



**TIPS FOR FTC-FRIENDLY BLOGGER OUTREACH**  
**INSIDE CISCO'S VIRTUAL GSX** **LOCATION SCOUTING** **SPONSORSHIP ROI**

# EVENT

**MARKETER**

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# THE YEAR IN REVIEW

The highs, the lows and more than 67  
industry trends that rose from the ashes



**VISUAL QUEST:** A huge part of making Cisco's Global Sales Experience successful was creating a totally immersive environment that would engage its high-powered sales force while expressing the company's key messages. EM scored these exclusive screen shots of the custom environment's navigation, information and chat zone areas.



## VIRTUAL EDGE

Cisco takes its global sales meeting virtual for the first time in 20 years

**VIRTUAL EVENTS** are one of the fastest growing platforms in the event industry. Yet despite their slick graphics, 3D environments and high-tech appeal, the pervasive question remains: How do you engage with attendees if you can't see, touch or talk to them?

When Cisco Systems set out to save costs by taking its weeklong annual sales meeting out of the real world and into a virtual one for the first time in 20 years, it had 20,000 very demanding reasons to answer that question: its sales force—the people who compete all day, every day to generate revenue and then bask in the recognition and rewards reaped at the annual sales conference. Cisco's Global Sales Experience (GSX) serves as one of the industry's largest virtual events of the year, a massive

undertaking—and one that required a little bit of moxie. Let's take a look at both the program and some of the lessons learned.

### COMMUNICATION

The three primary objectives of Cisco's annual sales meeting are: communication, motivation and recognition. Making sure its sales force is up to date on product lines, economic projections and goals for the year is mission critical to the company's communication strategy and the event's success. To help ease the transition from live to virtual, Cisco communicated to its attendees in a variety of familiar formats.

One way the brand helped familiarize attendees with the virtual realm was to create a virtual concierge, Eva, who welcomed every





**GAME ON:** Within the GSX environment, the mini games were a place for recreation, but also a critical part of the virtual event's strategy. The games helped drive key messaging, offered recognition and real-world prizes for the best players, unlocked clues for the larger "The Threshold" game and kept attendees engaged between sessions and keynotes, driving attendee engagement way up.

attendee who visited the environment for the first time and showed them how to navigate and maximize their time in each area of the virtual space. After that she didn't return unless called for. "We had to make people comfortable in the virtual environment," says Chris Meyer, svp-client services, worldwide and general manager at George P. Johnson Experiential Marketing, which handled the event. "We spent a lot of time on how to make the user experience easy and, if they needed help, how to give it to them."

In the weeks before the event, which ran Sept. 14 to 18, attendees were invited to pre-register for their agendas (about 80 percent complied, compared to 55 percent on average for Cisco's live events). Once they were inside the environment, their agendas helped them navigate directly to the sessions, chats and keynotes they signed up for. The exhibit floor was the first stop for the attendees, where product experts were available for scheduled live chats in real time. In the off-hours, content and videos were available for download from the product display booths.

Much like a real-world event, conference sessions were presented in several different formats. Some were video on-demand and others were live chat, like a breakout session. Some sessions were for specific product groups and others were for the various worldwide regions. (Remember, this event was global, so attendees were from all over the globe, from Sri Lanka to London.) Cisco research before GSX revealed that too much show content often overwhelms conference-goers, so the virtual show was right-sized accordingly. All in all there were about 200 sessions—less than there would have been at the live event.

The virtual environment also featured a chat zone for attendee networking and getting to know each other. Finally, there were several educational mini-games to be played and explored throughout the environment. Thanks to its efforts, Cisco hit all of its communication objectives this year; the post-event results show that the attendees are giving the communication strategy the same scores as those from previous years' live events.

"It was a cost-cutting initiative at first, when a decision was made to cancel all internal events or transition them to virtual," says Angie Smith, manager-global sales experience, global sales operations at Cisco Systems. "Our story now is that it's no longer about the cost, it's about the opportunity to innovate, too." (Though the brand did manage to execute this year's event for about one-tenth of the live event cost.)

## MOTIVATION

The motivation objective proved to be more challenging. "How do we motivate and recognize people when they are used to seeing great motivation-

al speakers like our ceo [John Chambers] or Bill Clinton and walking into a general session room that's glitzed and glammed up with loud music and great lights?" Smith asked. "Although the games and environments were great, there was a little piece missing."

Part of the motivation strategy was to go "Dr. No" on Cisco's sales force. Enter "The Threshold," a James Bond-style, "DaVinci Code"-esque scavenger hunt and puzzle-solving online game that was about getting the entire sales force involved and tapping into their inherent competitiveness to pull them into the virtual environment. It began three weeks before the sales meeting and ended on the last day of the event. The story line was simple: Someone stole a bit of Cisco technology and the company needs YOU to find the culprit. Clues to each step arrived via voicemails and emails, driving players into the virtual world. These weren't easy puzzles, either. One was a sound file that sounded like static, but had an embedded coded message. Other clues were hidden in the virtual conference sessions. There were prizes scattered throughout the game, at checkpoints and milestones. The final winning team won an all-expenses-paid trip to the Super Bowl this season. (For a complete play-by-play, check out pg. 20.)

