and in what format. With virtual events, you have to think outside the box to keep attendees engaged.

Different types of content lend themselves to delivery in different formats. For example, instead of a multi–slide presentation, can the information be presented in an infographic or short video and capture the same level of audience engagement? This will also help you home in on the content that can be offered for download after the event. Here are a few questions to ask yourself when selecting content:

» Is the content relevant to the purpose and theme of the event?

» Is the content valuable for an online audience?

» Do we have evergreen content that we can freshen and repurpose?

» Are there existing, well-performing blog posts that we can collect into a longer-form piece of content like an e-book?

» Will our audience be able to use the information in the short-to-medium term?

TIP

Speak with other departments (such as Sales) to determine the types of content that perform well with prospects and customers.

Certain types of content hold the audience's attention better than others. This isn't a "one or the other" thing. The right mix of content types will provide an engaging program plus a library of assets that you can reuse and redistribute after the event. Here are some content types to consider:

>> Thought leadership, like interviews with industry leaders and visionaries

>> Research-based content, such as interesting studies to share with your audience

>> Client insight — for example, case studies and white papers that double as downloadable content after the event

>> Product or service training for internal and external audiences

>> Pre-recorded sessions that can be edited down to make the content more engaging and punchier

REMEMBER

Just as certain content types speak better to audiences than others, certain content delivery methods engage attendees more than others. Content delivery and inspiration matter. This is about delivering content on a screen that is in front of you, not on a stage like an in-person event.

What are some good places to draw inspiration from? Check out talk shows and news broadcasts, interviews, websites like YouTube, and influencer trends. These resources can help drive the content selection process and corresponding production format if you lean into a presentation type that is tried and true for audience engagement and ratings.

TIP

Keep the content review team small. That way it's easier to determine if there is any repetition.

Delivering Value to Sponsors and Exhibitors

Remember that attendees aren't the only people who will be at your event. Depending on the event you're planning, you may have other companies coming in as sponsors and exhibitors. It's just as important that they get value out of your event.

TIP Unfortunately, delivering sponsor return on investment (ROI) requires you to think differently with virtual events because you no longer have the traditional on-site branding and lead-scanning opportunities. But planners and sponsors alike continue to experiment with how to best deliver brand awareness and lead flow.

You can offer sponsors and exhibitors several ways to grow brand awareness by being involved with your event. For example, sponsors can still be prominently featured on your event's website (Chapters 3 and 4 discuss event websites). They can also become more directly involved with the event by underwriting full content tracks or individual sessions.

However, it's harder to replicate the lead conversion of in-person events. Nothing compares to face-to-face to meetings as a way to quickly establish relationships with people and potentially qualify them as leads.

Lead generation during virtual events is not impossible, though. With the right technology (see Chapter 3), sponsors can establish "virtual booths" within an event, allowing them to host one- to-one or one-to-many appointments. Sponsors retain full control over branding and content, and leads can be gathered through appointment setting or qualifying "virtual walk-ins." Here are a few ways to deliver value to this audience:

» Sponsored sessions and content delivery

» Attendee activations by way of direct mail/gifting experiences

» Email marketing opportunities

>> Sponsored posts on the activity feed

>> Logo placement on the event website

>> Virtual trade show booth

>> Ad placement within content

>> Survey question during registration

>> Log-in screen

>> Check-in branding

Chapter 5 provides more detail on maximizing the sponsor and exhibitor experience.

TIP

These examples are appropriate for virtual events, but they also translate well to in-person events! Everyone has to think outside the box with virtual events, but one major benefit is that these ideas can be recycled for in-person events much more easily than in-person event tactics can be recycled for virtual events.

Chapter **3**
Building Virtual Events

Well before the pandemic, virtual events were part of many organization's total event programs. But as organizations increasingly turned to — and saw the benefits of — virtual events, it has become clear that they will be fixtures in most go-forward marketing plans. This change will have significant implications for your event technology stack. Running events in siloed technology systems was hard enough before these systems had to scale to meet the needs of multiple event types. Now, that scalability has become a necessity.

That's why it's important to standardize on event technology that is comprehensive and versatile enough to power your total event program. Although some of the technology used for in-person events can be repurposed for virtual (such as event websites and registration), the virtual technology component may be new to you. It's important that the technology you choose to power your virtual event works seamlessly with the rest of your event and marketing technologies to ensure it fits the needs of your event program well into the future.

This chapter takes you through the questions you should ask yourself when considering your technology toolkit, and especially a virtual event platform. We give you detailed information about the features to keep an eye out for when evaluating event planning solutions. Then we get into the different types of platforms, the features they typically come with, and the best use cases for each.

Determining Your Technology Needs

Before you choose technology for any event, you likely begin by thinking through what you need that technology to deliver for your organization and your attendees. Determining the right technology for your virtual events is fundamentally no different, but you likely have questions unique to how that event will come to life in a virtual environment.

For example, you may be wondering how your virtual attendees will explore and find content, and when they do, what the content experience will be like. Will the technology hold up? How will attendees schedule appointments or give feedback? Furthermore, if your event has sponsors and exhibitors, can your virtual technology enable them to get the awareness and lead generation they paid for? At the end of the day, how will you know if it all was successful?

This is the job of your virtual event technology. Chapters 1 and 2 show that, even though executing on these elements virtually can be challenging, it isn't impossible.

TIP Like in-person events, virtual events are not all the same. A tiered system for your event program can help you identify common needs for similar event types and see how your needs scale and differ based on event complexity.

We can't over-emphasize the importance of choosing your virtual event technology based on the experience you want to deliver. So when considering your tech tool kit, some questions to keep in mind are:

>> Based on the experience you want to deliver (and your budget), what platform types will support all, or most, of what you're looking to do?

>> Will all your content be delivered live, or a mixture of live and on-demand?

>> Is high production quality important to you and your audience?

>> How important is audience interactivity to you?

>> Do you need to facilitate one-to-one or one-to-many meetings?

>> Do you need to be able to showcase exhibitors and sponsors and deliver them leads?

>> What about data capture? How important is it that you are capturing event and attendee data from your event?

>> How important is branding consistency across each event component?

REMEMBER

For some organizations, virtual events are a completely new concept and selecting the technology will be overwhelming. Many organizations have been doing "one-off" virtual events for years. But when your overall event strategy scales to include more virtual events — or to be completely virtual — your technological needs change.

