



Building Event Strategy in a Volatile Marketplace

Planning Trends & Perspectives Paper

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Building Event Strategy in a Volatile Marketplace

The B2B perception pendulum oscillates economic mood. Through volatile markets direct stakeholder relationships nurtured through live events are more valuable than ever. B2B net sales in the coming year will continue to be heavily influenced by value-based live events that offer direct customer connection and cement relationships as trusted advisors.

Could your planning approach cost your company valuable relationships and net new sales?

Today, marketers find themselves facing planning phases in an economy where volatility is the mainstay and “respond now” is the daily executive battle cry. We are continually under pressure to pinpoint priorities and contain spending while still delivering a net increase in sales. In response, resources supporting valuable, face-to-face B-to-B customer events are often slashed across the board, a big mistake in an era where relationship is the competitive advantage in driving net sales.

While prudent fiscal planning and cost containment is at the core of any marketing plan worth its salt, failing to engage directly with your buyer meaningfully and personally jeopardizes pipeline performance through both current volatility and the long term.

After working with our clients to navigate thousands of marketing challenges and corresponding event formats, Starshot has identified key approaches to planning that either propel or undermine event performance and returns. We have also learned much about the types of value inherent in various event formats and when, how, as well as where they should be engaged.

If the goal of advancing the buyer relationship remains at the centre of the strategic planning cycle, it is possible for marketers to take a scalpel to their event strategy rather than a meat cleaver. Making nimble adjustments in response to market challenges guided by an understanding of the value behind strategic event formats is critical to crafting a plan that builds buyer relationships and net new revenues.

What is Your Event Planning Personality?

Now, how about some self reflection? What type of planner are you? In approaching your planning cycle we have seen the spectrum of event strategists tend to fall into four groups:

- 1) The slam-on-the-brakes strategist believes that live events are “expensive” and in the past have reached a limited audience. Event spending is reduced resulting in eliminated events, postponed campaigns, or substitute marketing vehicles with lower ROI.
- 2) Pained-but-patient strategists tend to be less confident in the ability to sustain a calendar of ongoing live events across a fiscal year. The pressure is to economize in all areas and to consider alternatives such as digital events as a cost-containment measure.
- 3) Comfortably invested strategists feel secure about the ability of live events to sustain ongoing lead generation targets throughout the current and future bumps in the economy. Investments will be slightly more selective; however, an underlying belief in the long-term value of events remains a constant.
- 4) Sell-it-today strategists carry on an affinity towards events as a primary method of driving sales and building direct relationships. For this group, it is all about investing to impress the prospect and this typically results in resistance to marketing tactics that reduce direct contact with individuals.

Regardless of which planning style you fall into, it is helpful during budgeting to review past events against four categories:

- Essential events are necessary for the business and are perceived as an expected part of the planning budget
- Reward events are periodic indulgences considered justifiable by the business
- Postponable events can be reasonably put off or reduced in scale
- Expendable events are perceived as unnecessary and unjustifiable

Understanding both your planning approach and how events are prioritized is relevant for weighing the impact of changing priorities. Marketers may altogether eliminate events in certain categories or they may substitute live event formats for digital or hybrid events under the auspices of cost-savings.

One very important planning consideration is the fact that live, digital, and hybrid events are not entirely interchangeable strategies. Each has a specific value structure and unique delivery model.

A common error in strategic planning is shifting from face-to-face customer events to a virtual strategy with the expectation of little or no impact on the health of your marketing pipeline. The unfortunate result of this fiscal best intention is the erosion of personal relationships and the devaluing of the company's investment in personal business relationships.

Idea Snapshot: Cisco's GSX Virtual Shift

In 2009, Cisco eliminated its annual GSX sales conference and migrated entirely towards a virtual events platform. The strategy involved investment in a heavy build-up campaign, interactive game and multiple sources of rich content consumed over three full days of live broadcast. Exit survey metrics of past attendee's showed 96 percent of the sales force still rated face-to-face interactions extremely effective in networking, versus only 26 percent that rated virtual networking extremely effective.

This significant satisfaction gap is indicative of the myth that digital replaces live events. Networking is one of the core values of the live event experience and translating this into the virtual world remains elusive.

Responding to this feedback, Cisco in 2010 has shifted strategy towards a hybrid event format where local events occur in key markets supported by a condensed "live feed" broadcast of content occurring across a single day. Cross-team networking is also a significant priority in the revised strategy.

