REIMAGINING HYBRID EVENTS AS FLEXIBLE EXPERIENCES:

A step-by-step guide

The pandemic kicked off a renaissance of choice for audiences, granting them the decision-making power to not only plan their workweeks, but also decide how they tune in to and attend events. Explore the decision-making processes, formats, technology toolkits and engagement strategies that event marketers should consider to attract and engage attendees in the new era of hybrid experiences.

Consider this scenario: An attendee shows up in person for the first day of a conference. On the second day, they log in virtually from home, where they're taking care of a sick child. Later, they catch up on the content they missed on demand.

In-person, virtual, hybrid: There is no hierarchy to the event format. In fact, in our post-pandemic world, an attendee may experience one event in multiple formats. They will be able to listen to keynotes, ask questions, vote in polls, network with other attendees, visit sponsor booths, and collaborate in whiteboard sessions.

The question is, what will hybrid look like for your organization?

In any format, the role of events is the same: To bring people together for a common purpose and build community. Brands use events to position themselves in the market, build loyalty, or reach new audiences.

But a lot has changed since the pandemic. Event formats, attendee needs and preferences, and even how event marketers view the structure and lifecycle of an event is different.

Ready to embrace the hybrid journey mindset? Read on.

INSIDE:

THE HYBRID JOURNEY

Meet your new audience—and event lifecycle

Remember when hybrid meant little more than live-streaming a keynote presentation? When the pandemic struck and events moved online, it became apparent that the experience needed to become richer. And it did, with chats, breakout rooms, polls, and more. Now, with momentum building for in-person events, organizers have to rethink hybrid.

Marketers need a better definition of the hybrid event that provides the excitement, creativity and can't-miss-this atmosphere of an in-person event but equally serves virtual audiences.

Now, as it's become easier to create more blended experiences and improved virtual experiences, many events will live on a spectrum somewhere between fully virtual and fully in-person, built to serve any audience, no matter how they attend.

Getting 'Hybrid-Ready'

For event marketers who believe that planning a hybrid event is really planning two separate events, well, that's not quite true.

"Hybrid-ready doesn't just mean mashing two audiences together and being able to serve them. It's thinking hybrid-native," says Nolan Ether, Webex Events content marketing leader. "If any given attendee can attend, however they choose, on any given day, what will be the best experience?"

Another component to think about is the goals of your event program. Are you trying to expand audience reach? Leverage your virtual components to grow in-person attendance? Build year-round communities? Deepen your relationship with customers? With those goals in mind, you can design a program that spans multiple events that meets your strategic objectives.

A hybrid event platform should support audiences no matter how they choose to attend. "There's a new world we're living in where there's this blending of digital and in-person, and those lines will continue to blur," says Ether. "It's about being ready for that change and being able to support that change."

Meet Your New Attendee

Attendees have developed new expectations and behaviors that will influence hybrid strategies moving forward. Three key areas of change include attention spans, the importance of choice and expectations surrounding personalization.

- **Attention spans:** Attendees simply are not willing to watch talking heads on a stage or a screen for an hour or longer. The solution? Shorter sessions—think 20 or 30 minutes, maximum—with more engagement and interactivity. If you're concerned with maintaining a sense of continuity, Ether suggests modeling the event after a television show by dividing content into segments. Start with an introduction, take a poll, share slides, then jump to a pre-recorded video. Keep the content moving.
- **Consider this other essential aspect to meeting expectations for production:** Your audiovisual capabilities. Is a single, fixed camera the best option for your virtual attendees? A hybrid-native approach would use multiple cameras at different angles—including having a camera showing audience reactions—and cater to both audiences equally.
- **Choice:** Hybrid events allow attendees to create a customized experience. They choose the format, the content, the timing, and the level of their interaction. Someone who used to be forced to choose between two concurrent sessions now can watch the session they missed on demand at the end of the day or even days later. When attendees choose how they engage, they become more empowered.
- **Personalization:** Gamification through scavenger hunts throughout the platform, "secret words" shared during sessions, and points for various types of interactions can give attendees a sense of fun and satisfaction as they see themselves atop a leaderboard.

"There's a rise in expectations, and virtual will need to step up," Ether says. "How do you continue to engage audiences? The challenge is the unknown, but the same old, same old is not going to work."

