

Living the virtual (conference) life. Considerations for marketers

Amid a global pandemic and with [time spent online up by 50%](#), you'd be forgiven for thinking that the only thing that is 'your oyster' right now is the internet; and certainly not the world. But, don't be hasty...businesses that are best set to ride out this coronavirus curve are upping the ante on digital ways of working whilst adapting sensitively to the challenges of the current environment.

It's been impressive to see how those big and small are transitioning to digital delivery with apparent confidence (and inevitable caution), doing what they can to maintain momentum by remaining relevant. They've had to re-evaluate where their customers are and what the best ways to reach them might be. There are also those that find themselves in a position where existing, planned online activity has become even more pertinent than it ever was.

INTERACTIVE INSPIRATION

Some of our clients' virtual activities might provide inspiration for others in these challenging times.

Our client VMware has recently taken the decision to move its annual event for elite technical and sales partners online. It will be replicating the usual **EMPOWER** event spaces, streaming keynotes, and facilitating product training workshops virtually.

When logging on from home was a choice and not a necessity, we were already working with client LinkedIn Talent Solutions, planning for and promoting a global virtual conference, to gather talent professionals and business leaders from across the globe. The [LinkedIn Impact: Talent Transformation](#) virtual conference has one agenda, which will be staggered in its launch across three time-zones, to deliver the same content to audiences in NAMER, EMEA and APAC regions in a single 24-hour period.

These examples help to demonstrate what's possible in a world where we're all currently dialling up on the virtual experiences, and down on the physical ones.

ANALOGUE VERSUS DIGITAL

Many of you will have attended a webinar or equivalent and may perhaps be sceptical about the possibility of these digital platforms replicating the diversity of a real-world event. However, modern virtual conferences have evolved significantly and many feature multiple sessions to attend; different 'rooms' to enter; and various engagement opportunities – be they Q&As, 1-2-1s or helpdesk type meetings. It's more than a webinar, and so much more than a conference call; ultimately, it's surprisingly like attending in person, but minus the crowds, miles of walking, and deciphering the conference floor map!

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Here are six things to consider if you're thinking of running one:

1. PLANNING

What are you delivering, why and when? Ensuring a virtual conference is the right strategy is an important first step (don't do it if it's not right for your audience), then establish a timeline and milestones to take you to live date - keeping pre-event activity focused and strategic.

2. INFRASTRUCTURE

How will you do it? Who needs to be involved? Choosing the right digital experience platform, team and partners are important to ensure effective delivery and technical know-how. Working groups may own different aspects so defining roles and responsibilities will be crucial.

3. PROMOTION

Where and how will we reach our audience? Using the right digital channels and targeted activity will be essential to driving registrations. This might be email, InMail or paid social. Don't assume a registration means commitment to log on; sending reminders with reasons to attend close to the date is essential to ensuring people actually do.

4. CONTENT

How do you make it appropriate and relevant? The virtual experience presents opportunities the traditional one doesn't, and as people join more and more virtual conferences it will become increasingly important to differentiate the format, presentation and environment to make it memorable. Designers can help to ensure stunning 3D customised backdrops set the scene and then there's the content itself. Could your keynote speaker present as a 'fire-side chat' giving each individual delegate the feeling they are one-to-one with a major industry figure? Does live chat have a role or could online voting during presentations be used to direct the conversation in real-time? Can gamification play a part maybe?

There are lots of opportunities to keep people engaged - and perhaps even more so than in a bricks and mortar environment. Real world events are often broad to bring in multiple audiences, but without the constraints of physical space perhaps you can be more focused with your content and speakers, to drive maximum impact with a more niche target audience?

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5. MEASUREMENT

What does success look like? Setting KPIs up front will help to keep planning and delivery aligned. For example, consider how many registrations you're looking to achieve and work backwards up the conversion funnel from there - to quantify target web referral numbers, number of clicks needed (from social ads say) to drive them, and therefore what levels of reach/impressions you should be aiming to generate initially based on average CTRs.

6. AFTERWARDS

What happens next? A benefit of being virtual is that the lifespan of the content doesn't need to be limited to the conference itself. A post-event strategy might focus on driving traffic to on-demand sessions for example or following up with those who logged on. Consider the learnings post-event, particularly if your virtual conference might be an annual occurrence.

It's evident that social distancing and lockdowns don't have to mean pulling the plug on all live meetups. Yes, physical locations are out of bounds, but effective events can still happen - albeit virtually, and with considerable planning. Obviously, it's hard to match all the benefits of a real-world event digitally - finding a way to facilitate the chance, 1:1 interactions; the post-event drinks; the networking and more digitally is no mean feat - but the opportunities for valuable human interaction are still very much in abundance and the ways digital events can replace their real world analogues plentiful.

Time will tell what impact virtual conferences might have on the \$1.5 trillion business events industry longer term, but one thing that's already clear is the power of technology in continuing to connect the world, colleagues and customers, particularly in the most challenging of times.

We hope these suggestions are useful. If you would like to talk more then please get in touch with us here at Brands2Life.