Always start with your event objectives and take it step by step. You'll find that working with one need at a time makes the task more manageable.

REMEMBER

Even before the rise of virtual events, planners relied on technology to plan and deliver great experiences. With virtual events, experiences are more important than ever. In a very real sense, for virtual events, the technology *is* the venue, so it's important that you get it right.

Compiling Your Technology Toolkit

Just as your in-person events require pre-event technology, so do your virtual events. Any event needs promotion and registration tools, and your virtual events are no different. So before we dive into the specifics of technology that powers your virtual experience, don't forget the key systems to plan and promote your virtual event before it even begins. These include:

>> **e-Marketing:** Email and social marketing drive demand for an event and increase registrations. They're also the best way to communicate with attendees at all stages of the event. Email keeps attendees informed about details and changes before the event and is useful for sending out feedback surveys after the event.

>> **Event websites:** Event websites are the primary tools used to catch the attention of potential attendees and entice them to register for the event. Your event website should communicate the value of your virtual event, contain the event schedule, showcase speakers, include FAQs, and point potential attendees to registration.

>> **Registration:** Registration tools allow attendees to register for virtual events, submit preferences and personal information, and provide payment if required. A robust online registration tool allows for personalized registration experiences, presenting each attendee type with relevant information that encourages registration completion.

REMEMBER

It's important that you have one event platform that is accessed in both mobile and web formats to give attendees options for interacting and engaging with your event.

Understanding Virtual Technology Components

The next step is to consider the types of tools and technologies you'll need to power the virtual event experience. This section covers some of the common virtual event technology offering types. In the case of larger virtual events, you may find yourself needing several of these capabilities based on the experience you want to deliver.

Video streaming

Video streaming technology is central to most virtual events because it's the primary vehicle for delivering your content to your audience. Most video streaming content is delivered either in livestream, simu-live (where content is pre-recorded but played back as if it were live), or on-demand. In many cases, you'll want to use all three formats in the same event.

The key benefits of video streaming are its ability to scale to very large audiences and the ability to include advanced production capabilities that make the content dynamic. One downside of video streaming is that it's best as a broadcast medium, so interaction with the speaker or the rest of the audience is generally limited to commenting.

Video conferencing

When interaction is necessary and the audience size is fewer than 50–100 people, video conferencing is a great option. It's a flexible solution because it typically doesn't require a formal presenter-attendee designation. Presenter mode can be switched easily from one attendee to another.

With video conferencing, all participants can have video and/or audio enabled to increase engagement and collaboration. Video conferencing platforms often have a chat option where attendees can engage with each other and the presenters.

The limitations of this solution include background noise and other audible disruptions when participants aren't muted. If multiple participants are speaking at once, managing the conversation can be a challenge.

WARNING

Make sure you know how many participants can be logged into the meeting at once. An organization that grew quickly didn't check about attendee limits for its yearly kick-off meeting — and nearly 30 employees were left out in the cold!

Use cases for video conferencing include internal meetings, client meetings, sales meetings, and breakout rooms.

Webinars

If you have one or more speakers or a panel presenting to a large audience, webinars may be the way to go. The session can be entirely live, pre-recorded, or a hybrid of the two where the content portion is recorded and the Q&A is live.

In most cases the audience is muted, but they can submit questions through audience response features like chat, Q&A, or polling. These solutions are typically user-friendly for presenters but have limited production capabilities that make it difficult for planners to customize the attendee experience and make it more engaging.

Webinars work well for thought leadership content, best practice sessions, company-wide announcements, and town halls.

TIP

If your event platform allows, adjust the settings so all attendees are muted upon arrival, and announce to the group that they'll have to unmute themselves in order to speak.

Virtual conferencing

Some event planners have gone the route of a fully immersive approach that attempts to replicate the in-person event experience. Building this type of event can be very complex. Newer solutions have fully embraced the digital nature of the platforms and don't try to simulate in-person experiences.

These newer solutions still include support for multiple sessions, multiple content tracks, attendee networking, sponsor activation, and much more, but the format is more similar to a web experience.

Just like with an in-person event, these immersive experiences often have pre-set "live" hours where attendees can explore the event and engage with exhibitors outside of official sessions. These platforms are often used for conferences, career fairs, and trade shows.

Selecting a Virtual Platform

The virtual event platform is the heart of any virtual event. It's the technology that delivers the content, drives the attendee experience, delivers value to sponsors and exhibitors, and collects critical event and attendee data. You should take several factors into consideration when looking for a virtual event platform. Some solutions are out-of-the-box, while others are customizable so you can make them your own.

Here are the features to keep an eye out for:

» **Integration with registration:** From first invitation to the virtual event itself, you want your event's key marketing touch points to convey a seamless, branded look and feel. Look for a virtual platform that integrates with event website and registration systems, so your attendees see one, consistent experience.

» **Virtual event lobby:** As with an in-person event, it's important to orient your virtual attendees when they enter the event, giving them easy, centralized access to key event information. This is particularly important if yours is a multi-session or multi-day event. This virtual "home base"

lets attendees explore and join sessions, create agendas, schedule appointments, and submit feedback, making them more likely to get engaged, and stay engaged.

» **Enterprise-class content delivery:** Content is king for virtual events. Your content experience must be reliable, and it must be immersive to keep your audience engaged. Look for a platform that securely and reliably delivers multiple types of content, whether it's being streamed live, simulated, or pre-recorded. You should also look for a platform that allows you to continue to make your event content available on demand, both during the event and after it's over.

If you plan to use pre-recorded content, consider having a live Q&A session to engage the attendees.

» **Powerful engagement features:** Keeping attendees engaged throughout the event is essential. It's important for attendees to engage with the content (and vice versa), but especially important for attendees to engage with each other. So, look for interactive features like live Q&A and polling in your sessions, and platforms that give attendees an opportunity to offer feedback on sessions. For person-to-person interaction, look for platforms that allow attendees to virtually network and schedule one-to-one or one-to-many-appointments.

» **Exhibitor and sponsor tools:** For some events, exhibitors and sponsors are critical to the event's success. If that's true for your event, make sure your virtual platform provides ways for these sponsors to stand out and get the awareness and leads that help them justify their sponsorship. Some platforms feature virtual booths with breakout rooms that allow interested attendees to virtually stop by and then enter a private breakout room if necessary.

