

6CONNEX



THE 6CONNEX PLAYBOOK
TO PLANNING YOUR VIRTUAL EVENT

TABLE OF CONTENTS

3	INTRODUCTION
4	REPLACE OR COMPLEMENT?
6	THE THREE PHASES OF THE VIRTUAL EVENTS ENGAGEMENT CYCLE
6	PHASE 1: THE PRE-EVENT PHASE
14	PHASE 2: THE LIVE-DAY: A STANDOUT EVENT
17	PHASE 3: ITS NOT OVER YET
20	THE WRAP UP



INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years virtual events have emerged as a new channel for companies to connect with prospects, customers, partners or employees, regardless of time and location. Virtual events have become an integral component of the corporate marketing mix, helping innovative companies to extend their brands, energize their communities, and generate a steady stream of qualified leads. Marketers are eagerly tapping into this new tool.

Virtual events take place within a highly interactive, online environment with rich content, multiple locations, live chat rooms, and webcast sessions, all accessible to an audience once they have provided basic registration information. Often the look and feel of these spaces borrow from physical events, setting the stage for intuitive and smooth navigation. Layered on top of the design are a variety of actions, ranging from 1:1 or public chat to social channel interaction to content consumption to direct calls-to-action.

Because they can track every click by a potential prospect to highlight specific interests, virtual events can generate highly qualified leads for the organizers, allowing them new avenues to reach a broader audience. The audience wins by quick and easy access to company content, product experts and a peer community, from the comfort of anywhere, on any device.

You can define your event type by its scope, size, and objectives. Common categories include: product launch, job fair, user conference, earnings calls, town hall meetings, pharmaceutical dinner meetings, etc. But a product launch in one company may look different in another, and event variables such as speakers, sessions and content will ultimately define your event.

If you're thinking about "going virtual" for the first time you're probably also wondering where to start. This virtual event playbook is designed to help guide you towards success with suggestions and tips across all types of virtual events, regardless of industry or use case.



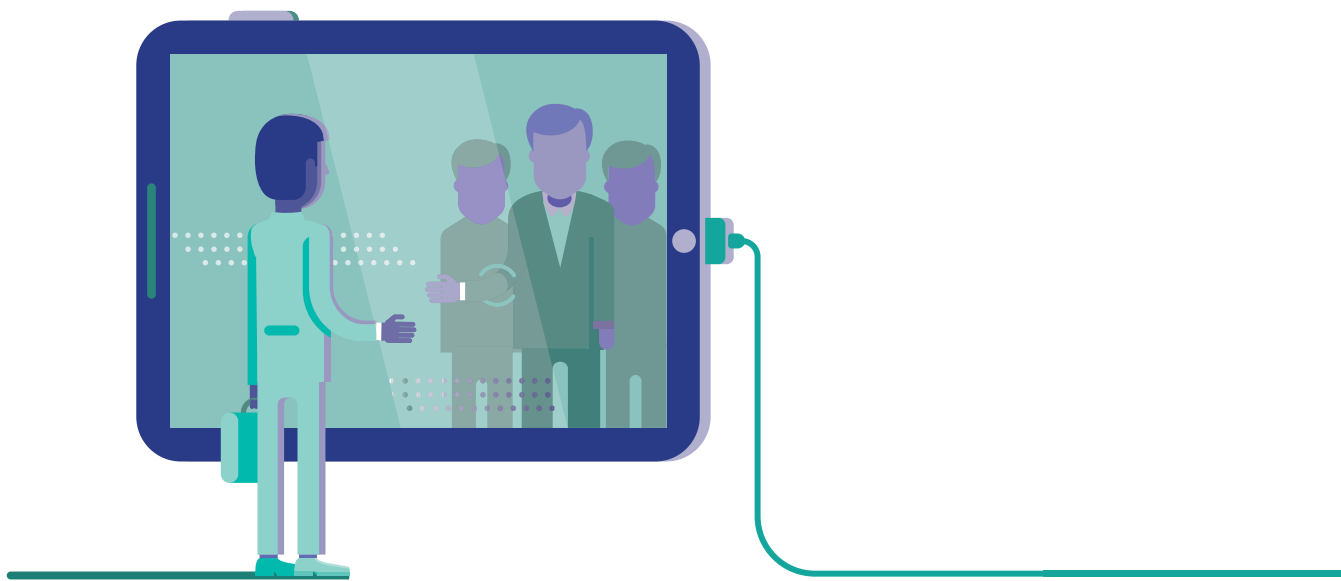
REPLACE OR COMPLEMENT?

