



bcw INSIGHTS

EVENT VIRTUALIZATION

WHY VIRTUAL EVENTS ARE MORE THAN VIRTUALIZED EVENTS

One minute it was "You are what you experience." Then came COVID-19. Meetings, events, concerts, festivals, conferences were first postponed, then cancelled. It's been a long road, with everyone eagerly awaiting the time when we can safely return to the daily activities of normal life. And even if we are not there yet, we are already beginning to understand that the event business will change forever.

Status Quo & Current Challenges

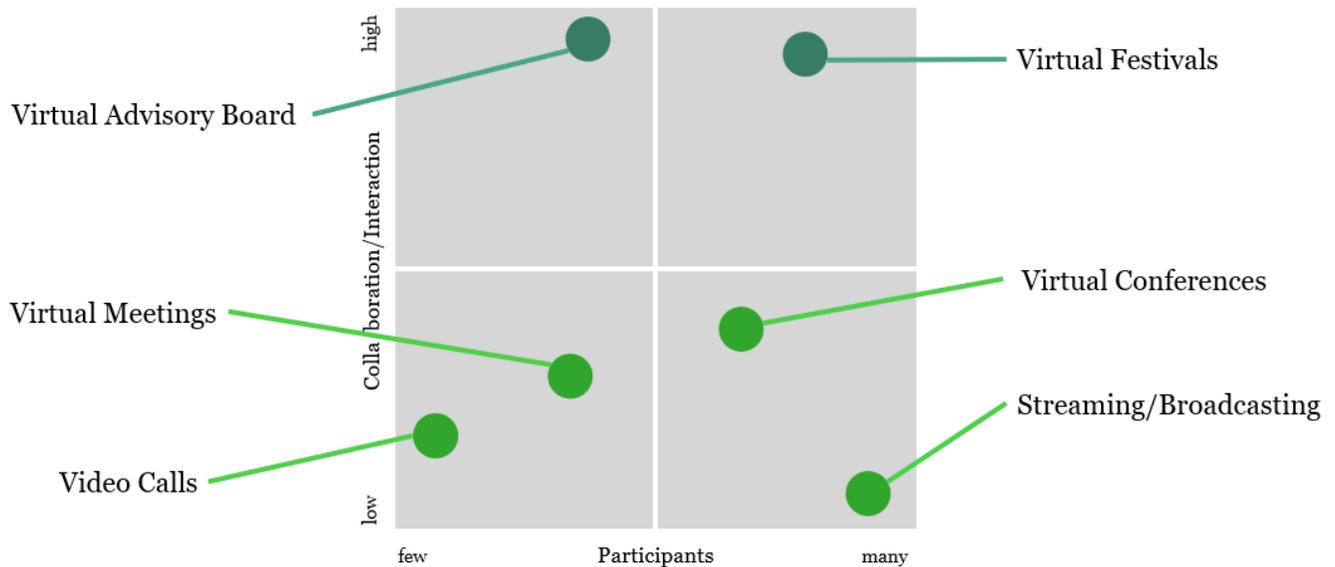
The boundaries between offline and online are disappearing. Our future will be hybrid. Events will be hybrid. This also means that communicators must remain extremely flexible and fully equipped to help their clients adapt to new ways of engaging with audiences. COVID-19 has made work life even less predictable, even harder to plan than it already was. But COVID-19 has acted as a catalyst for digital transformation. Event organizers, digital planners and concept developers must be flexible, continue to remove obstacles to digital formats and respond to people's needs with new forms of experience.

Virtual Events: But How?

From influencer events to press conferences to trade fairs, long before COVID-19 started, many more different types of events began to surface as hybrids – taking place partly online and partly offline. Now that trend is growing even stronger. Pioneers are digitizing sessions in combination with digital platforms and content formats or are even moving events completely into the virtual (3D) reality space, as was recently done with the [Cobot Exference 2020](#) as a virtual expo and conference. Here, visitors were able to come together at virtual exhibition stands and learn about possible applications of robots. Major events such as the [GTC Digital Conference](#) of chip manufacturer NVIDIA, on the other hand, have long functioned as hybrid events and are now completely digital, comprising of a wide offer of live sessions and on-demand formats.

Event Virtualization

Why Virtual Events Are More Than Virtualized Events – August 2020



Different types of events require different solutions. You don't necessarily need to create technically sophisticated virtual spaces. Two factors help you decide which formats and channels are suitable and which technical solutions are needed: First, the number of participants envisioned and second, the intensity of the desired interaction during the event.

