



HOW TO HUMANISE YOUR ONLINE EVENTS

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO CREATING CONTENT-RICH VIRTUAL COMMUNICATIONS

**YOU'RE WFH.
YOUR ENTIRE WORKING WORLD AND SOCIAL LIFE IS
ONLINE. YOUR KIDS ARE DOING VIRTUAL PE AND FUNKY
PHONICS AND THEIR TEACHERS DESERVE A MEDAL.
WE'RE ALL GETTING USED TO BUSINESS AS *UNUSUAL***

We get it. It's scary out there. Not just because of the global pandemic, but as events and communications professionals who love the buzz of live, we can't yet see a light at the end of the tunnel of uncertainty. Rather than panic, perhaps it's more productive to shift our perspective.

Here's our thinking on how you can maximise audience engagement in online events. It all starts with your mindset.

GLASS HALF FULL FLIP NEGATIVES INTO POSITIVES

Remember, we're all human

When you think about it, the COVID-19 crisis has actually created an unparalleled sense of global community and sparked creative ingenuity in countless ways. We've never been more in touch with our emotions. We're laughing more (have you ever been sent so many funny memes?!) and socialising more (Houseparty app trivia nights and virtual beer tastings). We're exercising more (virtual yoga and digital raves), sharing more (because we're desperate for social contact) and caring more (volunteering to help neighbours, the elderly and the vulnerable). We're all human. Let's find the joy in that.

Digital can be human too

When we need to communicate at a safe social distance, it's more important than ever to bring humanity and a sense of community to your content and comms. Let's dispel some myths about digital meetings and events. Let's embrace the opportunities it brings. This is a great time to rethink, redesign and reimagine your events and comms.

Build purposeful relationships

In a crisis, our conversations are more purposeful; and our comms should be no different. In tough times we stick together; with our families, friends and colleagues. The current situation presents a real chance to build more togetherness, to communicate more purposefully and to position yourselves (and your brand) firmly in the hearts and minds of your people, customers and clients. If you communicate in a tone-deaf fashion (we've seen a few corporate reputations go up in flames recently), prepare for backlash. But, if you stay true to your values and remain purposeful in all you do, the way you act in a crisis can actually seal loyalty.

Apply measured thinking

We're all exercising comms muscles in ways we're not used to – but on the bright side, the current situation might permanently embed some best practices that will make your content and comms better in the long run. Even so, it's important to form positive habits early on. So, before rushing into tactics, first focus on your content (get your story straight) and then nail your engagement strategy (your plan for how to share it). This is a good habit under normal circumstances, but all the more important now. Remember the old adage, 'act in haste, repent at leisure.'

Invest in content

"I love spending money on drayage" said no event manager, ever. Imagine if you reallocated the budget you had set aside for – venue hire, catering, power, drayage, rigging, flights and hotels – and reinvested even just a *tiny* portion of it to develop rich, imaginative, compelling content. Investing in audience engagement is arguably more crucial than ever.

Test and measure. Measure and test.

Surely the holy grail of live events is being able to effectively and accurately measure engagement? Well here's some good news; going digital actually allows you to do just that! From attendee numbers, tracking and online focus groups, to instant messaging and polling, you've never had a better chance to test and measure how your content is being received, in real time.

Let's do this.

Open mind? Check. Ready to embrace digital events? Check. We've used our Brands at Work design framework to create a step-by-step guide to building your own, fully-fledged online events and communications strategy.

We call it The Four As:

Audience. Ambition. Approach. Activation.

All set? Let's do this.



AUDIENCE

KNOW YOUR PEOPLE. LISTEN TO THEM. GIVE THEM WHAT THEY WANT

Don't start with the tech. Start with your audience.

If your first thought is "Zoom or Teams? Webinar or Webcast?" just hold your horses there. One of the common pitfalls in the current climate is jumping to find the right technology before thinking about your audience. It doesn't matter whether you use *Teams, Zoom, Skype, Workplace, Hopin or Google Hangouts*. What matters most (just as it did before) is your audience.

What's their current reality?