VIRTUAL EVENTS CAN COMPLEMENT PHYSICAL EVENTS

Many companies today have implemented virtual events as part of their marketing strategy to extend the reach of their physical events. Known as “hybrid events,” these add spice as another marketing tool in your overall campaign for the physical event.

One hybrid event strategy is to hold your physical and virtual events simultaneously. When you develop the project timeline, consider both the physical and virtual event milestones that culminate at the final event day (or days). Incorporating the look-and-feel, branding and physical location imagery into the virtual environment will make virtual attendees feel part of the physical.

Another hybrid event strategy is to capture key content from the physical event and use it for a separate virtual-only event at a later time. This path is great for allowing physical event attendees to revisit sessions they enjoyed, or to view sessions and content they missed due to a packed agenda. It also provides a great way to leverage all that great content to reach a whole new audience who was unable to make it to the physical event.





REPLACING THE PHYSICAL WITH THE VIRTUAL

While some companies use virtual events to complement or supplement their physical shows, others may opt to drop the physical event entirely. Sometimes companies discard their physical event after a virtual event's success; others add virtual events for cost or resource limitations.

Many companies are discovering that with tighter travel budgets and a globally dispersed audience, physical events are either not practical or have been steadily losing ROI. There will always be a place for mega events like Dreamforce and Oracle World but smaller shows with smaller budgets are having a harder time getting attendees to take off a few days of work, let alone getting budget approval for conference registration and travel costs. And there are 100s of physical shows for them to choose from.

Going virtual can be a cost-effective and efficient way to get your message across to a global audience who never has to leave their office. Keep in mind, though, replacing a physical event entirely with a virtual one changes the dynamics of your audience participation, content development and marketing strategy.

THE THREE PHASES OF THE VIRTUAL EVENTS ENGAGEMENT CYCLE

Much like a band getting ready to go on a world tour, you need a plan to produce a virtual event. This plan should encompass the three phases of the virtual engagement cycle: Pre-event, live-day and post-event. The following summary outlines best practices within each stage.

PHASE 1: THE PRE-EVENT PHASE

The pre-event phase is critical to your success. Conceptualizing a theme, developing a timeline and collecting all the elements (content, speakers, chat rooms, etc.) lay the groundwork for the virtual event creation process. As you begin, consider these fundamental questions:

- What are the objectives of this event? Are you creating a virtual event to drive leads, generate brand awareness or more? Is your virtual show set up for a product launch, recruitment fair or an internal training session?
- What metrics will you use to measure the results or define success? (Registrants, attendees, leads generated, average time in virtual environment, downloads, chat interactions, etc.)
- Who is your target audience? Is there more than one?
- Will you have sponsors/partners as part of the event—if so, how many? What will your sponsorship packages look like, and how much will charge for them?
- Will this event be internal (employees-only) or external (open to prospects, customers, and vendors)?
- Will you charge for the event or is the attendance free?
- What do you want people to take away from attending the virtual event?

Once you have answered these questions you can begin to identify content, staff and partners to produce the event. Speakers, webcast presentations, subject matter, material uploaded in the environment, chat topics displayed in the lounge and partners involved will all contribute to the strategy—and success—of your event.

PICK YOUR PLATFORM PROVIDER

The key to your virtual event success is finding an experienced platform provider. The platform must be easy to use for attendees, fast to build for the organizer, offer multilanguage features for global events, and deliver exceptional metrics for measuring ROI. Most importantly, the technology must be rock-solid, hosted in the cloud to manage scale, highly secure and built with HTML5 for accessibility on any browser and any device. Finally, you'll want best practices and top-notch project management. Your provider's team should have solid experience to support you throughout the event creation process, as well as following the live event.