- Stable Pipe
Slight or no change in opportunities
- Impacted Pipe
Reduced opportunities based on market strength of offering
- Declining Pipe
Substantial reduction in opportunities

The Strategic Event Planning Grid



Planning Your Event Investment

During volatile economic cycles it's more important than ever to remember that an engaged pipeline is the primary, enduring source of sales and organic growth. Event marketing as a discipline isn't optional – it is a “good cost,” essential to harvesting revenue from both existing and net new pipeline prospects.

In budget planning, marketers must take care to distinguish between the necessary and the wasteful. Building and maintaining a position of personal recognition and trust remains one of the best ways to reduce business risk.

Surgically trimming event budgets and allocating investment towards high-yield strategies is the smart path for marketers. This involves searching for creatively superior solutions instead of relying on pure cost elimination as a planning mind-set. The marketer's challenge is to make well-defended, case-by-case recommendations about where to contain spending, where to hold it steady, and even where to increase it.

In the coming year, there are three primary drivers that influence event planning: overall impact on opportunity pipeline, the shift from push to participation marketing, and the ever-changing landscape of digital event technologies.

Here are the primary points you need to consider:

1) Assess Impact on Opportunity Pipeline

Events still play a relevant role in maintaining and building relationships.

When planning, a good place to start is to perform triage on your events. Determine which events have poor results, which have made little impact on lead progression, and which represent the potential for new pipeline growth in the coming fiscal. Marketers should concentrate their resources on maintaining relevance and personal connections with core prospects in order to build momentum.

Eliminate stale and tired thinking towards events. Take new risks and inject energy and personality into how you connect with people. To move forward, marketers must take on a new way of thinking, which involves being able to tell a better story and giving the audience a voice in the event.

How to engage people more effectively at your events:

- Be authentic: it's about people talking to real people – avoid corporate-speak
- Go big: build your campaigns around a single and consistent idea
- Rediscover the art of storytelling through your events
- Be timely with interests and trends in the marketplace
- Deliver content that is intelligent and meaningful

Idea Snapshot: VMware's Emotional Polling

VMware now includes emotional polling of guests as part of their planning process to help identify emotions that attendee's wish to walk away with from that particular event. For example, the “courage” to implement the ideas they learned at the conference once they return to their respective offices.

2) Shift from Push to Participation Marketing

Events are truly multi-dimensional and extended by social media.

Customer interest in events declines when the purpose of attending is lost. Customers no longer need brands to deliver product information given the mass proliferation of information available online. Marketers that drift away from events tend to be those locked in the traditional one-way conversation of expert opinion delivered from behind the proverbial podium.

The Formula for Low Event ROI



Flipping this around towards a quality event experience that delivers higher ROI, marketers must embrace the following success formula:



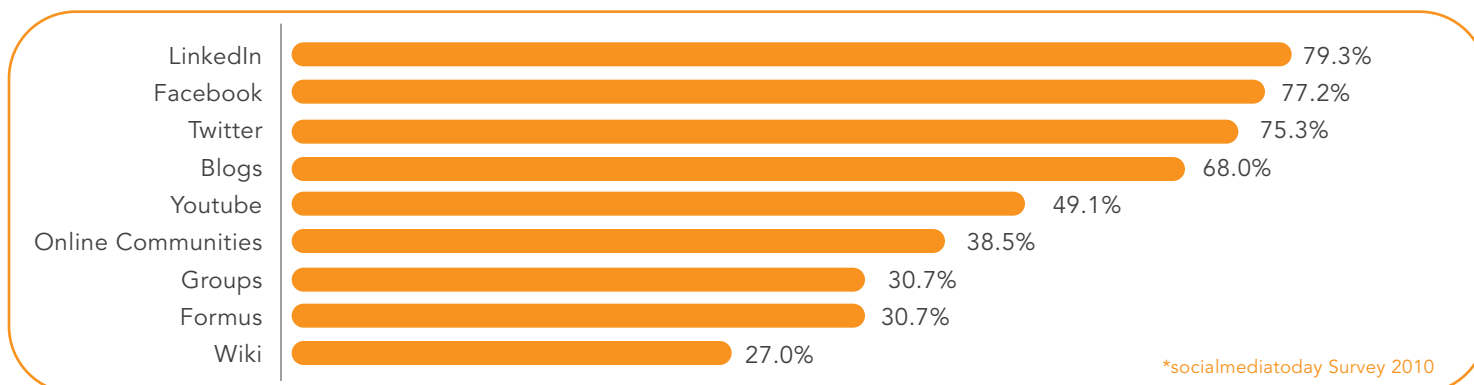
Put Social Media to Work

It is critical to align event strategies towards customers' priorities and redefine your value equation. The answer is not as simple as bolting on social media tools and calling a strategy fully baked. In fact, slingshot inclusions of Facebook event pages and Twitter feeds without relevance bring destructive potential to your marketing plan that could impact your reputation.

