

# VIRTUAL EXPERIENCES

AN INDUSTRY WHITE PAPER  
DISCUSSING THE EMERGING  
REALM OF VIRTUAL EVENTS  
AND TRADE SHOWS

## THE AGE OF VIRTUAL EVENTS HAS ARRIVED

- Digital events have officially arrived—used for standalone experiences and live event amplification

A down economy paralyzing travel budgets and threatening event and trade show attendance. A marketing community in need of larger audiences and more leads. Event professionals under fire to produce critical ROI at all costs. Budgets hacked down to a fraction of what they were in previous years.

The list of forces accelerating the rapid adoption of virtual events is getting longer every day. What merely 12 months ago was considered an option is quickly nearing requisite status as thousands of marketers around the world move to bend the learning curve and understand the value of producing (and participating in) virtual events and trade shows—while also leveraging the Internet to amplify on-the-ground live experiences. A recent survey of 10,000 executives by On24 found that 76 percent had begun, or would start using, virtual events to complement—or replace—physical events. “This is not a trend,” says Marybeth Hall, a senior vp with event agency Sparks (sparksonline.com). “This is a permanent addition to the event marketing toolbox.”

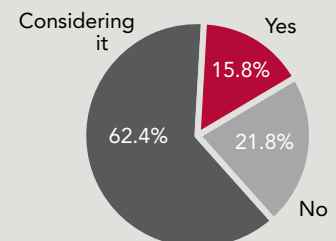
Indeed, the power of the digital realm is primed for substantial growth within the event marketing industry, as brand marketers integrate digital elements into their live portfolios. The two strategic roles of virtual:

- **Standalone Virtual.** The true virtual boom is coming from standalone digital events, seminars, conferences and trade shows (see round-up, pg. 2). Microsoft, one of the most aggressive entrants into the use of digital events and trade shows, is producing online programs around the world with plans to increase frequency. Those that are embracing digital say attendee numbers are impressive, costs are low, and reach and length-of-conversation are often greater than the levels produced at live events. And lead-generation numbers, the modern-day marketer’s ultimate metric, have in some cases gone through the roof, as much as 10 times those of traditional live initiatives.
- **Live Event Amplification.** Custom web sites are allowing marketers to use live events and trade shows as “the middle” of an engagement sequence, leveraging the Internet to start conversations before a live experience and continuing them long after the event has ended. Brands that use event-specific sites report they’ve extended reach and length of conversation by as much as ten times. And social media elements, from Twitter to Flickr, are playing a larger role in allowing Corporate America to connect with audiences before, during and after events. Example: Sony’s [sony.com/ces](http://sony.com/ces) portal took its exhibit at the nation’s largest trade show online, with a flash-based site broadcasting exhibit activities, product information and live video postings, as well as exhibit-to-web news, a booth overview and a real-time schedule.

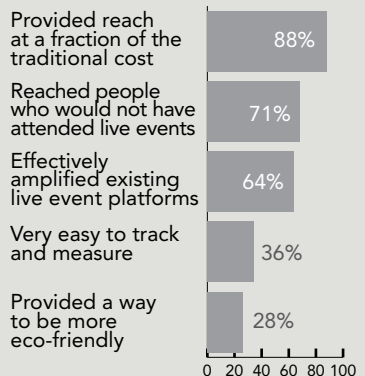
*“There could be as many as 100,000 annual virtual events by 2011, as digital events and trade shows grow in size and scale around the world.”*

## THE GROWING POWER OF VIRTUAL EVENTS

Has your company leveraged virtual events as a tool for connecting with audiences?

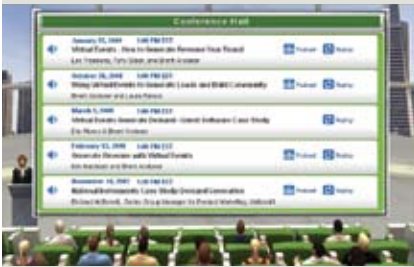


If yes, what were the top 5 benefits (select all that apply)?



Source: Survey of brand marketers by Event Marketer magazine.

