SUCCESSFUL

VIRTUAL

EVENTS
for PRINTERS

GIMBEL &
ASSOCIATES

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

Back in the "before days" printing companies, vendors, groups, and associations relied on live events to educate an audience, offer networking opportunities, or promote their products and services. Then came the lockdown, and we all had to adapt to a world where we did business without personal contact. Everyone was subjected to a deluge of electronic communications and it didn't take long for digital fatigue to set in, leaving many companies wondering what to do.

Nearly everyone says they'd like to get back to the good old days when they could host an open house or a user conference at their facility, conference center, or a hotel. Perhaps the time will come when those types of events become common once again, but we think virtual gatherings will be with us for a long time, even after people are once again comfortable about traveling or gathering indoors in large groups.

You should start thinking about how you can use virtual events to your advantage. That's what this book is all about. For a detailed guide about running *any* kind of event, see Gimbel & Associates eBook "Making Your Event a Success". This publication includes samples and other resources to help you plan and execute in-person or virtual events.

Our goal is to provide you with the information you need to manage your own virtual events. If you need extra help though, please contact us at info@rogergimbel.com. We can fill in the gaps you might have in your event planning and execution efforts or even participate as industry expert speakers.

ADVANTAGES OF VIRTUAL EVENTS

Virtual events have benefits to be sure. The first thing you'll notice is the cost can be a lot less than hosting an in-person event, but don't expect it to be free. It takes money to put on an event that provides value for the attendees and presents your organization in the best light.

Another benefit of virtual events is the audience size you can accommodate. You may have been forced to limit attendance to an open house at your production facility in the past, for instance, because of safety, constraints on parking, or conference room space. In a virtual environment, you can invite a much larger group, allowing you to spread the word to a wider audience. If by some chance your event doesn't attract the size audience you expected, you won't waste money on staff, food, swag, or other items associated with in-person gatherings. With virtual events, you've got a lot less at risk.

Speaker availability is also an advantage. If you intend to feature industry experts like the resources at Gimbel & Associates, scheduling these individuals for an online appearance is much easier and may be less expensive. Quality speakers are compensated similarly regardless of the setting, but you won't deal with travel costs and logistics. You might be able to book guest speakers that would have been impossible to attract otherwise.

You'll spend less time on a virtual event than you would on a similar affair that takes place at your facility or a rented venue. For an open house, for instance, companies spend lots of time coordinating with catering companies, cleaning up the entire facility, arranging for microphones, posting directional signs, assembling attendee sample packages, etc. Offsite events take even more time as you or your employees set aside regular duties to travel and work at the venue to set up for the event and take it down when finished. A virtual event still takes some time, but you'll appreciate the shortened commitment.

Without the constraints of physical space, your event can take many forms. You may schedule live presenters, recorded presentations, or both. Added features like on-demand polling are easier online, as is the distribution of recorded sessions, slide decks, or supplemental resources. Breakout rooms or social networking spaces are also possible with some virtual event management platforms.

Scheduling can be an issue at in-person events where attendees must choose among several simultaneous presentations. This isn't a problem for virtual meetings. If you record all the sessions, you can offer attendees the opportunity to watch the replays of sessions they missed. You can promote the replays for weeks after the event concludes, driving traffic to your website and enriching your lead nurturing strategies.

Weather won't be an attendance-limiting issue either. Bad weather won't keep people from venturing out of their offices, and you needn't worry about attendees taking advantage of pleasant weather that lures them away from the venue. Virtual attendees won't be stuck at airports because of weather-related flight delays, unable to make it to your event.

Data capture, tracking, follow-up, and feedback can be easier to handle with online events. You'll have access to registration information. The data may show who attended each session, which exhibits they visited, etc. Follow up can be more personalized and is a lot easier without the chores of downloading badge scans or entering information from collected business cards or hand-written sign-in sheets. Opinions about the content and the program presentation gathered from attendees via online surveys gives you good quality data that is instantly available. This information is valuable for planning future events.

Events that normally include exhibitors or partner booths can offer similar space in a virtual environment, but physical space will not limit them. You may be able to include more exhibitors and you needn't worry about unsold space.

DISADVANTAGES OF VIRTUAL EVENTS

No technology can replace the connection one can make through face-to-face conversation. No matter how well planned and executed, an online-only affair will not have the same impact. You can provide networking spaces and encourage spontaneous interaction, but it's just not going to occur like it would in a room full of people that share a common interest.

