BRIGHT LIGHTS, BIG OPPORTUNITY:
THE POWER OF CONFERENCE AND EVENT VIDEOS
Large and small companies are using live and on-demand videos to drive revenue, leads, customer satisfaction and brand awareness

By Blaise Zerega

After recovering from the Great Recession, the conference and event industry is booming once again. Audiences everywhere are eagerly embracing many of the things they've missed over the past four years: engaging with peers, learning about new developments in their industries, hearing dynamic speakers firsthand. And, of course, networking, networking, networking.

But that doesn't mean everything has returned to business as usual. "There is now a much greater focus on value for dollar than there was pre-crash," says Gregg Talley, CEO of Talley Management Group, an event management firm based in Mt. Royal, New Jersey. "Companies would rather send two people to a live event instead of the five they used to send."

That's probably why hybrid conferences, or those that combine both physical and virtual elements, are growing quickly in popularity.

A key part of any hybrid event is online video. After all, video adds an element of flexibility and convenience to the conference experience, allowing people to enjoy the proceedings at their own pace.

What's more, video-friendly devices like iPads and smartphones are increasing the amount of time users watch videos online. And conferences, with their high-quality keynote speakers, engaging breakout sessions, and cutting-edge professional content, are one of the best sources of rich, intelligent information.

While nothing is ever going to displace the face-to-face experience that is the hallmark of live conferences, video and live streaming are becoming important complements to existing events. A video strategy has a number of significant benefits, say experts like Talley. It can help expose a conference to a much wider audience, as well as extend the shelf life of the event by making the content available year-round to viewers across the globe.

A video strategy also meets the needs of cost-sensitive virtual attendees, who don't have to dig deep into their expense accounts for airfare and accommodations. There are also substantial economic advantages for conference organizers, who can generate significant revenue from online video in the form of sponsorships, advertising, and pay-per-view sales.

Of course, some fear that a virtual component will cannibalize the live event if conference goers choose to stay home and enjoy the event from the comfort of their laptop or tablet. But, in fact, conference organizers are discovering the exact opposite is true.

The Professional Convention Management Association (PCMA), the leading organization for meeting and event professionals, first experimented with virtual programs at its 2010 annual conference. Nearly 3,500 people attended the live conference with hundreds more attending virtually. The following year, live attendance at the PCMA conference surpassed the previous year's total. What's even more interesting, PCMA counted at least 120 meeting goers who came in person after attending virtually the previous year, supporting the notion that a video strategy will actually help drive attendance to live meetings.

Scott Schenker, vice president of global events at business software giant SAP, agrees that video content serves as a powerful magnet for the live conference. "We are now using the online platform to promote the value of our Sapphire Now event, and it is driving attendance to the show," he says. "For people who are not sure they want to come, now they go and take a look at what happened last year and the year before. They can see what they're missing. Physical events still have a unique value proposition. They allow for networking, socializing and unintended learning in ways that online platforms still don't allow for."

SAP uses video to enhance the Sapphire Now event, a global gathering of SAP customers, for physical and virtual attendees alike. "The physical attendees can and should benefit from that online component of the event," says Schenker. "For example, I may not be able to be at two places at once, even though there are two sessions going on at the same time that I really want to see. So, when I get back to my room that night, I can watch the other one online."

He adds that while Sapphire Now, which attracts tens of thousands of live attendees, can't run every day of the year, the virtual component can and should. SAP captures video of every keynote speech, as well as more than 700 breakout sessions. It also captures video content from its smaller Forum events, which are mini-Sapphire conferences held in about 80 cities each year.

"Our online platform runs 365 days a year," says Schenker. "It is always there because the interest among our customers is not always in perfect alignment with our events calendar. If, at midnight on Thursday over the Thanksgiving holiday, some customer wants to watch a video from Sapphire Now on the implementation of business intelligence software, they should be able to do that."

SAP's SapphireNow.com site features content from the last three years of events. Schenker admits that the ultimate purpose of the online platform isn't to increase attendance at the live event, but rather to serve as a channel for pipeline acceleration and deal flow. That's a primary reason why it offers its virtual content for free.

SAP is one of the largest technology companies in the world. It can afford to invest heavily in its online video strategy. But can smaller organizations with limited budgets add a virtual component to their conferences without breaking the bank?

That's a question Steph Pfeilsticker, senior event planner at Thrivent Financial, asked herself last year before launching a virtual extension of the firm's annual conference, which offers education and networking opportunities for financial brokers. "The cost of streaming media is really coming down," she says. "Two years ago the prices quoted to me were just outrageous. They were twice what we ended up paying. And they are probably even lower today. So this is not price prohibitive."

Pfeilsticker says she was inspired by what tech firms like SAP were doing with their virtual meetings. "Those companies have huge budgets and deep technical resources, but you can still pursue a successful video strategy even if you are not a big tech company," she says.

