



Food for Thought

Navigating the Post-Pandemic Event Marketing World

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After a major event, a landscape can appear altered beyond recognition. In the natural world, communities are disrupted, relationships are dispersed and processes reset. The more unpredictable the event, the more altered the landscape. And despite the initial confusion and rebuilding, we now know major events in nature are also golden opportunities for renewal, in many ways creating landscapes better than before. The same can be true for the business world and the lifeblood of its members: events.

In year three of our post-pandemic world we are just beginning to understand how our industry has altered. How and where people work, and why and when the industry meets, is still in flux; no one sees this more clearly than the marketer, whose events—the landscapes vital for inter- and intra-business connections, relationship building, product launches, trend insights, sales awareness and cultural cohesion—are having to adapt quickly to changing attendee habits, budgets and a new world. Such an altered landscape requires industry and marketing leaders to come together to help each other navigate this new world, its emerging distinctions and its novel requirements—and capitalise on its opportunities.

HotTopics and Blue Jeans by Verizon hosted a Food for Thought lunch featuring B2B marketing leaders for this very reason. Moderated by HotTopics' Editor Peter Stojanovic, these executives met at an exclusive central London location for an extended three-course lunch.

Each course offered an opportunity to debate one question as part of the wider debate on navigating the post-pandemic event marketing world. In this article whitepaper, learn how these marketing leaders discussed the following:

Food for Thought: Lunch series for the C-suite community

- 1. How is event marketing evolving alongside changing attendee habits?**
- 2. How can a business strike the balance between in-person, hybrid and virtual events in a given calendar year?**
- 3. What strategies should every good B2B marketer add to their post-pandemic event marketing arsenal?**

THANK YOU TO THE FOLLOWING LEADERS FOR THEIR INSIGHTS:

Marketing Leaders:

- **Amy Mortlock** - EMEA Marketing Director - **NetSPI**
- **Claire Macland** - Senior VP Global Marketing - **Equinix**
- **David Keene** - CMO - **Wipro**
- **Helen Trim** - SVP Marketing EMEA & APAC - **Coupa Software**
- **Marie Thornton** - Head of International Marketing - **BlueJeans by Verizon**
- **Mitali Isrsani** - Marketing Director - **Medallia**
- **Maya Price** - Marketing Director - **SAP UKI**
- **Sakina Najmi** - VP Marketing - **Tractable**
- **Sumi Shukla** - VP Marketing - **Riverbed**
- **Suzi Williams** - NED - **JD Sports Fashion plc**
- **Wayne Ellis** - Marketing Director - **HotTopics**

Moderator:

- **Peter Stojanovic** - Editor - **HotTopics**

1. How is event marketing evolving alongside changing attendee habits?

By far the greatest effect on the future of event marketing is attendee habits. Once sacrosanct, if tacit, rules of business event management have been broken as whole regions of people respond in different ways to the opening up of the world and the advances in remote or virtual technologies and platforms. Few have emerged with enough data to make concrete decisions on what trends are here to stay and what are mere disturbance ripples, but there are patterns of behaviour that we should note now. Below are the major factors impacting attendee habits and therefore the future of events, as recognised by these marketing leaders.

MOTIVATION DRIVERS

The motivation to attend events has shifted perceptively. Marketers have recognised waves of interest and disinterest for in-person, virtual and hybrid events over the last three years, with often unpredictable results. One factor affecting attendee motivation is sector. How often do members in your sector meet and what values will they gain from your event? Sakina Najmi of Tractable reported her in-person, central London event for insurers planned for 40 guests actually recorded over 300.

This group hadn't met for some time because of governmental Covid policies and an in-person event proved irresistible for this community. Marketing has to be increasingly adaptive to spikes in popularity due to the mood of the wider industry therefore; but further down the line marketers expect to have to work harder to motivate attendees in person, with more explicit value creation, shorter events, hybrid opportunities and higher profile venues.

GEOGRAPHY RECALIBRATION

Where you (or your event) is in the world is also affecting the uptake of your RSVPs. David Keene of Wipro has seen a strong bounceback in London, for example, but the US is yet to record pre-pandemic domestic flight levels for business travellers, he added. Asia is one of the last regions to open itself up for society (let alone business); even different cities within larger countries are recording distinct patterns of behaviour—see US and India. Not unlike planning around individual countries' Covid policies back in 2020/21, marketing leaders are now logging regions as factors behind whether events should be in-person, hybrid or virtual. The uptake? If it's what your customers want, it's the right thing to do.