*“Virtual events can cost 50-80% less than physical programs.”*



Images provided by Unisfair

# PICK YOUR FLAVOR

## ■ A rundown of virtual event types

IBM is holding virtual seminars. AMD is all about digital expos. Peugeot stages an online p.r. launch. The mix of virtual events being created and executed is pretty representative of the live event marketing types.

The top six types:

**1 Virtual Expos.** Proprietary expos you build and control. Typically includes a digital expo hall at which partners set-up virtual booths. Many have conference programs that run in tandem with the live expo hall. Most are live, and then archived for months. Cisco offers a virtual trade show experience as part of its Cisco Live event. Attendees who can't make it to the show can hop online while the show is happening, and both on-site and online-only attendees can access the site year-round to view the 300 sessions from the event on-demand.

"We try to make sure our online event piece has connections to the other parts of the integrated marketing plan," says Kelly Graham, Cisco's manager of corporate online events and virtual conferences.

**2 Virtual Exhibits.** Taking space as an exhibitor at a virtual expo. Now comes with a ton of options spanning booth size, look and feel and content and presentation offerings. Exhibiting at a digital trade show allows companies to meet prospects (in many cases, around the world) and have conversations without the costs of traditional exhibiting.

**3 Digital B-to-E.** Business-to-employee events, typically used to train sales forces or new employees. Often archived, but can be used for "live training." Features speakers, presentations, and audience interaction elements. Red Hat is hosting an online event around its JBoss Java-based middleware products. The JBoss Virtual Experience, as it's called, is a web-based conference through which executives and engineers give keynote speeches and host training sessions, just as they would at a regular event

**4 Virtual Conferences/Seminars.** Full-blown educational seminars, staged as one-day or multi-day events are all the rage these days. Can be free or paid-registration content offerings, and most frequently feature a mix of education, networking and "casual meet and greets" among attendees. AutoDesk used a virtual conference to augment a live road show. The event attracted 3,500 online attendees who spent two hours on average within the event, downloaded 36,000 files and 3,300 product reviews (and saved 895 tons of CO2 by not getting in their cars and driving to an event).

**5 P.R. Events.** Press events just got some extra reach, thanks to digital. Media events can be staged online for a variety of purposes, from product launches to investor presentations to corporate announcements. Allows media outlets and journalists to tune in from wherever they are.

**6 B-to-C Virtual Worlds.** Lest you think virtual events are strictly for the world of b-to-b events, consumer experiences are taking place, more and more, online. At a time when marketers are chasing consumers wherever they are, brands are pushing into digital quickly. Pontiac has held concerts on Second Life, Coca-Cola staged a Coke Zero Virtual Dorm Room online, and Burger King created a "virtual backstage" tied to its Jonas Brothers concert sponsorship.

## CASE STUDY

# INTERNAL DIGITAL EVENTS

## ■ KPMG bets on virtual and wins: The GO story

When professional services firm KPMG wanted to get the word out about a new global opportunities corporate initiative (dubbed GO) internally, virtual proved to be the best platform: With employees based in 140 cities across the globe, doing face-to-face events to promote internal messaging is no longer logistically feasible for the company.

The brand executed the b-to-e initiative digitally. The event was designed to encourage employees to check out the GO program and then allow attendees to interact with colleagues from around the world in one place. Across the virtual event, attendees could speak to other employees from different countries, download information, have chats and find out more about internal opportunities. (Technology platform: Unisfair.) "It was a huge success," says Paloma Alos, KPMG's director-global marketing and communications. "In no other way could we have gotten 3,200 people together from 104 different countries to talk about international opportunities in that way."

To promote GO, the company sent out e-communications to employees with a quick "how-to video" to give them a feel for the virtual platform before the day of the event. Reminders in the days and weeks leading up to the event ensured that it remained top-of-mind. The feedback from the event was so positive that the brand has since followed it up with an external effort designed to educate consumers about job opportunities within the company.

### GO STAT REPORT

- 5,000.** Number of people registered
- 3,200.** Number of people who attended event
- 65 Percent.** Overall turnout rate
- 104.** Countries represented by attendees
- 7,700.** Pieces of information downloaded
- 2,000.** Combined approximate number of private messages and chats

Three tips from KPMG's Paloma Alos:

**1 Increase Your Learning Curve.** Make sure that "you really understand virtual, because you're going to have to sell it into the rest of the organization."