The following channels and formats are suitable for digital meetings and events, among others:

- Video conferencing and collaboration tools for direct dial-in and exchange, including Skype, Microsoft Teams, Zoom (incl. breakout session option), Slack, Circuit, Avaya Spaces, Google Meet and Goto Meeting, to name a few
- Social media for all kinds of social gatherings on networks like Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube, Twitter or Twitch with formats such as live broadcasting sessions, closed events, live Q&A, video chat, video series and groups with event function or video conferencing via "Facebook Messenger Rooms"
- Streaming services for live broadcasting of online events, lectures, videos, webinars, seminars and product-specific tutorials on a website or social media, via providers such as Techcast, Converve, Brightcove, Streampark, Wirecast, StreamYard, Doo and local service providers
- Virtual reality for more demanding events such as 3D trade fairs, labs, product launches or meetings with solutions such as Microsoft Alt Space VR or Engage, Meetyoo by Ubivent, Völkel, Bizzlogic, Inscale, VRtual X or VR Expert

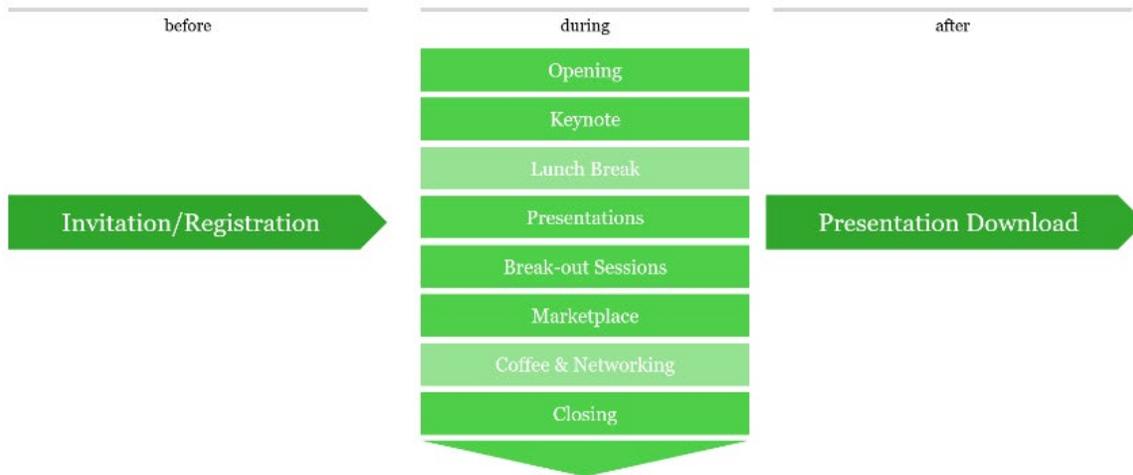
Planning of Virtual Events

Digital event formats differ significantly from face-to-face meetings, therefore you have to conceive and structure them completely differently. Up until now, the planning of physical events used to take place largely "vertically": First the date of the event was determined, then the programme was filled with as many agenda items as possible. We all know the discussions about whether to squeeze in another interactive format in the afternoon ("Mr. Mayer from sales would like a marketplace session"), or to use the time for another presentation ("brand marketing of brand XY would also like to say something") or to

Event Virtualization

Why Virtual Events Are More Than Virtualized Events – August 2020

extend the coffee break ("networking is key"). The time before and after the physical event, on the other hand, was often merely used to register participants and send presentations.



The needs of participants often took second place, if at all, in this process. Unfortunately, as a result, these events all too often ended up as overly lengthy and tiring gatherings. In the digital space, you can't allow for this to happen, simply because a significantly shorter attention span lets your audience switch off very quickly if their needs aren't sufficiently satisfied. Once this occurs, it won't be long before the number of participants drops noticeably. It's just so much easier and requires less justification to leave a virtual room silently. And other inhibition thresholds, such as a long journey or high costs, are usually not factors here, either, that would've otherwise made people stay.

Streamed product presentations in front of empty rows of chairs, as we have seen around the cancelled high-profile event, show that the direct transformation of a physical into a virtual event is not always the best solution, especially if the possibilities with digital formats aren't taken advantage of and conceptual weaknesses become clearly visible. In addition, empty rooms almost automatically create a dreary atmosphere, which speakers - especially those with little video experience - cannot positively resolve.

