

# Blend Physical and Virtual Experiences To Create Compelling Hybrid Events

BY MALCOLM LOTZOF

When I tell people that 2011 is the “Year of the Hybrid Event,” some nod in complete agreement, while others question why.

The reason is simple. Physical events always have and always will facilitate valuable connections as well as great content. However, new technologies and increased bandwidth now allow virtual events to cost-effectively extend this valuable content to more people (increased reach) for a longer period of time (increased life). In fact I believe that, in a few short years, every physical event will have a virtual component, or put differently, all events will move to a hybrid format.

But we can't get there overnight. And we certainly won't get there if we take the wrong approach to hybrid event and experience design. In my mind, slapping a live video stream of event sessions on a Web page doesn't constitute an effective hybrid-event experience.

What content goes virtual and how the content is delivered needs to be as well thought out as for a

face-to-face event. The good news is that the work you do on your physical event really serves as the foundation for your hybrid event. The secret is how to effectively blend physical and virtual to create the best overall experience.

## Physical Event as ‘Foundation’

In my experience, “the best content in a virtual event comes from the physical event.” This is so because the keynote presentation, the educational sessions and the chatter generated at the physical event comprise the “essence” of your event. From that “essence” flows complementary and contextual con-



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tent, both at the physical event and in the virtual extension.

For example, the content of your keynote speaker's presentation serves as the foundation. Hybrid event attendees experience this content on site (at the physical event) and in their browser (at the virtual event). As the keynote session unfolds, people are talking about it at the physical event,

they're tweeting about it (from both venues), and they're commenting on it in a group chat room at the virtual event.

## Social Media as ‘Glue’

It's critical that hybrid events have “connective glue,” and social media is a great binding agent. That's why it should be a central component of the hybrid-event experience.

A few years ago, we began to see active use of Twitter, whether events were physical, virtual or hybrid. I believe Twitter was the first “hybrid-event technology,” as it allowed any-

one to view and participate in the event's “social stream,” whether they were attending the event or not. At the physical event, signage should identify the event's “Twitter hash tag” (an identifier that the event producer defines), and presenters should communicate the hash tag along with their own Twitter ID (if they so choose).

In the virtual platform, social media should be integrated directly

## 7 Tips for Making Hybrid Events Memorable

Whether physical, virtual or hybrid, we don't return to events if they're not memorable. Follow these tips to make your hybrid events memorable:

- All presentations should be broadcast and streamed live (and not “simulive”).
- Presentations should be augmented with live, ongoing “news” or “talk show” broadcasts.
- Allow attendees to interact and engage directly with your presenters.
- Allow attendees ample opportunity to network with one another.
- Connect virtual attendees to on-site attendees and vice versa.
- Connect on-site attendees with virtual specialists.
- Allow attendees to play a central role in defining and generating the event's content.

into the platform, which encourages social sharing among the virtual audience. It also keeps them in the environment longer, since they're not required to "context switch" to another application.

### Give Virtual Audience a Voice

At a poorly executed hybrid event, the No. 1 concern I hear from virtual attendees is that they're not heard.

The way to address this is to elevate the "voice" of the virtual audience so that it matches the physical audience. For instance, speakers and presenters are well trained in speaking to a physical audience, but some may need to be trained on how to address a virtual audience — without the body language that can be observed when face-to-face.

One concept I've used successfully is the "virtual emcee," a person who is integrated into the physical event but whose role is to advocate for the virtual audience. The emcee is another "glue element" to connect the physical experience and its speakers and attendees to the virtual audience.

Attendees at a physical event can use session breaks to check their e-mail or grab a bite to eat. The virtual experience, on the other hand, can create "dead air." So session breaks are perfect opportunities for the virtual emcee to "take the floor" and provide commentary and recaps as well as interviews with on-site attendees and speakers who can answer questions submitted by the virtual audience.

### Continue the Conversation

Imagine if your "event" revolved around an engaging, year-round community with regularly scheduled gatherings (the events). The virtual component of a hybrid event can serve a dual purpose. It's not just the platform for hosting virtual attendees; it also can be your year-round community platform.

By connecting virtual and on-site

attendees at the event, you enable the networking necessary to spawn an engaged community. When on-site attendees return home, they can continue their great conversations in your virtual platform, collaborating with the new connections they've made both physically and virtually.

Hybrid events are win-win when done right. Be sure to map out a strategy that effectively blends the physical

and virtual experiences with the right amount of connective glue. We long ago learned how to make our web sites "sticky"; now turn that attention to events.

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