Focusing on the Event Lifecycle

Events can now be better integrated into the overall marketing strategy as milestones along a larger customer journey—with measurable results. Picture a brand that builds a narrative prior to an event, makes major announcements and deepens relationships at the event, and then continues the conversation with engagement including follow-up events.

This is the era of digital transformation, with events blending into the larger marketing journey. Instead of letting events exist in silos, marketers can make connections from event to event. For instance, after a large conference, they can follow up with more intimate meetups. The result is building loyalty and creating communities.

Event tech gives event marketers access to data that can measure results of an event to prove ROI to internal stakeholders and to sponsors, much like paid media ad spends. However, you need a plan to manage the data. Some brands may choose best-in-class event tech for each component of an event. That can lead to problems such as data silos that require integration—a task best handled by IT departments. The challenge is compounded if departments within one company choose different solutions.

"Every time you do that, you're adding complexity to the integration piece," Ether says. "You need a seamless end-to-end solution. It makes it much easier for you to not be handcuffed by the technology and instead focus on the experience for your attendees."

PORTFOLIO CHECKLIST

10 steps toward a hybrid event program transformation

Moving into a post-pandemic reality has given everyone permission to reimagine their event portfolios. Attendees will welcome—and possibly even expect—innovation in format, content, and engagement.

"There's a lot to unpack about the new hybrid-ready world that we're in," says Andrew Pearson, chief marketing officer at Webex Events. "Now is the time when organizers are looking at what their event program used to look like pre-pandemic and how the virtual world worked for them during the pandemic. Organizers are understanding that they just can't lean on all virtual in the future. But they want the best of both."

How to get started:

1. **Rethink the fundamentals, starting with your event size.** In the short-term, organizers are projecting smaller in-person events but want to retain the reach of their virtual audience. For example, Pearson says, that could look like 500 attendees in Las Vegas with 5,000 virtual attendees. "Hybrid is proving itself to be very effective, as long as you're doing it with really clear reasons in mind."

2. **Define the value for each audience.** When there's a significant difference in cost for the in-person and the virtual tickets, organizers need to determine specific benefits that will justify higher in-person prices. "You need to be able to plan some timeframes where the in-person attendees are doing something that your virtual audience physically can't participate in," Pearson says.

3. **Build ways for virtual and in-person audiences to interact with each other.** Bring both audiences together during networking sessions, whiteboard sessions, or roundtables with sponsors. "When you blend these two together and have in-person folks participating from their seat taking polls, liking things, suddenly you get value-add for both audiences," says Pearson.

4. **Conceptualize your program like a broadcast.** Take a page from producers of award shows or live sports competitions and consider technical questions like where to place cameras and what tools you need to bring speakers and other content elements together into a seamless production.

5. **Mix up your surroundings.** In a hybrid-ready world, speakers can address audiences from a variety of settings. Present a panel in a studio, then move to a speaker in a home office. Have an in-person emcee moderate a session with virtual panelists. Production managers can create a seamless experience by pulling people on and off the screen and overlaying slides or video. "There's an element of complexity," Pearson says, "but when you get it right you end up with a magical experience."

6. **Explore simulive content.** Live sessions carry risks, from technical issues to a speaker who flubs their words. One solution is to present content simulive. That means pre-recording content, editing it, and debuting it live to both audiences. "Everyone is experiencing it at the same moment and the wows happen at once," Pearson says.

7. **Empower speakers to lean into technology.** Skilled hybrid event organizers will pull through user-generated content from the digital platform onto the screen. For example, launch a poll on Slido and funnel the results into a word cloud. An emcee can highlight an insightful comment from the chat and weave it into the discussion. The tools create interactivity and generate crowd-sourced content.

8. **Structured free time.** In-person audiences need time to physically move to new sessions, grab a coffee, and explore exhibitor booths. You don't want to tether your audience to a stage, Pearson says, and that goes for a virtual audience, too. Hybrid-ready platforms offer options for downtime such as creating a video room for "birds of a feather" breakout sessions. Invite attendees to drop into a room to network with a small group, or assign a moderator to ask questions.

9. **Expand your event timeline.** Pearson says the next frontier is moving events from a moment in time to an event program. Opening the platform "early" gives audiences a chance to map their experience and interact with engagement tools. After the event, encourage attendees to explore content on demand. In a few months, host a smaller event that's virtual or regional, or several regional events that are connected. Build an event cycle that drives sustainable relationships with customers.