» **Always-on technical support:** Since the entire event relies on the technology working flawlessly, it's imperative that you have access to technical support regardless of the day or time to ensure you can get the event back on track as soon as possible.

» **Data collection and analytics:** One feature of virtual events that remains the same as in-person events is the need to collect as much data as possible. This data can be used for everything from lead gen, to getting feedback on sessions, to event revenue. You won't be able to prove return on investment (ROI) if you don't have the data to tell the story.

» **Integrations:** Integrations ensure that vital registration and attendee data is shared between your event technology system and your virtual event platform. It also enables this data to be shared with your marketing automation and customer relationship management (CRM) systems.

TIP

When shopping for a platform, don't just think about your current needs. Take some time to think about features you may grow into in the near future and the different types of events your technology may need to support. For example, many event programs will feature more hybrid events in the months ahead, so a platform that extended to both virtual and in-person audiences makes sense. As the saying goes, you get what you pay for.

Although no organization wants to spend money for the sake of spending money, it's important to look beyond the immediate cost of a platform. For example, if the platform has several automation features, calculate how much of your team's time will be saved if tasks they used to perform manually can be automated. Take those cost savings into consideration when shopping.

REMEMBER

The features you look for in a virtual event platform should support your event objectives.

Chapter 4

Promoting and Producing Your Virtual Event

As Chapters 2 and 3 show, many of the execution fundamentals of virtual events are the same as the in-person events you are used to. Every event needs attendees, and that means marketing and promotion. But when you begin preparing and producing the content for your virtual keynotes and sessions, you're entering an entirely new world.

This chapter goes through several ways you can promote your event, including getting the rest of your company involved. Then we take you through several considerations for determining — and producing — the content experience that will drive your event. We also give you some tips on how to prepare your attendees so they have the best experience possible.

Promoting Your Virtual Event

A lot of time and work goes into planning virtual events, so naturally you want to make sure there are as many attendees, sponsors, and exhibitors as possible. That's where event promotion

comes into play. In the following sections, we take you through some promotional activities you can do to get the word out about your event.

Promotion considerations for virtual events

Most planners and marketers are on familiar ground when marketing their virtual events. The basics of segmenting and targeting your audience with personalized messaging still applies. In many cases, virtual events allow you to cast a wider net, targeting segments and titles that previously were beyond your reach because of the cost or time commitment of an in-person event. Some studies suggest virtual event attendee counts are eight to ten times that of their in-person counterparts.

For example, virtual events can be an effective way to attract more prospects that don't know you or your offerings as well. They can also attract more senior-level titles who are able to spend a few hours with you, but not a few days. So, now is not the time to be timid. Be aggressive with your attendance goals and put the systems and channels in place to reach them.

Broad, multi-channel marketing including email, social, and inbound activities are all in play. Organizations with sales teams can ask them to call their high-value prospects and existing customers to generate interest.

REMEMBER

Keep in mind that although it may be easier to drive up registration numbers for virtual events, you'll need to work harder to get them to attend the event when the day comes. Go back to basics with automated registration, thank you notes, timely reminders, even "day-of" calls to important prospects and customers to drive attendance.

Utilize social media

Begin promoting your virtual event via your company's social media channels at least four weeks ahead of time, longer if it's a paid event or a multi-day event that will take people "away" from their regular work responsibilities.

Talk up your content. What speakers will be holding sessions? Who is sponsoring the event and what perks come along with that sponsorship? What is the subject matter the attendees will learn

more about? Since your content is what's going to draw people in, make it sound as enticing as you can!

Also, mention any fun "side" sessions you have planned like trivia games or wellness sessions. People want to know it's going to be work *and* play!

Encourage other employees at your company to share the event via social media as well. You can even craft some social messages for them to share and send them out to the company, asking for assistance. Make sure to include the event's landing page.

If you've ever held events for a similar audience, pull up that information to see what worked, what didn't, and things you thought of doing after the fact. This is a great way to get a head start on your upcoming event. But make sure you take note of whether a particular event was in-person or virtual. Make sure your promotional activities are an apples-to-apples comparison.

Develop an event website

Depending on the size and complexity of your event, you may need a separate event website (or at least its own section of your company's main website) or a simple landing page.

Your event website serves a few important purposes. It's where the following will happen:

» You'll communicate why the audience should care about your event and what they'll get out of it.

» People will register for the event.

» You'll collect payments.

» You'll post updates leading up to the event.

» People will go to see the event schedule, showcase speakers, and FAQs.

» You'll share information about the technical components of the event such as how to join and how to chat with other participants.

Whatever kind of event web page or landing page you decide upon, it's imperative that it be branded with your company's logo, colors, imagery and even fonts, if possible. You want viewers to recognize the event as being associated with your company. If it looks wildly different from what they're used to seeing from

your organization, you'll lose the benefit of brand recognition and may be ignored entirely.

TIP

Your event website doesn't go dormant as soon as the event gets underway. You should update it during the event with session reminders and schedule updates. After the event you should provide links to downloadable content, playbacks, and post-event surveys.

Reducing registrant attrition

Although it may be easier to get people to register for your virtual event, getting them to attend is an entirely different beast. Make sure your event stays top-of-mind and follow these tips:

» **Sales calls:** A day or two before the event, ask your sales team to place reminder calls to those attendees who they've established relationships with. This way, not only will the call remind the individual of the event, but it will give the salesperson a chance to answer any questions the person may have. It will also show that the person is top-of-mind and that your organization is invested in their attendance.

Another benefit of making a reminder phone call is that if the person cannot attend, the salesperson can find out why, and make alternative arrangements to keep them moving through the sales funnel, whether by setting up a sales call at a later date or sending them marketing collateral.

» **Reminder emails:** Reminder emails are standard, important, and effective. Be sure your email copy communicates excitement and reiterates some of the content that will be presented. Include links to event FAQs in case the recipient has additional questions before the event. It's common to send a reminder email about a week before the event and another the day before the event.

» **Social media:** Utilize your social media channels like LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter to not only promote your event, but to livestream portions of the sessions while they're happening. The livestreams will remind those individuals who follow your social accounts and may have forgotten about your event. Of course, this is also a great opportunity to pull in people who hadn't planned to attend but are now interested because of what they saw.