THINK MOBILE

iOS and Android smartphones and tablets are increasingly important to your users—how does your platform provider support these devices? You certainly don't want to build a separate environment for your mobile users—ask whether that's required. Given the visual elements of a virtual environment, ask whether the display looks similar on mobile and desktop devices. Are live webcasts supported on mobile devices? Are there compatibility issues with running legacy webcasts? You need to engage mobile users.



CONSIDER YOUR ROI

Would you like to predict the ROI of your virtual event? Or compare costs of creating a virtual vs. physical event? Look for cost savings in virtual events such as reduced travel costs, no physical booth to ship, lower to zero per diem expense for virtual events, etc.

CREATE OUTSTANDING CONTENT

In online events, content is still king. Select interesting speakers, engaging subjects, and timely themes that resonate with your audience. Invite industry experts, customers, and preferably at least one high-profile speaker who can draw a crowd. Limit each webcast session to 20 minutes or less; it's better to have multiple shorter sessions than a few long ones as the information is more consumable for an online experience, not to mention people on mobile devices aren't likely to stick around for an hour-long session. When developing the program agenda, remember to leave time between sessions for attendees to network, collaborate or simply peruse the virtual environment.



GENERATE YOUR AUDIENCE

Promoting your event early should beef up registration. Here are some ideas to get you started. Make sure registration is easy no matter what device your registrant is using.

- Execute an integrated campaign using email, social media, online advertising, e-newsletters, contests and press releases. Work with partners for promotional opportunities. Depending on your promotion period, send out at least two to three invitation emails for your event.
- Create a clean, mobile-friendly registration site to capture attendee details. Allow participants to register with their social media credentials (Facebook, LinkedIn or Google+ and include calendar reminders for registrants. Consider combining your registration with an industry poll, survey, or offer a prize incentive.
- Implement a social media strategy using tools such as LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook to promote your event. Create a Facebook event and invite all your fans, find LinkedIn groups relevant to your audience, and schedule regular tweets to create a cadence of interest before the event. Create a #hashtag for your event so people can find and reference it as they tweet.
- Send reminders to all registrants a minimum of one week before, one day before and the day of the event.
- As with any marketing program, you'll want to track the progress of different campaigns/marketing vehicles by embedding a "promo code" to the event URL link. This way, you can monitor the progress and gauge the effectiveness of each vehicle.

For most marketing-oriented virtual events, start planning at least 90 days before the event date, and promote your event at least 60 days out.

OFFER SPONSORSHIP PACKAGES

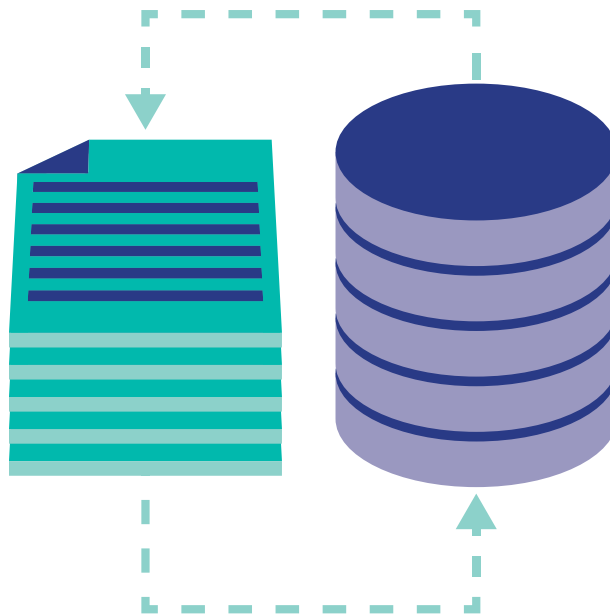
Sponsorships provide the organizer an excellent way to defray event costs or generate revenue. Sell sponsorship packages (e.g. Platinum, Gold, Silver) with varying investment levels to partners or vendors. Allow partners to host an entire webcast session, sponsor a hall, or sponsor a prize giveaway. Once signed up, include your partners as part of your integrated event promotion—mentions and advertising in emails, e-newsletters, banner ads and registration page.