Social media adds value to events by extending their reach beyond the physical space. However, cutting through the clutter of information and content in social media is increasingly a concern for relationship centric event marketers. The solution lies in delivering high quality events that provide context for the virtual world. Create memorable experiences that people will want to share on sites such as Facebook, YouTube and other social networking sites.

The call to action for marketers is to be dynamic in order to standout. Social media tools help you create conversations about your business and extend the human relationship into the online environment.

Which social media tools are organizations currently using?*



While the mass consumer buzz continues to be around Facebook/Twitter, most organizations are adopting blogs as a means to get their message out. More accurately, business is learning to harness the potential of online publishing platforms to reach a mass audience with a personal point of view. The critical advantage here is your event web sites are easily search engine optimized and content is relatively simple to share and link into online conversations.

The new future of social media marketing is, ironically, based in the one of the oldest forms of social media, an investment in blogging to communicate and exchange ideas with your stakeholders.

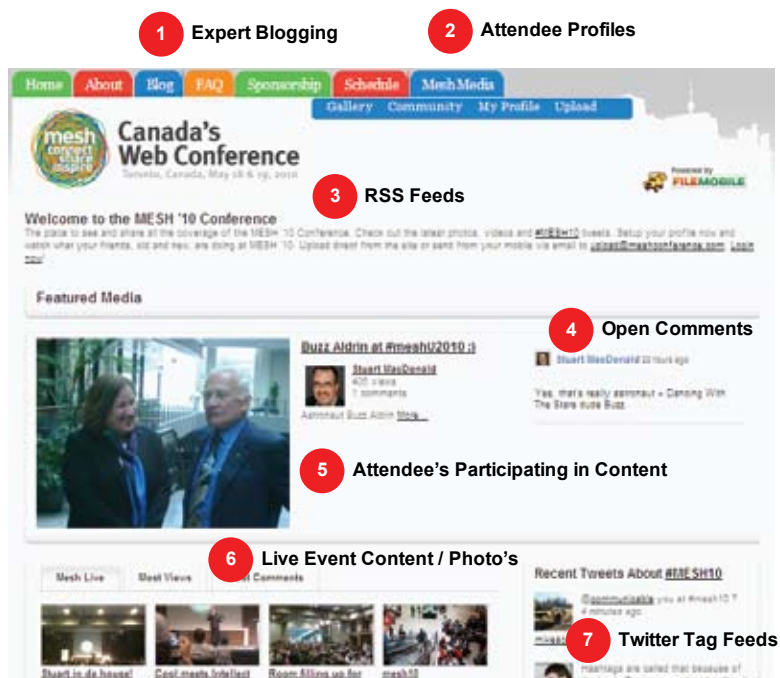
Get To Know Your Customers

When entering the planning stages, always think of your events from a personal relationship perspective. Your customer's experience begins at the very first marketing touch-point and your event strategy must optimize every possible opportunity to facilitate open knowledge sharing. This approach will strengthen the role of your team as trusted advisors as well as set the stage for a rich exchange that will form the basis of future customer value. Encourage people to participate, connect and share content on your event website and also their own blogs/social media tools.

Open knowledge sharing is the best method to uncovering who your customer really is and how you can help them. When conversations occur between people about your products or business, the insight to be gained is far more useful and relevant than if you had initiated a sales discussion outside of an event frameworks. This gives you an opportunity to engage people on their own terms, not as a salesperson, but as a resource.

How to connect with people more effectively:

- The cost of delivering a message today is minimal, explore high-impact and low-cost publishing platforms like WordPress to build your online event presence
- Twitter hashtags and other social sharing linkages are expected for every event campaign
- Your role shifts from educator to knowledge-facilitators
- Immerse your audience in rich content vs. pushing it to the audience via PowerPoint alone



Sample:

Multi-dimensional WordPress Event Site with Strong Audience Connections

3) The Changing Digital Events Spectrum

Technology is in constant motion but is no substitute for core strategy.

Digital events are often tagged as the "budget saviors" to balance "do more with less" mandates, where budget shifts towards strategies that replace live with online. But the replacement strategy is not as simple as swapping in a LiveMeeting or webinar and believing that customers will react according to plan.

Customer conversion rates from leads generated via webinars is in fact 65% lower than the conversion rates of live events. This alarming trend isn't necessarily a result of the medium; it is more a reflection of how strategy isn't aligned with the intention of digital events.

