



SPECIAL REPORT: VIRTUAL AND HYBRID B-TO-B EVENTS
WOMEN IN EVENTS • VIRTUAL CROWDSOURCING • CUSTOM PLATFORMS

EVENT

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FOR CREATORS OF THE BRAND EXPERIENCE

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ALWAYS ON

VP-GLOBAL EVENTS SCOTT SCHENKER IS HELPING SAP BLUR
THE LINES BETWEEN ONLINE AND OFFLINE EXPERIENCES

LEAVING THE LIGHT ON

Brands have a choice when it comes to virtual event strategies: one-off or always-on. EM explores both sides of the fence

VIRTUAL EVENTS rose to prominence out of need, and now they are as ubiquitous as branded swag at a tradeshow. These days, most brands look at how they can pair a virtual component with an existing live one, in what has become known as the “hybrid” event, creating a one-off virtual experience tied to that specific event. In the last year, however, there has been a rising tide of “always-on” virtual environments, owned by a brand and through which all of that brand’s virtual experiences flow, like owning its own conference center. Here, EM takes a look at the two approaches and when each makes sense for your next event.

ONE SHOT DEAL

By now, everyone knows what a virtual event looks like. It’s a web-based “conference center” with links to the sponsor area for product info, a chat room for networking, an “auditorium” for the big keynotes and several tracks worth of sessions chock full of content, all delivered to attendees at their homes or offices. No surprises there. The value for a brand sponsor or exhibitor is largely in data and lead collection and qualification. Thanks to detailed registrations, with almost unlimited custom fields, brands can get a much better sense of who their attendees are, and which ones are interested in its products, all at a touch of a button. That makes a virtual event component a gimme for any brand (or branded event) looking for that kind of ROI.

These days the best use for a one-off standalone or companion virtual event is for simple events and content delivery, like webinars and podcasts. They are also a good idea for low profile, or private events, with higher security needs, according to Jeorg Rathenberg, vp-products at virtual tech provider InterCall, formerly Unisfair. “A one-off is best used for tactical goals,” he says, “especially if there isn’t a lot of

associated content beyond what is offered within the event.”

So if a one-off has become the home of the tactical move, what to do for large, enterprise-wide strategic initiatives? Well...

EVERGREEN ENVIRONMENT

“Why turn off an event or platform when you’ve put so much work into building it?” Rathenberg says. “There’s almost no effort involved in maintaining it, beyond keeping the content fresh, so why only use it once?”

IBM couldn’t answer that question, so it became one of the first to go always-on last year, with its Virtual Event Center. (Incidentally, the VEC is a 2011 Ex Award-winning program.) Since then, it has created more than 20 other always-on platforms, each tailored to different audiences, both internal and external.

The VEC was built with more than 60 interchangeable environment options, a ready-made foundation for customized IBM-branded experiences. The platform supports more than 16 spoken languages for global reach and chat translation into more than 50 languages. It pairs with social media and allows live video chatting via

Skype. One of the real advantages for IBM is the self-service content repository, which helps event sponsors locate and populate their experiences with content based on a wide range of criteria.

Rob Pace, vp-marketing programs & events at IBM, says the program started as a way to avoid redundancies in creating unique environments for each

virtual event and to alleviate the frustrations of customers and other attendees who had trouble finding the event websites because of constant URL changes and new user interfaces each time.

“You want the attendee experience to be one of smooth relationships, not frustration,” he says. “We get a two-way learning flow and dialogue from the unified, always-on VEC. All of our events inform all of our other events.”

And the customers feel that value, too, as IBM can show by the numbers. In its first year, the VEC hosted 15,000 non-IBM attendees. This year, at the end of Q1, it had already had more than 12,000 people in the virtual door, and more than doubled the number of events hosted. “Very quickly, the VEC will grow to be bigger than all the other events we do, combined,” Pace says. **EM**

—Kenneth Briodagh

