



# Virtual + Physical = Hybrid Events

Best Practices for Creating Compelling, Innovative Hybrid Events

## Introduction

For event marketers, 2010 could rightly be called “the year of the hybrid,” as more and more brands add virtual components to expand, enhance and increase the success of their physical event programs. The hybrid model, which combines physical events with a virtual component offers brand marketers a win-win event, as it combines the face-to-face interaction of a live, physical event with the convenience, cost savings and expanded reach and interactivity of virtual technology.

Everywhere you look, whether in the boardroom or the local wifi café, people are texting, tweeting and filming their thoughts and opinions. The explosion of social and networking technology adoption has exceeded all expectations and become just a part of life for millions. It is no surprise then that the world of event marketing has also been transformed by these technologies – with more and more events now combining online and offline elements.

This whitepaper explores the growing role of virtual technologies in physical events (hybrid events) in marketing and communication, as well as identifies five best practices for maximizing their success in achieving organizational goals.

Forty percent of marketing executives surveyed by EMI said they are already employing hybrid events.

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## New Revenue Streams, Qualified Leads Dominate Business Priorities

With clear signs that the economic malaise dominating headlines and corporate marketing budgets is finally lifting, the priority for event marketers in 2010 is to generate new revenue streams and more qualified leads. According to the Event Marketing Institute's latest research, 80 percent of marketing executives surveyed say their top business priority is generating new revenue; more than one-third gave top billing to generating new leads (see Chart 1). Increasing event attendance, awareness and reducing costs are also priorities for over 50% of those surveyed

Virtual event technology can play a key role in achieving these all of these goals. Media and Associations are finding new revenue streams and generating leads for their members and sponsors. Organizations as diverse as the American Institute of Architects and GE Healthcare are increasing event attendance and awareness while significantly reducing costs to reach these new audiences.

Virtual events continue to grow exponentially in number and quality. According to the Event Marketing Institute (EMI), virtual events grew by 300 percent last year, while media research firm Market Research Media Ltd. predicts a compound annual growth rate of 56 percent through 2015. As the economy shifts emphasis from cost control to revenue and attendance growth, leading organizations have recognized that creating hybrid events can dramatically increase event attendance and leverage existing event investments by engaging online audiences and archiving content that would otherwise be lost for educational and revenue generating purposes. In fact, some hybrid and virtual events have actually delivered higher knowledge and learning scores than their physical counterparts could alone.

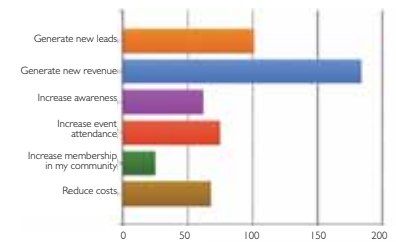
As a result, event marketers have an unparalleled opportunity to further innovate within existing event marketing strategies and tactics by using virtual events to maximize the impact of their existing physical events. Virtual events have already become an important complement to expand the reach and effectiveness of many physical event marketing programs. Forty percent of marketing executives surveyed by EMI said they are already employing hybrid events, defined as an event with both virtual and physical components (see Chart 2). In addition, half of the executives surveyed said the reason they would consider conducting virtual events is to expand the reach of an existing event (see Chart 3).

Event marketers currently using virtual events are most satisfied with the cost savings they create. Over 50% of marketers surveyed by EMI say the cost savings realized by their virtual events are good to excellent. In addition, more than half of event marketers say that both the overall attendee experience and satisfaction with their virtual events and the resulting positive change in the perception and preference for their brand are good.