Also missing from virtual meetings are the after-parties, golf outings, or field trips that often offer the greatest networking opportunities for yourself, your staff, and the attendees. Connecting with someone at the buffet table or getting to know someone over a cup of coffee will not happen the same way online.

Technology doesn't always work as it should. What if a speaker's power goes out while they are presenting? Or their computer freezes? What if slow internet speeds cause audio and video to be out of sync? These are all problems that mostly don't concern you at an in-person meeting. When you are present in-person you can usually step in, should mishaps occur. It's not always so easy in the virtual world.

Technical difficulties also happen on the attendee side. Some may have problems logging in or cannot access the event hosting platform. The chat or networking features can be a challenge for people unfamiliar with the platform. Differences in devices, operating systems, or browsers can affect the attendee experience. Voice or video Q & A can be hit or miss. Someone always forgets to unmute their microphone (or leaves it active while everyone listens to a dog barking in the background).

Attendee distraction is another downside to hosting online events. While attending in-person, people are mostly focused on what is happening around them. They've invested the time, whether they've traveled across town or from around the globe, and they want to make the most of the experience. Someone attending your event by sitting in front of their computer in their home or at the office isn't

nearly so engaged. Emails, phone calls, visitors, meetings, or other conflicting items are going to tempt them to mentally check out of your presentations.

WHAT YOU NEED TO HOST A VIRTUAL EVENT

Many of the steps you will take to plan a virtual event are much the same as the preparations necessary for an in-person affair. How you execute those steps may be a bit different, but most times, the same basic principles apply. Review Gimbel & Associates' book "Making Your Event a Success" for tips and information that pertain to both in-person and virtual events.

EVENT GOALS

A seminar or conference is an ideal way to introduce your services and solutions to a wider audience. Success depends on a simple statement about what you want to achieve. As with any project, your goals should be specific and measurable. Vagueness will keep you from preparing adequately and ensure an unsatisfactory result.

Your goals might include items such as "show at least 3 companies how our expanded services can help them achieve their marketing goals this year", or "introduce at least 5 prospects to wide format printing applications applicable to their business".

Can you see how being explicit makes a difference? With specific goals, you can make intelligent decisions about speakers, topics, promotion, and event format. Because you have defined your desired outcome, you'll make sure the event's topics and activities support them.

Generic goals like "show customers what we do", or "get more business" suggest no roadmap to success.

Don't go overboard. Pick only three of your most important objectives as your goals and make sure your staff and everyone else involved in the project know what you are striving to achieve.

Customers have goals too. To attract them to your event, you must communicate how attending will help them achieve their objectives as well. Your promotional material can't be all about you.

TARGET AUDIENCE

The target audience is one item that can change when you switch from an in-person event to a virtual one. Take an open house for a print service provider, for example. Though you might do business with customers over a large geographic area, chances are good that only local customers would drive to your facility to attend your open house. In a virtual environment, you can expand your reach to include individuals from wherever they live.

You'll still want to define attendee characteristics though. If your event focuses on services for large enterprise customers, for instance, you'll waste your time and those of your attendees if you invite representatives from smaller organizations. Again, specificity is helpful. Depending on the program you are planning, you might invite people with certain job descriptions, such as marketing directors or CFO's.

COMMUNICATION PLAN

The manner in which you communicate details about your virtual event and when you do, it will differ from your plan for an in-person event. Any event that requires travel requires you to promote the event far in advance—ten to twelve weeks sometimes. For virtual meetings, that's too far out. For your audience, attending a virtual event doesn't require nearly the advance notice you'd use for an in-person affair.

Large, multi-day virtual events still require giving attendees plenty of notice. You want them to put your event on their calendars before those days are consumed with meetings or other activities that could keep them from attending. For shorter events and webinars, send your first notice two to three weeks ahead of the event.

Where you advertise the event depends on your target audience. As with any marketing, you'll want your message to be posted where your audience will see it. Some of these can be pushed to known contacts via email, direct mail, and text message. Be sure you're following spam and privacy laws about email messages. They vary according to geography. Other messages may appear in LinkedIn groups, or in your company and personal social media profiles. Don't forget about your staff. If they have a following that matches your audience, then have them post announcements about your event as well. If you run paid ads via search engine marketing (SEM) or remarketing, plan a campaign that promotes your event.

