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Virtual Events: Green and Growing

By Mary Gospe

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A KickStart Alliance client recently participated in a trade show. The event had all the *usual* components: keynote addresses from national leaders and experts, seminar tracks based on specific topic areas and vendor booths in the exhibit hall. Employees staffed the booth to converse with attendees and provided them with collateral. Some exhibitors held drawings. And our client's CEO delivered a presentation to an audience of potential prospects. However, this event was also *unusual* in that it was held entirely **online**.

With more advanced technological capabilities – high speed Internet, streaming video, life-like graphics and innovations from games like Second Life – virtual events have arrived. And they provide both vendors and conference attendees with many advantages over traditional, physical events:

Cost Savings

- For both exhibitors and attendees there are no travel expenses (airfare, rental cars, hotels, meals, etc.).
- Sponsorship fees are similar to physical events but exhibitors do not incur fees for shipping booths and collateral to the event location.

Increased Productivity

- Participants attend the event right from their computers – whether at home, office or from the road – thus avoiding non-productive travel time. In addition to attending the live event, attendees can view archives of sessions and visit booths long after the event has concluded.
- Exhibitors save staff time by not having to book hotels, make travel arrangements, ship booths and print collateral and signage.

Global Reach

- Unlike location-based events, virtual events enable anyone in the world to attend.

- All participants fill out a detailed profile upon registration and their online behavior (booths attended, sessions viewed) is tracked and delivered in a spreadsheet to appropriate exhibitors. Exhibitors do not need to scan badges or risk not collecting valuable qualifying data.

Environmentally-friendly

- The fact that travel is eliminated and a large physical location and hotels are not needed vastly reduces the burning of fossil fuels and use of electricity and water. Providing only electronic collateral saves paper and trees.

Right from your desktop, you register and log in to the event. You'll enter a big virtual hall where you see people walking around and banners hanging from the ceiling. Scroll to approach and view booths in the exhibit hall, or enter a live video keynote or breakout track.

Examples:

The [Virtual Energy Forum](#), produced by [PlatformQ](#), and held in June 2008, was the first online-only event on energy efficiency, policy, management and sustainability. It is estimated that having the event entirely online saved more than 12 million pounds of CO2. The event included:

- Key notes from John Kerry and Newt Gingrich.
- Registrations of over 4,000 attendees worldwide.
- Live streaming video presentations by over 40 experts from academia, businesses, think-tanks and government.
- 50 exhibitors including vendors of clean technology products.

Here's how the main conferencing hall looked:



And our client's online booth:



Another recent example of a virtual event was the [B2B 2.0 EXPO - MarketingProfs Free Virtual Conference](#) held in March 2008 and produced by [Unisfair](#). This online-only event featured:

- Registrations of 5,700 marketers.
- Sponsor booths, presentations with live Q&A and breakout tracks.
- Networking opportunities via chat, email, and virtual business cards.

A colleague of mine who was researching marketing automation tools attended the event. In the course of a couple of hours, he was able to gather information from several vendors and chat with sales reps. It made his job easier and more productive.

Conclusion:

Although virtual events can never take the place of the relationships that are built by live, in-person conferences, they certainly are a cost-effective and environmentally-friendly way for organizations of all types to create awareness, generate leads and collaborate with colleagues and partners. I encourage organizations to consider these events as another effective marketing activity to add to their integrated marketing mix.

About the Author

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