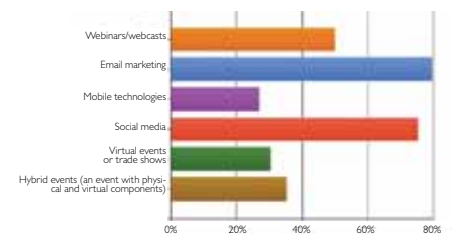
## Challenges Still Remain

Despite this positive outlook, many event marketers are not yet sold on the value of adding virtual events to their physical event strategies. As a result, virtual event platform providers face a number of perception and operational challenges. For

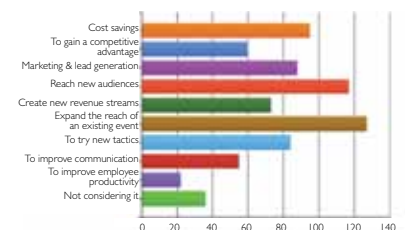
### What Are Your 2010 Business Priorities?



### What Event Technologies Are You Employing?



### What Would You Use Virtual Events For?



example, 43 percent of EMI survey respondents are not even considering hosting a virtual event as part of their external marketing efforts; more than half are not considering adding virtual events to their internal communication programs (see Chart 4 and Chart 5). Perhaps even more telling, 53 percent of event marketers couldn't even name a virtual event provider, according to EMI.

## Virtual Events Provide Better Metrics Than Ever

Ironically, one of the strongest aspects of virtual events is the incredible amount of attendee and exhibitor data they generate. Attendance, behavior, dwell time, number and length of visits to sessions, types of sessions and level of interaction are just a few of the ways that virtual events track and manage valuable data. Yet much of the obstacle to more rapid adoption appears to revolve around metrics – with many event marketers unclear about how or what to measure to gauge the effectiveness or impact of their virtual efforts. EMI's survey found that more than one-quarter of event marketers don't measure the effectiveness of their virtual events at all.

## An Opportunity to Educate

These challenges offer virtual event platform providers a prime opportunity to educate event marketers about how to most effectively plan, execute and measure virtual events and integrate the technology into their existing physical event programs. In particular, there is an opportunity to help brands establish more appropriate metrics and KPIs since one of the key benefits of hosting or participating in a virtual event is the attendee performance and behavioral data that can be collected and analyzed. By leading this education process, virtual event providers can allay existing misperceptions and work with brand marketers to demonstrate how physical events can become more compelling and effective when coupled with a virtual component.

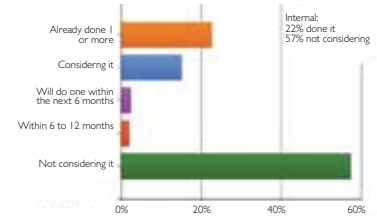
## Hybrid Event Best Practices

### I. Establish & Document Event Objectives

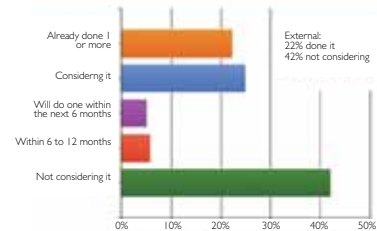
Strategy is critical to hybrid success therefore you must clearly define your objectives and metrics upfront. The internal dialogue among key stakeholders should answer such questions as: Is your organization's goal to cut costs or create incremental revenue? Are you trying to expand your audience or better serve your best customers?

In fact, the more you know about your audience, the more successful your hybrid event will be. Rather than focusing on the technology bells and whistles, focus on your audience's comfort level and access to virtual technology. Accurate targeting begins by asking questions such as: How tech-savvy is your audience? How important is online delivery to them? How price sensitive are they? You can't just build a hybrid event and expect your audience to come. Throw your assumptions out the window and instead find out as much as you can about their business needs. Conduct prospect and customer surveys during the event planning process to

### Has Your Company Held or Sponsored a Virtual Event as Part of its External Marketing Efforts?



### Has Your Company Held or Sponsored a Virtual Event as Part of its Internal Marketing Efforts?



Data courtesy of EMI

help you create an event experience that is technically appropriate, yet engages and delights your audience at the same time. By understanding why people come to your physical events you can begin to understand why they would participate in a complementary virtual event.

