

What's Working IN VIRTUAL EVENTS?

**B2B Orgs Enhance Digital Experiences With
Videos, Interactive Networking & Tech To
Mimic In-Person Engagement**

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REPORT
SPECIAL REPORT

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Introduction

It's no secret that COVID-19 has changed demand generation. In-person events, which were a prime source of leads, have nearly evaporated due to social distancing guidelines. The B2B sector has had to move quickly to make up for the sudden lack of in-person engagement, but all is not lost.

B2B organizations are more than open to opportunities that virtual events present. The demand for content is there — B2B organizations just have to tap into it. According to a survey conducted by *Demand Gen Report*:

- **61% of respondents felt positively about hearing keynote presentations from top influencers and thought leaders during a virtual event;**
- **55% wanted to hear from topical experts on problems they were having; and**
- **55% wanted to learn about technology solutions for business solutions.**

61% of marketers felt positively about hearing keynote presentations from influencers and thought-leaders during a virtual event.

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Marketers have a unique opportunity to leverage existing omnichannel solutions to create unforgettable virtual experiences. While there's no way to recreate an in-person event from scratch, marketers must tap into their database to gauge audience needs, evaluate the content they'd like to see and consider how to strategically place it in front of the customer.

Demand Gen Report's virtual research also revealed that respondents want short presentations:

- **87% prefer sessions to be under 45 minutes in length; and**
- **Of that 87%, 30% want sessions to max out at 20 minutes.**

This special report will lay out how marketers can take advantage of the current moment and develop virtual events that are immersive digital experiences, including how to:

- Create lasting connections through virtual networking opportunities combined with direct mail;
- Build hype around the event with promotional videos;
- Bring the best elements of a physical event into a digital setting;
- Leverage the “4 Ts” — team, time, turnout and technology — to align planning across the organization.

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Offer Engaging Virtual Networking Opportunities Combined With Direct Mail

A face-to-face meeting is a precious and dwindling commodity these days, particularly at events, where a defining feature is the ability to have spontaneous conversations and networking opportunities with likeminded people.

Demand Gen Report's virtual research revealed a strong desire for networking. Sixty-one percent said they want to network digitally via topic-oriented gatherings. Specifically, respondents noted that they want discussions based on:

- **Topics and challenges (77%);**
- **Role (64%); and**
- **Industry (50%).**

Furthermore, the research showed that 48% of respondents wanted conversation-based networking opportunities, while 44% said they wanted a mix of business and fun.

For example, **Cvent**, an event management technology and hospitality solution provider, recreates in-person networking by conducting small Zoom meetings and one-on-one discussions through their online meeting portal, according to CMO Patrick Smith.



“One of the key things that marketers struggle with is virtual event networking,” he said. “We looked at all the different ways to get people to connect and provided the ability to schedule one-on-one appointments at a moment’s notice. We have exhibitors at Cvent solution kiosks where you can pop into a Zoom meeting and watch demos. We also have topic-based discussions, which are not sales pitches at all. We’ve also done virtual happy hours with celebrity chefs.”

Direct mail can also enhance virtual networking opportunities. To facilitate an engaging happy hour, one of Cvent’s sponsors sent 4,000 participants margarita mixes so everyone could hold a drink at the same time — much like a real happy hour.

Neda Taylai, VP of Marketing at **Splash**, an event marketing platform, takes a similar approach with their online happy hours, sending wine to attendees. They’ve also partnered with NYC-based ice cream company Topsy Scoops, to send ice-cream making kits to attendees to enjoy.

Splash also integrates with a number of communication platforms, including a chat function, to allow attendees to ask questions and communicate with each other in real time.

“When you think about how to drive attendance, not just registration, there’s something to be said about how to incentivize people to show up,” said Taylai. “At the end of the day, we are all experiencing some degree of screen fatigue, but if you can create a different type of environment and give people an opportunity to connect organically, I think companies will find that to be more of a successful tactic than just a static virtual event.”

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PATRICK SMITH, CVENT



Use Video Content To Generate Buzz & Get Speakers To Engage With The Audience

Experts said videos are a great way of promoting virtual events and get speakers involved early on to drive attendance. Lee Odden, CEO of **TopRank Marketing**, a B2B marketing agency, suggested asking speakers to record promotional videos that can be used for social media and email promotion, as well as pre-event blog content.

Demand Gen Report's research showed that 55% of respondents said they wanted to watch videos that are quick overviews of solutions, and 86% said they wanted to watch case study videos.