**2 Have Enough People to Manage the Virtual Event.** "And make sure that they are fully trained to staff the event. With our digital event, 12 countries had booths, and we had 40 or so people from those countries who would be online to talk to visitors. For the external job fair, we have 160 KPMG people who were trained to use the platform. If you're going to generate a lot of interest, you have to have enough people trained and able to communicate at the event."

**3 Spread the Word.** "Promote it as fully as you can by giving people an incentive to take part and offer some reassurance about what the event is all about and how easy it is to use," she says.

## THE PERFECT STORM

### ■ Virtual events offer marketers total targetability and absolute measurability

The virtual realm is the yin to the live event yang, offering up high relevance, extended lead-generation and in many cases, longer actual engagements. The five benefits:

**1 Relevance.** Unlike traditional events that often draw a mix of buyers and non-buyers, virtual events typically draw an unmatched level of qualified buyers. Why else would somebody log into a web site for four hours unless they're interested?

**2 Length of Engagement.** Again, most average stays at digital events are as much as 10 times those of live visits. Some virtual events have clocked attendee stays in excess of six hours.

**3 Measurable.** In the virtual realm, there is no guessing. Marketers know exactly who registered, attended, who they are, how long they stayed, what

information they asked for and whether they turned into a lead of sale. ROI is absolute.

**4 Longer Lead Lifespan.** Virtual events allow for a longer opportunity for lead-generation. Last year, a research study of 200 digital events found virtual events each attracted 3,100 registrants and 1,587 attendees. During the live time period, 52 percent of registrants showed up. But with virtual events, leads don't stop with the conclusion of the event. On average, 25-30 percent of leads came in after the close of the live time period.

**5 Local-to-Global.** Seminars, conferences and trade shows can be tweaked to appear in local languages around the world simultaneously. This represents a huge opportunity for event managers who for years have had to execute programs one by one, geo by geo.

# THE ROAD INTO VIRTUAL

■ A few minutes with HP event marketing manager Marie Cottrell



**You are part of the corporate events team, yet your focus is virtual events. Would you explain the synergies between virtual and live events?** At HP, we believe that a virtual event provides all the benefits of a physical

event, whether it's an event or a tradeshow—with the ability to accommodate tens of thousands attendees. We deliver that experience through an online 3D application where attendees self-navigate through the experience. They view keynote speeches, attend webinars, participate in social networking activities. All the benefits of a physical event are captured within the virtual event, so it's a natural extension of what we do.

**What types of virtual events are you doing?** We are conducting a variety of types of events. We do customer meetings; external events; partner events; internal meetings, such as sales, product or marketing training; award ceremonies; and leadership meetings. The life of a virtual event or the capability of a virtual event is exactly the same as executing [an event] in the physical space.

**In some instances, are virtual events replacing live events?** HP constantly looks at evaluating all our programs to see what makes sense, where and for what objective. In some instances, and where it makes sense, yes we are using virtual events to replace live events.

**Tell us about your platform.** We are taking a very different tact on how we execute virtual events. We have developed a fully branded virtual events platform. It's designed to bring innovative, technologically advanced and visually engaging virtual experiences to market. And we do that with extraordinary creativity and technology. The 3D event platform is designed to improve online business-to-business communications while accelerating our customers through the sales cycle, and deepening our relationships with our customers. We encourage [participants] to participate in social networking, which—as you may know—is a key part of our marketing mix. It accelerates our time to market and it allows us to achieve a higher marketing return on our investment while expanding our global reach.

**What does a HP online event look like to an attendee?** An HP online event is a 3D representation of a space. It could be a convention space or an event meeting space, there are also auditoriums where speeches are presented. And it's all 3D and motion graphics. There are quite a few ways through which we deliver content to our attendees. We do that through presentations, keynotes, webinars—whether they're live or on-demand. We also have the ability to allow our users to go to our event experience and easily digest content that we have placed there—just as you would at a physical event. Then they're able to download that content into a zip file or onto their desktop as a takeaway. They have an event bag within the virtual event that they can download all their takeaways into. When they've completed their experience, they're able to take that with them, just like they would at a physical event.