One of the most motivational aspects of Cisco's previous annual sales meetings was the chance to travel to the event, so Cisco recognized that in the environment's visuals. The virtual event, powered by Chicago-based provider InXpo, was hi-res and packed with rich imagery and vivid colors reminiscent of an exotic vacation spot. It rivaled the best Xbox or Wii game's graphics in fluidity and, most importantly, depth. Especially in the gaming sections, the imagery was almost three-dimensional in feel. "I didn't hear a single bit of feedback that said it was anything but stunning and beautiful looking," Smith said.

## RECOGNITION

In the spirit of supporting recognition objectives, there was an exclusive chat area created just for top-tier sales champions. Top sales leaders' names were also advertised throughout the event's environments on leader boards and news crawls. But even with the additional levels of acknowledgment, it was still a tough sell. "These guys in the best of times made money hand over fist," Smith says. "They were the elite Cisco sales team and all they really wanted was to shake John Chambers' hand—but in times like this, when you take away the handshake, it's hard to replace."

So the event had its challenges, but will they do it again? In a word, yes. "Absolutely we will do this again, and on some level this will be part of our sales meetings going forward," says Smith. **EM**

—Kenneth Briodagh

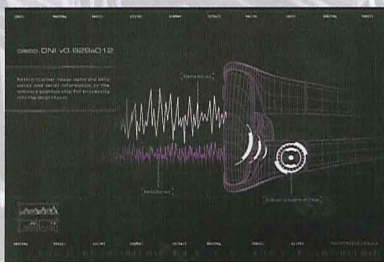
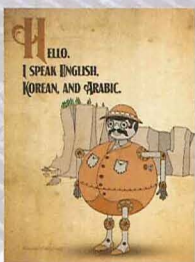


## LICENSE TO THRILL

How do you get a team as driven and high-maintenance as the Cisco Systems global sales force to get pumped up for a virtual sales meeting instead of a live event? Well, one way is to pit them against each other in an Ian Fleming-style action-packed puzzle game full of prizes to be snagged and problems to solve where the only way to get the brass ring is to work together as a team. So that's what they did. Introducing "The Threshold".



**1** Three weeks before the Global Sales Experience (GSX) kicked off on Sept. 14, the 21,000-member sales force was enticed to help the company find an industrial saboteur—an agent of a competitive corporation that had stolen a piece of revolutionary technology, recently developed by Cisco. The culprit's identity was unknown, but the clues would point the way for the clever and the quick. The hunt was on.



**2** Once the game was launched, the sales people teamed themselves up on in-house and private message boards so they could work on puzzles like these together, without being "eavesdropped" by other teams. They shared intel as they solved clues and brainstormed ideas, trying to get to the next step faster than the other teams. For instance, each of the clues conceals a hidden message encoded within the image. Once one member of the team decrypted the code, the others would go to work on the next step.



**3** As teams decrypted and solved clues, each of which led to other puzzles, and so on, they were driven back to this landing page, where they would enter the "Retrieval Code" to post points on the leader boards to earn one of up to 500 mini-prizes. The leader board also served as a constant reminder of who was winning and who was behind, driving them to work faster on each stage of the game. The site also gave lagging teams a chance at a hint. Just ask and maybe another player would take pity and help out.



**4** Along the way, it was revealed that the technology that was stolen was a revolutionary pair of eyeglasses, which contained an embedded microchip allowing the wearer to control computer devices hands-free. Mind-controlled computers and cell phones? Call Q branch because they need to see this.



**5** Some clues pointed to bits of live film that would advance the story along the pre-set path. Agency George P. Johnson, which designed the game with Cisco, wrote and shot more than 40 minutes of original video for the game. It all built toward a climax that hit right before GSX began. The last few clues were hidden within the virtual environment.



**6** The last clues were crucial to solving the puzzle and winning the game and, since they were hidden in conference session slides, virtual exhibitor booths and mini games, some of the most feverish game play was during the weeklong event, which was the goal.

