

# Virtual versus hybrid events: Where to from here?

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The move to online events driven by the ever-decreasing event capacities under the various Covid-19 Alert levels has birthed a "new normal" which we, in the events industry, have accepted and strive to deliver to, to the best of our ability.



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However, the months of lockdown to which our audiences have acclimated, together with the move to online engagement, have created a world in which seclusion has insidiously become a preference for many.

The events and exhibitions industry scrambled to offer their clients' alternatives to the planned in-person events that were cancelling left, right, and centre in the first few weeks after South Africa went into lockdown. Clients, organisers and event companies welcomed the advent of hybrid and virtual events as a short-term solution.

In all fairness, these events have sustained many companies during an unprecedented industry collapse, and we look set to continue along the hybrid path for the foreseeable future. Still, several of the hasty decisions made during the first wave of the Covid-tsunami have come back to haunt the events and cultural industries.

## Staying connected

Across the cultural space, museums, artists, theatres, dance studios and event companies began hosting free online

events, showcasing their owned content as a goodwill gesture to a population holed up at home. This way of retaining the connection with their audiences over what they imagined would be just a few weeks of black-out proved very successful as the world went through an online, quasi-cultural-renaissance.

However, as the weeks turned to months without any respite, businesses sought to keep their audiences entertained and informed by hosting webinars with compelling topics featuring sought-after speakers and robust debate. In many instances, the performers, organisers, publicists and technical providers supported each other on a pro-bono basis to retain traction in the industry.

Most of these events were offered free-of-charge to incentivise attendance, and they proved both popular and necessary to keep followers in the know under constantly evolving circumstances. This strategy also created an unforeseen by-product; a right of expectation amongst attendees that participation in events, webinars and hybrid conferences no longer needed to be paid for.

Later in 2020, as the lockdown relaxed its stranglehold slightly, event capacities started increasing. Albeit small, the industry saw at least some scope to increase its revenue and began hosting smaller events around the country. Because the restrictions under the threat of the pandemic made it impossible for the events industry to earn sufficient income, organisers continued adding an online element to supplement venue attendance.

After months of lockdown, however, audiences had become accustomed to attending events from the privacy of their homes, free-of-charge, in comfy clothes with a hot coffee to hand. In-person attendance has become less than optimal and our attempts to reassure and build confidence have not yielded sufficient results.

Our audiences seem to be beset by apathy, finding the effort to get dressed, get into their cars and drive to an in-person occasion prohibitive. Of course, anxiety around viral spread also contributes to their choice to attend online. Still, many of these same people are hosting gatherings in closed spaces with friends, going to the malls to shop, buying groceries at the supermarkets and attending funerals.

The stringent Covid-specific protocols in place across the events industry have ironically made it safer to meet face-to-face at an event than to participate in many of your daily activities, but the stigma around events remains.

### **The rise of hybrid events**

The early part of 2021 saw the ratio of attendees at hybrid events hovering around 80/20, with only 20% of the overall attendance being in-person. Although more and more people are realising that virtual connection is just not as effective as face-to-face, the event platforms on which sellers connect with buyers are hamstrung by the virtual element they themselves have implemented.

Genuine business relationships are formed face-to-face; let's face it! Deals are closed when you are in synch with your buyer's mood and can read the subtle signals in person. Virtual has afforded us something to hang our livelihoods on, but it's unfortunately not everything!

Unless we make a conscious effort to choose to meet in person rather than online, we may forever lose the opportunity to experience the emotional charge that a face-to-face experience evokes.

We need to understand that an event costs its providers to create - in the instance of hybrid, for both the venue and the virtual components separately. Until we start paying for the privilege of attending events with grace, we are disallowing our cultural community the ability to earn a livelihood, negating the potential of our industry to restart and preventing the events and exhibitions industry from contributing to the economic recovery of our country.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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