**How do you keep your virtual initiatives integrated with everything else you're doing?** I think that is one of the things that is unique to HP. The manner in which we're building this virtual event platform—because it's repeatable and works with any number of attendees—enables all of our global marketing teams to use this platform. Thus, we maintain a very consistent look and feel for our customers to present a consistent environment for our customers and our partners as well.

**What kind of feedback are you getting from the attendees?** We're getting amazing feedback. People really enjoy the platform. They've found it very user-friendly. It's easy to navigate. All the content that they need is there. And unlike a physical event, they're able to access the event on their own time. We've had nothing but positive feedback on our platform and the user experience, which is extremely important to us.

**What results are you generating?** We're seeing significant ROI for our virtual events. We're seeing significant increases in the number of attendees. We're seeing a five-time increase on our qualified leads. For example, one case study shows the comparison between a physical and live event where our total ROI increased from 15-to-1 to 51-to-1, so it's very significant. Also we've seen a significant increase in our lead captures.

**So what is your next step?** Customers will continue to see the platform evolving into an even more highly interactive place to visit.

# LEVERAGING WEBCASTS

■ Webcasts are evolving from one-way presentations to full-blown interactions

Webinars have become a successful and highly affordable platform for providing information or education to audiences. But clutter is on the rise and many targets are inundated with offers of live or downloadable webcasts. How to stand out from the rest? Make the content event-worthy and allow for audience interaction.

Manufacturer Pfaff, for example, recently used a webcast to provide product information and overviews to customers, employees and dealers. When the company launched its new Creative Vision product line at a convention in Dallas, non-attendees could tune into a 40-minute webcast that allowed them to view the fashion show held at the event and learn more about the merchandise. A host guided attendees through the features of the new product. "It was a way for people to amplify the experience," says Jill Hepp, marketing director at Pfaff.

Three ways to shape up your own webcasts:

**1 Offer Interactives.** A PowerPoint with commentary doesn't cut it. Give attendees the opportunity to participate with a Q&A session at the end of the webcast (and allot time for more than one or two questions). Cisco gives attendees several ways to interact during webinars—they can send questions in and watch as the answers are texted back to the audience, and the brand often does interactive polling to see where viewers stand on important issues and topics.

**2 Plan, Plan, Plan.** Give your webinars the live event treatment. Cisco puts on 150 webcasts a year, and each one typically has a 10-week planning cycle, which includes time for the brand to select speakers, and prep and brief them for the big event.

**3 Promotion.** The timetable for promoting webcasts can be tricky. If you send out notice too early, recipients might forget. Too late, and they've made other plans. Experts say marketers should send out the first communication a couple of weeks in advance of the event, and then send one or two repeat notices in the days leading up to the event. Other social networking tools—think Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn—serve as organic ways to get the word out to the target without being too in-your-face with constant messaging and reminders.



## VIRTUAL TRADE SHOWS BY THE NUMBERS

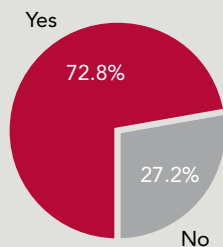
- Average live duration of a virtual event: **1.5 days**
- Average archived days: **90**
- Average registration: **3,102**
- Average attendance: **1,587**
- Show-Up Rate: **52%**
- Average number of exhibitor booths: **15**
- Leads generated, per booth: **348**
- Conference sessions: **5 per day**
- Average attendee event time: **2 hours 31 minutes**
- Average event sections/areas visited: **16**
- Average attendee interactions: **13**
- Average downloads per attendee: **5**
- U.S. attendees: **58%**
- International attendees: **42%**

Source: Unisfair

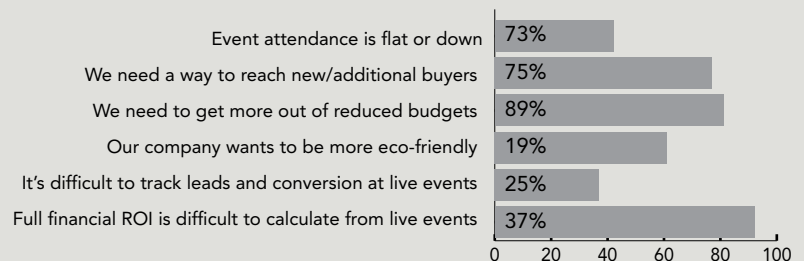


## VIRTUAL SERVES A STRATEGIC PURPOSE

Do you think virtual events and trade shows could benefit your event and trade show portfolio?