10. **Become data-driven.** Hybrid events present new opportunities for collecting data—and not just for virtual attendees. The key is motivating in-person audiences to download the event's mobile app. (Forget bulky laptops—people are more likely to use their phones.) It's easy to open the app, vote in a poll, or play a game to win prizes. When the app offers more than just the agenda, attendees engage and organizers capture valuable data to strengthen their hybrid strategy going forward. Says Pearson: "There is a ton of value to unlock."

THE ESSENTIALS

Inside the flexible hybrid event toolkit—key features to capabilities

Enabling a networking experience between an attendee on the show floor with someone in a home office is now a reality. Or at least it should be with a flexible hybrid event platform. Today's toolkit is more robust, yet easier to use, says Christina Torok, Webex Events product marketing manager. Here's a peek inside.

Tech Made Simple

The foundation is the right event management platform. As the world pivoted to virtual, event tech companies responded by offering platforms for hosting groups online. Webex Events (formerly Socio) began as an in-person platform and quickly adapted to virtual events. Now it's taking the best of both worlds to offer flexible solutions for hybrid events.

In the early days of hybrid events—when the program involved streaming a few keynote sessions—event marketers had to juggle different tech solutions for tasks like registration, ticketing, database management, content management, and more. They had to be integrated, which could be complex. Today, event marketers no longer have to use separate technology stacks. Webex Events' hybrid platform, for example, contains the features and capabilities that unite the virtual and the in-person using one tool.

What's more, the technical requirements for operating an event platform have lessened.

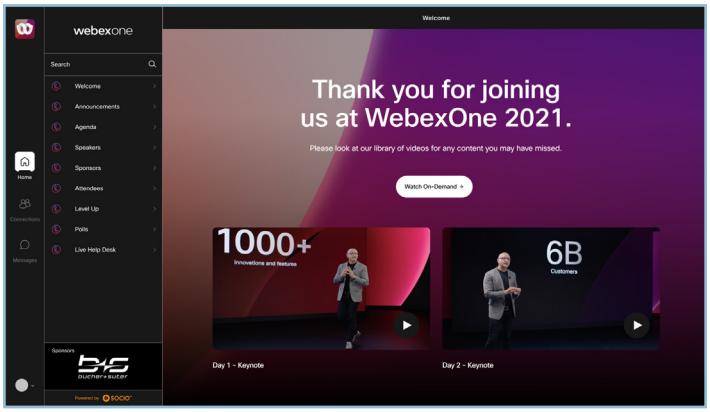
"Over the years the evolution of being able to democratize building an event for people who don't have an IT degree has come full circle," says Torok. "You think that because so much is under the hood it must be complex. But the platform uses a drag-and-drop technology. I can use my cursor to build an event that's also secure enough that I'm able to do credit card transactions, manage my attendee data, and customize it to the nth degree. Years ago, it would cost you a lot of money and resources. Now with my cursor, I'm building an event that will support 75,000 people and looks like it took a team of 500 people to build."

Get Flexible

A seamless hybrid event platform must offer flexibility. It's not just talk—Webex Events experienced it when planning its flagship conference, WebexOne, for 75,000 registrants. Less than two months before the event, the Delta variant hit and they scrapped the in-person component.

"We were able to make a small change to the platform and all of the work we had done going into it—speakers, sponsors, attendee registration—everything was still connected," says Torok. "If you had asked us to do that even two years ago, we would have had to scrap everything and cancel the event or have a slimmed-down version."

Another must-have tool is the ability to make changes in real time. After a poll launched during a recent event, an attendee wrote in the chat that they needed an option for "all of the above." Within 20 seconds, the planning team updated the poll. Some attendees changed their answer and it provided a new point of discussion in the session. "The way we can deliver content has become so immersive online," says Torok. "Things like virtual fatigue can be mitigated if you choose the right content and use the right tools to make that content engaging."



A Personalized Platform

Cookie-cutter platforms will not set your event apart. Look for a platform that will support your branding beyond a logo in the corner of your broadcast. "Being able to let the technology fall into the background and pull your brand and culture and your speakers forward is one of the most important things," Torok says.

Make intentional design choices with colors, icons, features, tabs, even attendee badges. They create a through-line for the event that will make it memorable for attendees. Encourage attendees to build profiles, add their photos, a short bio, and their interests. Then highlight platform features that will resonate with your audience. For some events, that could be gamification, for others, networking. Create multiple areas where they can meet with each other and enable meetings between in-person and virtual attendees.

