

Best Practices In Virtual Events

How to get the most
from virtual events

the FactPointgroup


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Top 10 Best Practices for Virtual Events

1. Pick an experienced service provider.
2. Create an event strategy and clear goals.
3. Educate sponsors and then sell them.
4. Provide administrative tools to make sponsors self-sufficient.
5. Maximize attendee time at the event.
6. Drive traffic to sponsor locations.
7. Proactively interact live with attendees.
8. Promote the event "on-demand" after the live event.
9. Qualify and prioritize leads.
10. Conduct an ROI analysis.

Introduction

Think of a trade show, a job fair or corporate training, conducted entirely online with event organizers, presenters, sponsors/exhibitors and attendees exchanging information and networking from the convenience of their computers.

Technologies have advanced to the point where these and other sizable virtual events look and feel remarkably like their physical counterparts while delivering the same knowledge-sharing and personal interactions. Virtual events also give event organizers and sponsors extremely rich marketing data.

Extensive planning is required to organize a successful virtual event, but for event organizers, putting on virtual events is notably easier than scheduling and executing a physical show. No booking a venue a year or more in advance, with the attendant risk. No logistics to build and ship a booth to the venue.

Instead, event organizers can have an easy entry into the market. With the right service provider, virtual events can be organized and promoted within six weeks, though, 12 weeks is closer to best practice.

While nearly any physical event that convenes people for knowledge sharing and networking can be replicated virtually, for the purposes of this paper, the world is broken in to two types of event organizers with two slightly different goals:

1. Generate Revenue by selling sponsorships to events
2. Generate Leads or Demand for their own company

Virtual events by the numbers

Average live duration: 1.5 days
Average archived days: 90
Average registration: 3,102
Average attendance: 1,587
Show Up Rate: 52%
Exhibitor Booths: 15
Leads Generated per Sponsor: 348
Conference Sessions: 5 per day
Average attendee time at event: 2 hours 31 minutes
Average Locations Visited: 16
Average Attendee Interactions: 13
Average Downloads per attendee: 5
U.S. Attendees: 58%
International Attendees: 42%

Source: Unisfair

The organizations that use events to generate revenue through sponsorships are generally in the media business. The second type, companies that want to generate leads for themselves and their partners by organizing virtual events, includes nearly every type of industry.

This distinction between the two types of organizations is highlighted as this paper details best practices for recruiting sponsors. Obviously, for the organization that wants to generate revenue through sponsorships, these best practices are critical. For the company organizing a virtual event to generate leads for themselves recruiting sponsors, partners, or any other type of exhibitor may or may not be important.

Sponsors of virtual events enjoy the same benefits as the organizers; cost effectiveness, fast time to market, etc. Added benefit comes from the rich marketing data that virtual events deliver. The anonymity of attendees roaming the physical event evaporates. Instead, sponsors receive detailed marketing data about attendees, much better than any other marketing vehicle available today.

People attend events for three reasons: 1) gather information/gain knowledge; 2) network with others; and 3) for the location. For those who cannot afford the time or expense to attend a physical event in an exotic locale, a virtual event can deliver on these first two objectives as well as or better than physical events.

For attendees, it is much easier to gather information without a booth vulture physically lurking to press you for a business card. In fact, the majority of attendees are more apt to interact with an exhibitor, speaker or another attendee online than in person because a different set of social mores apply. New technology, including the most business-applicable elements of web 2.0 and social networking, make it extremely easy for professional networking to occur in virtual events. As for location, if an attendee can't afford the expense and time to travel, then there is no better location to attend an event than from the convenience of his or her computer.

From event organizers and sponsors, it is interesting to note that many virtual event organizers see many more C-level executives than at a physical show, where popping in for a couple hours is simply not an option.

This best practices white paper is based on Unisfair's experience in enabling over 300 virtual trade shows with 2,000-plus sponsors and more than half-a-million attendees and on the actual success of two of its clients, National Instruments and MarketingProfs.