GET SPONSORS TO HELP WITH RECRUITING ATTENDEES

As organizer, create an incentive for your event sponsors to help promote the event and draw more audience. For example, send your sponsors the event registration page with a tracking code embedded. Those who generate the most registrants through their promotion efforts receive a discount on their sponsorship, more advertising opportunities throughout the event, or some other barter arrangement.

MAKE IT REAL

To make their virtual user conference resemble a physical event, many companies send out “Welcome Packages” to all registrants with t-shirts, coffee mugs and trade show collateral.





ALLAY THEIR FEARS

If your registrants are new to virtual events, provide them with an Attendee Guide early in the promotional period. For example, including the guide as part of your email campaign gives your audience a chance to review it and know what to expect during a virtual event.

PRE-STUFF THE BAG BUT DON'T OVERLOAD THE BOOTH

As the event organizer, pre-populate the virtual briefcase in the environment with one to three pieces of your most relevant collateral: white paper, video, data sheet or news link. Alternatively, you can allow a major event sponsor to pre-populate their content as part of their “premium” sponsorship. Booths should include relevant and timely content, of varying types for attendee interest. Be sure that each booth content area has at least 3 pieces of content, but don't overload the booths with too many items for attendees to consume. For sponsors, make sure their most important content appears in the top view of the kiosk interface; be aware of which content is revealed and which is hidden from an attendee's view without scrolling.

MAKE YOUR CREATIVE WORK FOR YOU

If your company lacks the creative resources needed to expertly brand your virtual event, seek an outside contractor, third-party marketing vendor, or agency. A clear creative vision for your virtual event elevates the user experience.

Here are some key elements to remember:

- Carry a consistent look-and-feel (theme) throughout all elements of your virtual event, including the pre-event promotion/messaging as well as post-event follow-up.
- Create a stylized, event-specific logo and incorporate your company's branding; do not hyperlink the event logo to ensure attendees remain inside your virtual event once logged in.
- Create a virtual host for the main hall or booth with a two-minute welcome message to enhance the user experience. Welcome messages could be a short introduction to what the event is about, or "instructional" on where to locate collateral, view webcasts, etc.
- Do a quick inventory of your company's creative assets by searching for existing stock images, photos, graphics, logos, etc. This can save time and money in creating your virtual environment.
- Use your corporate branding guide (if available) as a reference during the environment creation process.

SPEAKERS HELP OUT

Webcast speakers can do their part to help facilitate live-day activities by pre-recording "housekeeping" announcements as part of their presentations for the audience. They should mention key functionality of the webcast interface such as how to use the Q&A function, respond to polls, etc.





LAST-MINUTE PROMOTIONS REALLY WORK

Launch an email campaign the day before and even the day of the event. Last-minute campaigning to your target audience can draw additional registration as people may have forgotten your previous emails, or their schedules may have changed and they can now attend. Many companies find that an email sent right before the live event day generates the highest registration.

PLAN FOR ON-DEMAND

During the project scoping phase, determine the length of your event's on-demand period, the time after the event when content is still available in the virtual environment. Think of this as "anytime browsing for new and returning attendees. The on-demand time will serve as a lead generation mechanism that can continuously produce leads and engage customers for your company.

PHASE 2: THE LIVE-DAY: A STANDOUT EVENT

Live-day attendance of your virtual event ranges from 30-50% of the registration number, depending on program type and audience. While there is no magic bullet to guarantee a successful virtual event, you do have a captive audience in a controlled environment. This section explores some best practices on how to take advantage of live-day activities.

ANIMATE YOUR EVENT

Leverage advertising panels, logo banners, environment-wide announcements, media walls (to categorize and display content visually against a “wall”) and green-screen videos of virtual hosts to generate a feeling of “live” excitement. Have company leadership serve as the virtual host welcoming attendees. Swap out the standard booth rep images for those of your actual staff. Launch real-time, environment-wide announcements throughout the day to inform (i.e., scheduled webcasts), engage (i.e., last chance to enter contest), or drive attendees to different locations (i.e., moderated chat in the networking lounge).

