



Virtual Experiences: Raising the Bar

Chris Haff

There's an old saying that necessity is the mother of invention. Faced with tough times, people have a knack for creating breakthrough innovations to meet new challenges (a good thing, although we'd all probably prefer to skip the "tough" part).

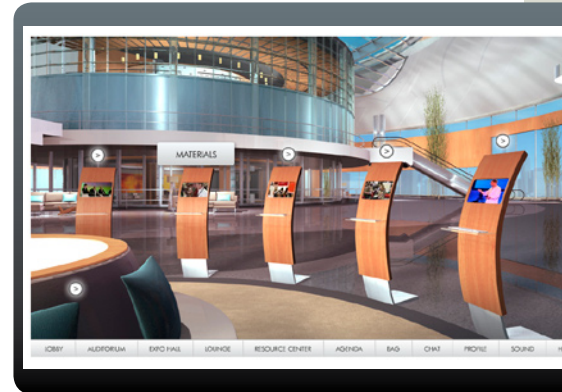
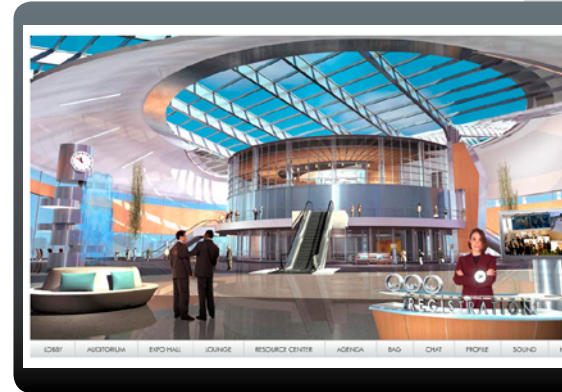
Virtual events are not new—we've been talking about them since the dawn of the Internet (yes, decades ago). But in the fall of 2008 virtual events became newly urgent: following months of shrinking travel budgets across sectors, the "optics" of spending money on face-to-face meetings became suddenly dubious as a certain financial giant spent money on incentive meetings in October just after accepting US government bailout funds in September.

A veritable gold rush of virtual event vendors emerged. But you'd be mistaken if you concluded that the need that virtual events fill is a temporary shrinking of travel budgets or bad optics—conditions that will eventually go away.

It's important to understand—what's the real, more enduring necessity that virtual events address? What conditions and needs existed long before the optics and economics changed—and what needs will endure long after they resolve?

- People have what the authors of *Groundswell*¹ call "an eternal desire to connect"—especially as rapidly evolving technologies enable us to connect more quickly and with greater reach than ever before.
- Businesses and brands have a similarly eternal need to connect with the people who have the most impact on achieving their strategic objectives—their employees, sales channel, partners, press and ultimately their customers.
- Even in the digital age, connecting with these people face-to-face is still essential—because face-to-face is understood to have the best ROI, defined in terms of immediate and long-term impact on the understanding and behaviors of those who participate.²
- Virtual events answer our "eternal need to connect," but grow the reach of face-to-face in critical ways—extending live engagement to more people, over a sustained period of time and across greater distances—for a comparatively small cost.

Put these truths together and you can see that virtual events address a fundamental need for people and brands to connect, in a way that enhances and amplifies but will never simply replace connecting face-to-face. There is an exciting opportunity right now to wed the benefits of face-to-face with the huge potential of online and social media channels to create 360-degree experience campaigns that span from the virtual to the physical, dramatically extending the reach and impact of both.



Yes, for some of our clients, there is an urgent need to deploy virtual right now, out of economic (or “optical”) necessity, but for most the exciting opportunity is the innovation that will impact how we connect brands and people in longer-term and deeper ways.

If we understand virtual events in this way, we have to raise the bar on our expectations for the quality of virtual events, or as I prefer to call them, virtual experiences.

RAISING THE BAR ON VIRTUAL

While there’s not a lot of disagreement about how to define a virtual experience, there is a huge variance in the quality of their planning, design and execution.

