



## **Best Practices in Planning and Marketing Virtual Events**

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## Introduction

Think about the events you hold in your business; sales and marketing meetings, conferences, trade shows, corporate meetings, training sessions, job fairs, and more. Now imagine making these events available to a much larger, highly attentive audience that can conveniently gather and exchange information, browse exhibits, receive product demonstrations, provide feedback, and network with colleagues through a live, interactive platform right on their computer.

The perfect fit for today's global, fast-paced business environment, virtual events can deliver the impact and effectiveness of face-to-face events at a fraction of the cost. A wide range of companies and organizations are finding that online events can, in fact, be the most effective way to ensure the success of their demand generation initiatives, corporate events and career fairs, conferences and trade shows, e-learning and training programs, and other critical group events. By eliminating the barriers of travel and non-productive meeting time, virtual events can extend a company's reach to new global markets and individuals that cannot attend traditional physical events.

Virtual event technologies leverage the latest in web, social media, and collaboration tools to stream your event in high speed across the globe. Because the event is held online, organizers and sponsors are freed from the tasks of booking venues, shipping booths and equipment, and other activities required for physical conferences and tradeshow. But, whether you are selling sponsorships for your event or generating leads for your own company, virtual events do require effective strategies, goals, planning, and marketing to achieve maximum results. While much of what you have learned about organizing physical events still applies, virtual events require stakeholders to understand and exploit the differences of this exciting new event format and opportunity.

As a leading provider of virtual events applications and services, VirtualEvents365 is pleased to share its experiences and views on best practices in planning and marketing virtual events through this white paper. This document covers a range of best practices that we consider essential to the success of an online event.

## Establish Roles and Responsibilities

Once you decide to hold an online event and have selected a virtual events provider, organizers are advised to hold a project kickoff meeting to identify core stakeholders in the event. In addition to marketing, be sure to include sales and any other relevant teams in the meeting to establish good communications and collaboration right from the start. The primary purpose of this meeting is to review the project scope and define roles and assign responsibilities for the event team and service provider. If you are putting on your first virtual event, your event provider will be able to provide guidance on the roles that will be required and who typically takes responsibility for each. When assigning responsibilities, make sure to identify who will sign off on each phase of the upcoming project.

Also in the kickoff meeting, devise a plan to ensure that all stakeholders will be kept in the loop and informed of all project activities. Even though you will want to hold regular status meetings for key stakeholders, you will need to keep the extended project team up-to-date and working from the same page. Also be sure that any related materials including a link to your partner's meeting demonstration

site are distributed to attendees so they can learn as much as possible about the project and virtual meeting platform.

## **Sponsorship Sales Considerations**

Virtual events can be conducted by any company to directly communicate with and generate leads from its target audience. Companies that offer sponsorships or booths in their virtual events will work to generate leads for these sponsors. Exhibitors in such an event can benefit from the overall event marketing as well as the wealth of attendee and lead information. Since virtual events are relatively young, selling sponsorships will require organizers to educate sponsors on the benefits of this platform.