## 2. Design

Virtual events require as much thought, planning and effort as a physical event on the front end. Event managers still need to develop relevant content, book keynote and session speakers, sell floor space and manage booth staff. As a result, you need to engage all appropriate hybrid event team members early on, including creative, AV production and technology partners. Build in enough planning time for these teams to work together. Hybrid events are a relatively new marketing tactic. As such, allow ample time for dealing with any unforeseen issues such as technology compatibility. To ensure proper staffing, you'll also need to assign enough staff to cover your physical and virtual events separately. Don't expect staff to monitor both venues simultaneously.

## 3. Train Speakers to Ensure Execution Excellence

The quality of your virtual content will make or break your hybrid event. But don't expect speakers to just "show up" and deliver a compelling presentation – even if they are dynamic face-to-face presenters – if they are not adequately trained, engaged, comfortable and technically supported. For webinar-style events, coach speakers about how to engage their audiences – especially if they've never led a virtual session before. Show speakers how to use their virtual tools by providing a speaker orientation session or program using the virtual platform. This will allow your speakers to see first-hand what the virtual attendee experience will be.

## 4. Create an Integrated Virtual/Physical Experience

While a hybrid event consists of both physical and virtual components, don't overemphasize one over the other. In other words, promote one event brand. By seamlessly integrating both public and private technologies, you can blend the experience for both your online and physical event attendees and create an experience that brings the two events together. For example, enable virtual attendees to view and interact with physical attendees via a live webcam.

## 5. Maximize Hybrid Event Impact With a Post-show Content Plan

You can delight audiences with free content, as well as plan how to monetize and leverage deeper, archived content long after your live hybrid events are over. To do so requires an organizational paradigm shift from marketing a single event to marketing an integrated content distribution channel that connects people with similar interests and goals and then allows them to share and add their own knowledge and perspective. Taking this type of long-term approach creates greater brand awareness and loyalty.



### GE Healthcare Blends Virtual, Physical Booths to Maximize Show Presence

The biggest trade show of the year for GE Healthcare, a \$15 billion division of multinational corporation General Electric, is the Radiological Society of North America's (RSNA) annual convention, which was held in Chicago last year. To maximize its investment and reach out to the customers that couldn't attend the physical event, GE Healthcare created a complementary virtual exhibit that mimicked its physical booth and seamlessly blended the experience for both virtual and physical exhibit attendees.

The virtual exhibit opened 10 days before the RSNA show and ran throughout the five days of the show, as well. GE Healthcare's virtual exhibit was created from the same 3D-models as the 30,000-square foot booth itself, and was divided into several product areas with lounges and seating. The user interface carried the same brand graphics, and included a live webcam that visitors could maneuver through the physical booth to see the action on the floor. A one-on-one chat function connected visitors with virtual exhibit staff to discuss products, ask questions and schedule appointments. Virtual exhibit users could see icons of the booth staff, with the employee's face, name and regional territories online.

GE Healthcare offered 15 to 20 taped demonstrations that walked visitors through new product features and benefits, including handheld shots of the crowds. Visitors could download a variety of product information, including brochures, images and case studies on the 25 or so new GE Healthcare products being introduced at the virtual exhibit. To further link its virtual and physical exhibits, GE Healthcare stationed four HP Touchsmart monitors tuned into the virtual exhibit at its booth, which allowed booth visitors to download those same product materials from the floor as well as view various parts of the booth, plan their visit and set up appointments.

GE Healthcare's virtual exhibit attracted nearly 4,000 attendees and generated four documented sales opportunities. More than 1,500 of those attendees came to the virtual exhibit before the RSNA show even opened; another 400 visited the virtual exhibit after the show closed on Dec. 4th. Visitors spent about 1.5 hours at the virtual exhibit on average, and visited more than five product areas during their visits. The company ultimately spent \$100,000 to create the interactive virtual exhibit, which was 30 percent less than it had spent on more static, flash-based microsites in the past.

### GE Healthcare by the Numbers

- 30% cost savings over previous microsite
- 4,000 participants spent 1.5 hours on average
- 4 documented sales from virtual visitors
- 23 million pounds of carbon emissions eliminated

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