



# A PLANNER'S GUIDE TO DIGITAL AND HYBRID EVENTS

BY JOHN NAWN

The Event Strategy Network

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# INTRODUCTION

**I DON'T KNOW** anyone who would argue that today's digital events are comparable to in-person events. Not even the most die-hard event tech evangelists are willing to make that claim.

That's partly the result of the historical bias the events industry has shown toward in-person events. Industry professionals are so invested in face-to-face events and convinced of their inherent superiority that our prejudice has blinded us to digital events' actual benefits and value.

It's also the fault of some of the tools we've had at our disposal. Many digital event platforms, especially in the early days of the

pandemic, were first-generation tools — which provided some basic functionality but had to evolve quickly to keep pace with rapidly evolving customer needs.

In reality, digital events are no better or worse than in-person events when it comes to building relationships and developing business opportunities; they're just different. Each has its strengths and weaknesses.

Instead of focusing on which is better, the question the event industry and event professionals should be asking is, How much better can I make them? The answer lies in building a solid foundation for your digital or hybrid event. Here's how.

# WHAT TO DO BEFORE YOUR DIGITAL OR HYBRID EVENT

**AS WITH IN-PERSON** events, success depends on a thorough understanding of your stakeholder's needs, how well your event design aligns with those needs, and a well-defined digital event strategy. It also requires a deep dive into the resources, marketing, sponsorship and pricing of events.

## Prepare a needs analysis

A needs analysis is a systematic process for determining needs or "gaps" between current conditions and desired conditions. It is typically used to identify priorities, make improvements and/or allocate resources.

There are several types of needs analyses you should consider before designing a digital or hybrid event:

**ORGANIZATIONAL:** an analysis of your organization's strategies, goals and objectives to determine the business needs for the event

**INDIVIDUAL:** an analysis of your target-audience(s) goals and objectives to determine individual and group needs for the event

**PERFORMANCE:** an analysis of your target audience's competencies (knowledge, skills and abilities or KSAs) to determine the performance gaps your event should address

**CONTENT:** an analysis of all content to identify gaps and provide additional content resources for your event audience

## Develop an event strategy

The information you gather during your needs analysis is essential for developing your digital event strategy. Unlike an event plan, which explains *how* to produce a particular event (who does what, when), an event strategy explains *why* you're producing a specific event (the business value).

**AN EVENT STRATEGY INCLUDES, BUT IS NOT LIMITED TO:**

- Event mission, vision (based on organizational mission, vision)
- Event goals and objectives (based on business goals and objectives)
- Event SWOT Analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats; based on business SWOT Analysis)

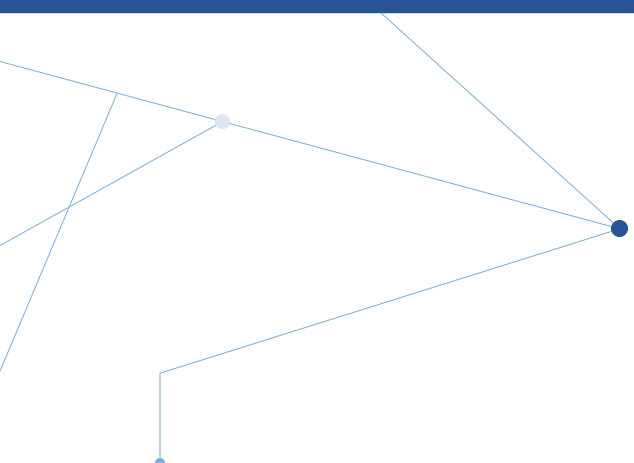
Event strategies focus primarily on the goals and objectives of the event owner and are mainly concerned with maximizing event effectiveness and adding value. They also examine the micro and the macro event environment, ensuring all elements are internally *and* externally aligned.