As an agency, it’s our job to ensure the integrity and ROI of any experience we create—in whatever medium. We have famously high standards for live experiences, and we have the same standards for virtual. Given that, we see a need to improve the quality of virtual events in the following ways:

- **Brand experience**

No client wants a one-size-fits-all live experience—or a one-size-fits-all virtual experience. In the virtual space the brand needs to be expressed fully and authentically; the experience needs to be true to the brand. For some clients, a virtual experience may need to look like a digital representation of a “real” 3D-space. For others, particularly with younger or more tech-savvy audiences, different design options (such as typical web design and Flash) are better suited. Any virtual event platform has to have the flexibility to provide either of these options—and indeed any option that is right for the brand.

- **User experience**

There needs to be intuitive navigation that gets users to their destinations quickly and that can be tailored to their specific needs. Many virtual event options currently available follow a single architecture and user path regardless of event type, audience or objective—so for example, every virtual event ends up acting up pretty much like a tradeshow online. Clients wouldn’t accept this limitation in the live space—and they shouldn’t have to in virtual. The virtual environment should link seamlessly to third-party systems such as LinkedIn, Facebook, corporate sites or event registration systems. By reducing barriers to these networks, the virtual event is better integrated into the user’s day.

- **User engagement**

Keeping users engaged in a virtual experience requires a level of skill and understanding of optimal communication environments that’s just not evident in most off-the-shelf offerings. Cognitive scientists have shown that students learn best in 20-minute periods; behavioral technologists have demonstrated that a significant portion of webcast participants simply tune out after that amount of time.

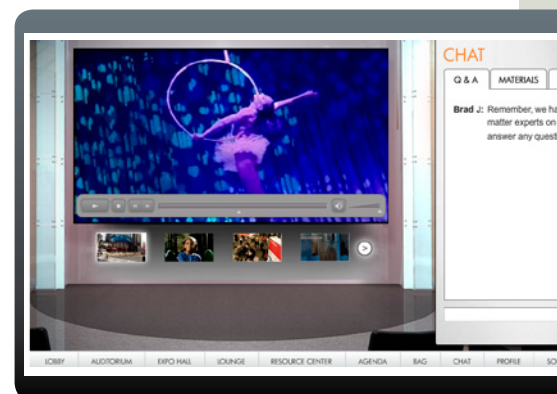
To keep the user engaged we need our usual set of communication tools, but we also need tools to overcome the isolation of sitting at a computer and the distractions it may offer. To this end the user experience needs to be rich and offer users productive engagement opportunities such as chatting or twittering questions during a presentation, seeing which of their peers are online, etc. The effect is a deepening of learning rather than distraction. If channels such as Twitter are used the network effect is highly valuable and can integrate with live audiences.

- **User flow**

Visit a typical virtual event space (especially those that replicate uninspiring conference environments) and you will quite often see wide open floors with little

VIRTUAL EXPERIENCE ADVANTAGES

- **Decrease costs**
Create a balanced portfolio of live and virtual experiences.
- **Increase reach**
Bring a live experience to people that can’t participate in-person due to location, timing or cost.
- **Amplify impact**
Build social networking features to enhance conversations and broaden networks.
- **Customize experiences**
Provide a virtual experience in which stakeholders can participate in ways that are relevant and effective for them.
- **Maintain relationships**
Take advantage of the lower costs and shorter format to connect with key audiences more often than you otherwise would.
- **Leverage marketing assets**
Repurpose content from live events or add rich media from other marketing sources; use new materials generated virtually for future needs and campaigns.



personality and a lot of things happening simultaneously. The scale and implied user flow of this kind of virtual space is simply not appropriate for all audiences. For a brand that needs to engage distributed groups of employees, for example, a more intimate and certainly more authentically personal space is more appropriate. A truly flexible virtual platform must provide the possibility of personalizing and streamlining the experience for users by prioritizing, scheduling and recommending content for varying user groups. All users should be allowed to explore and roam at times, and focused and directed when it's appropriate to the communication and engagement objectives.

