The Future Role of Virtual and Hybrid Events

A White Paper Produced by BizBash and Hubilo

BIZBASH × **Hubilo**

Introduction

In an ever-changing industry, there is a discernible shift occurring. Many of the events that turned virtual for the past two years are reverting back to in-person. The opportunity to gather face-to-face should be cherished and celebrated.

Yet the lessons from new models for community interaction and learning should not fall to the wayside. Technological advances were inevitable and integral to future development among corporations, associations and other organizations. While the pendulum has certainly swung back toward in-person events–making up for lost time–there remains a need to offer virtual and hybrid solutions.

With today's capabilities, combined with time constraints among attendees, events need to deliver a greater ROI that can be demonstrated in real-time. Should the situation arise, planners should be able to spur an event forward in a month's time rather than delay six months or longer. Therein lies the power of virtual and hybrid events that must be demonstrated in this new, new era.

Virtual meetings, conferences and other events are not the only show in town anymore. And with time to reflect on the grand digital experimentation, the time is now for remote experiences to evolve. These cannot be afterthoughts to face-to-face events. There is much room to explore the potential of virtual and hybrid programming to become greater tools for engaging audiences unable to meet in-person for any number of reasons.

Measuring the impact and importance of an event goes beyond engagement metrics. There is a bottom line that needs to be satisfied. To provide the programming to build robust virtual and hybrid experiences, planners need to justify the costs.
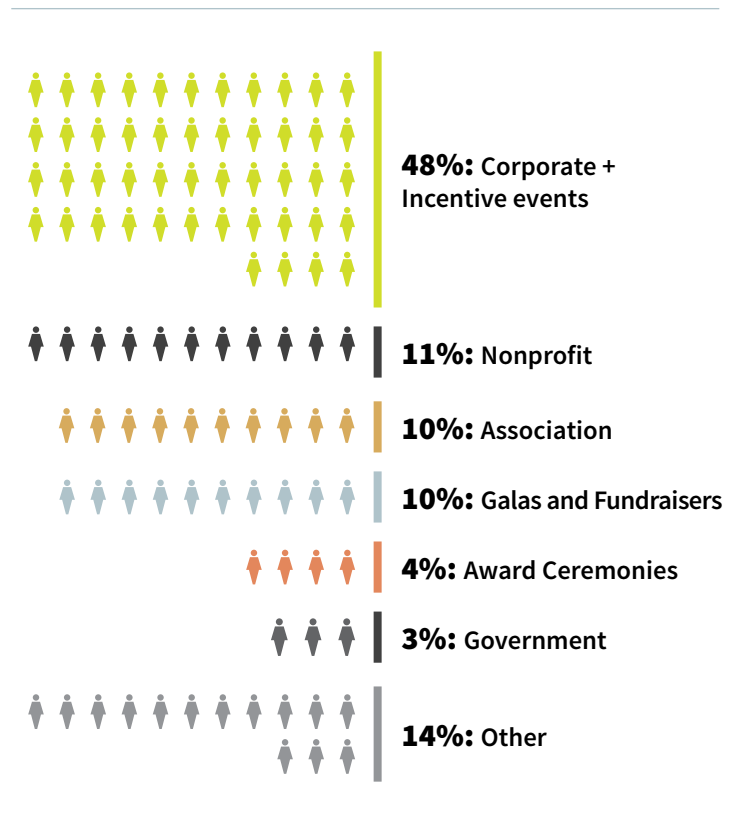
BizBash and Hubilo partnered to survey 350 elite event professionals to gauge the next steps for events. As we will explore in this white paper, a majority are prepared to go forward in a post-pandemic world utilizing traditional and new methods for engaging attendees. The challenge remains making virtual events rewarding experiences that provide value to everyone involved. Read on as we explore the role virtual and hybrid events fit in a world eager to reconnect in-person.

I. About the Audience

BizBash polled leading event professionals to gauge where the industry stands to project the path forward. The respondents cover the gamut, from titles and responsibilities to the market sectors they work in.

The largest portion of those surveyed, at 34%, are meeting planners, managers and producers. A quarter of the respondents work in the C-Suite and 23% work as directors overseeing day-to-day operations. The rest fall into sales, operations, marketing and other categories.