The event industry undergoes constant change with the addition of new technology occurring on an almost weekly basis. The variety of digital tools available to event marketers continues to evolve but the core objectives are consistent:

- Extend audience reach and life of the event
- Reduce cost per attendee
- Increase audience engagement/acquisition potential
- Provide a greener event footprint
- Boost lead generation

With this in mind, the question remains: how do you create an impact in the virtual world?

Think of digital events as an opportunity to bring innovation into your overall event strategy. Cutting edge digital strategy involves a blend of infotainment and rich content that is easily shared. Marketers should consider the range of potential digital event formats including broadcast live/in studio events, "simulive" formats, enriched webcasts, on-demand live chats, video blogging and augmented reality events.

Capturing rich customer intelligence also plays a critical role in your digital event strategy. When done effectively, your analytics allows a granular level of insight into interest and engagement across your prospect base. Accessing this data represents a nirvana for marketers, where you can understand exactly how specific segments of your customers are responding to the digital content.

Your digital event presence is essentially one large online catchment area for capturing lead data, ideas and attitudes, user content and validating your product position. This means blending together data capture forms, polls, surveys, open comments, social media metrics and web analytics into useful information that shapes your overall strategy.

Idea Snapshot: Statoil Augmented Reality

Working for Norwegian energy company Statoil, Jack Morton filmed an event with a small audience on a stage in London and then broadcasted it live in 120 countries, reaching 130,000 people.

The 3D Augmented Reality technology was overlaid on the live set so the people in the crowd could see the 3D environments on screens, but not on the stage—those on computers viewed the entire event as if it were magically transporting the speaker from an oil rig in the Atlantic to its headquarters in Norway. It proved to be an effective way to show off the company's global leadership.

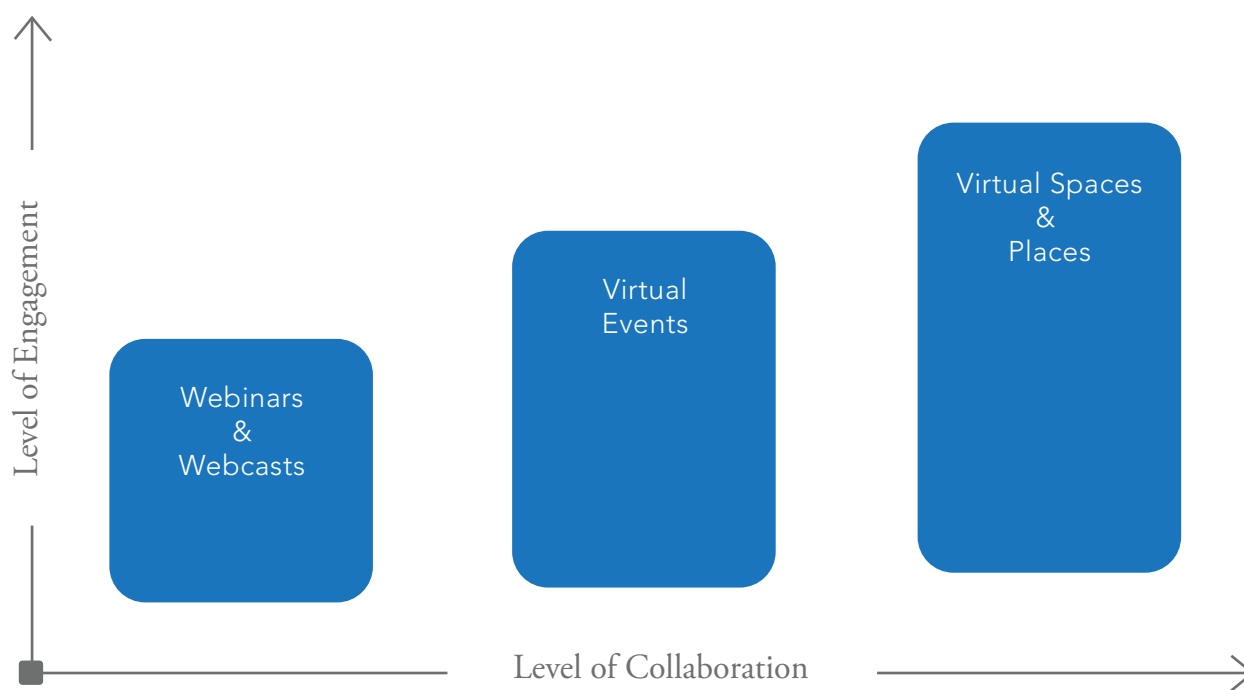
Digital is Digital / Live is Live

Digital events are a discipline to themselves and not necessarily an extension of your live event strategy.