This paper is organized into four sections: Goal-setting (key for a post-Event ROI analysis); pre-event activities; during-the-event best practices; and post-event actions.

Create goals for your event

“We like the idea of being cutting edge in our market space. We’ve jumped out in front to extend our core competency. We have done, can do and will again do virtual events. They extend our brand.”

—Roy Young, president, MarketingProfs

Start with the main concept for your virtual event and the specific type of event (trade show, user conference, 24/7 expo center, job fair, product launch, sales training, etc.). Next identify and segment your target audience at a granular level. Create a strategy and set goals to give you a yardstick to measure results.

How to set goals

- § 52% of registrants attend
- § Technology scales beyond 10,000
- § Organizers: Be realistic on targets
- § Sponsors: Leads plus branding

For example, National Instruments, an Austin, Texas-based manufacturer of measurement and automation equipment, wanted to reduce costs associated with its annual 18-city “Automated Test Summit” road show of developer events—but still generate the same leads and demand as the physical shows. National Instruments took its road show virtual using Unisfair in May 2007. It attracted 2,000 engineers—equal to the total number of participants in the entire three-month road show the year prior. The virtual event cost 50% less than the physical events.

National Instruments’ strategy was to develop the virtual Automated Test Summit as an industry event hosted by NI and strategic industry partners. The industry event combined a technical conference with an expo of NI and partner exhibits. NI calls the event “a great success for everyone – our customers, our partners and NI.”

For those in the business of generating revenue through sponsorships, the goal may be to sign up a particular number of sponsors (a proxy for revenue) and a target number of attendees.

The sponsors and exhibitors of your virtual events will likely use leads generated or deals closed as a result of conference contacts as their central metrics.

Event organizers should help sponsors set realistic goals. For first-time virtual exhibitors, base goals on their best practices for physical trade shows. Experienced sponsors can factor in prior virtual events. Rely on the service provider for best practices.

Work with your virtual event technology provider to establish realistic, achievable goals for your event, and don’t skimp on numbers.

“We leveraged the strategy of our successful road show events in the online environment provided by Unisfair. I feel this was a key reason for our success.”—Richard McDonell, product marketing group manager, National Instruments

Pre-Event planning makes all the difference

The keys to a successful virtual event are: 1) content; 2) audience generation; and 3) sponsor recruitment. The event organizer's staff must work with their service provider, sponsors, speakers and others. That is why the best practice for advance scheduling is 12 weeks to maximize promotion. In a pinch, you can schedule an event as few as four weeks ahead, especially if you have one or more of the three keys (content, audience, or sponsors) already lined up.

Rules for Content

- § Make it compelling
- § Draws attendees, sponsors
- § Leave time between sessions
- § Tailor to audience, goals

Schedule events carefully. Don't go up against major industry events or major holidays. Also take into account budget cycles for sponsors. If your audience is worldwide, schedule or repeat sessions for optimal attendance around the globe. Global audiences seem to love virtual shows—international attendees have accounted for 42% of the audiences, according to Unisfair's research, compared to 58% U.S. attendees.

The HP OpenView User Group, for example, had visitors from 96 nations and used a "follow the sun" theme, running its event in three geographic regions (Asia, Europe, North America) over a 24-hour time period, broadcasting in multiple languages. In just 24 hours, user group members around the globe received consistent information in their native languages.

If you plan a series of events, promote the whole series. Organizers of physical events such as MarketingProfs, an online publisher of know-how for marketing professionals, are using virtual conferences to build a prospect list for later physical conferences. Others are running virtual events to augment physical ones.

Think about how long you'll archive the event to be available "on demand." Be sure to build in marketing for the on-demand replays so they continue to produce leads for sponsors. The average Unisfair event remains on-demand for 90 days, but some organizers are moving toward a year-round virtual event center. Within the same environment they host multiple live events throughout out the year, and continue to draw their prospects, customers and partners to the virtual event center—using it as a "community" destination.