POLLING POWER

Polls help presenters learn about the audience so they can tailor their presentations; for attendees, these questions make the session interactive and more engaging. Make sure you launch the first poll early in the presentation. Polls can breathe life in your webcasts, but only if you capture the audience’s attention quickly to get your point across or get real-time feedback. Share results within the webcast for greater attendee engagement, and ask multiple questions. Demographic questions about visitors help you understand the audience.

SOCIAL MEDIA PLAY INSIDE

Activate the LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook features within your virtual environment. This allows attendees to share thoughts and insights live with their communities in real-time. Social media creates and extends buzz inside and outside your event and may produce viral registrants during the live day. Run a contest challenging attendees to use social media tools to create “buzz” during the live day. As an example, offer an incentive to the top ten attendees who create the most buzz by using LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook.



SOCIAL MEDIA MANAGER

Dedicate a person on your team to manage and monitor social media tools: send out tweets, post announcements on Facebook, update your company LinkedIn profile, and blog about the event on external sites. Put this person in charge of delivering buzz, creating excitement, and drawing additional audience to the event.

PRIZE GIVEAWAYS, CONTESTS, AND CHALLENGES

Incent attendees to compete in a contest, challenge or prize giveaway during your event. Include the incentive as part of your pre-event promotional campaign.

Here are some ideas:

- Invite attendees to view a sponsored webcast, then go directly to the sponsoring vendor's booth afterwards to answer questions about the webcast to claim a prize.
- Keep the challenges simple to understand, fun to do and scattered throughout the live day.
- Create a "Prize Booth" for the event and activate the "prize" tab in the environment to prominently display giveaways.
- Promote a "scavenger hunt" in which attendees need to visit various locations within the environment (to find an item or answer a question), then submit their answers for a drawing.
- Make sure to consult with your company's legal department for any rules/regulations to prize giveaways, contests, etc.

SMART STAFFING

Ensure your booth staff is trained and prepared to answer a multitude of questions, ranging from program agenda, to sponsor and booth locations, to product information. Create a Frequently Asked Questions or "cheat sheet" document for the day's event so your staff has quick access to important or common questions. Staff your booth appropriately; more booth reps for larger events and fewer for smaller. Also consider staffing other locations such as the networking lounge to moderate discussions between attendees.



INVOLVE THE AUDIENCE

Invite participation during webcasts through questions and/or comments via the Q&A feature. Have a list of seed questions ready for speakers during the live Q/A session. This way, your speakers can quickly familiarize themselves with the Q&A process and feel more comfortable as questions come in. Additionally, your prepared questions can trigger follow-on questions from an otherwise shy or non-active audience.

SCHEDULE OTHER ACTIVITIES

Launch a live-day poll or survey to spawn greater engagement within your virtual event. Publish the results in real-time to keep the buzz going. Also, schedule chats or forums in the networking lounge or at a major booth sponsor to promote networking. Encourage your speakers to be available for one-on-one or group chats after their webcast sessions. Promote a “VIP” lounge chat or discussion. The idea is to provide a sense of continuous activity for the attendee and encourage participation wherever possible.

MISSION CONTROL

If all your booth staff members are physically located in one location on the live day, create a “war room.” In a large conference room, your staff members can assist each other with questions/issues, and build a sense of excitement for the event. Alternatively they can use a web conference, or other shared communication to stay in close contact throughout the course of the event day.

Similar to physical events, many elements during the live-day virtual event can be unpredictable. With virtual events, however, you have the flexibility to control and act swiftly when issues arise. You must have immediate access to your key team members to address or escalate issues. Keep all lines of communication open, regularly monitor all locations in your environment, and prepare a contingency plan with your staff before the live day to ensure program success.

PHASE 3: ITS NOT OVER YET

You’ll be hearing the tunes from your event long after the event is over, in the form of leads, follow-up and, ideally, sales. The post-event period is usually characterized by a sense of achievement, satisfaction and sometimes relief for the organizer. Don’t give in to that – at least not yet. While engaging with the audience is important during the event, you now have to look for ways to continue the conversation. Below are key steps after your event concludes.