Being remarkable in the digital world is a different skill set than being remarkable in a live event environment. It requires in-depth understanding of how people interact and absorb content online. This also means understanding how to create a consistent digital brand experience that reflects the values and identity of your organization.

Digital events give you the capability to facilitate collaboration between speakers, guests and experts. A traditional broadcast webinar or LiveMeeting in this light hardly qualifies as a rich digital event given the one-way delivery mechanism and the fact that these interactions do not easily enable peer-to-peer or multi-dimensional connections.

The Digital Event Value Chain



Creating Value through Digital Events

During early planning stages, take a campaign-driven approach to your digital events and layer in a diversity of online tactics such as webinars, videos, live chat and virtual sales rooms. The hub of your digital event strategy is always a compelling campaign site that allows you to add new content throughout the event lifecycle. This website becomes the digital destination for your event strategy and creates a legacy of high value content that can blend into broader marketing efforts.

It is of vital importance that content created for digital events have suitable production standards to engage the audience, otherwise you risk losing their interest. It is a common mistake for planners to under-invest on the production values of digital events.

A good rule of thumb is to allocate at least 1/3 of the money otherwise invested in transportation, venue and catering costs into rich content development. Poor content quality in audio/video experiences are the digital equivalent of hosting your executive events in the basement boardroom of a Motel 6.

The toolkit for digital events is a source of continued evolution. It is important for marketers not to get locked into the specific features/functionality of any particular tool, but instead to understand how the digital environment can facilitate new ways of being interesting and relevant.

The mantra to repeat is that live or digital – content still rules the roost.

In Summary: 7 Smart Ways to Boost Your Digital Events:

1. Facilitate user defined content creation and publishing
2. Make sharing and peer collaboration simple
3. Create a brand experience that is consistent with your live events
4. Entertain and inform with rich multimedia digital content
5. Harness online capture tools to create advanced customer intelligence
6. Invest in production values, particularly video & audio quality
7. Redefine how you measure digital events to include social media mentions/linkage stats

Idea Snapshot: Hybrid Event Planning

When budgeting, marketers must balance efforts to pare costs and shore-up short-term sales against long-term marketing investments that support overall business health. Streamlining events by adopting a hybrid strategy is one way to offer both the live experience and take advantage of the extended reach of digital. The answer is not as simple as webcasting a live event.

Marketers should treat their hybrid events as an effort in producing broadcast media. Each live event requires treatment as a “show” where the live guests serve as the studio audience for the digital experience. Think of your hybrid as a true production that deserves a theme or narrative to create wide-spread interest. Layer in production values worthy of a broadcast experience to produce content with social media legs.

In Conclusion

This position paper is designed to help marketing planners evaluate their overall event strategy from a variety of perspectives. As organizations invest in event marketing campaigns, incorporating these principles should be considered a high priority.

Skeptics might say that these opinions are representative of an event agency encouraging further budget expenditure on events. Historically events represent the strongest marketing tactic for nurturing personal relationships across a one-to-many spectrum. A volatile marketplace is not just a time of market uncertainty; it is also a time when the customer relationship becomes even more valuable.

Events offer marketers the strongest position for building opportunity pipeline, but the willingness to adapt strategy as outlined in this paper is imperative for long-term success.

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Rising/Falling Event Trends in the Coming Year

With events under pressure to perform better than ever, here is a quick snapshot of the trends impacting the event marketing landscape.



User-Generated Conferences

The coming year will see even higher uptake of barcamps and other unconference formats built by the people for the people.



20 Minute Presentations

The popularity of conferences like TED have proven that high value content doesn't have to be long-winded. Be brief, be brilliant, be gone.



Communication Platforms

The day of big website builds is over. Robust event websites built on communications platform technologies just make sense at every level.



Twitter

Having a Twitter hashtag for your event is a standard across pretty much every event so there is no excuse not to keep pace.



CRM Data Capture

Customer data capture via your event website is only useful if you have a home for the data and a plan for ongoing dialogue. CRM is the new essential.



Sales Follow-up

72 hour follow-up still best but teamed with facilitated knowledge sharing kills lead latency dead.



Unsolicited HTML Email

Email boxes continue to be hammered by spam. Unsolicited data purchases remain a needle in the haystack approach to spending your marketing dollars.



Webinars

Fatigue is setting in for industry-standard hour long conference calls where speakers drone on about their slides and interaction is only allowed during Q&A.



Product Seminars

Even the muffin-eater crowd is getting tired of product information sessions that are really sales pitches in disguise.