Optimize conference program content to draw attendees

Formulate an agenda that will attract your intended audience—it will help you attract both attendees and sponsors. Start lining up compelling content early—the best speakers have busy schedules. The upside to virtual events is that it is much easier (and cheaper) to have speakers appear virtually, or even to pre-record their presentations at their convenience, than to have them travel to a location on a specific day.

Pursue content that delivers value to your audience, not marketing pitches. Having noted this, you can still generate additional revenues from sponsors or partners by making some of the conference sessions available to them, if they follow your editorial guidelines.

Schedule and balance compelling content throughout the day—putting all your best speakers in the morning may deter attendees from staying for the entire live event. Five sessions per day are usually enough. It's very important to leave breaks between sessions to encourage attendees to visit the exhibit hall.

Tailor content to your industry and goals. MarketingProfs avoided industry luminaries. "Our audience is less enamored of the star system," said Roy Young, president of Los Angeles-based MarketingProfs (www.marketingprofs.com). "They like the meat and potatoes."

Promote the virtual event

Promoting the virtual event is critical. For attendees, map your promotional campaign to event content. Emphasize keynote speakers, session topics and your sponsors—these draw attendees. Start 60 days before your event—you can cram preparations into six weeks, but start earlier for greater success.

Start with your usual promotional tools and assets—Web sites, newsletters, online search and banner ads, email signatures on company emails, direct mail, print ads, etc. Emphasize online promotion, such as search engine marketing and customized email messages to target groups. Start with your own email lists and lists from partners, then explore buying targeted commercial lists.

Encourage exhibitors to promote your event and give direct access to their sponsored area. Expand the campaign through relationships with partners and associations. Corporate event organizers should consider partnering with a media company to get access to its database of potential attendees.

Promote for success
§ Start 60 days out
§ Stress content
§ Use proven tools, focus online
§ Get sponsors to help
§ Track campaign for effectiveness

Track your campaigns from the start to see which are producing registrants. Offer codes on outgoing marketing will tell you what's working so you can go back to your winners for the late push to hit registration goals. Your service provider should offer these campaign-tracking tools to simplify your job and support the campaign optimization process.

Sponsor recruitment

Organizers shouldn't shortchange themselves in approaching sponsors—virtual event packages can be just as lucrative as those for physical events. For media organizers, the key metric is selling exhibit booths and higher-priced packages that generate significant sponsor leads and visibility.

Virtual events are an emerging market, so educating sponsors is crucial. Create marketing materials to first educate, then recruit sponsors. With your service provider, train your sales staff on selling virtual sponsorships. Service providers should supply sample sponsorship packages and sales tools to create and sell packages to sponsors, including a pre-show Web site and an interactive Flash sales demo. Your service provider also should assign your event a specific event manager.

Unifair's average virtual trade show has 15 exhibitors, but don't think small. Some virtual organizers see hundreds, even thousands of sponsors in the future. But temper expectations on your first show because you'll have no prior numbers. "Primarily you need experience, a story with numbers from your past virtual events," MarketingProf's Young cautions.

Recruit sponsors
§ Don't think small
§ Educate, then sell
§ Set realistic expectations
§ Monetize imaginatively
§ Demand good sales tools

As with physical shows, virtual conferences can be monetized in multiple ways—sponsors for the entire event, locations within an event or white papers area can all be sold. Take

advantage of your service provider's ability to differentiate sponsors. Remind sponsors that benefits include not only lead generation, but also branding value and visibility. Make sure your service provider offers exhibitors training and a robust set of intuitive tools, with wizards, to set up their booths and other sponsored locations. The key is to limit manual intervention between organizer and sponsors by enabling all sponsors to easily manage their sponsored locations self-sufficiently.

Maximize registration

In your online outreach, use an event registration page or micro-site as the landing page when prospects click through to details on the virtual event. Minimize the number of clicks needed to register. Put a short description of your event at the top of your registration page. Embed a video or audio "teaser" to your event in your landing page.

