

Old-Fashioned Meetings Get a Digital Upgrade

Virtual events have all the benefits of an in-person meeting without the expense and headache of actually going to one.

MARKETING Some of the worst aspects of attending a user conference or trade show include travel headaches, rubber-chicken lunches, and the never-ending pile of tote bags. Never mind having to save all those receipts and the work that stacks up while you're away.

It's no surprise that potential visitors are cutting back on their physical event attendance. A January survey of more than 10,000 companies by on-demand provider ON24 found that 42 percent of respondents expect participation in physical trade shows to be down in 2009 by as much as 50 percent; 64 percent expect to have fewer in-person sales meetings; and

60 percent expect training, management, and other internal events to be down 20 to 50 percent.

The virtual event space is taking up the slack. According to the ON24 survey, 53 percent of respondents already use virtual events and another 23 percent plan to use them in 2009.

Current market conditions have created a perfect storm for marketers to create successful virtual events, such as trade shows, user conferences, and roundtables, says Brent Arslaner, vice president of marketing for virtual event company Unisfair. First, the



economy is taking its toll on business spending. Budgets are being cut, but marketing's responsibilities for generating leads, nurturing prospects, and brand-building stay the same. Second, environmental responsibility has become a widespread business concern, and physical trade shows are not particularly environmentally friendly. Third, business users have become more comfortable using social media tools and creating relationships online, as communities like Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter grow in popularity.

When it comes down to it, however, "an event is an event is an event," Arslaner says. "Virtual events don't replace physical ones. They augment them."

Cameron Deatsch, product marketing manager and customer liaison at Jive Software, echoes the sentiment. "A majority of companies use a hybrid approach to add more value to offline conferences."

Intuit "gets its geek on"

Intuit recently added a virtual element to its event strategy to help promote its products and train customers on its accounting software. The company has always done in-person road shows, but decided an online event made practical sense. "It's really hard to take two days out of work when you run your own business," says Stephanie Morris, Intuit's online training and event manager. "People can still do their regular jobs while also attending our conference."

Five Tips for Virtual Event Planners

"Sometimes there's an assumption that because it's virtual it's easy," says Brent Arslaner, vice president of marketing at virtual event company Unisfair. "Yes, you're eliminating logistics, but you need to have an event strategy, promotion plan, content, and everything else you would have for a physical event." Here are some tips Arslaner recommends for virtual event planners.

- 1. Treat virtual events like other events.** Some companies think that an online event won't require as much preparation, then they end up scrambling. By considering it on par with physical events from the start, companies can eliminate this last-minute stress.
- 2. Be aware that interactivity and collaboration are different.** People communicate in a much more straightforward manner online, Arslaner says. There's no time for small talk at a virtual exhibit hall.
- 3. Plan a strategy beyond the specific event date.** About 70 percent of activity happens during the event timeframe, but another 30 percent happens during the on-demand time period, which averages 90 days. People may go back to get more detail, or recommend the event to others.
- 4. Proactively manage speakers.** In a virtual environment, you have to manage schedules, timing, and even speakers' technology limitations. Consider prerecording some sessions ahead of time to avert potential speaker issues.
- 5. Content is still king.** People are more willing to stay at a physical event with bad content because they're already there, but online there is no excuse to stay if the program does not meet an attendee's expectations.

Admittedly accountants are not typical early adopters when it comes to technology, Morris says. But their growing comfort level with online networking, along with the on-demand aspects and lack of travel commitment, led to the program's success.

Intuit invited its accountant customers via email, its website, and its customer newsletter to a two-day virtual conference in January featuring six live training courses, a 10-booth exhibit hall staffed with Intuit tech reps and product managers, a central resource center for marketing and presentation materials, and a networking lounge. More than 1,100 customers attended the two-day event, and the site remained live for 30 days on-demand. "It was a great experience for the attendees," Morris says. "It was what and when they wanted. People could attend on their own time."

She says the online event was more robust than last year's 30-city training tour. "We had more Intuit product reps and experts avail-

"It was what and when they wanted. People could attend on their own time."

able, and more attendees to network with each other," Morris says. The platform allowed for more individual attention through one-on-one interactions and the flexibility to make changes to materials in real time. "We were able to meet individual, immediate needs." In addition, attendees were much more candid with their feedback. "It was easier for them to be honest because they weren't face-to-face."

Intuit measured number of attendees, and monitored what questions were asked, which materials were downloaded, and how much traffic each booth had. She said attendance well exceeded expectations, and Intuit plans future events for the summer and fall. "Based on the metrics we can change booths for the next event based on interest," she says, which will enhance the experience for the user.

Her advice to other marketers? "Just because it's online doesn't mean you can do it overnight," Morris says. But she emphasizes that it can also be fun. "I had a lot of fun with it. I was getting my geek on a little bit." > Elizabeth Glagowski

Chat Your Way to Customer Service

Online chat enhances the customer experience while lowering the cost to serve.

CUSTOMER SERVICE

Online self-service tools provide great convenience, but in many instances customers still need some guidance. Companies are increasingly turning to live chat to provide that assistance in real time. Chat can take many forms—avatar, text box, or live image—and can take place via text or voice.

Companies that do embrace chat find that for sales or support using click-to-call voice chat or text-based chat reduces calls to the contact center and increases repeat Web visits. Additionally, customers whose issues are resolved via chat are much less likely to leave a site in frustration.

Live chat is not yet mainstream, but technology is improving and customer adoption is steadily increasing.

Just as each company has its own customer service strategy, there are different ways to approach live chat within the customer service realm. "It's surprising to me how many companies in the same industry have very different philosophies when it comes to chat," says Forrester vice president and principal analyst Chip Gliedman, who recently authored the report *Best Practices: Implementing Online Chat*. "In financial services and insurance, for example, chat is implemented by product or department instead of at the enterprise level.



You'd think if it works in one place it would work in another, but each group goes about serving customers differently."

Companies also vary in how they handle chat within the contact center. Some designate certain agents to switch between servicing certain agents to switch between servicing phone and chat customers; others use agents specifically for chat; while others require agents to handle calls, emails, and chat queries. Gliedman suggests having dedicated chat agents who proactively handle online issues can reduce calls and increase satisfaction.

"The great thing about chat is that agents know where on the site customers are initiating the chat from," Gliedman says. "That helps with routing the issue to the right agent.

Who's Chatting?

"When going ONLINE for researching/buying products or services in the past three months, which of the following have you done?"

	Gen Yers (18-27)	Gen Xers (28-41)	Younger Boomers (42-51)	Older Boomers (52-62)	Seniors (63+)	Total
Found and used a phone number to call a company	43%	53%	50%	58%	62%	53%
Filled out an email form on a company website	39%	39%	47%	42%	41%	42%
Found and used online chat on a company website	20%	19%	13%	10%	18%	15%
Responded to an invitation on the website to chat online	13%	10%	7%	6%	6%	8%
Requested alerts about information via cell phone	4%	3%	2%	1%	2%	2%

Source: Forrester Research