There are more and more examples of virtual events showing that it pays off to be creative and to break new ground. It is not always a virtual event in the strict sense of the word that stands at the end of the process. And quite often the character of the event will change significantly with the medium.

The Munich [Residenz Theatre](#) has chosen not to broadcast planned productions via streaming technology to a large, but anonymous, audience on the Internet. Instead, a format was created in which people could receive a call from one of the actors and a short, exclusive performance by telephone. This individual and highly personalized experience has been instrumental in retaining regular customers in difficult times.

[Adobe](#) has chosen not to create another virtual live event for its recent Summit 2020 but to go for preproduced content instead. All content has been made permanently available on a content hub on the website for asynchronous watching. This decision has allowed Adobe to eliminate all typical risks of live events, increase the performance of all sessions and create a highly relevant, well-orchestrated experience.

Event Virtualization

Why Virtual Events Are More Than Virtualized Events – August 2020

The American rapper Travis Scott decided to try something new instead of relying on live streaming on social networks. He hosted a virtual concert via [Fortnite](#) on “Party Royale” island. This way he could not only create a completely new, immersive and collaborative concert experience, but also take a big step towards his target group.

We therefore recommend planning virtual events consistently around a creative idea. Answering these seven questions during the event planning phase, helps to structure your thoughts and to make sure that you are developing a valuable event concept

- 1) Is the transformation into a virtual event really the best solution or are there more purposeful approaches?
- 2) What is the core idea that justifies the implementation of a virtual event?
- 3) What are the wishes and needs of potential participants?
- 4) What are the most pressing problems of potential participants to solve?
- 5) How can their needs and problems be addressed and tackled by the event?
- 6) How credible can the organizer (based on experience and background) occupy the chosen topic to enable a positive image transfer for the brand?
- 7) What value does the event add for its participants? This is about content (gain knowledge) as well as formats (tutorials, recordings, downloads, take-aways).

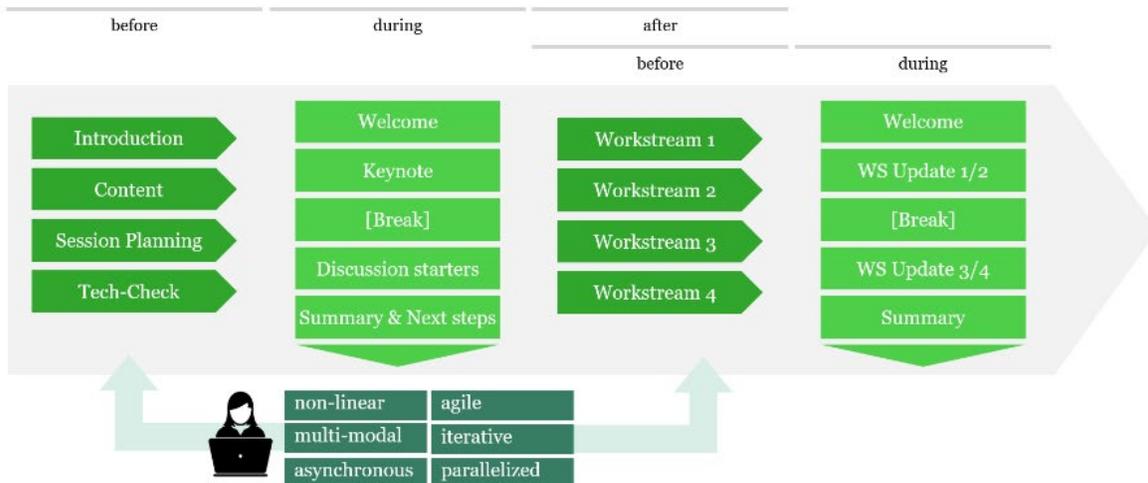
Only after these questions have been answered can you dive into a more detailed planning of the event. Here, a "horizontal" approach to planning is recommended, in which the actual event is shortened as much as possible. Less is more! Question each individual module: What is its real value? Does it have to be offered live or is it sufficient to prepare the content and provide it on-demand? You should delete modules without a clear value. You have the flexibility move on-demand modules to pre- and post- phases of the event. For example, you could offer a keynote where no interaction is desired as a pre-recorded video sent out to get audiences in the mood.

The misconception that complex topics can be dealt with exhaustively during an event has already caused frustration among organizers and participants at physical events. Instead, think about using the event to start collaborating on content and initiate discussions that will be deepened continuously over the following weeks in smaller workgroups on platforms such as Microsoft Teams and in combination with shared documents. The results could then be presented again in a digital event.

