

The Show Must Go On!

Why You Should Consider a Digital Experience when an In-Person Event is Cancelled

Cancelling a face-to-face event is traumatic, costly and emotional. Gone is the opportunity to engage an important target audience, not to mention the lost opportunity cost by not achieving the business outcomes the event was designed to produce.

Live event organizers are very adept at planning for all sorts of contingencies, yet some risks are nearly impossible to predict, much less mitigate. During the Great Recession of 2008-2009, many companies chose to cancel face-to-face events because of severe financial challenges. In 2011, an Icelandic volcano eruption interrupted air travel around Europe, leading to a number of event cancellations. Today, it's COVID-19, or Coronavirus, a health scare which has already led to a number of major event cancellations worldwide.

The Benefits of Producing a Digital Experience when an In-Person Event is Cancelled

Organizations who decide to postpone or cancel an important event should consider replacing it in the immediate term with a virtual event or digital experience. While digital experiences can't completely replace the unique power and value of face-to-face engagement, digital experiences provide significant benefits to both the event owner and its target audience.

- **Achieve Your Business Objectives** – the business reasons for holding the in-person experience in the first place still exist – they don't go away simply because the event cancelled. A digital experience addresses these business objectives.
- **Maintain Audience Engagement** – don't lose the event cycle! A digital experience maintains consistent engagement with your target audience.
- **Demonstrate Commitment** – show your audience how important they are by producing a value-creating experience in spite of difficult circumstances. Highlight your nimbleness and ability to respond to unforeseen circumstances to still deliver value for your audience.
- **Put Your Event Content to Work** – leverage the content you produced for the in-person experience to create valuable digital programming for your audience and generate a return for your investment in content creation.
- **Establish New Digital Engagement Paradigm** – capitalize on the opportunity to create new digital modes of engagement that can become the basis of an “always on” digital engagement strategy that works in conjunction with future in-person events. Leverage this new paradigm to connect with your audience between episodic events and throughout the year.

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The Five Keys to Digital Event Success

Digital experiences can be highly effective if properly designed and delivered. Although similarities exist, delivering a successful virtual event or digital experience can be very different from a traditional in-person event.

Here are five keys to digital event success that event owners should consider as they embark on a digital experience:

1. Align Your Business Objectives with Your Audience's Objectives

This recommendation holds true for any event, but event owners who produce a digital experience should use the opportunity to redefine their objectives and expectations, and align them with those of their target audience. Successfully resetting audience expectations for the digital experience ensures alignment and leads to successful outcomes for all stakeholders.

2. Design a Success Model that Measures Business Impact, Not Just Activity

Companies produce events to create business value. And value is measured by business impact, not just activity. This is true for in-person, hybrid and digital events and experiences. Too often, companies measure success by activity metrics (e.g., number of session attendees, number of social media impressions, how many demos were given in a booth, etc.). Activity metrics are an important part of an effective success model because they tell you what happened, but they alone don't tell you the business value created. The problem with focusing solely on activity metrics is it ignores whether or not those activities drove business outcomes, such as accelerating pipeline, increasing order size, driving more revenue through Channel Partners, etc.

3. Reimagine Content & Programming for Your Digital Venue

Certain content and experiences translate well from the physical to digital space – a technology software demonstration, for example. Other experiences are harder to replicate, such as sitting in the driver's seat of a luxury vehicle. Depending on your business and the purpose of your event, you may need to reimagine the event experience to adjust for the different realities of a digital venue.

4. Create an Audience Engagement Plan that Proactively Drives Participation

In-person events have certain advantages over digital experiences when it comes to driving audience engagement and participation – the mere physicality of an in-person event often leads to “organic” engagement. Attracting and maintaining the attention of a digital audience requires

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a different approach, but there are proven techniques to keep your digital audience engaged to encourage their active participation.

5. Deploy the Right Technology Ecosystem to Support Your Event

Fortunately for event organizers, virtual event and digital experience technologies have matured to the point that they now offer a viable alternative to a postponed or cancelled face-to-face experience. A wide variety of technology solutions exists to support any experience, from small group meetings to large global conferences. The most sophisticated systems offer a feature-rich array of capabilities including robust event broadcasting and syndication options, robust audience engagement features, multi-media content sharing capabilities, and intelligent data and analytic tools. Alternatively, less sophisticated technology solutions can be deployed quickly, efficiently and cost-effectively while still benefiting from an event strategy and audience engagement plan that drives the technology requirements and selection.

The decision to postpone or cancel an important business event is an extremely difficult one for any organization, and the negative implications can be significant for both the company and its target audience. Because of the significant downsides of outright cancellation, we encourage companies to consider a digital experience as a viable replacement for a cancelled event. Done properly and guided by the right strategic partner, the organization and its target audience will still enjoy many of the same benefits of an in-person event and drive successful business outcomes.

The show can still go on...and it should!