“Getting speakers to create videos that preview what they’re going to talk about can be a tremendous asset that can be leveraged in a lot of different ways, such as social media, blog posts and email,” said Odden. “Video is incredibly important, but the challenge is getting those speakers to record the videos. One thing that I’ve seen since [the increase of virtual events] is companies using prep calls with the speaker as an opportunity to capture the speaker’s promo video right then and there.”

Videos that are recorded beforehand can also be useful to eliminate down time in between sessions and can prevent attendees from becoming bored and dropping off, according to Cvent’s Smith.

“If you’re going to run a virtual event, the only thing keeping someone engaged is looking at their computer screen or their tablet or phone,” he said. “If you have a lot of dead time, where the person is just sitting there seeing nothing, they may potentially leave the event because they are not interested. We have a lot of interstitial content in our waiting rooms. If we have five minutes to go before a session, we’ll run a video. That way, people are still entertained and engaged.”



How AICP Turned Virtual Events Into An Engaging Brand Experience

This year has presented event marketers with never-before seen challenges. The response to the pandemic triggered event cancellations, leaving teams scrambling. In what seemed like an overnight shift, event marketers had to learn everything they could about transforming their would-be in-person events into virtual events.

While all of this was unfolding, the **Association of Independent Commercial Producers (AICP)** was organizing their largest annual event series, The AICP Awards. These events, which celebrate the craft, creativity and collaboration of the best marketing communications in the moving image genre, were hosted over multiple days in New York City and culminated with the AICP Show debut, a 2,000-attendee gathering at The Museum of Modern Art.

In light of recent events, AICP's team had to pivot sharply and quickly, while facing a virtual-event learning curve and keeping guest satisfaction as their highest priority. Like most event marketers today, the AICP team knew this would be a challenge.

"We discussed at length how to engage people in a setting that feels like it's live and mimics the energy of an in-person event as much as possible," said Aurora Warfield, AICP's National Events Producer. "We wanted everyone to be able to talk about the work and watch it together in a way that felt like a group experience instead of an isolated one."

"But among all the conversations and decisions around attendee engagement, we still had to make sure the AICP brand and the purpose of our event didn't get lost in the shuffle of us trying to elevate the experience."

The AICP team knew they had to move quickly, but wanted to avoid rash decisions — especially when it came to the technologies they would use.

“At first, we were just thinking about a registration software and housing the event somewhere else, because we had a few options,” said Warfield. “But then as we progressed down this road, we encountered different obstacles in our goal to make the experience seamless for guests.

“We wanted to remove as many barriers as possible for entry and engagement. This meant having a platform that made logging in easy. We wanted it to feel as though — similar to the in-person event — they arrive at a place, they enter through a doorway and they have that full brand experience while making their way to the main stage.

“Having attendee data is wonderful, but our number-one priority was ease of use for our attendees,” said Warfield. “So, if a platform could give us great data, but it became a barrier for guest experience, it wasn’t the platform for us.”

Luckily, AICP didn’t have to compromise on any of this. After looking at all of their options, they found that Splash checked all of their requirements.

“Because everything was on Splash, we were able to present our event in a way in keeping with the craft, creativity and elegance our audience expects,” said Kristin Wilcha, AICP’s Vice President of Operations. “With live streaming tools, you may be limited with what you’re able to do in terms of branding. With Splash, we built a really beautiful house for our awards shows, plus had all of the back-end functionality and data to support it.”

Using Splash as the “house” for the entire awards show, the AICP team embedded YouTube for the live stream and connected chat capability to make for a seamless attendee touchpoint.

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AURORA WARFIELD, AICP

Katie Mulligan, AICP's Manager of East and National Events, agreed that the back-end data was intuitive and helped her understand event performance.

"It was so important that I could go on the back-end and see where the majority of people registered for the event, whether through social media or directly through the event page," said Mulligan. "We were also able to see how many people attended over the three nights, who checked in and how long they stayed."

"At the end of each awards season, I'm usually going through lists and manually tracking how many people from a given company bought tickets and attended. And because of the unique URL that each attendee used to enter the event, I didn't have to do that this year. The data was simply tracked for us."

According to Wilcha, many industry awards shows went virtual this year, so they had to market and manage the event right — and she attributes a part of their success to the technology.

"We got rave reviews, and Splash was a big part of that," said Wilcha. "Our attendees said almost unanimously that our event was the most seamless, most beautiful and most well-executed virtual awards show."

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KRISTIN WILCHA, AICP



Take Advantage Of The Lack Of Physical Space

With virtual events, marketers don't have to worry about the headache of booking a venue for two days and cramming one to three days of programming in. They have an opportunity to take their time and stretch out the content, according to Tessa Barron, VP of Marketing at **ON24**. The advantage is twofold: Saving on costs and giving attendees the opportunity to really digest the content, instead of wandering from crowded room to crowded room.