The lack of high costs for on-site event organization and travel favours a procedure in iteration steps. Other modules that can be outsourced are thematic introductions, presentation rounds, announcement of the agenda and session planning. It is also conceivable to work out the contents of a lecture together with participants of an event. For all virtual formats, you definitely want to offer a thorough technical check in advance.

Event Virtualization

Why Virtual Events Are More Than Virtualized Events – August 2020



Even if some people still hesitate to deal with virtualization strategies and mourn the sudden death of a beloved, long-planned physical conference, it's important to stay positive and open-minded. Think about the ways you could test new technologies and introduce them as pilot projects.

You should use this momentum. Now is the time! Especially since people across industries are now willing to try out new things, without (yet) expecting the perfect solution. The lack of established recipes for success in the virtual event space facilitates an open, explorative approach. Check each module to see if and how it can be rethought and improved through technology. While it was previously hardly possible at large events to hold a round of introductions that would facilitate subsequent networking, this can now be started very easily via an event platform with text, images and video.

A connection to business networks such as LinkedIn is also conceivable, in which a real (sustainable) value-add can be created for participants by creating the option to network with relevant contacts beyond the event.

Also, when designing the individual modules of the event, you should consciously make sure to combine different elements in such a way that a varied, and in the best case, surprising event is created. Even small features can have a big impact.

- As an ice-breaker format, use playful activities such as quizzes, question rounds, interviews or creative ideas that make people feel comfortable and bring them together. Effective icebreakers warm up the conversation, approach a discussion topic if necessary and ensure that everyone is involved.
- To lighten the atmosphere, ask the participants to post a smiley face that best describes their mood.
- Simplify networking in larger groups by bringing two people together for a virtual coffee date. In this context, we would like to mention the "Icebreaker App" from Microsoft, which as an extension of Teams takes over and automates this task.
- Create closeness and keep attention high through personal interaction, collaborative exercises, break-out sessions and prepare ways to connect - and stay connected (beyond the event, e.g. via social media, catch-up sessions, groups)

Event Virtualization

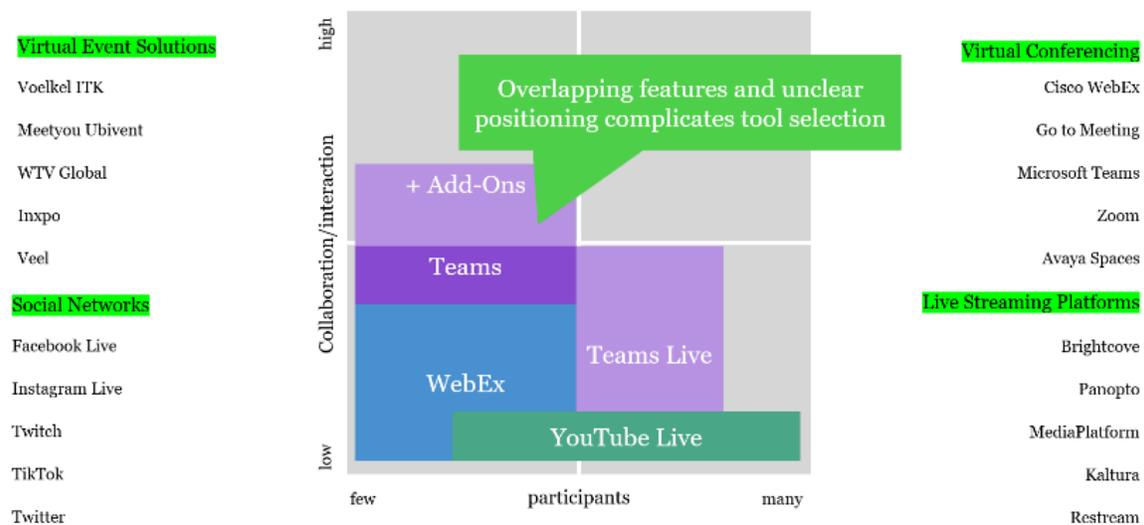
Why Virtual Events Are More Than Virtualized Events – August 2020

- Surprise with novel features, tools and techniques that you integrate or add. Use apps such as Polly or Mentimeter to obtain ad hoc feedback from participants on important issues.
- Use tools such as Kahoot to convey content in a playful manner in multiple-choice questions similar to "Who Wants to be a Millionaire?".
- Follow the advice of Marcus John Henry Brown and stage keynotes like short feature films. Think like a director and develop tension for your event.