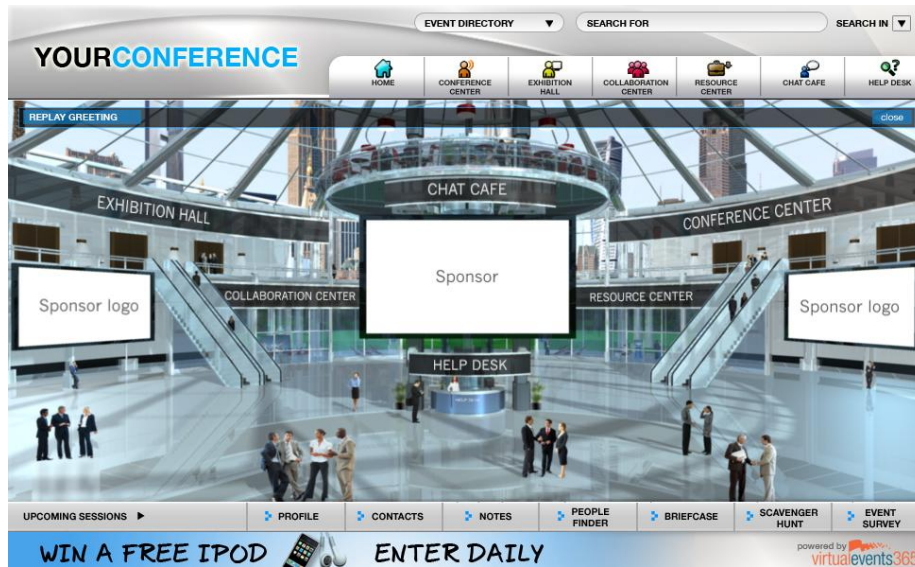
If your event includes the sale of booths or sponsorships, you will want to define the sponsorship tiers or packages you offer as one of the first steps in the process. This is important as you must allow ample time for sales teams to accomplish this important task. As other steps in your event marketing plan rely on securing sponsors, booth sales can impact the entire event schedule. Be realistic about how long it will take to secure sponsors and start as early as possible.

One way to ensure sales success is to create and carefully review sponsorship sales materials in collaboration with your sales team. Clearly define and differentiate sponsorship tiers to increase effectiveness of sales efforts. You may also want to involve your experienced event provider for input or training on establishing sponsor packages, sales materials, pricing, and other best practices in sponsorship sales.

Consider creating a short (four to six minutes in length) Flash demo to support your sponsor sales efforts. You can work with your service provider to produce this valuable sales aid that will effectively explain the concept of virtual events, the value proposition for sponsors, and your event objectives. Your sales team can simply send links to the presentation through emails to potential sponsors.

## **Messaging and Positioning**

As with any event or project, positioning and message creation best begins with a thorough evaluation of event goals and deliverables. Start first by identifying the ideal sponsors and attendees and determine how many of each you need to make the event a success. Work through the value proposition for both sponsors and attendees. This important exercise will put into focus the event messages, campaigns, promotions, and content that will be needed to reach your target audience.



Good promotions are also important to your success. Consider starting your campaign at least 45 to 90 days in advance of the event. More promotion time is generally better. Before investing in new promotional tools and online tracking tools, think about how you can use the ones that you already have available, such as websites, emails, newsletters, and online ads. Emphasize your agenda, keynote speakers, and most relevant presentation topics to attract attendees. Work with sponsors, partners, and associations to expand your campaign. Do the simple things that can have a big impact, like setting up email signatures linking to the event across your company and with business partners and sponsors. Get creative by using social media tools like LinkedIn and Twitter to promote your event. Many online event organizers use incentives and prizes to encourage early bird registration, event day registration, attendance in specific webcasts or event sessions, or other desired behavior.

## Choosing and Coaching Speakers

Event content is often the most important component of your event. The agenda, presentation content, and speaker list are the top criteria for attracting attendees. Never underestimate the power of highly recognized speakers to your event.

The delivery of the presentation content is just as important as the message. No matter how thought-provoking or high quality your content is, it will not create the impact that you desire if it is not delivered in an effective way that engages, captivates and holds the attention of the audience. Therefore, it is critical that you train and coach your speakers. To insure proper delivery, we recommend that you enlist experienced, eloquent professionals that are comfortable in front of the camera to deliver the message and create the necessary impact with your target audience.

Your virtual event audience has many distractions competing for their attention. Make sure you engage them by providing the highest caliber of relevant content and deliver it in the most compelling way. "Content is king," as the old saying goes, but virtual platforms create unique opportunities for delivering that content in ways that are not possible with a physical event. In the end, the quality of your content and its unique delivery will be the critical drivers of success for your event.