"I think that the number one thing that people do wrong is to think that they can drag and drop a physical event into a digital world," said Barron. "And when you try to replicate and reproduce all of the elements that happen within an in-person event, and do so digitally, you're overlooking a really key aspect to a virtual event."

Another advantage of a lack of physical space is that marketers can have as many attendees as the platform can support. If a physical event previously held several hundred people, a virtual can host up to thousands. That means more potential interest, more potential connections and more potential pipeline. It also allows marketers to track all of the attendees' digital footprints during an event to gauge real interest and intent.

"We built an attendee engagement score that shows us whether people opened a registration email and what they did at the event," said Cvent's Smith. "Every one of those actions feed into a lead score, or the attendee engagement score. The trick is being able to capture all the demand signals, all the way to the post-event survey and any feedback about products."



Focus On Team, Time, Turnout And Technology

According to ON24's Barron, there are "four Ts" to pulling off a great virtual event: Time, team, turnout and technology.

"The first [pillar in your virtual event] is your team," said Barron. "When you are doing a digital event, it cannot be in a silo, you have to involve demand gen, operations, content marketing and brands. You also have to involve digital if that's a separate team within your whole marketing organization. That's because a digital event truly is omnichannel if it's done right. They should be treated like a campaign, because it has the power to create a connected customer."

Barron advocates sitting down with any and all relevant teams to brainstorm on how to connect with an attendee through various touchpoints just like they would with a regular omnichannel digital campaign.

The second pillar is time. When event marketers run a digital event, they are in control of the process and can decide when to follow up. Marketers need to be able to sort in real-time the difference between the attendees who are ready to buy and those who are not.

The third pillar has to do with turnout. "[At a digital event,] you're suddenly dealing with a scale of thousands of attendees versus hundreds of attendees," said Barron. "That means someone simply showing up to a virtual event is not enough to show intent."

The fourth pillar, technology, ties all the other previous aspects together. Leveraging the right digital tools before, during and after an event act as a net that captures all intent data and passes it on to the sales team for follow-up.

Virtual Events: Not Just Another Webinar

TOM GARDINER, HEAD OF PRODUCT MARKETING, **SPOTME**



In the face of uncertainty, marketers have had to pivot quickly to fill in the lead gaps left behind by the shut-down of in-person events. Some organizations dove right into developing virtual events, webinars and digital experiences to get a head start on the competition. When others followed suit, audiences experienced symptoms of webinar fatigue. So how can B2B companies engage with their audiences authentically without tiring their audiences with too much content?

Demand Gen Report sat down with Tom Gardiner, Head of Product Marketing at **SpotMe**, a digital experience and virtual events platform, to discuss the current state of virtual events in B2B marketing and how marketers are coping in the face of these challenges. Read on to learn how to replicate B2B marketer's success by rethinking the entire virtual events strategy, and not simply creating another webinar.

Demand Gen Report: What is the current state of virtual events in B2B? How have they evolved since the start of the pandemic until now?

Tom Gardiner: Right at the start of the pandemic, we saw the fight-or-flight moment. Basically, pivot or delay. As teams and organizations scrambled to adjust and recalibrate in a whole host of areas, initial decisions were made on the basis of best-guess scenarios and data available at the time.

For those that pivoted, what we have seen is a fast learning curve and reaction to quite possibly the first real taste of virtual. Generally, people pivoted in one of two-ways: 1) they simply hosted their in-person event virtually (i.e. kept the agenda, formats and content largely the same); or 2) they re-thought what it meant to now have a virtual audience (i.e. really attempted to tailor and tweak the experience for the virtual setting).

For some organizations, the pivot was a success. They beat expectations and smashed their in-person performance. For others, lessons were learned very quickly, where perhaps the virtual experience fell flat or was not as engaging as it needed to be. Either way, those that pivoted benefited from getting in and trying. To the extent that now conversations and planning for virtual take on a new level of detail and thinking.

One great example of the evolution is in the format. Heading into the pivot, a lot of virtual events relied on the webinar format. Where you have speakers, Q&A and chat, but not much else. As more and more virtual events were held, the webinar experience became ubiquitous. And now we see audiences getting webinar fatigue. From a host and planning perspective, we are now having many more discussions around how to engage the audience. How to drive networking and connections. And generally, how to move beyond the webinar format and stand out.

DGR: Physical events have always been a great way for B2B marketers to network with their peers. How can brands recreate these networking opportunities through virtual events?

Gardiner: The first thing is to realize that just because an event is virtual, it does not mean the audience cares less about this aspect of their experience. So networking is usually still a must for a virtual audience.