Choosing the Right Tool

Choosing the right tool is important, but not the most important task when planning a virtual event. Common event formats can be easily implemented with most tools - and some creativity in design. Therefore, we recommend our clients to first check which tools are available in the company. The most important questions then become: What kind of event do you have in mind? How many people should participate? How intensively should they interact with each other? This will give way to the type of software or apps suitable.

If you want to communicate content to a large target group without much interaction amongst participants, live streaming from LinkedIn, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram or Facebook may be suitable. If you want to work closely together on a small scale, Microsoft Teams, for example may be suitable, supplemented by tools like a "collaborative whiteboard", such as Miro or Mural.



If an organization does not have a suitable video conferencing solution in place or a special event with special requirements is pending, we take our clients through a structured tool audit. First, the requirements are recorded in a workshop. We look not only at functional requirements (which in most cases make up 70-80% of the criteria), but also at non-functional requirements such as reliability and performance of the tool, vendor-specific requirements such as a local contact person and strategic business requirements such as the maturity level of the solution. All factors are assigned a weighting factor of 0 to 5. In this way, the search for the appropriate tool can be made significantly more objective and the risk of wrong decisions reduced.

Event Virtualization

Why Virtual Events Are More Than Virtualized Events – August 2020

How to find the right tool

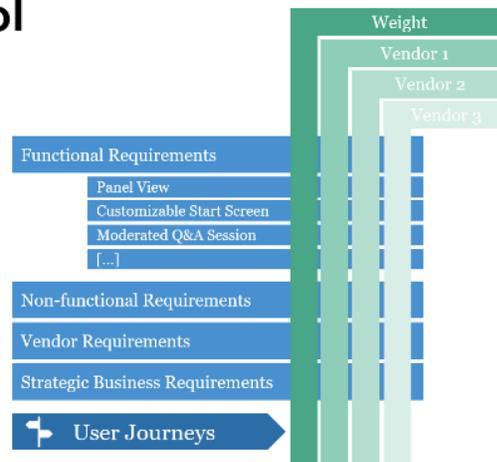
- 1) Start with your goals to define the type of your virtual event

 Size of the audience

 Level of interaction

- 2) Check if you can leverage an existing solution

- 3) Run an structured tool audit



Why It Is Worthwhile to Break New Ground with Events

At present, it's hard to predict when it'll be possible again to hold larger events in physical attendance. But, sitting out the second half of the year without planning is probably not an option - especially since it's already clear that the number of postponed events will exceed the number of days available at that time.

Anyone planning an event must therefore consider the possibilities of digital and virtual formats. There is much to suggest that these will become even more important, even if the restrictions imposed by COVID-19 are further relaxed. In the future, participants will increasingly question whether it's really necessary to fly across the country for a day event, polluting the environment and losing precious time with the family - and possibly even exposing themselves to the risk of infection along the way. In many cases, virtual collaboration will prove even more enriching and goal-oriented if new tools and formats are used in a meaningful and creative way. Now is the time to familiarize yourself with tools and apps, to let the first sessions take place and to not get left behind.

Why don't you think of virtual events as ideal "training grounds" for testing new content formats, and technologies. When developing them, you should deliberately ask yourself which modules will provide further insights, and which newly acquired skills could be helpful elsewhere in the company.

The expertise gathered with video and streaming could, for example, be used for a new video series format, the newly acquired equipment might make the production of a podcast easier. And the playful use of virtual and augmented reality may open up completely new fields of application for the customer service or field service. It has never been more important to learn in small steps and iterations. There is still time for experiments.

Event Virtualization

Why Virtual Events Are More Than Virtualized Events – August 2020

About BCW

BCW (Burson Cohn & Wolfe), one of the world's largest full-service global communications agencies, is in the business of moving people on behalf of clients. BCW delivers digitally and data-driven creative content and integrated communications programs grounded in earned media and scaled across all channels for clients in the B2B, consumer, corporate, crisis management, CSR, healthcare, public affairs and technology sectors. BCW is a part of WPP (NYSE: WPP), a creative transformation company. For more information, visit www.bcw-global.com.

Contact

Jan Warp, EVP, Digital Innovation, BCW Europe & Africa | jan.warp@bcw-global.com

Serina Gummert, Account Manager, BCW Germany | serina.gummert@bcw-global.com

A German version of this information was first published in [PR Report](#) in June 2020