Each year, Thrivent invites thousands of independent financial brokers who sell its products to a conference at the Minneapolis Convention Center. Last year, Thrivent also attracted 450 virtual registrants who paid $49 each. While the virtual registration fee was nominal, it did help recoup some of the costs. Perhaps the best indication of success was that a whopping 51 percent of virtual attendees said they would attend the show in person next year.

For its upcoming conference, Thrivent plans to increase its return on investment by offering sponsorship opportunities to its partners. After all, online video sponsorships provide high-impact, long-term branding – and for significantly more value than the physical event. For instance, companies can sponsor one of the recorded Q&A sessions and have their logos serve as the backdrop. Or they can buy time on the video feed when there is a five-minute break between live sessions.

"Sponsors want to be viewed as cutting edge and want their names associated with education," notes Gregg Talley, whose firm organizes conferences for more than two dozen organizations including the International Game Developers Association and the American Geriatrics Society. "If you can attach your name to a high-quality conference, then that conveys a positive message about your brand."

Organizations of all stripes are discovering they can increase revenue and sponsorships by adding a virtual component to their events. "The revenue potential is significant," says Mary Beth Micucci, director of distance education at the Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society (HIMMS). This year, for the first time, HIMMS, a non-profit organization focused on using information technology to improve healthcare, added a virtual component to its annual conference. The show attracted 37,000 physical attendees and nearly 1,000 virtual ones.

Pricing for the virtual audience ranged from $299 to $549 for the week-long show, which featured keynote addresses by Biz Stone of Twitter and best-selling author/ explorer Dan Buettne. The virtual program also featured live streaming of a dozen educational sessions, videos of pre-recorded sessions, and plenty of online networking opportunities. Sponsors produced a number of paid advertisements for the virtual conference and, for next year's show, they will have the opportunity to broadcast live demos from the show floor.

Successful virtual events require much more than shooting some video and pushing it out to the Web. The best conferences are designing programs that deeply engage the virtual audience and pull those viewers into the action. SAP, for instance, noticed that after each breakout session at is Sapphire Conference, there was always a small, passionate group that crowded around the presenter. So SAP decided to invite those folks into a discussion room where they could ask detailed questions. These intimate gatherings were captured on video and streamed in real time to the virtual audience. Moreover, virtual attendees were encouraged to ask questions via chat panels, IM and Twitter, effectively pulling them into the conversation.

"Conference organizers are pouring more and more into the virtual element," says Michael Doyle, executive director of the Virtual Edge Institute, an international organization dedicated to advancing the development and adoption of virtual events. "They are hiring virtual emcees; they are building studios on the show floor like a CNN stage set or an ESPN desk; and they are doing interviews and commentary exclusively for the virtual audience. The idea is to get people excited about attending the event in person – to capture the energy and show them what they are missing. And it really works."

SAP, for its part, deployed an army of Social Reporters who advocated for the virtual attendees. These reporters had their own "beat," covering different industries and areas of innovation at the show. They produced a stream of video blogs and social media posts to connect the virtual audience with the live action at Sapphire Now.

Mary Beth Micucci of HIMMS says she was amazed at how many virtual attendees stayed glued to the conference channel for the duration of the HIMMS12 event. "People on average stayed the entire time," she says. "They blocked off time on their calendars, and they came back day and after day. They even got to know each other really well because of the chat and social networking features, so they would eagerly greet each other every morning."

Thrivent, meanwhile, hired a professional emcee to engage with the video audience. In between keynotes or breakout sessions, virtual attendees were treated to exclusive content, such as the virtual emcee conducting a Q&A with top speakers, including Frank Abagnale, the famous con-artist and inspiration behind the movie *Catch Me If You Can.*

"We wanted to create a TV-like feel with easy transitions between one segment and the next, because that is the experience viewers are most familiar with," says Thrivent's Pfeilsticker. "You don't want to give the virtual audience any incentive to leave."

You also want to give the virtual audience plenty of incentive to come back, even after the actual event is over. Too often, conference organizers don't succeed at extending the life of content. They stick the video somewhere in the ether to gather dust. And then they wonder why it gets so little traffic.

"To spark some interest, we advise event organizers to bring back the content in monthly installments," says Doyle of the Virtual Edge Institute. "Also, invite the speaker back to moderate an online discussion and make an event of it. That really seems to work."

Rather than leave viewership to chance, some conference organizers are publishing event video to sites that feature like-minded content. SAP, for example, hosts all of its video on the Sapphire Now site, but it also publishes high-impact keynotes and breakout sessions on YouTube and other channels. "Our YouTube views have exploded and that can only help drive interest in our events and product offerings," says Schenker.

By adding a video strategy, conference organizers are exponentially expanding the impact of their events. They are whetting the appetites of people who will want to see in person what they have witnessed virtually. And they are reaching an ever-wider audience that might never be able to attend in person.

"I believe wholeheartedly that a virtual extension greatly benefits the live conference," says HIMMS's Micucci. "During our last show, I was chatting online with a number of virtual attendees, and they expressed how excited they were for our next live conference in New Orleans. In fact, a group of virtual attendees who met online are even planning on going to New Orleans together so they can meet face to face."

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