>> **Reminder texts:** Texts are another great way to remind your registrants about your event because everyone is glued to their mobile devices these days! Consider sending a reminder text a day before the event and then a couple of hours before the start of the event.

REMEMBER In your reminders, remember to include instructions on how to access the event.

Deciding on the Broadcast Method

One issue you rarely had to deal with when planning in-person events was the format — more often than not it was live. With virtual events, you have to decide whether your event will stream live, be simu-live, or be entirely pre-recorded.

Whatever format you decide upon, it should always complement the content, since different types of content sometimes call for different features. For example, if a session is highly interactive, a pre-recorded or simu-live event won't work.

For each session, consider the following:

>> **Session length:** Given the reality of shorter attention spans online, keep keynote sessions to no more than an hour. Thirty minutes is fine for most breakout sessions.

>> **Session format:** Choose a panel, webinar, keynote, news-style broadcast, executive presentation, TED-style talk, video, or late-night show.

>> **Audience interaction:** Will the audience be able to appear on video, ask questions out loud, or ask questions over chat? If you're planning to have breakout rooms or virtual happy hours, those obviously must be live!

>> **Type of content:** Will it be thought leadership, research-based, client insight, product, or service training? Will the content have portions that require breakout sessions or small group work?

- **Live versus pre-recorded:** More can go wrong with a live session, but it provides a feeling of community and increased engagement. This is especially important if this event will likely be a big networking opportunity for attendees.

- **Streaming versus on-demand:** On-demand is a great option for smaller sessions and offers a break for attendees because they can decide when to watch.

REMEMBER

Once the event is over, it's good practice to offer the sessions on-demand for attendees to replay. These can serve as a lead-gen opportunity for those who didn't attend the event.

- **Talking head versus on-screen presentation:** What is the best viewing format for the content? Take into consideration the benefit of visual aids based on the content type.

- **Visual versus audio only:** Sessions don't have to be the same — you can do an audio-only podcast-style discussion or a presentation that utilizes only visuals. It all depends on how that content would make the biggest impact.

- **Interactive versus one-way communication:** For a keynote, you likely don't want the audience to be able to interact with the speaker, but for smaller sessions, interaction can engage attendees. If you want interactive capability, make sure your event platform has this feature.

TIP

You can always offer the opportunity for attendees to submit questions ahead of time, and ask your keynote speaker to answer them as the event goes on. You can create a special section on your website, such as near the speaker's bio, where these questions are asked and answered FAQ style.

Whatever delivery method you choose, it all comes down to the experience you want to deliver. How important is high production quality? Do you need one-to-many "broadcast" capability or is interactivity more important? Do you have complex transitions or "virtual run of shows" that require trained professionals, or will a simple, self-service platform do? Remember that the event is for the benefit of the attendees and presenters.

Ensuring a High-Quality Production

When you are engaging with someone through a computer screen, you need to keep your content compelling, interesting, and fast-moving. That means a whole lot of video and a whole lot of planning — down to the last second.

It also means the importance of putting on a quality production cannot be emphasized enough. The larger, more complex the event, the more moving parts it will have, meaning you need to make sure you have the time and budget to support that. Video content takes longer to create and tends to be more expensive. And since a virtual event *is* video content, don't underestimate the number of videos you'll need. It's a lot of work to make your content look good, engaging, and professional, and it makes a huge impact.

Now that we've stressed the importance of having a high quality production, here are some tips to make sure you can pull it off:

>> **Have dynamic content.** Make sure you have multiple speakers so no one is on the screen for too long. People tune out if they're looking at the same face and hearing about the same topics for an extended period.

>> **Change camera angles.** Another tip for keeping the audience engaged is to use different camera angles. That way attendees aren't staring at the same wall or bookshelf the entire time.

>> **Utilize pre-rolls.** Use pre-rolls for promoting a sponsor, offer, or new product. Or, you can show trivia questions or strange facts to the audience while they wait.

Attendees have downtime while they are waiting for sessions to start and when they are navigating your online event experience. These are great times to feature advertisements from your organization as well as those from your event sponsors.

>> **Run an "intro" video.** A great way to set the stage for the event is to play an introduction video to get attendees hyped up for what's in store for them. You can have the keynote speaker talk for a few minutes about the event's theme, or even the CEO of your company.

>> **Consider an emcee.** If you have a large or complex event, consider having an emcee to ground the event and keep it moving. Part of putting on a high-quality production is ensuring it stays on time and that the energy stays high.

>> **Provide intermittent entertainment.** Part of ensuring that attendees are enjoying the "show" is making sure they remain engaged. One way is to arrange for entertainment throughout the event. That way people can clear their heads and interact with other attendees.

TIP

If you have high-profile content, consider renting a studio and leave production of the event up to professionals. They know the right camera angles, the proper lighting and sound settings, as well as how to keep the pace and flow of the event going.

Chapter **5**
Realizing Attendee Engagement and Sponsorship ROI

All the planning in the world may be for nothing if the attendees aren't engaged and enjoying themselves — or if the sponsors and exhibitors aren't getting any return on investment (ROI). Sure, you can't *force* attendees to pay attention during sessions or ask questions of presenters or sponsors.

But you can make everything so interesting, helpful, and (most importantly) fun, that everyone is naturally engaged and curious. It's not as difficult as you'd think. With a little pre-planning, you'll find that people are as engaged as they would be if they were at an in-person event. This is the "Holy Grail" of virtual events.

In this chapter, we share some best practices and tips for how to get the most engagement out of your attendees. Here's a hint: It isn't all about the content!

We also talk about the importance of ensuring that your exhibitors and vendors are engaged and enjoying themselves as well. Sure, return on investment (ROI) is at the top of everyone's mind,

as it should be, but if they aren't having a positive experience, they won't be able to provide one for your attendees, either.

Attaining the "Holy Grail": Attendee Engagement

In Chapter 4, we mention that registrations to your virtual event will likely be much easier to come by than getting people to attend. That's because these events require a lot less commitment; there aren't any travel plans to make, no caregivers to arrange for, and no work coverage to find. When there are additional activities, such as those that require a reservation, a person is less likely to "ghost" your event once the plans are made. All in all, a lot more is at stake when someone is attending an in-person event.