## Branding and Attendee Qualification

To build the event brand, organizers are advised to set up a special purpose website to focus attention on the event and provide a convenient means of registration. Whether it is linked to your main website or altogether separate, giving the microsite's landing page a unique domain name is a great way to elevate positioning of your event. Post the agenda, key topics, speaker information and photos, benefits of attending, sponsor information, and other important event information on this site.



As for the registration form, we generally advise shorter than longer with drop down or checkbox entries rather than free text fields where possible. You will want to collect basic contact information and ask a handful of key qualifying questions. The goal is to make it simple and easy for your attendees. You will have ample opportunity to gather much more detail on your attendees during the event through surveys, polls, live question and answer sessions, and other event tools. Also keep in mind that you will also be able to track individual time spent in the event, places visited, webcasts viewed, items downloaded, chat transcripts, and other valuable information which minimizes the need for data collection at registration.

Consider making the registration page your landing page to make it simple for prospective attendees to sign-up without additional clicks and site navigation. If you do this, you will want to provide a concise and effective event description just above the registration area. You will also want to highlight any early bird incentives, prize drawings, or other promotions you may be offering for the event on the landing page.

## Driving Live Day Attendance

Now that you have your attendees registered, it is very important to work to confirm their attendance on the day of the event. Your virtual events provider can generate reminder emails to this list. We recommend sending a minimum of three reminder notices to registered attendees; the first a week prior to the event with a "add to calendar" function, another one day in advance, and the third the morning of the event. You may also want to consider sending a reminder in the middle of live day to help bring in attendees for the afternoon session. The "add to calendar" function may also be included as part of the registration confirmation email.

Organizers and sponsors can also help drive event day attendance by sending out additional emails and teasers to their prospective attendees. Some also conduct telephone campaigns close to the date of the event to deliver a more personalized reminder message. Whether calls are made to all or just highly targeted groups, we generally find that teleboosting does measurably increase live day attendance. Should you need help with promotion, a full service event provider will be able to provide these and other marketing services.

Even after the live event day is over, organizers will want to continue to promote attendance for the on-demand period. This can be done using either “sorry we missed you” or “thanks for attending” emails to all registrants according to their live day participation. In addition to thanking those that attended, don’t forget to encourage them to forward the on-demand event information to colleagues so they can join in when their schedule permits. Of course, continued promotion is also important to encourage new registrants that can build significant lead generation during the on-demand period. We see cases where savvy organizers gain as much as one-third of the total event attendance through a three month on-demand availability period.

## Making Your Booth “Sticky”

Work to make your booth “sticky” so that visitors stay longer, absorb the sponsor’s message and interact with booth representatives. With most virtual event platforms, this is accomplished by staffing the booth with professional representatives and providing a collection of relevant content. Staff the booth with the most knowledgeable people who can address any questions the attendees may have about your products or services. Ensure the booth has premium content such as demonstrations, FAQs, and white papers to add value to each user’s visit.



Video or Flash content is usually the most engaging for visitors, so place short video clips front and center in the booth to make them easily accessible. Be careful that you do not bury the videos in a pick list where they are difficult to find as this can result in only one video message playing most of the time. You want the fact that you have several different video clips to work as a means of getting visitors to stay longer.

Another way to make the booth sticky is to deliver an engaging and exciting environment. For many events, games can be a great tool for engaging attendees and reinforcing a message. Your service provider should be able to help you create and offer games; such as crossword puzzles, jeopardy-style contests, word matches, and more; which can be displayed directly in the booth. Furthermore, offering prizes is another way to make the games, and the overall attendee experience, more engaging.

## **Maximizing Sponsor ROI**

Organizers must also work diligently to drive leads and value for event sponsors. To do this effectively, organizers are strongly advised to participate in the live day training sessions. To facilitate this, we typically conduct this training in a convenient online format a week or so prior to the event. In these sessions, stakeholder groups will learn what to expect, how the virtual events system works, and the responsibilities they will have during the event.

