

6 Core Concepts: Get the Most From Virtual Events // 15 Blast from the Past: Resurrected Brands Thrive

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YOU'RE VIRTUALLY THERE

CONSIDER ADDING VIRTUAL EVENTS TO YOUR MARKETING REPERTOIRE. HERE'S HOW.

IN AN AGE of constrained budgets, rising airfares and an increasingly global marketplace, companies are looking to connect with their customers, potential customers and employees scattered across the country and around the world in ways that don't require a plane ticket. For many, the solution is virtual events.

Virtual events can include everything from webinars and live webcasts to online conferences and trade-shows held in a two-dimensional, video game-like virtual world complete with a branded entrance hall, exhibit space for sponsors, conference rooms, breakout sessions and nearly everything else that a physical event offers, save for a free continental breakfast. An added benefit is that virtual events aren't necessarily over when the conferences end: Hosts can allow content to live on in the virtual environment for several months to serve as an ongoing resource.

Also, while marketers often are lucky to collect a fish-bowl full of business cards—randomly submitted for an iPod raffle—with notes scribbled on the backs of them at physical events, virtual events allow marketers to collect data on almost every move each attendee makes: presentations they watched, collateral they collected and questions they asked, says Joerg Rathenberg, senior director of marketing at Menlo Park, Calif.-based virtual event provider Unisfair Inc.

That's not to suggest that virtual reality is preferable to, well, reality, says Scott Kellner, CMO of 6Connex, a Campbell, Calif.-based virtual technology company. "I think all of us in the industry agree that virtual events are not here to replace physical events," he says. Instead, they can extend the reach and scope of physical events, allowing a global audience to participate in real time and expanding on content presented in a real-world setting.

Companies across the marketplace are beginning to add virtual events to their repertoire. According to the Digital + Exhibit Marketing Insights 2009 study conducted in April and May by the Center for Exhibition Industry Research, George P. Johnson, the Exhibition Industry Foundation and Rudder Finn Insights, 40% of corporate brand marketers report using virtual media. The vast majority of those respondents—83%—primarily use webinars, while 55% use Web conferences, 48% use live webcasts and 10% host events in the virtual world.

Houston-based online marketing resource MarketingProfs has hosted four virtual events for its Web-savvy audience. The first event in 2007 attracted 4,000 attendees. The third event, held this April and supported by virtual technology provider InXpo Inc., attracted 15,000, says Susanne Sicilian, vice president of events for MarketingProfs. (Attendance for the last event was not available before this issue went to print.) The key to success, Sicilian says, is to remember that "what you put into it is what you get out of it, and that's the same for both a physical event and a virtual event."

MarketingProfs relies heavily on viral marketing to promote its virtual events—which, thus far, have been free for attendees, but the company is contemplating creating paid registrations down the line, maybe requiring payment for access to

higher-tiered content. When drawing up her event schedule, Sicilian keeps the medium in mind and incorporates breaks, offers shorter presentations than in the real world and includes an on-demand function so that attendees can access the content at their leisure once the event has ended. InXpo's analytics tools help sponsors collect leads, and allow MarketingProfs to track attendance and improve event content based on which presentations are popular.

Sicilian is particularly impressed with the amount of networking that goes on at MarketingProfs' virtual events. "People are really engaged," she says. "Everybody asks for the virtual happy hour." **m**

Editor's note: An AMA virtual event is in the works. Stay tuned!

Here's a list of virtual technology providers to help you get started:

- 6Connex, Campbell, Calif.
- InXpo Inc., Chicago
- ON24 Inc., San Francisco
- Unisfair Inc., Menlo Park, Calif.
- VirtualVU Inc., Barrie, Ontario

If you're interested in giving virtual events a try, here's how:



- 1 Figure out whether your audience is Web-savvy and what kind of virtual event suits your purposes—each case is unique. Providers offer a range of virtual platforms for various needs, whether you want to host a souped-up webcast series or a conference in a more immersive Web environment, experts say.
 - 2 Identify your objectives or "key performance indicators" for your virtual event, such as whether you want to generate leads, or train or attract employees, 6Connex's Kellner says.
 - 3 Define your content strategy. "Just because it's virtual doesn't mean you can wing it," Unisfair's Rathenberg says. Recruit industry thought leaders as speakers. Plan a schedule of sessions each day in a variety of formats. Steer clear of the hard sell and offer your audience useful takeaways.
- Keep in mind that it's unlikely that attendees will want to sit in front of their computers for six hours of virtual presentations. According to research conducted in 2007 by Unisfair and The Fact Point Group, virtual event attendees spend, on average, 2.5 hours at an online event visiting 16 locations, downloading five resources and participating in 13 interactions via e-mail and chat.
- 4 Make the experience truly interactive, says Malcolm Lotzof, CEO of Chicago-based virtual technology provider InXpo Inc. Online chats at virtual events allow attendees to participate, move from conversation to conversation, speak with a group or one on one, and use profile-matching technology to speak with like-minded attendees. "That is engaging. That keeps people inside the environment," Lotzof says.
 - 5 Create an audience acquisition strategy. Include an educational component in your marketing strategy to ensure that potential attendees know what a virtual event has to offer.
 - 6 Enlist sponsors' help. The majority of virtual events offer attendees free registration at this point, experts say, but sponsors often are willing to help foot the bill because their return on investment—qualified leads—can be worth their while.