COLLECT AND INSPECT

As the organizer you have the ability to track attendee data throughout the virtual event. You’ll capture detailed attendee activity, with reports on the collateral they’ve downloaded, webcasts they’ve viewed, and people they’ve networked with. Rank, categorize and distribute these leads internally. But act quickly: aggregate the data the day or so after the event, and make it available to your sales team right away.

FOLLOW-UP MATTERS

As earlier mentioned, on average 30-50% of registrants attend the live-day virtual event. Your follow-up plan must include getting the rest to attend the event during the on-demand or “anytime” period.

To achieve this goal, you should:

- Send out both a “thank you” and a “sorry we’ve missed you” email a day or two after the event; summarize key findings and outcomes from the event. Write as though you’re a reporter for an industry trade publication.
- Run another integrated campaign to promote your on-demand event using targeted email, online advertising, SEM and other vehicles after a few weeks or month.
- Have your inside sales team follow-up on attendee questions that were not answered during the live Q/A portion of the webcasts.
- Continue the dialogue about the event on your company blog, Twitter or other social media sites; encourage attendees to get involved by asking questions and initiating conversation.

SURVEYS SAY A LOT

Smart reporting may capture attendee activities, but not necessarily their feelings about the event. Within 1–2 weeks after the event date, launch a short survey to capture this information. Keep the survey friendly and to the point. Create a separate survey for event sponsors or exhibitors. Use survey data to augment or enhance your next virtual event. For event better results, consider including the survey in the thank you email.



ANALYZE CAREFULLY

Conduct a post-event meeting with your team within a week after the virtual event ends. Identify metrics, challenges, trends and lessons learned while your memory is fresh. Collect feedback from others. Capture any positive customer feedback or testimonials, and relay them to your marketing or sales team as marketing ammunition. Set up your ROI metrics and wait for at least one sales cycle before calculating your event ROI. Capture this information in a document and use it as a guide for future events.

PURSUE PERPETUAL ENGAGEMENT

When you switch from live to on-demand, the event remains in the public eye for as long as you wish. Refresh content periodically to extend your on-demand period. New material may draw additional attendees, energize your space and keep your brand relevant.

CONTINUE TO PROMOTE

A clever way to promote your on-demand event is to record a session strictly dedicated to answering all the unanswered questions during the live Q/A sessions of your webcasts. This “answer the-leftover-

questions session” can then be placed as an on-demand webcast within the conference hall. Promote this session with a follow-up email or other marketing campaign to all registrants and attendees alike.



THE WRAP-UP

As you navigate through the virtual event creation process, one thing is clear: Virtual events may be easier to attend than physical events, but still require a well thought strategy and project plan. The 'heavy lifting' for virtual events can be hidden in the details—from content development to sponsor recruitment; from audience generation to post-event follow-through.

Leveraging the power of a virtual event platform requires a clear vision of the event objective, strategy and execution. As one experienced virtual event marketer notes: "Virtual events are not the same as virtual worlds...(they) are a rich, interactive, and multi-faceted marketing tool that are as complex and daunting as they are valuable." The payoff can be huge. A virtual event allows you to capture rich marketing information that is unmatched by any other marketing vehicle.

Today, the use of virtual event technology is increasing. Virtual event practitioners, vendors, and attendees alike enjoy the added benefits that come with platform enhancements. But how you leverage it for brand extension, customer outreach or thought leadership speaks directly to your company's long-term marketing goals, which should note the value of a long-term virtual engagement strategy.

Companies experienced with virtual events are phasing out one-time, episodic events in their portfolio and moving to always-on virtual engagement centers where they can host any number of events in any number of different venues whenever they please. This practice, adopted by CA, Hootsuite and Intuit among others, reduces the workload and provides their customers, partners and vendors a persistent platform to engage and network anywhere and anytime. And for your company this means reaching a wider audience, which is definitely a recipe for success.

For more information, go to www.6connex.com