ROI IN A RECESSION

Data-driven marketing is established best practice, but the changeable event environment offers marketing an opportunity to test their experimentation, adaptability and responsiveness. Some members of the lunch are rethinking their marketing spend to better offer 1-1 meetings for the sales team. Inflationary and recession measures are also impacting spending power. More focused and targeted event creation means marketing dollars (or pound sterling) can be attributed to a tangible relationship or prospect—and also allows marketing to test event hypotheses without breaking the bank. As Mitali Israni of Medalia succinctly quipped, “The era of the ‘spray and pray method’ is over.”

EVENT FORMATS

“There are many, many different formats for events—no matter what the sales team believes. Marketing leaders are recalibrating these formats to suit their audiences and expectations. In-person meetings for advisory boards, say, have fallen down the list of priorities, reported Claire Macland of Equinix, as trade shows remain relatively steady. That said, Claire also shared how Equinix had adapted its trade show strategies, with no booth presence or broad activities in place, instead focusing on its sales teams’ presence versus targets, a very different form of engagement. Amy Mortlock of NetSPI agreed. “The appetite for events has changed; timings have changed.” She believes breakfast meetings are over, for example, and for smaller or younger marketing teams, large trade shows are not as relevant anymore.

NetSPI conducts virtual-only discussions and invests in creating better experiences there, with packages in the post and high quality content to drive post-discussion engagement. Virtual events and webinars are also an increasingly sophisticated alternative for lead generation campaigns, particularly considering the cost/benefit analysis comparing virtual and in-person events. Further, some event formats or hosts have a more cultural or abstract hold for marketing teams. Gareth Scragg of DXC Technology commits to certain industry events because it reflects his firm’s commitment to the specific sector.

EVENT COLLABORATION

Julia Porter of Optimizely has seen changing sales team expectations. They also recognise the evolving habits of their prospects and ask marketing for help bringing them together once more, perhaps in more intimate gatherings, or for guidance as they tinker with the funnel. This nascent landscape offers an opportunity for marketers to reset their relationship with the rest of the business as the value of events becomes a more complex conversation. The visibility marketing has on how attendees are re-engaging should be shared intimately with sales and leadership to help motivate better events that support customers and prospects.

VIRTUAL, HYBRID ATTENDANCE

A major theme within the lunch was the relative dominance of virtual experiences, either as replacements for events entirely, or as complementary sessions for an in-person agenda. The default position of in-person events pre-pandemic has been shaken, said Marie Thornton of BlueJeans by Verizon. Virtual events can offer a viable alternative for guests with busier schedules (a more common challenge in 2023), an international postcode, or those who, for personal reasons, simply do not want to attend your wonderful event in person. These virtual platforms aren't new, however, but they have evolved inline with people, and the experiences online can be—and should be—similar to that of an in-person event.

REGULATION AND MORE

“Real creativity is needed in event marketing today,” said Suzi Williams. Here, she refers to a “perfect storm” of updated bribery and corruption rules that affects some attendee's ability to be looked after by vendors, nervousness in the general public and, of course, the CFO, enjoying the savings of minimal business travel since 2020.

That creativity should therefore consider personalising experiences for different audiences, knowing that capturing the attention of guests and prospective guests is of paramount importance. What the industry used to do will not cut it anymore, the group felt.

DIVERSITY SHOCK

A sobering moment of the debate was when anecdotal reports of attendee diversity emerged. Less diverse audiences for in-person events have been seen, possibly because of traditional gender roles around childcare or healthcare duties.

How home circumstances are driving attendee trends is a core question for the marketing team in 2023; the follow-up of course is what we can do collectively to address this disappointing downward trend.

GENERATIONAL PREFERENCES

Currently we are enjoying the most diverse workforce in terms of generations in living memory. The relative attributes of Gen X versus Millennial versus Gen Z are well documented; their engagement with events are less so.

Where younger generations have been desperate to come back and work from the office, and vice versa for older workers, it isn't so clear cut for event attendees, especially when the quality of some virtual platforms provide for a more environmentally friendly alternative, which we know is an important consideration for this cohort. What this means is that the marketing team are building distinct journeys and events for different audiences, factoring gender, generation and geography.

2. How can a business strike the balance between in-person, hybrid and virtual events in a given calendar year?

With those nine factors in mind the next natural question for marketers is, what next? Mapping changing attendee habits and expectations means the blueprint for event formats must evolve, adopting a more balanced, or pragmatic, approach to in-person, hybrid and virtual events. But that balance is hard won, and given this is an evolving story, that balance or equilibrium, must constantly be refined. But what refines it?

RELATIONSHIPS

Regardless of what event is being hosted, one of the core aims is to build brand trust. And trust is borne from relationships. Balancing different formats of events must consider the cost-benefit analysis of the relationships you may build at any given stage.

Virtual events are harder to build 1-1 relationships, but are far cheaper and also perhaps better at content-on-demand initiatives to drive brand awareness. The question the leaders kept coming back to, originally voiced by Amy Mortlock, was how does each event provide value for the customer or partnership?