WHAT'S CHANGED?

In the early days of COVID, your customers and prospects gave organizations a pass as they scrambled to adapt to this alternative communication method. People forgave technical difficulties or inferior quality. They themselves were struggling with big changes that came from suddenly working from home full time. But now we expect those bugs to have been ironed out. Your audience has probably experienced well-planned and executed online events, raising the bar for any virtual event you may be planning.

Because you battle against unseen distractions on the attendee side, the content of your virtual event must be top-notch. At in-person events you might have been able to fill a vacant speaking spot with an unpolished presenter and sub-standard slides. One bad session rarely prompts in-person attendees to abandon the event. Trying the same thing at your virtual event, however, is perilous. If you lose the attention of attendees, they will tune out the presenter and get involved in something else. Once they click away, you might not get them back.

Try sending email reminders, even during the event, promoting the next session or speaker. You may lure some wanderers back to take part in more sessions.

Throwing together a bunch of speakers doesn't really make it an event. To attract attendees and keep their attention, try establishing a fairly narrow theme and choose speakers and topics that support different aspects of the theme. If you've identified your goals (see above), applicable themes should be evident. People will attend only if they can foresee the value of reserving time for your event. Be sure the session topics and speakers are aligned with your goals and theme.

Vet all your speakers and make sure they are prepared to deliver content designed to keep your audience's attention. Add interactivity like instant polls to keep audience members engaged and attentive.

The pandemic-forced shift to virtual events has been a boon for technical solutions like Zoom and Teams, but it has also accelerated growth in a relatively new industry—virtual event management as a service. New platforms meant to support larger, more complex affairs have gained ground. These services provide not only the technical backend software and resources, but also furnish platform experts. These resources help configure the environment for your needs, train facilitators, and monitor your event as it happens so they can jump in to handle problems should they occur.

Future events, even in-person ones, may be hybrids that combine the benefits of face-to-face interaction with the flexibility of virtual presenters and attendees. These meetings will require a great deal of planning, coordination, and expertise, along with platforms built to support such efforts.

WHAT ABOUT THE TECHNOLOGY?

As you're doing all the preliminary work to identify your goals, audience, and content, decide on the technology you'll need to host a professional workshop, open house, or conference. The size and complexity of your planned event will determine the features to seek in technology solutions to support your efforts.

Simple events like webinars can be adequately supported with a collection of free and low-cost software applications. You'll probably want solutions to handle registration, video delivery, and interactivity such as chat or instant polls. Make sure all the pieces are mobile-enabled. Some of your attendees will use their mobile devices.

Video conferencing platforms like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, WebinarNinja, or Webex may serve your purposes for simple events.

For more complex events, you may add virtual exhibits, social networking, attendee tracking, or appointment-setting features. Some vendors in this space include Cvent or 6Connex.

Reliable internet connections and adequate bandwidth for all presenters are essential, as are good quality microphones, lighting, and cameras. Be sure everyone can deliver their content from a quiet space where they won't be interrupted by landscapers with leaf blowers and lawn mowers, people wandering through, or other audio and visual impediments.

Consider creating a dedicated web page for your event and direct all your pre-event communications to that page. An event web page will include the date and time of the event, a registration form, an agenda, speaker biographies, and clear statements that describe the benefits of attending.

Just as with in-person events, send reminders to registrants about the upcoming event and reinforce the value of attending. Don't be too shy about sending reminders. Though it may be easier to get

more people to sign up for your event, it will take more work to get them to attend. Since this event is online, reminders by email and text message are entirely proper, but if you capture registrants' mailing addresses, you can send postcards as well. Since you may attract attendees from a wide geographic area, be aware of privacy rules concerning electronic communication.

On the day of the event, double-check the internet connection, software, and hardware are all still working properly and are ready to go. Send one last reminder email to registrants, including the link necessary to join once the event begins. Open the event shortly before the start time to give people a chance to log in and get settled. Unless you're on an extremely tight timetable, wait until a few minutes past the start time to launch your introduction. This gives late-comers a chance to hear your remarks.