Sponsors will also want to heavily promote their participation in the event; both in advance and during the live day. To maximize leads, they will naturally want to keep their booths staffed during the event day so they can engage booth visitors in live mode. Sponsors can also utilize a number of valuable system tools to increase interaction with attendees. Organizers can help sponsors connect with live day attendees by offering logo placements in a virtual event hall. Sponsors can also participate in an event “passport” program that rewards attendees for visiting specific locations, viewing targeted webcasts, or participating in other scavenger hunt type activities. Simple actions like holding prize drawings in the booth can also be an effective way to increase sponsor leads. If giveaways like t-shirts and gift cards work for exhibitors at physical events, they will also work here. If you will be including tangible prizes at your event, make sure that your registration fields include mailing address, ZIP code, etc.

Organizers and sponsors are also advised to build appropriate break time into the event agenda. Even though the event is online, attendees and participants still need time to stretch and take care of other things much in the same way as they do in physical meetings. Depending on your event agenda, break times can also give attendees an opportunity to visit sponsor booths. While sponsors do need to staff their booths throughout the live event, they should also have additional staffing on hand to manage larger crowds at peak times such as during conference breaks. Event organizers can facilitate this interaction by using announcements during the event to direct traffic to specific sponsor booths.

Event organizers will also want to provide sponsors with detailed event reporting immediately following the live day as well as during the on-demand period. Organizers can extend the value of this information by working with sponsors to help them understand and convert this data into actionable information.

## **Conference Sessions**

The best conference sessions engage the audience with objective, editorial content. This is not the time or place for a sales pitch. Where possible, include a recognized, well regarded industry guru in the program to add value and attract larger audiences. Just as you would in a physical event, be sure to engage attendees with live question and answer sessions and use the audience polling capabilities of your system to maximize presentation impact. Some companies even rebroadcast their sessions for different geographies and time zones with live Q&A and polling for each region.



If you are concerned about unpredictable surprises of “live” sessions, such as speakers getting stuck in traffic, you may elect to use pre-recorded conference sessions for your virtual event. This makes preparation more manageable and ensures precise delivery as speakers can record, review, and make changes to their presentations at their convenience. Simulated live sessions also reduce stress and time requirements for speakers as they need only participate live in the Q&A session. To leverage these benefits, organizers will want to confirm all speakers and schedule their recordings well in advance. This helps to avoid a last minute rush to prepare presentations and allows adequate time to review and make edits where necessary. Be sure to record the audio sessions in conjunction with your virtual event provider to ensure that all files are of proper quality and will work well on your meeting platform. It is also important to provide a formal approval of the presentations to their speakers and event platform provider based on the event planning schedule. If you are planning any fully-live sessions, be sure to rehearse well in advance so that everyone involved is ready on live day. Live sessions will also require a set of advance preparations and decisions that typically require you to build in additional project time.

Depending on the number and content of your conference sessions, you may choose to run one session at a time or offer multiple, concurrent conference tracks. Running one at a time is a good choice if you do not have too many sessions and if splitting the live audience is a concern. Independent sessions will draw larger audiences and are much easier for attendees to manage from a scheduling perspective. You will want to have a good balance with the number of presentations you offer during the day. Putting on only a few sessions may not be enough to compel attendees while packing the day full of presentations may overwhelm visitors. Keeping sessions to one hour or less will be most effective. Of course, the length and number of presentations depends on the focus of your event. It may be helpful to assign a question and answer session moderator to feed questions to the presenters and keep them on track and on time. As mentioned earlier, be sure to allow adequate breaks between session for attendees to take care of their personal and professional needs. They will appreciate that you allowed time to catch up on email and make some important calls.

## Managing the Live Day Experience

Once the virtual doors open, organizers and sponsors will want to take advantage of available platform tools to enrich the visitor experience and maximize interaction with attendees. Your virtual events platform should offer multiple messaging capabilities to help direct event traffic. Ticker text messages displayed in the main hall and at individual booths can effectively call attention to conference sessions, featured sponsors, and other important event activities. Perhaps even greater impact can come from leveraging centrally located banners and billboards, customized text with links, and audio/video greetings in the main hall. Providing a show guide is also an effective way to highlight key event attractions.