Nearly half (48%) work on corporate events or incentive trips. A full breakdown of markets is seen below:

48%: Corporate + Incentive events

11%: Nonprofit

10%: Association

10%: Galas and Fundraisers

4%: Award Ceremonies

3%: Government

14%: Other

Each style of event represented above experimented with greater reliance on virtual and hybrid events. However, the criteria for judging success is entirely different, just are the budgets involved. For instance, a corporation is more likely to have funds to support a robust technological leap. Meanwhile, nonprofits and associations, which are both reliant on volunteers, will likely lag behind the most cutting-edge solutions. How respective meeting segments continue to adapt will shape the attendee experience, whether events are held strictly in-person, virtually or a combination of both (hybrid).

II. Current Events

Before we look forward, it's important to establish a baseline of where events stand today. Virtual and hybrid events remain robust for the immediate future but our results show a creep toward pre-pandemic planning. In general, smaller events with under 500 attendees are the most prevalent options, as was the case even prior to the pandemic. The only difference is whether groups meet inside the same room or on the same event technology platform.

Interestingly, the Hubilo and BizBash study suggests that organizations are using virtual/hybrid sparingly–akin to an annual conference–or going all-in with year-round content development. The number of planners organizing one through five virtual/hybrid events doubles the second-highest percentage, which is those planning more than 20 such events.
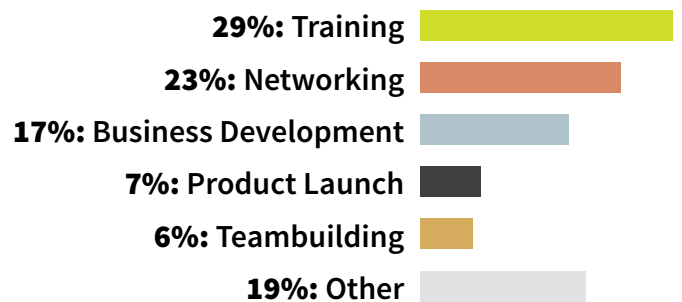
How many virtual and/or hybrid meetings and events are you planning this year?

- 22%: 20+
- 44%: 1-5
- 14%: 10-20
- 20%: 5-10
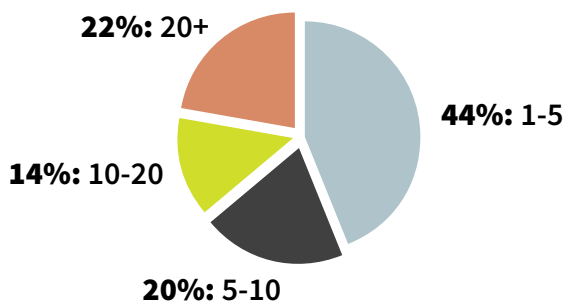
Of these virtual and hybrid events, the majority are relatively small, which encourages greater engagement and does not replicate the experience of large-scale events such as citywide meetings and conferences.

- **33%** host virtual/hybrid gatherings with **fewer than 100** attendees
- **36%** report that **500** is their attendee cap
- **14%** plan for **between 500 and 1,000** attendees
- **10%** organize events for **1,000-5,000** attendees
- **7%** say their audience **exceeds 5,000** attendees

The purpose of the events is often reflected by the size of a group and the channel the content is being presented. With more than two years of hands-on virtual experience, planners have learned what works best in remote environments and what is perhaps best saved solely for in-person meetings and events. Training and networking, two common goals associated with the past two years' worth of gatherings, are the most common stated purposes of gatherings in our study.

- 29%: Training
- 23%: Networking
- 17%: Business Development
- 7%: Product Launch
- 6%: Teambuilding
- 19%: Other

These results remain in line with what is to be expected. But as we will see, the events industry is shifting with the changed attitudes from local, state and national governments. With the United States and other countries dropping COVID-era restrictions, there is clearly momentum to return to in-person meetings. Strikingly, 79% of respondents say they are planning at least some exclusively in-person events in the next year while 21% are keeping remote options available for all of their meetings.

Is this a case of what's old is new again? In the next section, we explore where events are headed.

III. Future Planning

The next phase in the recovery from COVID points toward a greater reliance on in-person conferences, meetings, trade shows and other events. However, this is not a complete U-turn toward 2019 either. More than two years of virtual and hybrid events have made their mark. The benefits of being able to connect teams regardless of physical location remain attractive from a logistical and economic point of view.