Knowing what is most important to your audience (and to you) is key. What is your audience's current reality? What are their current work-life behaviours and habits? How have these changed? What are they thinking, feeling and doing? Think about their schedules, their attention spans, their other pressures such as home-schooling. Put yourself in their shoes and ask yourself – what do they want, what do they need? Or better still, ask them...

What does everyone love being asked for?

Their opinion of course. Use surveys and focus groups to gain insights. Questions could cover agenda and content preferences, formats, frequency, needs, wants and desires. Listening actively and letting the data inform your design is a step not to be skipped.

Create authentic, personal experiences

Yes, digital behaviours are different to live behaviours, but if your content is authentic, and you're creating a great experience, then your audience will engage. Human content will get a human response, after all, we *all* want great experiences. The more personalised the experience, the better. If you've done your homework on your audience's preferences (see above), then you're one step ahead.

Creatures of habit

Why are millions of people tuning into Joe Wicks' PE class at 9am every day? Because they're craving structure and routine. Consider how your event communications can seamlessly slip you're your audience's routines, workflows and working groups to achieve virtual efficiency.

ASK YOURSELF

What assumptions have you made about your audience? Are they still true now?
Were they ever true?!

What do they really want and need?
How do you know?

How can you personalise the experience for your audience members?

How can your content become bite-sized and accessible? How can it fit into your audience's new reality, routines and rituals?

AMBITION

KNOW YOUR 'WHY', YOUR GOALS AND PRIORITIES

Know your why

Clearly articulating the 'why' is a key part of humanising your design. Why are people attending? What are their driving factors? Do they want to hear inspiring keynotes? Or network with others? Is this a masterclass? Or a knowledge share? Is this about connecting, learning or entertaining? Knowing your why (and that of your audience) is just as important now as it always was.

Set clear goals

Whether your digital event is a conference, an exec meeting or an expo and whether you aim to inspire, innovate or entertain, being clear on your strategic goals and objectives is just as crucial when going digital. For example, is your goal 'to bring together 500 people at an educational event' or is it 'to educate 500 people'? These subtleties, informed by understanding your audience, can transform your strategy and design for the better.

Prioritise (and stay realistic)

If you're adapting a live event and taking it online, consider revisiting your objectives. Are they still realistic and achievable? What were your priorities when it was live, and do they still hold true for online? Or do you need a different approach? For example, turning what was a three-hour face-to-face workshop into three one-hour sessions might be a more realistic way of achieving your priorities.

Stay true to you

Remember who you are – your brand, personality, purpose and values – and stay true to those. Consider dress code, culture and whether your usual 'workplace norms' should apply, or whether they can change for digital events.

ASK YOURSELF

Can you clearly articulate the 'why' for this event?

Have you defined your goals and priorities as well as those of your people?

Have you stayed true to your brand? Your leaders? Your people? Your clients / customers?



APPROACH DESIGNING YOUR DIGITAL EVENTS

Make the technology work for you.

Not the other way 'round.

Technology is a vehicle, not a strategy for communication. Simply choosing a platform is not enough to turn your live event into a digital one. The technology you choose has to work with your strategic objectives and approaches.

Choose wisely

You'll be spoilt for choice with the many different platforms and tools that are available. Collaboration rooms, virtual booths and roundtables, brainstorming whiteboards and even immersive simulation environments. Many are affordable, but don't just plug n' play – do your research and choose wisely. Some are all-in-one but others need additional apps to enhance the basic functionality and, on some occasions, you might need to mix a few different technologies to enhance engagement, and to achieve your goals.

Design from your people's perspective

Create a great user experience by whiteboarding and wireframing every touchpoint of every moment – with your audience and their needs front of mind. From pre-event comms and registration, to a fascinating agenda and a focused follow up, building a human-centred user experience will make the transition from live to virtual a rewarding experience rather than just a necessity.

Bite-size is best

Digital audiences want to consume at their convenience, so creating on-demand content that can be accessed at any time will allow them to engage whenever they want. What's more, attention spans tend to be shorter online, so bite-sized is best. Think less about traditional event designs and more towards an accessible, Netflix-style menu serving up short, snackable, quality content.