Keep your registration process simple by asking for only basic "business card" information plus 2-3 qualifying questions. A long form is a barrier to registration, and you can collect additional information during the event using surveys, polls, live Q&A questions and interactions at exhibitors' virtual booths.

Registration rules
§ Keep it simple
§ Limit qualifying queries
§ Get more data later

Include sponsor logos on all communications to registrants. Use branded sponsor content in email confirmations and reminders to registrants.

Maximize attendance

Based on Unisfair's experience, about half of registrants (52%) will show up for your virtual event. Take your target attendance and double that number to set your goal in registrants. Stay in touch with registrants to promote your event to enhance your show-up rate. Focus on three key areas:

Email - this is a key means to stimulate attendance, starting with the confirmation of registration. Your service provider should have online tools to automate email blasts after you customize its templates with your own language and branding. Plan to send four email messages:

1. Send an automated email confirmation when registration is completed. Include "Add to calendar" functionality to get your virtual event on the registrant's schedule.
2. Send first email reminder one week before the event.
3. Send second email reminder, the "day before" email, 24 hours before the event.
4. Send third email reminder or "show daily," on the morning of each live event day.

Attendance builders
§ Stress email follow-ups
§ Offer incentives to show up
§ Pre-event networking
§ Teleboost

Resist the urge to send even more reminders—the line between helpful reminders and "virtual nagging" is subtle, but you don't want to cross it.

Incentives - incent attendance, not just registration. The usual giveaways—t-shirts, Starbucks cards, premium content can work virtually as well as they do physically.

Teleboosting - calling registrants 24 hours before the event—increases attendance. Your service provider should offer you that resource.

During the Live Event

Real-time managing
§ Keep attendees all day
§ Run on time
§ Keep sessions short
§ Push attendees to exhibit hall
§ Monitor sessions
§ Record SimuLive

The organizer's top priority during the virtual event is to drive high-quality leads to sponsors. By keeping sessions to 30-40 minutes, you leave time between presentations to send attendees to the exhibit hall.

"A buffer between sessions gives attendees time to walk around, answer email or go to the virtual exhibit hall," said MarketingProf's Young.

At the end of conference sessions, push a link on the screen to send attendees directly to the session sponsor's (or speaker's) booth in the exhibit hall. Likewise, rely on your service provider to announce the start of key activities throughout the live event.

For your conference sessions, assign someone to monitor or moderate Q&A at sessions to keep them lively, on topic and on time. Consider using SimuLive (simulated live) capabilities to pre-record presentations to reduce the risks (and stress) of all-live events. Speakers record conference sessions in advance, then play them as "live" at a scheduled time during the event. Engage users with real-time Q&A, even for a pre-recorded speaker.

MarketingProfs found many speakers preferred pre-recording because they could fix mistakes before the presentation went live. Then they only had to show up for the 15-minute Q&A session after their pre-recorded session on the day of the virtual event.

Maximize leads per sponsor and lead qualification

Virtual conference technology produces highly qualified sales leads and a wealth of valuable information very difficult to obtain from physical events.

Optimize navigation on the virtual event site let attendees access information with a minimum number of clicks. Entice attendees with "Featured content" to produce additional clicks.

Maximize leads
§ Polls and surveys
§ Matchmaking
§ Easy navigation

Try these tricks to tease more information out of attendees at the show, keeping exhibitors happy:

- § Use polls and surveys to collect additional qualification information.
- § Leverage professional matchmaking to automatically connect attendees with sponsors based on interests and experience.
- § Minimize the use of free text for qualifying registration fields.

Exhibitor best practices in the virtual booth

The goal of the sponsor/exhibitor is to get people into the booth and convert those leads into sales. Use all of the virtual booth's functionality to provide compelling content and to incent attendees to visit your booth.