What event challenges do you think virtual can help solve? (select all that apply)?



Source: Survey of brand marketers by Event Marketer magazine.

## CASE STUDY

# WEBINARS

## ■ How Pfaff Uses The Web To Train Dealers And Consumers

Sewing machine manufacturer Pfaff has many messages it has to communicate to a pair of primary audiences: dealers and consumers.

For dealers, the brand has to communicate information about a variety of topics: Everything from new product launches to internal software updates and everything in between. To do these things effectively, face-to-face would be a logistical nightmare. Instead, Pfaff uses regular webinars to make connections.

Using web meeting platform WebEx, the brand offers monthly sessions on such issues as new software and products. The format? A self-guided tour. For webinar attendees, a trainer takes dealers through the specific content, showing his/her desktop to viewers so they can watch exactly how many of the features and functions being discussed work. For product launches, the brand does a similar webcast, showing dealers photos of the new products and going through marketing materials through a PowerPoint presentation.

And for consumers, the company offers training chats through webcasts, as well as streaming video tutorials on a separate microsite. The site is subscription-based to offset the costs of running it, and consumers can log on for 24-7 access to download tutorials on everything from new machines to quilting techniques.

# VIRTUAL WORLDS

## ■ Here's how brand marketers are *really* making connections in Second Life

Second Life, launched in 2003 by San Francisco-based Linden Lab, has in recent years become a hotspot for brands as many a marketer jumped in to try to make connections with SL's estimable user base.

But many companies are now taking a second look at Second Life. The virtual world is no longer all-new territory, and savvy marketers have taken note about what it takes to create a successful brand experience in the virtual world...and what can derail a campaign into digital oblivion. A list of dos and don'ts for marketers considering testing the waters:

### DO

**Create an experience that's as creative and engaging as the most successful real world event programs.** "We find that the programs that are the most successful are from brands that approach Second Life as a way to engage with the community of people who have a potential for being interested in the brand," says Robin Harper, vp-marketing and community development at Linden Lab.

**Consider a temporary presence.** Many marketers are cautious about virtual worlds because they're not sure they have the infrastructure to keep it going—and keep it appealing—year-round. But if a virtual world would be an ideal fit for a temporary campaign, consider treating it as you would a limited-run event program. Go in for what you need and plan, from the very beginning, an exit strategy. CareerBuilder, for example, jumped onto Second Life for a limited engagement and set up digital "kiosks" listing jobs online visitors could perform at Linden Lab (and links pushing them back to the brand's web site, where consumers could check out real-world gigs). H&R Block is another example of a brand where a limited engagement makes the most sense—the company activates on Second Life during tax season.

### DON'T

**Treat Second Life like traditional media.** "Early on, there were a lot of experiments that approached virtual worlds in the same way that more traditional media might be approached," Harper says. "People who did that ran into problems. One, they didn't have the reach that they would have in a different medium. Two, they couldn't measure things the way they were used to measuring them."

**Forget about the support the effort will require.** Make sure everyone internally has bought into the concept and that you can get a sign-off on the investments required to make it successful. "It's a 24-7 online community that requires a level of commitment in staffing and content refreshing and engagement with the community for success," Harper says. "We're seeing more people understand that."

**Be passive.** "Early on, there was this idea that you could build something neat and just leave it static, just set up shop and never update it," says Fred Fuchs, a consultant for brands looking at Second Life. "That didn't work." Now, he says, the successful brands are offering support and classes for consumers or clients, or other opportunities that drive traffic to the SL presence.

# SOCIAL MEDIA PROFILE

## ■ And the newest social media darling is...Twitter

The last few years have given rise to a variety of social media platforms—first Friendster, then MySpace and now Facebook—that have allowed brands to look past the limitations of one-way conversations, like banner advertising, and focus on making real connections with consumers and customers. Social media allows brands to attract new targets, and even better, allow those targets to bring others back to that brand. For every social media site that breaks into the mainstream, there are hundreds of brands immediately ready to jump on board and make an attempt to master it.