In addition to meeting expectations concerning Brand experience, User experience, User engagement and User flow, any virtual event offering also needs to address more pragmatic concerns like security and system integration:

- **Security** is a significant concern for internal events where proprietary or competitive information is exchanged. Campaigns need to be able to run over secure connections, or better yet on internal networks.
- **System integration** is an expectation when clients have invested in tools that need to integrate with their virtual experiences and their experiential campaigns more broadly—tools like analytics, webinars, webcasts, video streaming, internal social networks, Twitter, SMS, content management (CMS) and learning management systems (LMS).

SHAPING VIRTUAL CONTENT TO OPTIMIZE THE EXPERIENCE

One of the biggest challenges clients face with virtual events is ensuring that the content is appropriate to the online medium—not simply taking content from live and putting it online.

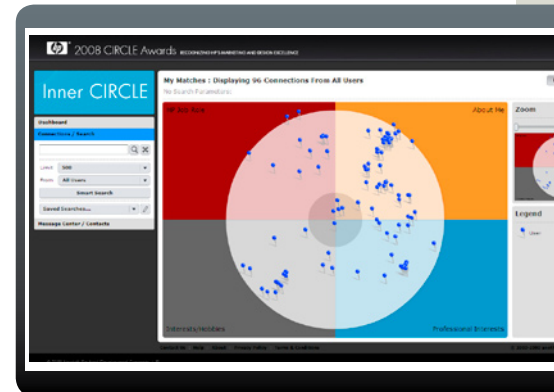
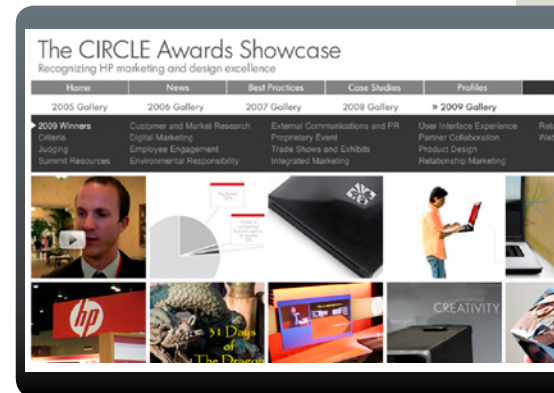
Many virtual event vendors are not able to provide such counsel, because their business is focused on executing tactics. They provide an empty shell to put content into. But if users get bored because the presentations were too long, or not interactive enough, your audience will complain about your virtual event—even if the technology works perfectly.

To optimize the virtual experience, it's important to ensure that you craft content to:

- **Create a moment in time:** To drive engagement and gather a critical mass of simultaneous participants, virtual experiences need a focal point, a "moment in time sensibility," for example, exclusive content such as VIPs or subject matter experts for keynotes and Q&A sessions.
- **Keep attendees focused:** It's hard to maintain the attention of virtual attendees—for obvious reasons, they're simply less of a "captive audience." So content needs to be concise and interactive. Distinctions should be made between "moment in time" content and self-directed content like training, surveys or forums that provide opportunities for more extended, pre- and post-presentation interaction on the attendees schedule allowing them to prepare and then deepen their experience.

A NEW VIRTUAL EXPERIENCE PLATFORM

To address these needs and capture the full potential of virtual experiences, Jack Morton has created a new Virtual Experience Platform to meet the highest standards for experience design. This proprietary platform provides the flexible tool chest our clients need in their experience design as well as the authenticity to their brands we passionately believe they should always expect.