Personalization extends to sponsors as well. Effective platforms allow sponsors to customize their virtual spaces. They should be able to start meetings in real time just like an in-person trade show. Banner ads can drive people to sponsor booths. "Giving sponsors the ability to customize and curate the space that represents their brand provides opportunities to meet people and get value from the event," says Torok.

After the event, organizers can use data, such as which sessions people attended and the sponsors they met with, to curate future communications with individual attendees. That's where true personalization comes into play.

A FRESH PLAYBOOK

Ideas to inspire and level-up digital engagement

Now that you are hybrid-ready, here are several use-case scenarios for fresh inspiration and ideas for livening up chats, boosting sponsor engagement, hyping live-streamed sessions, and more.

Build Anticipation

Use time before sessions or during breaks to promote upcoming content and build energy and anticipation, says Riley Sawyers, Webex Events customer success manager. Play a teaser video. Choose a random attendee in the chat for a prize. Air pre-recorded or live content from a DJ, magician, or other performer. Announce when codes for games or other challenges will be announced.

Reinvent the Meet-and-Greet

Give attendees one-on-one interaction with speakers in a variety of formats. Too many questions for the keynote? Open a video room following the session to address questions that didn't get answered. Want something preplanned? Post office hours for a video room. For an asynchronous interaction, attendees can leave comments or questions in the speaker's profile for the speaker to respond to later.

Curate a Chat That's 🔥

If you're only using the live chat to ask attendees where they're logging in from, you're just scratching the surface. Sawyers suggests surprising audiences with a guest appearance in the chat—a celebrity, a company honcho, or the keynote—to juice up the conversation. And don't underestimate a well-chosen emoji for a quick but effective response in the chat. In a debate-style session, invite people to flood the chat with emojis that correspond to the side they agree with. Sawyers saw effective use of emoji at a recent hybrid event for the National Speakers Association. Emcees encouraged the in-person and virtual audience to drop emojis including applause and fire when something exciting happened. Our verdict? 💯

Create Competition

Hybrid environments are built for gamification. The Webex Events game feature presents tasks or trivia questions that attendees complete for points. Plan a virtual scavenger hunt in which the answers are found during sessions or within a sponsor booth. Often it doesn't matter if there are prizes, Sawyers says (though it doesn't hurt). What people want most is a unique experience.

Change Your Surroundings

MAD//Fest, a marketing, advertising, and disruption festival, mastered the art of the format switch at its 2021 hybrid event in London. Attendees bounced from a streaming session to a meeting-style workshop, to a virtual micropub that brought the 4,000 in-person and 4,000 virtual attendees together.

Level-Up Sponsor Engagement

Create a virtual wall and ask attendees to leave a post and be entered into a prize drawing. Sawyers recalled a hotel that asked attendees, "What would you do if you could join us at a particular destination?" Attendees posted pictures and comments. Sponsors can follow up with personalized responses. Push notifications sent through the platform can direct even more traffic to sponsors.

Liven Up Lunch

One highlight of a company's annual employee meeting was the camaraderie formed over lunch. Event marketers wanted to recreate that in their hybrid event, so Webex Events built a virtual lunch room. People grabbed a seat at a "table" and started chatting with others using video, an avatar, or their profile photo. They could switch tables to meet more of their co-workers. "It was a very simple way to use the video rooms but something that was important to them," Sawyers said. "They didn't lose that in the virtual component."

Welcome in a Third Party

Look for a platform with the flexibility to integrate third-party tools. Examples include applications like Slido, which helps transform presentations into two-way interactions with features like word clouds; the collaborative whiteboard platform Miro; or the virtual photo booth from Snapbar.

Adjust on the Fly

Metrics give instant insight into how attendees are using features. Sawyers recalls an event where few people were participating in a game. It turns out, organizers had listed it at the bottom of the speaker list. The next day, they bumped it up on the agenda for greater visibility and drew more participants.

"The virtual component will probably never go away," says Sawyers. "We'll continue to see hybrid use-cases that surprise us."

ABOUT

Webex Events (formerly Socio) is an end-to-end event management platform that powers immersive virtual, hybrid, and in-person events. Webex Events supports multi-track events with custom virtual venues, mobile apps, live and on-demand streaming, registration and ticketing, interactive attendee networking and in-person solutions like onsite check-in & badge printing, lead retrieval & live display. Webex Events joins award-winning support with #1 ranked user satisfaction. Learn more.