The latest social media breakout: Twitter. Having debuted in 2006, it's actually not all that new, and in the last two years has grown to include more than 2.2 million users. Plus, Twitter has recently been getting major play in traditional media. Earlier this year, Twitter users helped get the word out when a graduate student from California was jailed in Egypt and posted the word "arrested" to his account on the site for help. The L.A. Times used a Twitter account to post breaking updates about wildfires in Southern California late last year.

But despite its time on the scene and growing popularity, the workings behind the latest social media phenomenon often remain a mystery to those outside of the Twitterverse.

A primer—Twitter touts itself as a micro-blogging site (each post can contain a maximum of 140 characters) but what sets it apart from other, similar blogging platforms like Tumblr is its community-building and conversational capabilities that make it more akin to social media sites.

Twitter users link to other users by "following."

They can use a search tool to find users with similar interests and locations and then start following. If the user being followed likes what he or she sees, they can follow back.

Then, users can talk to each other or respond to each other's posts (or "tweets," in Twitter parlance) by placing the "@" character in front of that user's handle and then writing out a comment. Just like any other post, it goes up on the screen of everyone who's following the user authoring the reply, and others often join in on the conversation.

How brands get involved: Companies like Zappos, Starbucks and Southwest Airlines are finding that Twitter offers an organic way to connect with a group of consumers that are hyper-connected, and, as such, often hyper-influential.

Twitter users are a diverse group—from your typical techies to mom bloggers to fashionistas and everyone in between—so just about any brand interested in making a connection can likely find an audience.

One brand who's found a following on Twitter: Popeyes. The fast-food chain got an unlikely but welcome start on the site when one of its employees started posting on his personal Twitter about the company's new Bonafide Chicken campaign earlier this year. The postings were a hit with Twitter users and soon the company gave him an official Popeye's identity on Twitter, where he now regularly chats with consumers.

"It's a very unique and convenient way to engage consumers that are already talking about us—and it's a way to keep Popeye's top-of-mind for them," says Alicia Thompson, the company's vp-communications and p.r..

### FOUR TIPS FOR EXPLORING TWITTER

- Understand what Twitter is and why consumers use it. As with any platform, you have to engage them by the rules of that particular media.
- Be very respectful of the users and engage them so they know that behind your Twitter is a true person and not just a company.
- When picking a user, look for someone who's already familiar with Twitter. If need be, go outside of marketing. (Popeye's Twitterer works in IT.)
- If every post is going to have to go through corporate to make sure it's "on message," it's not worth the hassle. Be open, or don't play at all.



# EXHIBITORS GO ONLINE

■ 5 booth-promoting web sites... from CES



## COMMUNITY: Intel.

Some brands are creating “community” sites, where attendees chat about all things electronics. Witness Intel’s aggregate site for news, posts, blogs, and feeds (combining every major social media platform). Check out [consumerelectronicsinsider.com](http://consumerelectronicsinsider.com).



## BUZZ: Kodak.

Some marketers try and turn their sites into online places for “real-time updates.” Kodak was trying to generate a little organic buzz at CES with corporate chief blogger Jennifer Cisney posting away about all things CES. Check out: [pluggedin.kodak.com](http://pluggedin.kodak.com).



## NEWS: Microsoft.

The tech company’s CES portal served as a repository for news stories, product information and videos related to anything Microsoft-CES. Twitter and blog feeds rounded out the site with a little non-commercial content. Check out: [microsoft.com/ces](http://microsoft.com/ces).



## BOOTH INFO: Panasonic.

The company displayed booth diagrams with info, daily videos from the exhibit, product highlights and a show blog. Check out: [panasonic.com/promos/ces/2009/](http://panasonic.com/promos/ces/2009/)



## ALL OF THE ABOVE: Sony.

Got our award for the exhibitor who went the biggest online. Sony’s flash-based site was an experience in itself—exhibit activities, product information and live video postings, exhibit-to-web news, a booth overview and a real-time schedule. Check out: [sony.com/ces/flash.html](http://sony.com/ces/flash.html).