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Integrating Face-to-Face and Virtual Meeting & Event Strategies

Enhancing Participant Experiences and Increasing Business Value



The meeting and event landscape has changed dramatically over the past 18 months.

Overview

From a business perspective, you've heard, read and talked about it yourself – some examples include the economy, travel restrictions and negative rhetoric surrounding meeting and event programs. Despite these and other influencers on this industry, organizations refuse to do away with their meeting and event investments. They can't. Simply put, organizations can't afford to because, the fact is, doing so would have a much greater consequence on business performance than most realize. This is evidenced through a number of studies including recent findings from the Oxford Economics USA report where, on average, meetings and events are generating anywhere from a \$4 to \$1 to a \$20 to \$1 return.

Before getting into a virtual discussion, we need to first think about the participant or attendee perspective. People have a desire to be connected with one another. It's human nature. Daniel Goleman, author of *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships*, states that human brains are in fact "wired to connect." Denying this fundamental need can only prove detrimental to an organization's ability of achieving effective business outcomes. Retaining customers, converting sales prospects, building relationships and investing in human capital are essential to business performance and heavily rely on this need for connection.

The reality of how virtual fits in to the mix for meetings and events is driven by shifts in how we manage, operate and interact with one another. Think about how virtual already plays a role in our lives today:

- Every month, MySpace, Facebook and YouTube generate 250 million unique visitors collectively.
- Both Generation X and Y represent the "Net Generation." Both are highly connected virtually and consider one-way communications such as email outdated.
- 1 in 6 higher education students are enrolled in online curriculums
- 1 out of 8 couples married in the U.S. last year met via social media

Now, a general question often surfaces on taking an extreme adoption of face-to-face versus virtual. To avoid all of the back-and-forth arguments, it can't be an 'either or' discussion, but one that centers more on how to develop the best integrated or blended strategy. Think of it this way, while phone calls, emails and other non face-to-face engagements help keep you connected, you still likely celebrate holidays, family gatherings or other events in-person. There's no difference from this to the relationship between face-to-face and virtual for meetings and events.

Organizations can experience better business outcomes with the integration of virtual into their strategy as a supplement to their face-to-face meeting or event. This strategy enhances the value of the meeting by further engaging an organization's people – employees, channel partners and customers. It extends the content, expands the audience reach and creates enhanced ways to interact with hosts, speakers and other participants.



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- Daniel Goleman,
author of *Social Intelligence*

Principles of Blended Strategies

Virtual needs to be more about how we extend customer, channel partner and employee experiences. Building on top of face-to-face engagements, virtual can provide the right blended strategy resulting in more effective business outcomes by delivering rich, interactive experiences. But, you need to follow some core principles to ensure you end up with the right, not lackluster, outcomes. To do so, consider:

- **Content, Collaboration and Community**

Traditional content won't work. In a virtual setting, content has to be engaging and interactive in order to gain and sustain the attention, participation and interest level of attendees. In addition, collaborative experiences need to bring participants together with one another, speakers, hosts and sponsors. Don't forget about building community. Social media can play a significant role in the success of your virtual extension of meetings and events. Whether recognized or not, social conversations already occur on line regarding your meeting and event programs. One area that greatly separates weak from strongly performing virtual programs rests in the degree social networking communities are embraced.

- **Before, During and After**

- **Before** the live event, organizations that choose to enhance their meeting or event with a virtual component allow their people to connect with other participants, speakers, hosts and sponsors; inform and guide the agenda and presentation content; and generate buzz and excitement around the meeting and event.
- **During** the event, organizers can take advantage of monitoring the participant experiences in real-time and take action to provide more relevant and meaningful engagements.
- **After** the face-to-face meeting comes to an end, there are ample opportunities for organizations to continue to extend the life of the event. For example, making recorded presentations available on-demand, providing on-line contact information, encouraging discussion posts based upon content, or even survey participants on noted areas all adds to the overall experience – extending it beyond the actual face-to-face portion of the event.

- **Face-to-Face vs. Virtual Playbook**

When you can't see your audience and they can't see you, the approach has to be different. While there are common ground areas between how a face-to-face and virtual meeting or event is designed, developed, executed and measured, there also are distinct needs that require different service approaches.

- **Different Technologies for Different Needs**

The types of virtual engagement technologies available have increased greatly over the past few years. There are four main virtual technologies that make the most sense for meeting and event programs; including:

- Virtual Event Platform (VEP)

An online, privately branded stand-alone or companion to face-to-face meetings and events. Here, meeting hosts can communicate with audiences anytime and anywhere through a secure, interactive event. A virtual event platform can be for many event types, including sales kickoffs, educational programs, trade shows, and conferences.



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- Web Collaboration
Consisting of web conferencing for two-way communications and webcasting for one-way, web collaboration allows participants to view a live or recorded session via the Internet with phone line audio streaming that can incorporate interactive features such as surveys, Q&A and polling.
- Satellite Broadcast Events
Satellite broadcasting delivers invitation-only experiences to audience members through a custom-created, live television broadcast with interactive technologies. Meetings take place in private dining room venues such as a Morton's The Steakhouse or Maggiano's Little Italy.
- Telepresence
Consists of high-quality, real-time video and voice conferencing. It employs life-size imagery that allows participants to connect with other groups of people around the world.

Considering Next Steps

Making an investment in a meeting or event is a good idea when you want to improve service levels, launch new products, educate audiences, encourage innovation, or improve customer, employee and channel partner engagement. While situations vary, so should the strategy. Otherwise, organizations run the risk of an ineffective, one-size-fits-all approach.

The future of meetings and events isn't coming, it's arrived. To determine the right strategy, you need to align with the right partner who can offer expertise and experience in both traditional and virtual meeting design, operations and measurement. At the end of the day, in order for you to achieve the fuller potential value your meetings and events can deliver, you need to consider the who, what, when, where and how of virtual. Having the right answers on virtual as an integrated strategy makes all the difference for a truly effective approach that delivers better, more engaging and lasting experiences for your participants as well as better business outcomes for your organization.

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