## Assemble your team

As with in-person events, digital and hybrid events require a diverse team of professionals with specialized knowledge, skills and abilities to plan and execute your event successfully. In addition to hosts, professional speakers and nonprofessional (peer) speakers, other key roles and responsibilities you might find helpful include:

- Content strategist
- Creative designer
- Exhibition manager
- Marketing manager
- Presentation coach
- Registration manager
- Social media moderator
- Sponsorship manager
- Team leader
- Technical manager





## IF THERE'S ONE CERTAINTY ABOUT DIGITAL AND HYBRID EVENTS, IT'S THAT THERE WILL BE TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES. PLAN ACCORDINGLY.

### Develop a budget

In some ways, budgeting for digital events is more straightforward, because many key expense and revenue categories are nonexistent or significantly scaled back. In other ways, budgeting for digital events might be more difficult, because you have to ask different questions than you're used to. Basic questions about your event, digital event platform and desired level of engagement will have financial consequences.

#### ASK THESE QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR EVENT:

- What are our business goals and event objectives?
- How will we determine success?
- How many hours/days will our event last?
- How many attendees are we anticipating?
- How many sessions?
- What type of sessions?
- Will our event be live, prerecorded or hybrid?
- What is our marketing plan?
- How large is our event team?

#### ASK THESE QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR DIGITAL PLATFORM:

- What platforms or tools do we currently have access to that can be used for our digital event?
- What additional platforms or tools

might we need to deliver our desired digital event experience?

- Do we plan on having an exhibition as part of our digital event?
- What CRM, analytical or reporting capabilities do we need?

#### ASK THESE QUESTIONS ABOUT ENGAGEMENT:

- What is the desired level of engagement we seek?
- What capabilities do we need in order to achieve our desired level of engagement?
- What kind of content will we be delivering?
- What kind of accommodations (inclusions) will we be providing?

### Build your technology stack

Determining technical requirements is perhaps the most challenging for event professionals because of their limited knowledge and relative lack of experience with digital resources.

#### HERE ARE SOME OF THE CRITICAL SELECTION CRITERIA TO KEEP IN MIND:

- Data collection (analytics)
- Degree of engagement
- Risk management
- Scalability
- Support
- User experience

#### SOME OF THE TOOLS THAT WILL COME IN HANDY FOR PRODUCING A SUCCESSFUL

#### DIGITAL OR HYBRID EVENT INCLUDE:

- Event website
- Registration platform
- Webinar platform
- Livestreaming software
- Event planning software
- Event marketing software
- Digital audio/video equipment
- Event app
- Event feedback tools

And because we're talking about technology, you also need to consider what redundancies, if any, you should have in place in case of any technical difficulties. If there's one certainty about digital and hybrid events, it's that there will be technical difficulties. Plan accordingly.

The digital event platform is the most consequential of all the technologies required for digital and hybrid events.

#### SOME OF THE FEATURES YOU SHOULD BE LOOKING FOR IN A DIGITAL EVENT PLATFORM INCLUDE:

- Attendee management
- Task automation
- Customizable branding
- Event "spaces"
- Event management
- Event marketing
- Exhibition support
- Live audio/video
- Live text chat
- Live support

## YOUR MOST IMPORTANT CONSIDERATION SHOULD BE TO FOCUS ON MASTERING TECHNIQUES, NOT THE DIGITAL-EVENT PLATFORMS THEMSELVES.

- Live surveys/polling
- Live Q&A
- Networking
- Presentation tools
- Reporting/analytics
- Social media integration
- Sponsorship or monetization support

Selecting a digital event platform can be extremely time-consuming. Throughout this process, your most important consideration should be to focus on mastering techniques, not the tools themselves.

### Market your digital event

Almost two-thirds of marketing dollars are wasted. The numbers are even worse for digital and social media marketing. The main reason? Marketers can't get accurate insights from the data they collect to measure the impact of their marketing. Without this information, they can't reallocate dollars away from inefficient audiences, formats and media channels.

Another challenge with event marketing is that we're marketing events like products instead of services. Marketing an event like a product means we're settling for a transactional relationship instead of aiming for a transformational one.

