

Rethinking Event ROI: How Technology Can Save Live Events

It's time for associations to face the unfortunate truth; live events have become a poor performing communication channel.

In a digital world defined by flexibility, interactivity and measurable results, most association events remain rigid, impersonal and, let's face it, ineffective. So, no one should have been surprised when events came under fire as the economy dipped. Yet, many organizers were surprised. And the pull back on events was dramatic.

Associations scrambled to cancel events as event attendance fell. As a result, association event organizers are being asked four big questions: First, how do we deliver better member experiences with fewer resources? Second, how do we deliver more value from and for their members? Third, how do we expand the reach of live events? And, in the end, how do we better justify event spend through measured results?

The challenges are daunting. But, face-to-face meetings are the most powerful tool associations can use to communicate with members.

So, how will associations save live events?

The answer is proving to be quite simple. In this environment providing a measurable return on your event spend comes down to one thing: It's all about the participant.

For the past decade, event technology has focused on making life easier for event organizers. If associations want to continue to profit from events, the next decade of event technology must be all about delivering better experiences for your participants.

The Participant Journey.

The key to delivering better event experiences and creating better results lies in understanding – and monetizing – the participant journey. The journey around an event used to be simple. You invited members to an event, you delivered the event, and you followed up to see what your members thought. It was a simple model built around a few very productive days.

The only problem is, that model doesn't meet the needs of participants. From members to sponsors to exhibitors, many events don't address the ways your participants want to participate.

So, what do your participants want?

They want more choices, increased relevance and expanded interactivity. Put simply, your members and all your event participants want to engage with you and each other on their own terms.

That means in order to deliver better, more measurable results, event organizers need to stop thinking of a live events as the destination and start thinking of those events as steps in a journey to sustained community engagement.

To get there, associations need to leverage emerging technologies. The following is an overview of the four key areas of technology that event organizers are using to drive measurable ROI through community engagement.

Four Steps to Community Engagement: The Future of Live Events Technology

1. Marketing Optimization

- ▶ **Target. Target. Target:** *Integrated email marketing* tools allow organizers to reach out personally to members and provide important opportunities to sponsors and exhibitors. Through the use of advanced list segmentation, organizers can provide highly relevant and personalized messages to members. The result is happier members, higher attendance and better results.

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- ▶ **Look at the facts:** *Web analytics* packages provide insight not only into the performance of your event web site, but also important details like where members are abandoning during the registration process and what web pages receive the most attention from your visitors. In the end, it allows organizers to react to the preferences of participants.
- ▶ **Turn members into promoters:** *Social sharing tools* put the power of promotion in the hands of your audience. Members can see what friends are attending your events and even recommend your event to people who may want to attend. As marketing becomes less one-to-one and more one-to-many, organizers can actually spend less and drive more attendance.

2. Digital Interactivity

- ▶ **Go social:** *Event social networks* and *member communities* are extending the lifecycle of events by providing a forum for interaction before, during and after the event. *Matching tools* within these technologies can link members with each other, exhibitors or sponsors based on desired outcomes from their experience. Members can also set up one-on-one meetings, build custom schedules and discuss important topics.
- ▶ **Go mobile:** *Mobile event applications* provide the full event experience from scheduling to networking to maps to paperless surveys in the palms of your members' hands. Plus, *mobile organizer tools* provide better insight into attendees, empowering exhibitors to connect with the right people at the right time.
- ▶ **Go virtual:** Virtual events have proven to both increase attendance through online audiences and to increase attendance at live events by adding value. *Webcasting* provides real-time, interactive access to sessions while *virtual tradeshow* tools allows virtual users to shop and interact with exhibitors and sponsors in a highly measurable environment.

3. Event Efficiency

- ▶ **Make it easy:** Streamlined *online registration platforms* make it easy for participants to register for events and manage their preferences. Members can register for events and social networks in one smooth process. Speakers can submit papers for easy online voting. And exhibitors can choose space and select requirements. In the end, the experience is easy, the data is accurate and participants are more satisfied.
- ▶ **Make it smooth:** New onsite technologies have revolutionized the onsite experience. Offline *self-service kiosks* make check in easy while removing the threat of internet downtime.
- ▶ **Track everything:** Live experiences are increasingly easy to measure. *Lead management* tools go far beyond lead retrieval to provide detailed analytics on the performance of exhibitors against targets. *Session scanning* tools track continuing education units automatically while *session access control* makes sure prerequisites are met and sessions registrants get the seat they were promised.

4. Business Intelligence

- ▶ **It's not what they say. It's what they do:** Event organizers have always been in the habit of asking participants what they thoughts. Now, *business intelligence tools* are allowing organizers to monitor the behavior of members to better target groups. For example, one technology company recently identified more than 200 leads that were in the buying cycle for a particular solution by studying session attendance trends at an event.
- ▶ **Get the whole story:** In the past, event technology has been fragmented and mechanical. *Integrated data warehousing* has revolutionized the sophistication of intelligence around live experiences, providing a single, comprehensive view of the entire participant journey. This holistic, integrated approach to data management empowers organizers to analyze trends and drive value from every touch point with every participant.

A New Technology Standard

Changes in the participant journey have put new demands on association event organizers. Yet, those demands provide new opportunities. By implementing a new technology standard, events can reach farther, engage members longer, deliver more rich experiences and create quantifiable results.

Live events don't have to be a poor communication channel. If association managers are listening to their participants – members, sponsors and exhibitors – events won't just survive; events will thrive.