The virtual event platform can provide excellent tools to enable professional networking and collaboration among attendees, speakers, and sponsors. Organizers and sponsors are encouraged to promote the collaborative nature of the event on the microsite, invitations, reminders, show guide, and other marketing materials. An audio/video greeting in the main hall can be used to explain and reinforce the collaboration capabilities to attendees as they arrive for your event. A deeper, more personalized level of interaction is possible when participants and attendees take advantage of the networking, contacts, and profile functions available through the virtual event platform.

Creating and promoting an open networking area, such as a Chat Café, is an excellent way to get everyone talking and sharing during your event. Organizers and sponsors are encouraged to have speakers and subject matter experts spend time there to converse with attendees that want to interact in a more casual networking environment. A chat session is also a great opportunity to point interested attendees to your downloadable marketing collateral. This gives them more detail and allows you to collect additional marketing data about your prospects.

To get the most from sponsor participation, booth representatives will want to attend a pre-event training session, staff the booth throughout the live day session, and proactively greet and engage booth visitors even before they initiate contact.

## Post-Event Marketing

Once your live event comes to a close, prompt follow-up with new contacts and leads is critical. In addition to making leads available to proper parties, organizers will want to hold a post-event meeting with the event partner to review event metrics and share feedback. Organizers will also want to meet with their sponsors to review event reports and ROI.

The virtual event can continue to reach new attendees and generate leads long after the live event day. Leveraging the recorded webcasts, the hall and booth design, and other compelling content, most event organizers will keep the event available for an additional three to six months. With this in mind, it is clearly important to continue your event promotion activities during this time. As mentioned earlier, the post-event email campaign to drive on-demand event attendance can yield measurable results.

## Conclusion

We hope that these planning and marketing tips help you to successfully produce your next virtual event. After reading this paper, you have no doubt recognized another important planning step; that of choosing a virtual events service provider. As you have seen, the right partner can provide much more than the technology needed for the event. When you consider service providers, look for an event partner that offers all of the tools and services you need to fully plan your event, build compelling content, attract and hold attendees, and capture actionable lead and marketing data. You will soon discover that selecting a partner that focuses on services is one of the most important steps you can take to ensure the success of your events.

As an organizer or sponsor, you will want to be sure to plan for contingencies and keep everyone in the loop on these plans. Organizers must designate reliable support contacts for event day. Sponsors will want to adequately staff their booths and proactively seek out interaction with attendees. Make sure you have all speaker contact information and double check that all speakers are accessible and have confirmed acceptance of their call-in times.

Keep in mind that, even though they require extensive planning, virtual events are generally simpler to organize and execute than traditional events. In today's time and cost-sensitive business environment, virtual events provide greater opportunity to reach more decision-makers on a global scale and gain far more valuable attendee and lead information in the process.



## About CGS VirtualEvents365

CGS VirtualEvents365 ([www.virtualevents365.com](http://www.virtualevents365.com)) is the global leader in virtual event solutions for corporate events, demand generation marketing events & launches, corporate e-learning, virtual job fairs, virtual conferences and virtual tradeshows. This innovative VirtualEvents365<sup>SM</sup> platform builds on the CGS twenty-five year track record of enabling global enterprises, regional companies and government agencies to drive breakthrough performance through technology. With global delivery capabilities, expertise across leading platforms and deep experience in multiple industries, CGS has become the IT partner of choice for thousands of organizations worldwide. CGS delivers a wide array of proprietary and third-party business applications, technology and business services, outsourcing solutions and learning & communications platforms. Headquartered in New York City, CGS maintains a worldwide presence with 20 offices in North America, Europe and Asia. For more information please visit [www.cgsinc.com](http://www.cgsinc.com).