Your booth may get busy at certain times during the event—one sponsor at a recent virtual show had 30% of show attendees come through the booth. Make sure you adequately staff your virtual booth, and arrange back-up booth help if traffic gets heavy—booth duty at virtual events simply means asking co-workers to spend time at their computers chatting with booth visitors. Ahead of time, script the beginnings of chats with visitors, at least the friendly “hello” or “I’m with someone right now, I’ll be with you in a minute” type of message.

Exhibiting for Dummies

- § Maximize the number of live interactions
- § Script the beginnings of chats in advance
- § Arrange back-up booth help
- § Schedule demos later
- § Point visitors to collateral

Use chats to elicit additional qualifying information from visitors about their interest in your solutions. Point visitors to white papers, other collateral or datasheets that back up points made in chat sessions.

Make sure all booth reps spend 15-30 minutes with the rep’s interface and tools before the live event. The virtual event provider should make online training available at the sponsors’ convenience.

Post-Event

The virtual event isn’t over when it’s over. Archived events (the average is 90 days but rising) are an on-demand convenience to attendees and generate more leads for sponsors. Typically the on-demand period generates 25% of total leads.

Work with sponsors to maximize their results. Your service provider should offer online tools that rank actionable leads to maximize value for sponsors. Ask about a lead-ranking and qualification engine and other analytic tools. Help sponsors prioritize and categorize how to respond to leads. For example, hot leads may go to direct sales, medium leads to telesales, and cool leads to marketing for further nurturing.

Service providers should help sponsors generate reports that demonstrate ROI, and produce detailed prospect profiles and preferences.

Virtual event organizers should conduct a thorough ROI analysis. Compare your upfront plan to actual results. What worked and what didn’t in the virtual event? Identify specific measures to improve and set goals for the next virtual show.

When it’s over

- § Promote on-demand
- § Rank leads
- § Calculate ROI
- § Email registrants
- § Email attendees
- § Move data into CRM software

Organizers should communicate with registrants. Send a mass “sorry we missed you” email to all who didn’t show up and encourage them to visit the on demand version of the event. Send “thanks for attending” email to attendees. Encourage them to forward to their colleagues the URL to attend the extended on-demand show. Tell both groups about relevant future events.

Organizers and sponsors should be able to easily integrate virtual event attendee data into their sales force automation software.

Conclusions

The organizer's most important decision is picking the service provider whose experience and technology will assure a successful virtual event. Check references. Demand best practices and a unified user experience.

Be clear on your goals and event strategy—everything else flows from them. Schedule your live dates far enough out for optimal promotion.

Press your service provider for easy-to-use tools to recruit attendees and sponsors. Virtual events are new, so organizers will do as much educating as selling to sponsors. Intuitive tools should make sponsors self-sufficient and help organizers throughout the event lifecycle.

Maximize attendee time in the live event with appealing content, live Q&A sessions and breaks between sessions.

After the event, organizers should help sponsors prioritize their leads with a lead-ranking and qualification engine. Integrate attendee data into their CRM software.

About Unisfair

Unisfair is the leading provider of virtual trade shows, expos, conferences, job fairs and marketing events. These virtual events increase demand and generate new revenue for their partners and clients.

A Unisfair Virtual Event Provides: Multiple Venues—Unisfair Virtual Events have all the same facilities of a physical event; Robust Interactivity—attendees, exhibitors, sponsors and presenters use text, audio, video and voice technologies to interact throughout the multiple venues in the event; Experienced Virtual Events Team - From event planning and production, to delivery of post-event follow up and reporting, Unisfair Event Managers have produced more successful events than anyone.

Founded in 2000, Unisfair is a Sequoia Capital Group backed company headquartered in Menlo Park with offices in New York, Boston and Israel.

About The FactPoint Group

The FactPoint Group (www.factpoint.com) is a Silicon Valley-based market research, publishing and consulting firm specializing in the early adoption of new technologies. The FactPoint Group has been producing world class research, analysis, and consulting since 1993 and continues to help its clients sell and use new technology solutions.