
7 The Future of Events will be Hybrid

Tim Brown

Introduction

In early 2020 a pandemic was declared following the rapid spread of COVID-19 across the globe. As a result, numerous governments worldwide implemented strict measures to limit the movements of their populations to prevent increases in COVID-19 infections (Ludvigsen & Hayton, 2020; Mohanty et al., 2020). These restrictions included regional and national 'lockdowns' which severely restricted personal activities, with all but essential workers urged to work from home, schools and universities closed and moved online, and only critical business (such as supermarkets and pharmacies) to remain open (Richter, 2020). Many industries were affected by the lockdowns, with the tourism, hospitality, and events industries most severely affected (Mohanty et al., 2020).

The Meetings Industry Association (mia) reported that in the UK the impact of COVID-19 on the events industry has resulted in £ billions lost in revenue through cancelled events and declines in enquiries, and that over 126,000 event jobs in the UK have been lost to date (mia, 2020), with fears this could increase to over 500,000 job losses without more government support (Fullard, 2020). This picture is mirrored in other countries, such as the USA, where it is outlined that 46% (8 million people) of those working in food, travel and events have lost their jobs (Dubay, 2020). Events are a global industry, worth \$ trillions annually (Events Industry Council & Oxford Economics, 2018), and the shutdown of events presents an existential crisis to the industry which may take years to recover (EventMB, 2020b; mia, 2020; Mohanty et al., 2020).

There has, however, been some small green shoots that provide some optimism for the future recovery of events and the event industry. The business events sector in particular has turned to technology to provide a platform for creating and delivering events (specifically meetings and conferences), providing continuity of service, and experimenting and enhancing the consumer experience. Whilst not at the same level of capacity as live in-person events

pre-pandemic, the 'pivot' to online is providing a lifeline for event professionals (EventMB, 2020b).

The purpose of this chapter will be to predominately explore the business events context in relation to the development and benefits of virtual and hybrid events, the impact of COVID-19 on the events industry, the pivot to online, designing virtual and hybrid event experiences, current trends of virtual and hybrid events, and postulate the future direction of events emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

Virtual events

Technology has been an intrinsic and integral element within events for decades, and as the quality and capabilities of technology has enhanced so has the reliance on it to transform event experiences (Bowdin et al., 2011). The developments in web-based applications and platforms, and mobile applications, have further changed the event industry, enabling event professionals to create more meaningful event experiences, reach wider audiences, and increase returns on investment (Raj, Walter, & Rashid, 2017).

Despite the technological advancements over the last 20 years the growth of virtual events has been slower than predicted. This is due to several key factors. First, the atmosphere, ambience and emotive response of a live event are difficult to replicate online (Getz & Page, 2020). Second, whilst technology is embedded within our normal lives there is still a reluctance to use this in place of tried and tested event experiences. Third, a lack of confidence exists from some event organizers and consumers in using technology for events (Sox et al., 2017a), as well as the perceived costs associated with developing and delivering online events. Finally, the socialization and networking that live events offer are hard to artificially construct online (Nolan, 2018). The potential that virtual events can offer, therefore, has not been fully realized by the event industry, except for the business events sector (Davidson, 2019).

Virtual events are not a new genre but have existed for nearly 40 years since the development in the early 1980s of videoconferencing as a meetings platform (Sox et al., 2017b). It was not until the early 2000s, however, before virtual events began to build traction as a viable platform to conduct events, primarily meetings and conferences, due to breakthroughs in reducing the size and speed of the data being transmitted (Nolan, 2018), ease of use, and the reducing costs associated with using these platforms (Rogers, 2013). The financial crisis in 2008 had a major impact on the meetings and events sector with businesses reducing their capacity and budgets for delivering or attending events (Goldblatt & Lee, 2012). As a result, virtual events witnessed a significant growth to bridge the gap that had emerged during this recession and

demonstrated their potential as a viable alternative to in-person events, and were expected to become a dominant aspect of the event industry (Briodagh, 2010; Shapiro, 2009). It was estimated that virtual events would grow to be worth \$18.6 billion by 2015 and (Raj et al., 2017) and were predicted to grow exponentially (McLoughlin, 2014; Rogers, 2013; Sadd, 2014; Sox et al., 2017a). Sadd (2014) explored the technological possibilities for the future of events and argued that a blend of virtual and live elements would be the norm. The timeframe for this future was rather opaque, however, as the technology and prohibitive costs meant that for the foreseeable future the interconnectivity that in-person events provide could not be completely replaced or replicated online (Rogers, 2013; Sox et al., 2017b).

Virtual events also have their detractors with Getz and Page (2020, p. 51) commenting that all events are *“social in nature, and that is because people have a need to be together – to socialize, celebrate and do business”* and these elements cannot be replaced via technology. This is echoed by Sadd (2014, p. 216) who posits that despite the significant advances, technology *“cannot yet allow for total connectivity and immersion and that integral face-to-face reaction, co-creation and co-production are crucial elements to the event experience”*. There are real barriers, physical, technological, and sociological that are preventing the potential for virtual events to become fully integrated in the events industry. Whilst business events are seeing the benefits of virtual events, they have not fully replaced the demand for attending in person (Bladen et al., 2018).

Defining virtual and hybrid events

There are numerous definitions of what is meant by the term event but Dowson and Bassett (2018, p. 2) provide a succinct yet encompassing definition by outlining that an event is *“a planned gathering with a purpose”*. This definition can be attributed to any type of event, irrespective of size, scope, or scale, and can therefore align to both physical and virtual events. In contrast virtual events are defined as *“events represented on the internet”* (McLoughlin, 2014, p. 242), and are therefore an online gathering with a purpose. The focus of virtual events, therefore, is to create an effective online environment for people to engage with the event content and each other (Beech, Kaiser, & Kasper, 2014; Sa, Ferreira, & Serpa, 2019). The business events sector has been able to benefit from virtual events in particular given the relative ease that these events can be developed and delivered virtually (Beech et al., 2014; Davidson, 2019; Raj et al., 2017; Rogers, 2013; Sox et al., 2017a, 2017b), whereas other event typologies do not translate as readily to a virtual context, for example sporting events and fundraising events.

From a hybrid events context, Nolan (2018, p. 136) states that this can be defined as *“a live event that also includes elements of a virtual event or has an*