The optimal digital or hybrid event marketing strategy uses data to

allocate resources to the most effective channels and position the event as a service — one that builds trust and relationships — rather than a product, which can quickly become obsolete.

### Establish your sponsorship model

The traditional model for event sponsorship — selling generic, prepackaged opportunities based on tiers — is dead. A new model of sponsorship is evolving, one based on a more intimate understanding of your audience's needs and wants and more innovative engagement and activation opportunities that mutually benefit sponsors.

Covid-19 has forever changed the sponsorship landscape.

#### FOR EXAMPLE:

- Sponsors are generating less revenue, so they have less money to spend on sponsorships.
- A lack of in-person events, which the industry has overly relied upon, has severely diminished the value of sponsorship packages.
- Digital events have been underdeveloped and therefore represent an undervalued asset. Event organizers are trying to justify pricing them like in-person events, but sponsors aren't buying it, literally.

The old model will continue to linger and stumble along, primarily

because folks are resistant to change. But these efforts will continue to see diminishing returns. It might take them years to reach pre-Covid levels — if indeed they ever do.

### Price your digital or hybrid event

In the rush to migrate in-person events online, traditional registration revenues took a huge hit. Before the pandemic, organizations typically provided access to digital or hybrid events for free, while others charged a nominal amount for limited or full access.

From a pricing standpoint, most digital/hybrid event owners saw their experiences as "less-than" and priced their digital/hybrid event registration accordingly. I could not find any organizations that charged the same amount for access to their digital/hybrid event as their in-person event, though some might exist.

While the cost basis of digital events is significantly less than in-person events, they do cost something to plan and execute. If an organization can afford to, digital events can be used as a loss-leader, attracting an audience in exchange for contact or other demographic information of value.

As in-person events reemerge, the careful mixing and matching of hybrid participant opportunities will allow prices to creep upwards.

# WHAT TO DO DURING YOUR DIGITAL OR HYBRID EVENT

WITH SOME FINESSE, digital and hybrid events can offer programming and engagement to which in-person event attendees are accustomed, making them more user-friendly.

## Deliver a familiar opening

Help your digital and hybrid event participants ease into the event with:

- Ice breakers
- Welcome messages
- Introductions
- Housekeeping
- Program introductions

## Engage the virtual audience

Plenty of technologies and tactics can foster digital participant engagement, including:

- Polls
- Question-and-answer sessions
- On-platform chats
- Breakout rooms
- Whiteboards
- Screen (desktop) sharing
- Note-taking

## Add a human element

Hosts, moderators, facilitators and presenters also play a critical role in maximizing engagement.

A host (or emcee) serves as a bridge between the audience and the presenter(s). They are responsible for keeping the event on track and ensuring the event's goals and objectives are met.

The role of a moderator is to be a neutral party in guiding discussions or debates that occur during your digital event. They also serve the administrative function of keeping time and ensuring participants stay focused on the subject matter and don't stray too far off course.

Facilitators are neutral, guiding discussions that occur during your digital event. However, unlike a moderator, a facilitator is used when participants are interested in reaching a consensus, making a decision, or developing action plans for a particular goal, challenge or problem.

Presenters are storytellers. Too many presenters think of themselves as lecturers, giving speeches that impart wisdom to a naive audience. But your audience doesn't want to be lectured. As adults with both personal and professional goals and objectives, they want to be engaged. They want knowledge, skills and abilities that will improve their individual or organizational performance. Nothing matters more to your audience.

I've argued repeatedly that compelling content is the most significant differentiator when it comes to the success of your digital event. Hosts, moderators and others are responsible for delivering that content and, therefore, deserve as much attention. Because, as we all know, you can have the most compelling content in the world, but if it's not delivered efficiently and effectively, its value drops significantly.



# WHAT TO DO AFTER YOUR DIGITAL OR HYBRID EVENT

**IF WE WANT** to develop as event professionals and deliver more value to our stakeholders to earn more accolades, promotions, raises or even a proverbial seat at the table, we will have to do things differently after the event.