When people attend your virtual event, you're competing with distractions galore. It's safe to say that getting them to register is the easy part. Now comes the challenge of getting and keeping them there — and keeping them engaged.

Drawing them in (and out) with content

What makes people pay attention? What makes them want to stay tuned in to a presenter? What gets them excited for the next session and the next? It's the content. It's what piqued their interest when you started getting the word out about your event. It was most likely what drove their decision to sign up and eventually attend your event. It's what's going to keep them in their seats during the sessions.

In Chapter 4, we talk about deciding on your event format whether it be live, pre-recorded, or a combination of the two. If event content is delivered live — either completely or just portions of it — it allows for more natural audience engagement. After all, back-and-forth conversations are easier if the other party is capable of responding in real time!

Here are some other ways to build engagement during content presentations:

>> **Breakaway sessions:** Create smaller groups of attendees during collaborative sessions. Have them get together to discuss the topic and even present some ideas to the larger

group. Some virtual event platforms allow you to have virtual breakout rooms to facilitate these activities.

» **Encourage respectful debates**. Debates don't have to be seen as arguments. When people are passionate about one side or the other of a topic, they'll enjoy the opportunity to talk about it with others, even those with opposing views. Just make sure that each side gets equal representation.

Always have a moderator present! In the heat of the moment, even the most respectful people can get fired up and say things they normally wouldn't. If things start to get out of hand, take control of the conversation and redirect it until people cool down.

» **Encourage feedback:** Every once in a while, ask the audience questions about the content just presented. Chances are it'll expand the discussion and lead to more people being engaged. A side benefit is that if the audience knows you'll be polling and surveying them throughout the session, they'll be more likely to pay attention!

» **Encourage social media usage:** Create an event hashtag, and encourage attendees to post about the event using that hashtag. To get the conversation started (and to keep it going), post pictures and video clips to your social feeds during the event, and use the hashtag so other attendees can find the content.

Take note of the interesting answers and discussions that come out of these polls (and debates). You may find some great ideas for future content.

» **Q&A:** Having question-and-answer portions of sessions is a must, not only to encourage audience engagement, but to make sure you can clarify content that may have been confusing. It's also a great time for attendees to expand upon a related topic that may not have made it into the presentation. Q&As can happen either throughout the presentation or at the end. That's typically left up to the speaker and announced at the beginning of the session.

To save time, ask attendees to submit questions for the presenters before the event. Presenters can prepare answers in advance to ensure they have the needed information available. Use upvoting, where attendees vote for the questions they most want answered, to ensure speakers are answering the most popular questions.

>> **Encourage webcam use:** To make it a more interactive experience (as opposed to a "talking head" show), encourage attendees to leave their webcams on during collaborative sessions, in virtual booths, and during networking opportunities. Seeing others on the screen helps attendees feel like they're a part of a live event.

You'll always have individuals who prefer to attend with their webcam off for whatever reason.

Allowing for downtime

"All work and no play . . ." is how the saying goes (the first part of it, anyway). The same principle applies to virtual events — *especially* virtual events because engagement is at a premium. People come for the content, of course. But giving them the opportunity to digest the material as well as let off some steam will keep them refreshed and get them ready for more.

You can provide various opportunities for downtime at virtual events. They include:

>> **Wellness breaks:** Offer some meditation or mindfulness sessions during the day. Bring in a yoga practitioner and have them lead a quick session. Bring in a fitness instructor to take attendees through a quick sweat session to get the blood flowing and energy levels up. Whatever you decide to do, make sure it's something that resets and recharges the attendees' batteries.

>> **Offer lunch — on you:** Give attendees a gift card to a food delivery service and have a space for a virtual lunchroom where attendees can meet up and share lunchtime with each other. You can even require them to come into the lunchroom to pick up their gift card code.

>> **Virtual meeting spaces:** Have meeting spaces set aside for sales meetings and other lead gen activities. Many virtual event platforms offer this option.

>> **Virtual happy hours:** Have a time in the agenda for a virtual happy hour where attendees join others to share a beverage of their choice (alcohol optional). For events that run multiple days, the end of the first day is a great time for this because it can break the ice for the following days and sessions. This

idea also gives those attendees who cannot stay the entire length of the event the chance to network as well.

» **Virtual scavenger hunt:** Put together a virtual scavenger hunt for attendees of events that last more than a day. Select "objects" from different sessions and exhibitor booths as well as other downtime sessions. Put together teams of people from different industries or parts of the country.

» **Hold an awards ceremony:** At the end of a multi-day event, hold a mock awards ceremony and hand out virtual badges or certificates. Make the award categories fun and silly such as "best debater" or "most likely to forget they're muted." Tell the attendees the categories at the beginning of the event so they can keep their eyes and ears peeled for candidates.

» **Trivia night:** There are companies that specialize in running online trivia for events. Many times, these competitions are done via online platforms that allow video and text chatting. You can put together random teams of attendees and give the winning team a prize.

WARNING

If you have an international audience, a trivia night may not be a good option because of differences in popular culture and education.

Delivering the Best Sponsor and Exhibitor Experience

There's another important group of attendees that likely isn't participating in your event for the educational benefits. These are your sponsors and exhibitors.

Offering the business benefits that these organizations would get from in-person events is more challenging than ever. In the absence of traditional on-site branding and lead scanning opportunities, event planners have had to get extra creative with how to best deliver brand awareness and lead flow.

REMEMBER

Many tactics utilized for in-person events can be tweaked to work for virtual events, while others have come about *because* of virtual events.

Delivering brand awareness and lead generation opportunities

Here are a few ways to help your sponsors and exhibitors increase brand awareness or generate leads:

>> Sponsored sessions

>> Email marketing opportunities

>> Sponsored posts on the activity feed

>> Logo placement on the event website

>> Virtual trade show booths

>> Survey questions during registration

>> Log-in screen

>> Check-in branding

>> Session background branding

>> Branded pages between sessions

>> Branded breakout and virtual meeting rooms

>> Splash pages

>> Banner ads

>> Video ads

>> Sponsored listings, highlighted exhibitors, and highlights on the agenda

>> Sponsored virtual happy hours

>> Surveys and interactive polling

>> Gamification

>> Push notifications

>> Branded swag mailed to attendees

>> Virtual office or "drop-in" hours with sales reps

Ensuring their event experience is positive

In addition, here are a few things you can do to make sure your sponsors and exhibitors have a good overall event experience:

» **Use an event solution with lead capture capabilities.** Some virtual event platforms provide exhibitors with the ability to automatically capture leads when attendees engage with them, as well as the option to score leads on the spot and include notes to help them prioritize follow-up.