Knowing where your customers go, what they want from different types of events and what your offering is can accurately determine (for now) the balance of events put on.

RELEVANCE

“Drive relevance by personalising events, as part of an arsenal of ABM strategies,” said Claire Macland. Designing your ideal event, or ideal relationship with a prospect, and working backwards is a helpful way in considering event formats—which is exactly what Equinix did.

Having personalised content for each prospect that can be shared with them over an intimate conversation and extended period of time is their ideal experience. And sometimes, with the strength of that personalisation, a virtual experience can suffice.

PRODUCTION

Production values of virtual events is a serious consideration for marketers. Sumi Shukla of Riverbed observed the love-hate relationship the market has with virtual events—to many murmurs of agreement—that David Keene considered was because of the lack of preparation time compared to in-person events.

Closely linked: production quality is a key consideration. High quality virtual content is now expected from delegats and audience members, and although visual elements has a margin of grace, audio quality has to be exceptional, and captions should be used to be inclusive to hard of hearing audience members. Stronger offerings online, with careful consideration of branding, content and timings, can help lift virtual events so they don’t feel like afterthoughts.

INTERNAL MARKETING

Events are not just for prospects. Often, the most important customers a business needs to market to are their colleagues—and virtual and hybrid events can offer a lifted experience to bring teams closer together, for a fraction of the cost. Amy Mortlock, Mitali Israni and Sumi Shukla in particular compared the value and excitement between hybrid sales kick-offs, culture meets and bonding.

Although in-person events are hard to beat when it comes to maintaining company culture, as Mitali noted, with organisations that run into the thousands, those types of events become unfeasible.

3. What strategies should every good B2B marketer add to their post-pandemic event marketing arsenal?

Marketing leaders should now consider how and when virtual and hybrid events are best used within their calendar, and how they can curate better in-person events for attendees with varying levels of expectations. Certain strategies can help marketers come out on top—in either category.

For the former, for virtual, Marie Thornton said the core requirement was to keep people engaged. Platforms should have a “run of show that ensures content is pushed cleverly, the platform is customisable for branding and attention kept for polls, ticker tapes, layout evolution and more.”

Audiences should be able to speak with one another, agree and disagree—bond—and chat with hosts and speakers. This securing of engagement allows for attendees to feel part of something; they focus more, comment more and engage more. Engagement is contagious and so kickstarts a virtuous cycle that gives people an event buzz despite not being physically present. It also allows for you to collect feedback in real time, we heard, which can be more valuable than reflections after the event.

There is also an opportunity to experiment, as Gareth Scragg pointed out, revealing their testing of metaverse environments to differentiate themselves. But far more important, as noted by Sumi Sukla, Sakina Najmi and others, was the importance of placing any event along a continuum of activities—the event is not the end goal—so that pre- and post-engagement strategies are given equal consideration. Only then will the context of each event make sense for the marketing and sales teams to help build a sensible narrative for attendees.

This builds into what David Keene posed, where are your targets in your funnel? He said that marketing needs to think longer term about who it is nurturing, where there are cross selling and upselling opportunities, and how awareness and attention is being considered across different events. Wipro is looking carefully at segmentation, he continued, to help with this.

Partnerships were also floated as potential strategies to lift event programmes and differentiate from competitors. Collaborations like Nike and Tiffany do not immediately link to events marketing, but the creativeness of the partnership—and its products—can offer inspiration for marketers to get more people talking about, and ultimately attending, your events. They also allow for shared services, data insights and talent as the unpredictability of the industry continues unabated.

And finally, what will be the next major event to reshape the landscape? Perhaps the answer is almost immaterial: what is more important is how teams can respond to them, how resilient your efforts are in supporting customers and prospects with their challenges—one of the main reasons for your events in the first place.

Conclusion

There is a reason the post-pandemic event marketing world requires navigation—or several, as this group of marketing leaders discovered over almost two hours of conversation.

Changing attendee habits are still changing, made more complex because of the lack of data around just how attendees consider engaging with events in 2023. Sector, geography, gender, generation and personality all impact the micro-decisions behind RSVPing or not. To ensure that RSVP is a yes, marketers need to be more mindful of a more personalised programme of events, evolving our definition of a successful event to one that has wider scope; what does the quarter or year look like and how have we moved important prospects through the funnel? A complementary mix of in-person, hybrid and virtual events will be needed to appeal to the ecosystem of individuals marketers engage, from customers to colleagues. It will require experimentation, resilience and a firm understanding that it is the user alone who directs your events, where they are, how they are built and who they are for.

If anyone has benefited in the post-pandemic event marketing world, therefore, it is the attendee, and that is a brilliant opportunity for event marketers to build even stronger relationships.

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