Survey results reveal a desire to strike a proper balance between physical–or "In Real Life"–gathers versus when and how to incorporate the technology–ie. Event tech platforms–to meet.
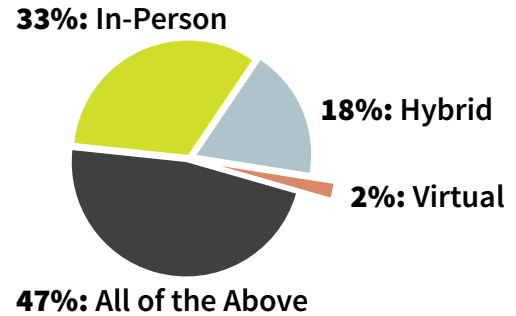
Do you believe we will ever go back to 'normal' regarding having in-person events/meetings?
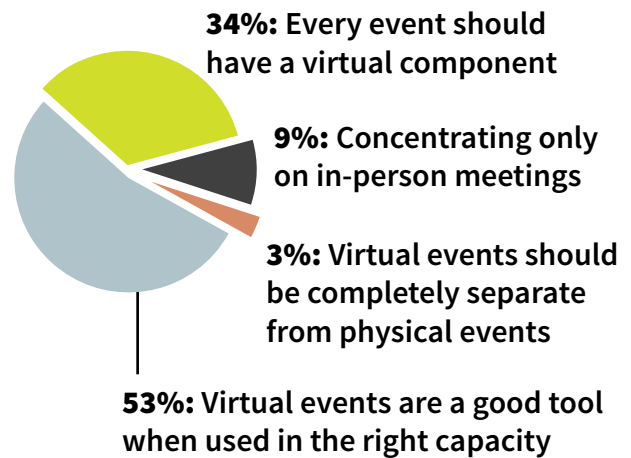
55%: Yes   **45%: No**

Two-thirds of respondents expect to plan fewer virtual and hybrid events beginning next year. An even larger majority (84%) plan to execute more exclusively in-person events compared to 2020 and 2021.

Both statistics are to be expected. Perhaps more revealing about how the industry will evolve are plans to integrate pandemic-era solutions in the new era.

When asked what types of meetings planners expect to organize in the future, respondents said:

33%: In-Person

18%: Hybrid

2%: Virtual

47%: All of the Above

Similarly, respondents widely agree there is room for all styles of meetings and events.

34%: Every event should have a virtual component

9%: Concentrating only on in-person meetings

3%: Virtual events should be completely separate from physical events

53%: Virtual events are a good tool when used in the right capacity

IV. Next Steps

The good news is that a vast majority of respondents (75%) are pleased with their virtual events in the early years of this revolution. Relatedly, confidence in the future of events is strong–92% are confident or somewhat confident events will emerge stronger than ever. These are remarkably high numbers given the forced quick switch to a new normal, in which rules, regulations and expectations have remained a moving target.

That continued success is contingent on improving programming, particularly with virtual and hybrid. It's fair to say that a perfect remote-based event has yet to be created– the same can just as easily be said for traditional events. Data collected from virtual and hybrid events allows for greater transparency into the experience, and more importantly, what can be improved.

Survey results show that 44% of respondents cite audience engagement as the biggest challenge of virtual events. Another 21% say their greatest concern is attendance while 15% point to meeting revenue expectations. Networking isn't meeting the standards for 12% and 9% of respondents seek greater media attention and social media buzz.

Perhaps in search of a better end product, corporations and organizations are open to new partners. Of those surveyed, 56% are confident they have the right long-term event platform and 44% are not sure.

Are the challenges in virtual a result of audiences burning out on the medium? Could virtual events offer more? Are platforms ready to compete with a great reliance on face-to-face meetings?

There are best practices for maximizing virtual events so that attendees are active participants, which in turn creates a more valuable experience for them and the organizing organizations.

Planners would be wise to consider this checklist for building a better remote experience:

- ✔ Use **social media contents** to entice audience pre-event
- ✔ Don't be afraid to rely on **asynchronous content**
- ✔ **Don't replicate** in-person online. Treat it like a different platform
- ✔ Be ready to **adapt**, even on the fly
- ✔ **Dream big**

Just as no two in-person events are alike, the same is true for virtual and hybrid. Planners will need to address known challenges to prove the ROI to attendees and their superiors.

V. Conclusion

Some things never change. Finding the right partners and maintaining those relationships will allow events to grow, both in-person and virtually. Without the ability to predict the future, finding trust in known quantities, like tech partners whose job it is to think ahead.

While many are planning more in-person again, virtual and hybrid looks to remain a consistent role in event strategy–very likely attributable to driving ROI and the real-time audience data gleaned from remote events.

Event technology partners like Hubilo are experts in audience engagement and building events. Increasing attendance and participation will prove the ROI that merits extra expenditures to run virtual and hybrid events. The more value events bring, the more every partner–from technical support to events to sponsors–feel rewarded with knowledge and tools to build a better future.

To learn more about Hubilo and its offerings, **click here.**