» **Promote them on social media.** In the days leading up to the event, consider giving a shout out to your event sponsors and exhibitors. Say a little bit about the company and what event attendees can expect from their presence at the event.

Don't forget to tag them in all social media posts! This not only notifies them that you mentioned them, but it also gives them the opportunity to share your updates, giving your event even more exposure.

» **Email their sales materials.** When you're sending out your event's emails, include links to their website and sales materials like online brochures or datasheets. This gives registrants the opportunity to know more about the companies they'll encounter, and it will save their sales team time during the event.

» **Incentivize with online coupons.** Encourage sponsors to give out coupon codes to the people who visit their booth. List the sponsors who are offering coupon codes on your event website.

» **Set aside time for exhibits.** Consider designating blocks of time for your attendees to wander around the exhibitor hall. This option pairs well with gamification. For example, attendees win perks if they visit certain exhibitors' booths.

» **Post event exhibitor pages.** If you have sponsor pages on your website, leave them up after the event so attendees who haven't had a chance to visit during the event can do so when they find the time.

Events can be lead generators long after the event is finished. If you leave up the sponsors' pages on your website, event attendees have a place to go to find vetted vendors if they're ever in the market for those goods or services.

- » **Offer exhibitors the option to hold workshops.** Although their product or service may not have made it into the lineup for event content, consider allowing exhibitors to offer a free workshop during the downtime periods. This is a great way for them to add value to your event while giving them an opportunity to collect pre-qualified leads.

- » **Provide them with data after the event.** To help them determine their ROI, give exhibitors a report containing information such as exhibit visitors, the engagement their profiles generated, chat and voice interactions with attendees, and how many leads they got. You can go a step further by comparing with past in-person events that they've attended or, if they're new to your event, a report showing the averages of other attendees in similar industries.

REMEMBER

It's well known that attendee engagement with exhibitors and sponsors is lower at virtual events than at in-person events, but many organizations don't know *how* much lower. They may have been prepared to see dismal ROI when it turns out much better than they anticipated — especially since you're reading this book!

Chapter **6**

Maximizing Virtual Event Value

J ust like in-person events, with the right engagement strategy, your virtual events can deliver a ton of valuable data. As virtual attendees register, attend sessions, engage in live Q&A and polling, attend appointments, or provide feedback, they are giving you data that can help you drive revenue. In addition, you'll want to understand how attendees interacted with sponsors.

As you look to execute your virtual event, you'll want to be deliberate about your data capture strategy and the technology that can power it. This is the critical step in assessing the success of your event and maximizing its value.

In this chapter, we start with the purposes and uses of event data. Then we go through the different types of data you'll have collected, what it can tell you, and how you can make use of it. We also take you through some data points that you may not have collected (or at least paid any attention to previously) and how those can complete the picture of the success of your event.

Determining the Purpose and Uses of Event Data

You made it! A lot of hard work and planning went into making the event successful and helpful for all who attended.

Now it's time to dive into the data. Here's where you figure out whether or not you met your objectives for the event, what worked and what didn't, and most importantly, how to maximize the value of the event to your organization.

TIP

The world of virtual events is new to many organizations. So get into the mindset that there are no mistakes — there are only lessons. Even sophisticated organizations are experimenting with what are the appropriate key performance indicators (KPIs) for their virtual events. The important thing is to systematically capture virtual event and attendee data so your teams can learn from it.

Here are four of the most common uses of event data:

» **Understand event performance.** How did your virtual event perform? Did you meet your registration target? What was your direct revenue from the event, either through registration fees or sponsorship dollars? How did revenue compare to costs? How many virtual registrants attended? And just as importantly, *who* came — prospects, customers? These insights are important so you can improve event after event and measure the success of your virtual event against other virtual events, as well as in-person ones.

» **Drive more revenue.** Whether in-person or virtual, events contain thousands of high-value touchpoints. As attendees interact with each aspect of the virtual event experience, they give you valuable insight into their interests through buying signals. Capturing and activating this data can help your selling and marketing teams follow up faster, and smarter, leading to increased revenue that can be attributed to your event.

» **Refine your message.** You likely put a ton of work into your virtual event's content. Why? Because you had a message to deliver. Did it resonate? Understanding what sessions and speakers resonated with each audience gives you great

insight into what topics piqued their interest and can help you refine your event and overall marketing content to make a greater impact.

» **Prove sponsor and exhibitor value.** If your virtual event had sponsors or exhibitors, they'll want to know if your event was a good investment for them. Did it deliver the awareness and leads they need to see before deciding to sponsor again next year? You'll need the data to prove it.

Finally, ensure you have the right mindset. Make sure you are as rigorous about capturing data from your virtual events as you are with your in-person events. Virtual events shouldn't be executed as stand-alone instances. They, like the rest of your events, are valuable touchpoints in the prospect and customer journey. As such, they should work in conjunction with your other events — and the rest of your marketing mix — to better understand your attendees so you can take the next best action. This mindset is critical because it informs the systems and technologies your virtual event will "listen for" throughout the event.

Event management platforms continuously collect information about attendees' behavior that planners can utilize. When pulled together, this information can provide an attendee engagement score to highlight your most engaged, and thus most valuable, attendees.

Types of Data Your Tech Should Listen For

Virtual events are more challenging in a number of ways, but they also perform better in others. Collecting actionable data is one of those ways. All data points can be broken down into three main categories: event data, attendee profile data, and engagement data.

Event data

This is basic data that describes the event itself. Information such as the event type (for example, a training event, seminar, or conference), the event's cost, date, registration count, and attendee count. Capturing event data for your virtual events allows you to compare this event's performance with other virtual events as well as its in-person counterparts.

Attendee profile data

Attendee profile data is attendee-level firmographic and demographic data that describes the attendee and the organization they work for. Examples of profile data include names and addresses (physical and email), title, company name, and the number of employees at the company.