Campaign thinking

Just because your face-to-face event was a two-day show, doesn't mean that's how it needs to look online. In fact, it might work even better if spread out over time to maximise engagement, energy levels and audience participation, especially when people are joining from home.

Festivalise your format

Ok, so we might have made that word up, but here's the point: Online gives you flexibility beyond 'two 10-hour days in a conference hotel'. By applying the concept of a festival to your design, you can reimagine the format. Different content experiences that cater for different tastes on different days, personalised showcases or masterclasses, inspiring keynotes, 'commercial breaks', (even silent disco dancing, comedy and secret music performances) will all help to deliver digital diversity that's fit for a festival.



APPROACH CONTINUED

Combine your channels and mix up your media

Digital events are not just talking heads in rows of rectangles. Combine your channels and mix up your media to keep your audience hooked. Podcasts, on-demand films, interactive video, gameshows and quizzes. Online ice breakers, teambuilding challenges, comedy breaks and live music. Even some of the more traditional formats can make the break from live to online – from virtual panel sessions to 'lunch and learns' where everyone joins from their kitchen table.

Build community

If there's one thing that social distancing has encouraged, it's the spirit of community. From Elton John living room concerts and virtual pubs to making neighbourly calls to those in need, a sense of community makes people feel part of something much bigger. How can you weave this into your design? Examples such as crowdsourced 'Reimagined Art', John Krasinski's homemade *Some Good News* show, 'sofa choir' challenges, and social distancing street parties are great ways to get inspired. Just because the medium has changed, doesn't mean we can't get our messages across creatively and theatrically. Sure, be tasteful, but don't lose your sense of humour either!

Be like a binge-able box set for your brand

Sharpen your storytelling skills like never before by getting people talking before, during and after the event. Showcase your key 'characters', consider TV-drama style cliff-hangers and create memorable 'episodes' and shareable stories that build over time. From encouraging conversations in virtual social spaces and making your own memes, to creating an entertaining, episodic drama, turning your digital event into a performance will lead to powerful results. Imagine a role play training workshop hosted by improv actors, or a traditional strategy keynote reimagined as a cinematic experience.

Some rules still apply

Just because it's not live, doesn't mean you can rewrite all the rules. Make sure you champion dialogue not dictation, allow plenty of breaks and networking opportunities, and keep sessions short and sharp to keep everyone engaged. Online testing is the new dress rehearsal: Just like live, if it *can* go wrong, it *will* go wrong so test, test and test again.

Dull content = dull event

It's harsh, but it's true. It's not about the whizzy tech and the cool tools you choose, it's about designing an audience-centred online experience with emotional intelligence, versatility and above all, bold, beautiful and broadcast-worthy content. Your talent squad should now be made up of creatives, scriptwriters, UX designers, content producers, production managers, moderators, graphic designers, animators, video/broadcast directors, and audience engagement specialists.

ASK YOURSELF

Have you chosen the right tech platform(s) and tools for the right reasons?

Have you kept your people front and centre in your design?

Do your channel combos contain shareable content and plenty of variety?

Are your stories authentic, gripping, entertaining and memorable?

Have you applied community, campaign thinking and conversation?

Have you tested your tech to its limits?

ACTIVATION

TAKE TIME TO CONSIDER YOUR TACTICS

Now it's time to have some fun by combining a collection of creative tactics to breathe new life into your digital events. Here's ten free ideas for you to run with, from pre to post event.

1. Pre-event comms

Just like for live, your pre-event communications should inform and excite in equal measure. Why not create visual graphics using the results of an audience survey? Or a photo collage or a piece of participant-penned Pictionary artwork in line with your event theme? Or, using crowd-sourced video platform Seenit, turn your audience into an army of vloggers. Everyone submits their video messages from home and you edit them all together, to be played during the event and/or sent out as a post-event keepsake.

2. Ice breaker

For the event opening, warm them up with a digital scavenger hunt. Your audience must find a list of random items in their home, against the clock. This could be business-related ("build a model of our business using only household items") or just for fun ("find something green and hold it up to your webcam").

3. Host with the most

Whether you book a professional facilitator or if there's someone in the business with a hidden talent (or a co-hosting combo of both), having a dedicated host is a great way to ensure fluidity and flow – and entertainment! Just make sure you invest in enough pre-event rehearsal time.

