

## How to Strengthen your Live Events with Virtual Components

Don't be afraid of virtual events — they may be the best thing that ever happened to face-to-face events

by **Rob Everton** | Published in **April 2009** Focus on Technology | [social media](#) | [technology](#) | [virtual](#)



Combining a virtual audience with a live audience can dramatically increase your reach.  
Photo: Motiva

For the past decade, event marketers have tailored their events to either onsite attendees or an online audience. Rarely were both segments considered equal parts of the same event. For face-to-face events, online visitors were considered acquisition failures.

We can't afford to think that way anymore.

In an increasingly technologically sophisticated world, we have viable options for delivering events right to people's desks and homes, and our attendees are asking for it. Plus, in a downward economy, travel costs will slow attendance at face-to-face events. We must change the way we look at events, and spend as much effort reaching those who cannot attend our events as those who can.

### **The Perfect Storm**

There is a perfect storm that is pushing and pulling people to spend more time attending events online. On one side, events are getting tougher to attend. Travel restrictions, a slow economy, time pressures and other factors are reducing people's ability to go to face-to-face events. On the other side, the online experience has greatly improved. In fact, companies have started to figure out that there are satisfactory alternatives available online and that perhaps they should consider limiting their expenses. Pushing from both sides are environmental concerns — events and companies are feeling the pressure to be more "green," and that means less jet fuel.

## Online Adds Value for Attendees

The natural tendency of any event marketer is to push everyone to the event, fearing that the availability of online content from the event will cannibalize the onsite attendance. To some extent, this is true — especially now that the online experience has improved to the extent that it can reasonably replace much of the onsite experience. But remember, face-to-face events aren't going away any time soon. People still need to touch products, shake hands and get the heck out of their cubicles; they can't do any of these things online yet. Once rooted in that essential belief, we are free to treat the online audience as participants, rather than scavengers. Now you have a larger, not smaller, event. Now you have greater ROI.

Delivering your event activities and content online can significantly augment the onsite experience. Your audience can network with each other, contribute ideas and learn some of the concepts before they attend. By the time the event occurs, they are already engaged, in sync with the topics being discussed, and armed with a plan of who they want to meet and what they want to see. This will make the event more valuable for attendees and result in lower attrition.

**"People still need to touch products, shake hands and get the heck out of their cubicles."**

Initially, some of these components may be outside of your event budget. You may need to reallocate the budget in order to support your online audience. However, you will find that small, incremental increases geared toward the online audience will result in proportionally larger overall reach and ROI.

When you have that perfect blend of onsite and online support, be sure to register and measure both audiences. Once you have a compelling experience online, your event will naturally appeal to a broader audience and onsite attendance will likely increase. The online content you create this year will create vivid justification for next year's crop of onsite attendees.



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