This type of data is typically captured during the registration process and can help build new prospect profiles or complete existing ones. Either way, you'll know your attendees much better as a result, and it'll help you tailor future events to this audience and others.

Engagement data

Engagement data is dynamic and is captured as a result of attendee interactions with, and responses to, the event's sessions, other content, sponsors and exhibitors, and even other attendees.
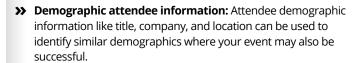
Examples of engagement data include session registration, session attendance and duration, appointments scheduled, exhibitor booth visits, and feedback submitted. Engagement data is valuable in helping your sales and marketing teams better understand attendee interests and follow up more effectively.

TIP

Virtual event data can be housed in several systems (such as the event website, registration, virtual sessions, and virtual booths) If you don't want your event data in multiple silos (and trust us, you don't!) looks for an end-to-end virtual event platform, so all your data is on one place. Remember, given that your virtual events are delivered online, many of these data points must be captured within your virtual event experience through web analytics. Here is some of the data gathered at virtual events:

» **Email open and click-through rates:** An email open rate is the percentage of email recipients who open the email you sent them. The click-through rate is the percentage of email recipients who click a link (such as a registration link to your virtual event) in your email. This data tells you if you should adjust the subject lines or content of your email.

» **Number of registrations:** This is total number of people registered for your virtual event and is commonly used as the most immediate way to determine the success of your event.

>> **Demographic attendee information:** Attendee demographic information like title, company, and location can be used to identify similar demographics where your event may also be successful.

>> **Session registration:** This is the total number of people who registered for a particular session at your virtual event and can be used to determine which speakers you should invite back or which topics to include at your next event.

TIP

It's a good idea to A/B test variations of the emails you send out to see what succeeds and what doesn't.

>> **Post-event survey results:** A post-event survey asks attendees questions about the virtual event. This data can tell you a number of things including the attendees' satisfaction with the content, engagement opportunities, and the technology involved.

>> **Number of qualified leads:** This is one of the top metrics (if not *the* top metric) that sponsors, exhibitors, and even your own sales team likely use to determine the success of the event. A lead is qualified based on data points such as activity or demographics.

TIP

The number of leads generated will be the top metric if the purpose of the event was to generate leads. But if the event was a training class or internal event, leads generally aren't the number one success metric.

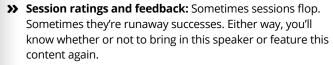>> **Session ratings and feedback:** Sometimes sessions flop. Sometimes they're runaway successes. Either way, you'll know whether or not to bring in this speaker or feature this content again.

REMEMBER

Keep in mind that it may not necessarily be just the speaker or content that wasn't received well. Maybe the content was great, but the format used to deliver it wasn't the best, or it was at the wrong time. Look at the entire picture before nixing the presenter or content from your future events' lineups.

>> **Q&A and polling engagement:** Were attendees actively participating in the Q&A sessions and polling opportunities offered? If so, were the discussions fruitful, and did the rest of the audience seem engaged?

>> **Number of appointments made and attended:** Appointments show commitment. If a lead made and attended appointments, then they're a well-qualified lead, and their follow-up should be prioritized.

>> **Social media engagement, mentions, and reach:** This number is the total reactions your social media audience had to your posts related to the event (such as likes, shares, and retweets). Typically, this number is used to understand how your virtual event content is resonating with your audience.

Mentions refers to the direct mentions (using your hashtag or handle name) that your virtual event received. This metric helps you determine how social media-friendly your virtual event was and how engaged the attendees were.

REMEMBER

You'll want to share much of this data with exhibitors and sponsors to help them prove their ROI, which may lead to future engagements with them.

Activating Event Data For Better Results

All the data in the world doesn't mean anything if you can't take action on it. For many virtual events, you may actually end up with too much data! Although that isn't a bad problem to have, getting real value from your event data means it has to be both easily understandable to the lay person and shared with your organization's business systems. This way, the data can be used to paint a more complete picture of impact and inform your next steps.

The following sections go into these requirements in more detail.

Making your data understandable

A virtual event, like an in-person event, can yield hundreds of data points or more for each attendee. Getting your arms around what all that data means can be a daunting task, and the more time you need to make it actionable, the less valuable it becomes.

Increasingly, organizations are looking to centralize their event and attendee data into a single source of truth. If your event data sits in multiple systems, it's almost certainly harder to find, is likely in different formats, and takes a ton of time and manual work to bring it together so you can see patterns.

For too many organizations, the resulting delays in processing your event data leads to an incomplete understanding of how your event performed. Worse still, these delays lead to slow follow-up from your sales and marketing teams. So, all of that hard work and expense gets lost. Your first step should be to get all of your event data in one place, not just for your virtual events, but across all your events: virtual, hybrid, and in-person.

Attendee data

Next, consider attendee data. When your attendees transit through your virtual event, they leave behind *digital breadcrumbs,* also called *engagement data.* It can be extremely useful in determining attendees' interests. This kind of data can be useful to separate signal from noise across a virtual attendee base that may number in the tens of thousands.

Increasingly, a strategy being employed to address this challenge is to distill all this event engagement into a single, digestible Event Engagement score. The concept is simple but powerful. Each attendee is assigned a score (or multiple scores) based on their engagement level at the virtual event. The more sessions they attend, exhibitors they visit, feedback they share, and appointments they have, the higher their score.

With the right event management technology, engagement scores are calculated automatically based on the attendee interactions within the virtual experience. Be sure to look for a virtual event platform that has this capability.

The attendee scoring approach has several benefits:

» It's fast and easy for your teams to identify the top engaged attendees and accounts at your event.

» It helps your sales and marketing teams prioritize their follow-up efforts.

Virtual events can yield eight times or more registrations over their in-person counterparts, though not all your virtual attendees are qualified and justify the same level of follow-up. Prioritizing your next steps with the help of a single, simple score saves valuable time and lets your downstream teams focus on the most qualified attendees.

Making your data actionable

So, now that you've had your virtual event technology "listen" for event and attendee data, you've systematically collected that data, and you've even centralized it in one place so you and your stakeholders can make sense of it.

Mission accomplished, right? Nope.