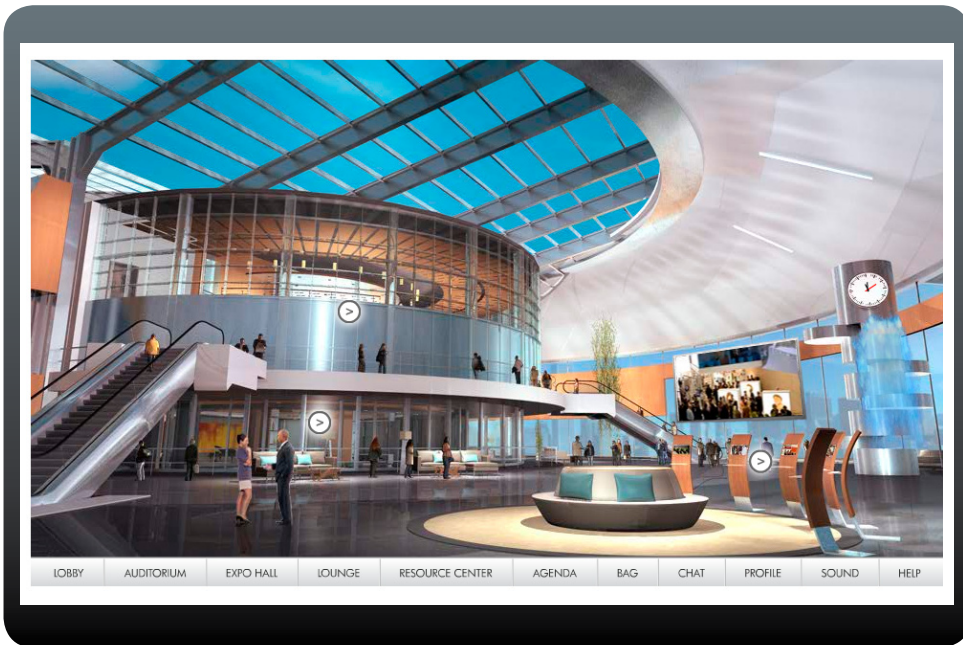


FOUR CRITICAL ELEMENTS OF FACE-TO-FACE AND VIRTUAL:

- **Unique content**
Competition customer mindshare is greater than ever. Unique content pulls in participation.
- **Networking**
Web and social networking applications add a new dimension to engagement.
- **Intelligence gathering**
Tracking audience behaviors is critical to determining success and qualifying sales opportunities. Web applications mean more robust data can be gathered and deployed more quickly.
- **Accelerating sales cycle**
Speeding up sales has never been more critical. Virtual experiences done right can create an ongoing dialogue and move people more quickly from awareness to action and advocacy.

The Virtual Experience Platform delivers on the immediate need for virtual alternatives as well as a long-term paradigm shift where live, event-based networking will always be linked to some form of digital interaction or social networking online. We know that integrating live and online is a big issue for many clients. To that point, according to a survey of over 400 marketers conducted in the spring of 2009, 82% agree that “my organization could increase revenues by better leveraging experiential strategies to engage employees, business audiences and consumers online.” Simultaneously, 64% cited the ability to “integrate live experiences with virtual/online or other marketing experiences” as a key obstacle to successfully deploying experiential strategies for their organizations.³ This urgent interest in integrating live and online effectively truly demands that we raise the bar on how virtual experiences are deployed.

With the Virtual Experience Platform, we tap deep, decades-long experience in digital and live to provide the best experience design, the most flexible and customized approach, and the most user-friendly ties to broader networks and systems—thereby amplifying our clients’ brand connections, wherever they need to be.



ABOUT JACK MORTON:

As a leading global experiential marketing agency, Jack Morton Worldwide creates brand experiences—and thereby helps clients build experience brands. We integrate live events, digital engagement and 3D environments to build brand relationships, increase sales and improve business results. Jack Morton has a staff of 500 employees throughout the United States, Europe and Asia-Pacific, and is part of the Interpublic Group of Companies, Inc. (NYSE: IPG).

For more information about Jack Morton, please email:
experience@jackmorton.com

or contact

US: Liz Bigham
+212-401-7212

Europe: Julian Pullan
+44-208-735-2000

Australia: Helen Graney
+61-2-8231-4500

Asia: Ben Taylor
+852-2805-1767

www.jackmorton.com

© Jack Morton Worldwide 2009. All Rights Reserved. This report may not be copied or reproduced in whole or in part without the express written permission of Jack Morton Worldwide.

¹ Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff, *Groundswell: Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies* (Forrester Research, 2008).

² MPI and American Express, “Future Watch 2009” (January 2009).

³ Jack Morton, 2009 Marketers’ Survey (forthcoming June 2009).