"The whole strategy was to entertain, but also to engage," says Angie Smith, manager-global sales experience, global sales operations at Cisco Systems, who headed up the game. "Our executives were super excited about the game, but they didn't want it to be only fun and games. No one could win without paying attention and listening to the speakers in the sessions." Oh, and the prize? It wasn't revealed until the end. The winning team was told to choose any kind of trip or vacation they wanted as a prize. They chose an all-expenses-paid trip to this season's Super Bowl. If only they'd invite poor Money-Kenny, er Penny. **EM**

—Kenneth Briodagh





## 50 BRIGHTSIDING

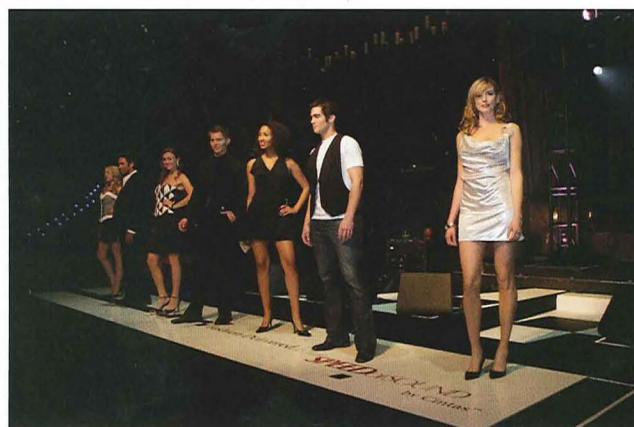
With America's collective spirits in the dump, the pop psychology trend that suggests we look on the bright side of life becomes a marketing concept. So does the trend of turning ordinary consumers into living marketing campaigns. Example: Kodak's BrightSide tour features the Compliment Guys, two kids from Purdue who dish out compliments for fun.

Ann Taylor LOFT stores go on tour to build media attention for the brand's more youthful look and to attract a new, younger clientele.

"We found these guys on YouTube and noticed they have a huge fan following. We have a campaign launching this fall with the tagline, 'It's time to smile,' so we thought, what a great opportunity to get together with them, take their genuine sense of optimism and desire to make people happy and try to get them to as many people as possible."

**LESLIE DANCE, VP-WORLDWIDE BRAND MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS AT KODAK, ON WHERE THE BRAND GOT THE IDEA FOR ITS BRIGHTSIDE TOUR WHICH FEATURES TWO STUDENTS FROM PURDUE KNOWN AS THE COMPLIMENT GUYS**

700 retailers participate in Fashion's Night Out, Sept. 10, on the eve of Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week to support the industry and kick off the fall season. Anna Wintour is overheard asking, "What is this place?" when she arrives at her first stop, Macy's. (Okay, we made that up. But seriously, like she shops at Macy's? Bitch, please.)



## 51 LIVE REINVENTION

Brands more and more turn to events to shake off old perceptions about their products. Cintas, the uniform company best known for its blue scrubs, shakes up its reputation with an upscale fashion show in Las Vegas. It is, dare we say, sexy.



## 52 VIRTUAL EVENTS LEVERAGE LIVE STRATEGIES

To help ease the transition for first-time virtual event attendees, brands such as Ariba, ASI and Navistar turn to live event tactics. Top tips include: giveaway offers that encourage exploration of the environment, a 24-hour help desk, a guided tour, pre-show training via webinars and hybrid programs that mix live and virtual events.





On Sept. 14, Cisco takes its annual sales meeting virtual for the first time in 20 years. Dubbed GSX, it becomes the year's biggest example of the proliferation of digital events (see pg. 16).

## 53 GREENWASHING

File this under the "Trends that need to die" file. Eco friendly tours may not be so eco-friendly after all. Many use gas-guzzling flatbed trucks to haul biodiesel, electric and solar-powered vehicles from city to city, defeating the purpose entirely. What's worse, some have yet another vehicle that follows filled with alternative fuels. WTF?



"We wanted to show consumers that they never have to be without great coffee. We're trying to trail blaze in social media and this is just the first step in things to come for Starbucks in this space."

LARA WYSS, DIRECTOR-GLOBAL CONSUMER P.R. AT STARBUCKS



## 54 SCREENLESS GREEN SCREEN

No longer do your photo activation programs require the big stationary neon green curtain. Thanks to a ton of new technology, consumer photos can be taken anywhere and electronically manipulated on the spot to appear in front of any variety of backdrops. As an added bonus, attendees can customize the photos themselves, which means more time spent on the data collection website. Aw, snap!



Starbucks concludes a 4,500-mile, two-week, 33-stop international tour designed to build excitement for the official launch of its new instant coffee, Via, touted to taste the same as the brewed version.



It ain't easy telling 200,000 of your top sales people that there would be no recognition event this year. So Cisco created "The Threshold," an online scavenger hunt and puzzle-solving game that was designed to get the entire sales force excited about the event and tapped into their inherent competitiveness to pull them into the virtual environment. It began three weeks before the sales meeting and

ended on the last day of the event. The storyline: Someone stole a bit of Cisco technology and the company needs you to find the culprit. Clues to each step arrived via voicemails and emails, driving players into the virtual world. Some attendees may have been bummed about missing the chance to shake ceo John Chambers' hand, but when faced with the economic realities of cutting back on its live shows, Cisco found a way to talk to its audience in a relevant way (see pg. 20).