## **Measure what matters**

The goal of measurement is to advance understanding. We need to understand if our event provided any meaningful business value. We look at business value to determine if our event was 1) worth doing and 2) worth doing again.

We all form subjective opinions about the success or failure of our event based upon what we perceive with our senses. But enterprises require a more objective view of success or failure, which is not unique to an individual but is agreed upon or accepted by others (generalizable). Objective opinions require objective measures.

To identify objective measures, you need first to identify the business goals of your event — the broad

outcome toward which effort is directed.

Not unlike the strategies and tactics discussed earlier, goals identify the general direction for your business or event — your *why* — and objectives identify more specifically *how* you're going to achieve your goals in ways you can easily measure.

Your business goals and event objectives might differ because every business and every event is different. But the task remains the same: determining the business value of your event. Without identifying business goals and event objectives, there's no way you're going to be able to determine, objectively, whether your event was successful or not.

And after all the time, effort and money you and your team spend planning and executing your digital event, it's in your best interest — and that of your stakeholders — to justify those investments.

## **Evaluate event performance**

The most common tool used by

IF EVENT PROFESSIONALS WISH TO BE TAKEN MORE SERIOUSLY, THEY WILL HAVE TO TAKE A GREATER INTEREST IN INDIVIDUAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT.

event professionals to gauge the success or failure of their events is the post-event evaluation. But if you take a close look at the typical evaluation form, you'll see that what they're evaluating is not the success or failure of the event; it's the success or failure of the event professional themselves.

The typical post-event evaluation form asks event participants to rate the registration process; the housing process; the transportation process; the quality of the venue, food and beverage — all of which are important. Still, none relates directly to individual or organizational performance outcomes.

If event professionals wish to be taken more seriously, especially by the business professionals who hire them, they will have to take a greater interest in the only outcomes that matter to business professionals: individual and organizational performance improvement.

If the only tool you are using for evaluating events is a post-event evaluation form that focuses almost exclusively on providing satisfaction ratings for essential services to attendees, you are limiting your potential impact and that of your

event. And that serves no one.

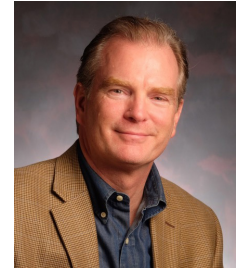
Event professionals must work more closely with their stakeholders to determine business goals and event objectives and make sure evaluations align with them.

### **Leverage your content**

I want to encourage you strongly to think about repurposing your event content or identifying other channels to share your content.

Repurposing content doesn't mean reusing a piece of content over and over again. Repurposing means developing an omnichannel content strategy (improving the user experience and building stronger relationships with your audience across multiple contact points). It involves altering your content to make it fresh and appealing to a new audience.

The Internet is the largest content-distribution network the world has ever known and represents the most significant business opportunity not only to connect with your primary audience but with potential new audiences and the world at large. Use it to build larger and stronger communities through the strategic distribution of compelling content.



*John Nawn is the cofounder and chief strategist for The Event Strategy Network, a diverse group of trusted advisors dedicated to unleashing the full business potential of events. To download John's complete Digital-Hybrid Event Manual, click [here](#).*

# CONCLUSION

Regardless of where you are along your digital event journey, your focus should always be on improving. I'm a big believer that there's *always* room for improvement, no matter how well you think your event went. I haven't witnessed a digital event yet that couldn't benefit from improvements, especially in terms of outcomes.

I strongly believe in the power of face-to-face events, although most of the evidence is anecdotal. But I can't deny that digital events, while not necessarily representing new technology, undoubtedly represent a disruptive force. And as history has taught us, those who ignore or fail

to adjust to disruptive technology do not survive.

The global pandemic has wreaked havoc on the in-person events industry. I've seen all the same surveys and heard from all the same experts you have, and one thing is certain: No one knows for sure when the industry will rebound fully and, more importantly, what it will look like.

The only sure thing is that the industry will be different from before in many ways. Now is the time for organizations to do things differently and capitalize on the generational opportunity to organize smarter, faster and better events. ■