It's a great start, but you aren't quite done. For many events, activating your event data means using it to drive sales or membership. And the reality is that the marketing and sales teams responsible for that critical "last mile" don't live in your virtual event technology. Their systems of record are their customer relationship management (CRM) systems, association management systems (AMSs), or marketing automation systems like Marketo or Eloqua. These systems allow marketing and sales teams to better understand, target, manage, and track touchpoints with customers and prospects.

Many organizations rely on these systems to trigger automated, personalized communication to customers and prospects, and ultimately determine which of these activities creates the most value. The bottom line is, it's critical to your event's success that your virtual event and attendee data gets integrated into these systems.

Integrating your virtual event data with these systems has several benefits. First, consider the benefits for your marketing teams. Most marketers will tell you that all events, including virtual events, are just one of many tools they use to reach and convert their targets. When marketers integrate attendee activity data with their marketing automation tools, they can combine the engagement activity from virtual events with the information they already know about a customer or prospect. Demographic and firmographic data captured during registration can also help build more complete buyer profiles. With this more complete picture of interest, your marketing team can respond with smarter post-event nurture programs based on the attendees' expressed interests.

TIP

Your sales teams can also benefit from getting event and attendee data into their CRM or AMS tools. Getting qualified leads quickly into the sales team's hands gives them the best chance to succeed. The right integration can pass important qualifying data from an attendee right into the CRM or AMS systems where your sellers live, giving them clear, accurate information about what that prospect did at the event.

This allows your selling teams to be armed with that insight during their outreach, and your sellers can get access to this critical information quickly. For any event, leads get colder the longer they sit. For virtual events, with their myriad distractions, it's arguably even more important that sellers follow up with virtual attendees quickly and in a targeted way. Done well, these integrations ensure that your virtual event leads get to your sales teams in hours, not days.

Chapter **7**

Ten Tips For Successful Virtual Events

Virtual events aren't a new concept; the first webinar, one of the most popular types of virtual events, was broadcast in February 1999. But they've evolved over the last couple of decades. That evolution came, in part, thanks to event planners, who rose to the challenge when organizations wanted to reap the benefits of holding an event online (lower costs, significant time savings, and so on) while still realizing a return on investment (ROI).

This chapter offers ten tips for ensuring that your virtual meetings are successful from start to finish — and beyond.

Know Your Objectives

Knowing your objectives drives the rest of the decisions you'll be making, such as the purpose of your event (thought leadership or training, for example), your audience or attendee list, the format in which your event will be broadcast (webinar, multi-day event, and so on) as well as the technological platform you should use to plan, manage, and execute your event.

These objectives are also what you use to measure the success of your event when everything is said and done.

Know Your Audience

Make sure you're clear about who you want to invite. Although it's good practice to expand your invitation list for virtual events, since it's likely your registration numbers will be considerably higher than usual, you want to make sure the content will still be relevant for the larger audience.

Knowing your audience serves another purpose: to make sure you have a good source of qualified leads for your sponsors and exhibitors.

Re-Think Your In-Person Event Knowledge

You and your team are pros at planning events. In-person events, that is. Virtual events are an entirely different ballgame, and it's important that you completely nix the idea of "just switching" your existing event strategy to be all virtual.

In-person and virtual events aren't an apples-to-apples comparison, and you'll be doing yourself (and your event) a huge disservice if you try to take that approach. Start from scratch with your thinking, and reframe your strategy so it supports the use of virtual events.

Utilize the Right Technology

A virtual event is virtual thanks to the technology that runs it. From event planning, managing, and executing platform solutions to event websites, many moving parts go into virtual events, and it's important you use the right tech for the job. See Chapter 3 for a discussion of event technology.

Repurpose Where You Can

Sure, you have to start from scratch, and make sure your events (and event strategy) are set up for virtual events. But that doesn't mean you have to toss *all* in-person event parts.

For example, you need an event website, emails, and social media promotion for your event — regardless of whether it's virtual or in person. You can also repurpose some content to be in a format that's better suited for virtual delivery.

Prepare Attendees Beforehand

Because virtual events are still fairly new for many people, chances are good they won't be familiar with the technology that's involved. Whether they're attendees, presenters, exhibitors, or sponsors, make sure everyone has the proper resources ahead of time so they can get the most out of your event from start to finish and without any major hiccups.

Focus on Content

Content *is* your event. You don't have white sand beaches or the promise of riches on the blackjack table to entice people to attend. That's why it's so important that your session and speaker lineups are top-notch and that your content is rightsized and produced for online consumption. Whatever you do, don't underpower the content production for your virtual event.

Prioritize Engagement

Ah yes, engagement . . . make sure it's there at the top of your "must have" list! People attend in-person events because of the networking opportunities they present. You don't have that with virtual events. But this book has you covered. Chapter 2 and Chapter 5 give some great tips on how to encourage and sustain attendee engagement from start to finish.

Capture and Use the Data

As your virtual attendees interact with the event, they are telling you about their preferences and interests. Is your tech listening?

Make sure your systems are capturing event, profile, and engagement data, and that you are sharing that data with your marketing and sales systems. The payoff can be huge. You'll start to see the full picture of attendee interest. And when you combine that event data with what you already know about your prospects and customers, your sales and marketing teams can more quickly and completely drive value from your virtual event.

Consider the Exhibitor and Sponsor Experience

Exhibitors and sponsors are used to in-person events, too. They're used to standing in branded booths and handing out company swag with their logo emblazoned on it to well-qualified leads that they just had a 15-minute face-to-face conversation with, during which they built up a rapport. They don't get that with virtual events — at least not in the physical reality.

There are ways that you can ensure your sponsors and exhibitors are getting a return on their investment. Whether it's building brand awareness or lead generation, we give you tips on giving them a great experience that meets *their* objectives in Chapters 2 and 5.

Master the new world of virtual events

Faced with a new event landscape, many organizations have reflexively pivoted their meetings and events program to virtual. And although virtual events have been around for a long time, the rush to re-package in-person events into virtual format has been an experiment for most. So, toss out your in-person event playbook because this book will help you create a new one. We'll walk you through how to develop an effective virtual event strategy and then execute that strategy given the unique considerations of a virtual format. Virtual events are here to stay, so it's time to make room for the new tools you'll need to become a highly efficient, successful virtual event planning professional.

Inside…

- Understand your virtual event options
- Design engaging virtual events
- Choose a virtual platform
- Engage virtual audiences
- Master virtual content production
- Make the most of virtual event data

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