3 Designing the virtual and hybrid event experience

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Abstract

This case study examines the significance in the growth of virtual and hybrid events and its potential in a post-pandemic events landscape. The greatest challenge for event students and professionals is in developing a meaningful event experience for virtual and hybrid events. The teaching note challenges students and professionals to consider how the event customer journey can be mapped to capture the nuances of differing or competing consumer needs.

Subjects: Event design; virtual & hybrid events; innovation; event experience; consumer journey

Introduction

Event technology has been a cornerstone of the events industry for decades as it enables event professionals to develop and deliver high quality event experiences. The embedding of technology within events also enables innovations to practice to continuously evolve to meet growing consumer demands and expectations. Virtual events, for example, have been developing for over 40 years but the global Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the growth and development of our virtual activity across the sector. Virtual events were the only event option available due to national lockdowns and restrictions and there was an unprecedented demand for events to continue.

The pivot to the virtual world and working methods within the space of a few weeks required those working in the events and hospitality sector, and respective supply chains, to adapt, innovate and overcome. As a sector, events are well-versed in managing immediate crises, but the global pandemic required us to go beyond what was known territory and utilise our innate ability to survive. For nearly two years Covid-19 provided the driving force for the accelerated development of virtual and hybrid events, and as the events industry (among others)

emerges from the pandemic it has an opportunity to capitalise from these developments that can grow the event experience.

As a result of the pandemic, event professionals have been focused on enhancing the techniques and calibre of virtual events and the supporting platforms and evolve the commercial opportunities of virtual and hybrid events, that are ultimately designed to enhance the consumer experience. The biggest challenge, however, is that in-person event experiences are easier to manage and design, whereas virtual event experiences can be significantly more difficult to create due to the artificial nature of the event environment. As Nolan (2018, p. 136) prophetically posited "*the general consensus is that live events cannot be replaced by virtual ones and many of us would only choose to attend a virtual event if a live event were not available*". This was due to several reasons, such as pre-pandemic there was a perceived lack of confidence and skills from both event professionals and consumers in using technology for events, creating barriers for virtual and hybrid event delivery (Sox et al., 2017). For example, the atmosphere, ambience, and emotive response of a live event are difficult to replicate online (Getz & Page, 2020), and whilst technology is embedded within our normal lives there was a reluctance to use this in place of tried and tested live event experiences. There are also perceived high costs associated with developing and delivering virtual and hybrid events, as well as the socialization and networking that live events offer are hard to artificially construct online (Nolan, 2018), which continues to be a challenge for both virtual and hybrid events.

The Covid-19 pandemic, however, has resulted in a significant development in people's technological capabilities, and confidence in using technology. As a result, people have become far more adept at working virtually and utilising new technologies and platforms in order to work effectively and to stay connected socially (Ritcher, 2020). The events industry also capitalised from this crisis and rapidly developed and experimented with new innovations including: enhancing the calibre of the virtual event platforms enabling these to integrate with other applications (such as social media, networking apps, and so on); developing practitioner guidance on enhancing the delivery styles and content for virtual events (such as using interview formats for conferences and presentations); and more interactivity for the audience (through live polling, chat functions, and voting). This has resulted in an exceptional growth in virtual events and an appreciation of the benefits that both virtual and hybrid events can provide. As a result of the pandemic the global value of virtual events has increased from an estimated $18.6 billion in 2015 to $139 billion in 2022 and is anticipated to grow to over $650 billion by 2030 (Grand View Research, 2022). The question, however, is how can event professionals capitalise on virtual and hybrid events post-pandemic to create exciting event experiences?

Designing virtual event experiences

In this section, we are using a fictitious case study that is based on various prior experiences to demonstrate the challenges and opportunities of designing and delivering virtual and hybrid events.

In 2021, as Covid restrictions were progressively removed, Imogen had an opportunity to attend a conference in London. As a final year events management student, she was excited to attend an event in person and represent her university. However, a week before the conference, Imogen had a personal emergency and she was unable to travel. The conference was offering a virtual attendance option as well as the in-person attendance (hybrid delivery) and she transferred her ticket so she could still engage with the event. She was disappointed that she couldn't attend in person but pleased that the opportunity wasn't lost, reflecting Nolan's (2018) commentary about how attendees previously wouldn't choose to attend virtually.

Berridge (2007) outlined that for events there are three key premises for the designing of events and their respective experience. First, that "*all event environments are created*" (Berridge, 2007, xv) and this is the same perspective for any in-person event or virtual or hybrid event. Second, "*all experiences within the event environments are purposefully designed*" (ibid.) meaning that event professionals must have a clear plan and understanding of what they are trying to create within their event in order to have a positive impact for all participants. And last, "*all stakeholders are the direct recipients of the designed experiences*" (ibid.), which is especially critical when considering hybrid events and the different audiences, and stakeholder engagement.

Designing and creating meaningful event experiences are essential for every event. Virtual and hybrid events must similarly gide considerable attention to the event design to ensure that the experience is as rich and immersive as live in-person events. This is of particular importance for hybrid events due to the differing needs of the in-person event and virtual aspects (Fryatt et al., 2012).

A week before the conference, Imogen received her login information and set up her profile. It wasn't as straightforward as she was expecting but after a few attempts she was logged in and started to make connections using the meet-up function on the platform. She had a look at the programme of speakers and the four tracks of conference sessions and registered for the sessions she really wanted to attend. There was a lot of choice and Imogen found that there were several times where there were clashes of sessions she wanted to engage with. This situation reflects the challenges noted by Fryatt et al. (2012) and Berridge (2007) where the event design has failed to consider the virtual experience.

In facilitating the virtual or hybrid event experience it is critical to map the audience journey of the entire event. This will enable the event professional to visualize the event from the consumers' and stakeholders' perspectives and perceive how the event will be experienced and therefore how the event objectives will be fulfilled. This will highlight any potential difficulties that an attendee or stakeholder may encounter and develop appropriate solutions for these that enhance the overall experience. The complexity of hybrid events, however, means that the event professional does not only need to visualize and map both the in-person and online journeys but also how to link these two audiences and deliver equally meaningful experiences to both. To facilitate the experience design for an event, including virtual or hybrid events, there are three considerations that need to be examined: the event objectives; the space; and the people.