Monitor the chat and Q&A functions as speakers are presenting. If attendees can't see or hear the presentations, they will use these tools to let you know about the issue. Start organizing the questions and comments coming in from the chat or Q&A streams during the presentation so you can ask them of the speaker once their presentation concludes.

AFTER THE EVENT

When the event is over, send thank-you emails to everyone who attended. Include links to the recordings, if you are making them available. You can also include a post-event survey to get attendee feedback about the content, the speakers, and the online experience. The responses will provide guidance about changes to make for your next online event.

A post-event survey will include questions such as:

- How satisfied were you with the event?
- How would you rate the quality of the content?
- What should we change for next time?
- How easy was it to log in?
- Did you experience any difficulties navigating the event or seeing the presentations?
- What was your main goal for attending this event? Did you achieve it?
- If we held a similar event in the future, would you attend?
- What topics would you like to see us cover?

Registrants who did not attend should receive a "sorry you missed it" email. Again, include links to recordings. These emails should also include a few highlights from the event. Let them know they missed something useful and interesting. This will encourage them to view the recordings and promote attendance at your next virtual event.

The first follow-up emails sent to attendees and non-attending registrants should be sent within a couple of days following the event. Prepare them in advance, make any last-minute adjustments, and send them.

Nurturing the relationship that began with a virtual event is vitally important. We suggest sending follow-up email or direct mail that contains some extra content, such as checklists, guides, or infographics relevant to presentations made at your event. You may want to include a special discount or other offer to event attendees.

A post-event webpage can be a worthwhile investment. Session highlights, photos, or video clips on a post-event webpage remind attendees of the informational value you provided. Such a page is also valuable content that allows prospective customers to learn more about your organization as they do their online research. This benefit extends for months.

Give your sales team access to any data collected about event attendees so they can make personal contact. Any information about which sessions each person watched will be helpful for sales. As they conduct their pre-call planning, salespeople can focus on particular areas of interest, prepare questions, and be ready to offer more content or resources relevant to each attendee.

Don't forget about social media. Plan campaigns to highlight topics covered at your event and ask people who attended to describe the areas they found most interesting.

The content you've developed with your virtual event is golden. Don't make the mistake of never using it again. Wait a month or two and then run another live event. This time, use a live host that introduces each presentation and then plays the recording for the audience. Repurpose the presentations in other ways as well. Every presentation supplies content for at least one blog post. This content published to your website aids in search engine optimization (SEO). Parts of recorded presentations may lend themselves to slide shows, videos, or podcasts. Questions posed by attendees can sometimes suggest entirely new pieces of content that discuss a specific item that came up in one of your sessions. Promote the existence of all this content through your website, email newsletters, printed materials, and social media.

VIRTUAL EVENTS ARE HERE TO STAY

Many organizations reluctantly adopted virtual events as a pandemic-forced substitution for previously planned in-person gatherings. Interestingly, many have seen that a well-planned and organized online event can produce satisfactory results and even present opportunities not available to promoters of large in-person affairs.

We believe virtual events will continue to be considered a viable alternative to the "only in-person" model of business events. Some organizations will attempt to re-introduce their in-person shows and conferences, but they will probably still include virtual events in their promotional/marketing/educational plans.

While many aspects of virtual events mirror those of in-person meetings, event planners must know the factors that make virtual events different. Some of these differences are positive and some are negative. Careful planning and execution can ensure you will stress the positive aspects of virtual events and minimize the negative circumstances that exist.

Dismissing online events simply because they aren't the same as traditional events is unwise. Companies are better served by embracing virtual events as tools that can help their organizations achieve their goals. The path is different from what they've done in the past with open houses, forums, or conferences that relied on attracting groups of people to meet together in a single location. But the results are worth it.

ABOUT GIMBEL & ASSOCIATES

We're an international management consulting firm working to ignite business growth through digital technologies. As an independent company, we offer clients customized consulting services to achieve their sales and marketing goals.

We provide consulting engagements in the following areas:
Business development ~ Sales strategy ~ Sales training ~ Digital implementation ~ Strategic planning
Marketing plans ~ Workflow analysis ~ Integrated marketing services ~ Variable data ~ Data analytics
Micro modeling ~ Software deployment ~ Customer workshops

With our extensive background in print production, digital, inkjet, workflow, marketing communications, training, and direct marketing, we help our clients accomplish their growth and efficiency goals.

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