4. Experiments in sound

Use audio production to create a memorable opening moment that works well for your working-from-home community. To embrace the fact that your audience are wearing headphones, why not create a binaural sound experience as your event opening? This audience-centred audio could deliver a genuinely original, immersive experience for your kick off.



ACTIVATION CONTINUED

5. Problem-solving hackathon

Launch a scalable problem-solving challenge where teams must 'hack' a solution in virtual breakout rooms. An actor or facilitator sets up the challenge, which is based on an existing (real or fictional) business or customer problem. Teams then collaborate across geographies using video calling and digital whiteboards and must respond in real time to surprise status calls and other digital 'gamechangers'.

6. Using breaks to full effect

Create a series of 'brain breaks' during your event by providing virtual wellness activities, networking rooms or more formal 'lunch and learn' sessions. You could even use breaks to show films, such as the pre-event participant videos submitted via Seenit. From desk-side yoga and home HIIT classes to collaborative cooking, breaks are a great chance to keep the engagement going.

7. Pecha Kutch presentations

Worried about lengthy presentations? Give guidance around the visual stimuli that can be shared in your keynotes (or hackathons). Using the 'Pecha Kutch' technique, presenters are limited to 20 visual slides in 20 seconds, with no text! This design challenge will ensure that your presentations skip along, while supporting the short attention spans associated with online engagement.

8. Digital Dragons' Den debates

Linking back to both the team hackathon and the Pecha Kutch technique, teams could present the results of their challenge to a panel of actors or business leaders via video conference. This could involve elements of 'virtual show and tell' using household items, online debates and polling ("what does the audience think of the solution?") and of course, Q&A with the business 'dragons'.

9. Collaboration and co-creation

To leverage the creativity of your people alongside the power of your chosen tech, consider how you can weave co-creation and collaboration into your digital events. From writing stories together in a game of 'online consequences', to creating dynamic (and organic) collaborative artwork using digital whiteboards. What could the business version of the ice bucket, mannequin or toilet-roll-keepy-up challenges look like?!

10. Post-event comms

As is often said, the most important day of any event is the day after. If you've recorded sessions, why not edit them down into snack-sized social highlights reels? Is there a final surprise you can send, such as a montage film as a digital keepsake? Or can you leverage 'campaign thinking' by following up with an engaging post-event task, quiz or even a teaser for your next event?

ASK YOURSELF

Have you considered engaging your audience before, during and after your digital event?

Will your chosen activations and programme work well with your chosen technology?

Is there a good combination of individual and team activities? Have you woven collaboration and co-creation throughout?



CHANGE IS THE ONLY CONSTANT

CREATE AN AGILE PLAN FOR DIGITAL AND LIVE

Plan like the military.

So, you're all set... For now. But what happens in six months' time? Nine? 12? The truth is, in the current climate, we just don't know. That's why planning with agility – and with military precision – is vital. If a live event has to become an online one (or vice versa) make sure you have a plan. In fact, have a Plan A, B and C for every piece of comms and every event. Build the different scenarios into your comms timeline with defined "go/no go" decision points. You'll thank yourself later down the line.

This situation will help us

The world is changing rapidly, but some of the changes we're being forced to make and the habits we're being forced to form will stick. Online comms, collaboration and events are quickly becoming a strong proof point in our industry. Once your audience is more comfortable engaging with your virtual content and comms, your face-to-face events will benefit too. We promise. Which brings us to...

Be ready for hybrid

As the world (and business) begins to return to normal, it's likely to happen in stages. Carefully controlled environments that combine live and digital are going to play a big part, so building hybrid events into your plans is a smart move. For example, a TV-style 'news broadcast' with one presenter, a small studio audience and thousands more tuning in from home.

One final thought

It's easy to feel that this is how life will always be. But that's really not the case. Life will return to normal and the events industry is no different. So, while designing your online events and communications, don't forget about face-to-face. There will undoubtedly be a triumphant return to live, and when that happens, there will also be a venue and resource availability crunch! Keep this front of mind, and consider holding those dates, venues and hotels, as things could get back to normal in no time.