When we think about networking, we are often talking about three distinct experiences. The first one is finding others to connect with. What we advise our clients to do, is be purposeful in how they set up the experience to foster this connection. From a tool perspective, you will need attendees to be able to find other attendees; a way for attendees to find people by other criteria (e.g. specialty, expertise level, first-time status, role...etc.); and finally, a way to incentivize attendees to take action (i.e. gamification).

To foster peer-to-peer interactions, you need a social element to the experience. The aim here is to have attendees share knowledge and add value in ways above what was planned. One top tip we give clients is to have dedicated and focused discussion forums, and to even have proactive moderators set up to start and keep the conversations going. Then you need to drive traffic from sessions and breakouts to the discussion forums and have an ongoing discussion between the attendees.

Finally, connect with sponsors, vendors and exhibitors. The key here is not to think like the in-person event. To make this work with virtual, we want to think about how sponsors can drive meaningful conversations and get noticed. One thing we found works well is to have sponsors moderate expert discussion forums and be the expertise.

DGR: What are some ways B2B organizations can leverage existing and new content/messaging to create a fully immersive experience?

Gardiner: What we like to advise clients is to bring the audience in ahead of the “live” or event time. To make this work, you need to give the audience a reason to be there. And this is where existing and new content/messaging can play a big part.

It starts by thinking ahead of time about the theme and topics being covered. Then creating (or re-purposing) content to support the event. The important thing, which we have found works for our own experiences, is to have all channels in and out of the experience focused around the core theme.

DGR: What are the best ways to collect feedback and measure the impact of virtual event success?

Gardiner: One of the things about in-person events was the on-site team presence. This team was oftentimes an informal way to collect important, raw feedback in the moment. With virtual however, you do not have this same automatic presence.

So, one thing that we advise clients, is to plan for this. Be purposeful about having your team available and interacting within the experience the moment you have people in. This might be actually reaching out and chatting with attendees, it might be being present in discussion forums or commenting on the home feed. Whatever it is, it is important to keep the informal feedback channels open.

The advantage of virtual over in-person is the level of formal data available. Now, with virtual, you can literally see how people interact and engage within the experience. All this data is really akin to what you would expect from a website. But all this information can also be overwhelming. So, look for a tool or partner who can make sense of it all. You need to be able to distill all the data and give you signals that say who is a genuine lead or engager, and how you can continue the discussions. The real question is: How quickly can you get from an attendee action to being able to meaningfully follow-up.

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TOM GARDINER, SPOTME



Conclusion: Maintaining A Human Connection Virtually

Experts agree that the future of events will be a hybrid of in-person and digital events. No one is sure when in-person events will become possible again, so for now, digital events will likely continue the inexorable process of digital transformation in marketing. That means the time is now to take advantage of these changes and transform strategies to keep connections alive.

It all comes down to that human connection. Through engaging experiences — a combination of video, direct mail, Zoom meetings and great content — virtual events create numerous opportunities to generate awareness and build authentic relationships. This can result in more and better-quality leads than what in-person events can offer.

“People are coming together to build and rethink virtual experiences,” said Taylai. “The question we should all be asking is how to build them to fuel a human connection.”

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NEDA TAYLAI, SPLASH

Additional Resources



Splash is a platform championing the next era of event marketing by helping businesses market, measure, and scale their live event marketing programs. From beautiful event pages and customized registration forms, to email follow-up programs and easy integrations with other business systems, Splash empowers teams across the organization to design on-brand, measurable, and compliant event marketing programs that deliver exceptional experiences and inspire quick action on attendee data. See why Fortune 500 companies work with Splash to scale their event marketing programs and unleash the power of your programs.

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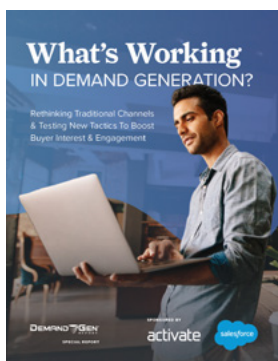
The SpotMe team is dedicated to helping audiences feel connected to brands. That's why companies like SAP, Pfizer, L'Oréal and KPMG use SpotMe's virtual event platform and hybrid event apps to get more show-ups, higher participation, and fewer drop-offs. SpotMe has over 2M users every year (and that's why they are the enterprise leader in event apps and virtual event platforms – check g2.com).

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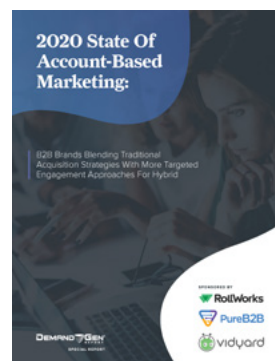
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