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**UNLOCKING THE POSSIBILITIES
OF HYBRID EVENTS.**



THE TERM 'HYBRID' IS THREATENING TO RIVAL 'PIVOT'

FOR MOST OVERUSED AND UNDER-DEFINED PHRASE OF ALL TIME. HERE, WE OFFER OUR GUIDANCE ON WHAT A HYBRID EXPERIENCE MIGHT MEAN FOR YOU.

Forget the 'new normal'. Normal never changed the world.

The 'new normal'. Have you ever heard a less optimistic phrase? Talk about going through the motions.

We don't see it like that. We're celebrators of ingenuity and we're all about the art of the possible.

Take this last year. The evolution of events was so quick that Darwin didn't just turn in his grave, he grew wings and sprouted a third eye. Amid the slamming of shutters across business and venues and the restriction of budgets, the events industry responded in force. By embracing digital channels, we've been able to reach bigger audiences with greater relevance. Storytelling, creativity and technical innovation flourished. We've learnt so much about human behaviours in virtual worlds. And frankly, we've come too far to turn back now.

Then again, it has also reinforced the power of in-person experiences (as if we needed reminding). And now, the balance between in-person and virtual experiences sits tantalisingly on the horizon.

New normal? Perhaps, but there's nothing normal about it. The possibilities here are endless.

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YOUR NEEDS

HYBRID ANSWERS MANY MOTIVATIONS

Baby steps

Let's not get too ahead of ourselves. Everything is possible, but the majority of you will be tentatively dipping your toes in the hybrid waters.

So, swimming caps on and armbands at the ready, let's establish the most common and practical reasons why you may be considering a hybrid event.

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...hybrid isn't one size fits all. It has many applications that can be tailored to your needs.
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Top of the list? Risk. If there's one thing we all know, it's that we don't know very much about how this pandemic will progress. Sure, there are roadmaps to 'normality' in some countries. But the lack of certainty doesn't help when you're keen to increase engagement while keeping your audiences safe and minimising risk. Without doubt, hybrid events offer that glimmer of hope to bring some people together without opening up to the masses.

Perhaps your biggest concern is how to engage multi-national audiences – each with different restrictions, cultural expectations or needs – across multiple time zones. Or perhaps you're keen to explore hybrid because you've noticed some of that 'screen fatigue' set in and you want to shake things up. Or maybe, most of all, you're just missing that ineffable, ethereal magic that sparks into life as people interact face-to-face.

And then there will be some of you coming the other way who are less convinced about hybrid's usefulness. Perhaps you're worried that blending an in-person and virtual event means double the cost. Or you're unsure what the technical requirements are and don't know where to start.

Whatever your underlying feelings on the matter, fear not. While we're not here to answer each and every concern, what we can tell you is that hybrid isn't one size fits all. It has many applications that can be tailored to your needs.

DEFINITION

HYBRID MEANS LOTS OF THINGS

Sorry if you were hoping for a one liner on what hybrid really is.

The truth is, there are so many types of hybrid events or communications, and they all have their place. It really depends on what your ambition is and who your audiences are.

If we unfurl the ginormous map of the experiences and events universe, you can generally plot three key areas. At one end, you have purely in-person events. And for some people, that's prime rib – the ideal scenario to get back to.

At the other end, there's pure virtual engagement. This is what we've all been focused on in the last year, and the best virtual productions have demonstrated the power of digital channels and their reach.

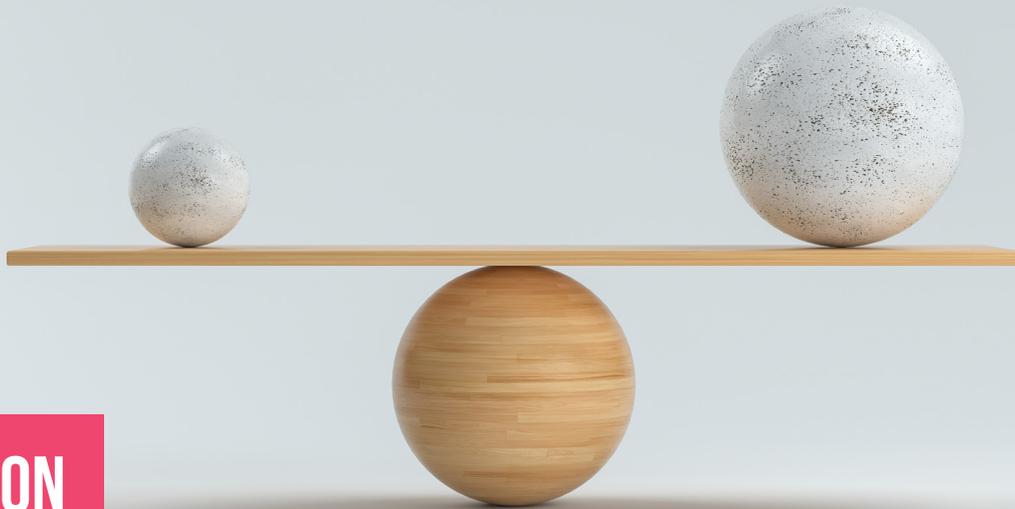
And slap bang in the middle sits the glorious third option: hybrid events. A balance between the two extremes that, in theory at least, offers the most powerful way to communicate and design content experiences.

But the truth is, that's all a little too simplistic. These three areas are useful way finders, like the cardinal directions on a compass. But there's an enormous amount of untapped hybrid opportunity that sits between them.

What Hybrid ISN'T

Given Hybrid can be so many things, let's try to define what it's not. Maybe you've produced an in-person event and broadcasted a live stream of it. Or recorded an in-person event with a couple of static cameras at the back of the room and posted it online for on-demand viewing. Yeah, sorry, neither of those are examples of a hybrid event. That's digital amplification – footage published online, but with no digital experience in the content design.

But don't be put off – what it shows is that there are key technical and production principles (show record, live relay, online broadcast, audience reach) that your agencies have been doing for decades. Combined with an intuitive understanding of how to create human experiences, they're the foundation to much of where we're going. You're in safe hands.



DEFINITION

CONTINUED

So what IS Hybrid, then?

A hybrid event is one that balances the experiences of in-person and virtual audiences, acknowledging the needs, nuances and opportunities of each (oh hey, we could sum it up in a sentence after all).

At its most potent, a hybrid event results in a shared outcome between the audience types. By which we mean that you'll likely have a single ambition for your project (sell a product, motivate a workforce, change behaviours, and so on). And it doesn't matter whether your audiences are in-person or virtual, that outcome is relevant for both.

But here's the crucial part: that doesn't mean the experiences should be the same. Different audiences and different channels have different needs. In other words, the plot of your story is ultimately the same, but the way you tell it will vary.

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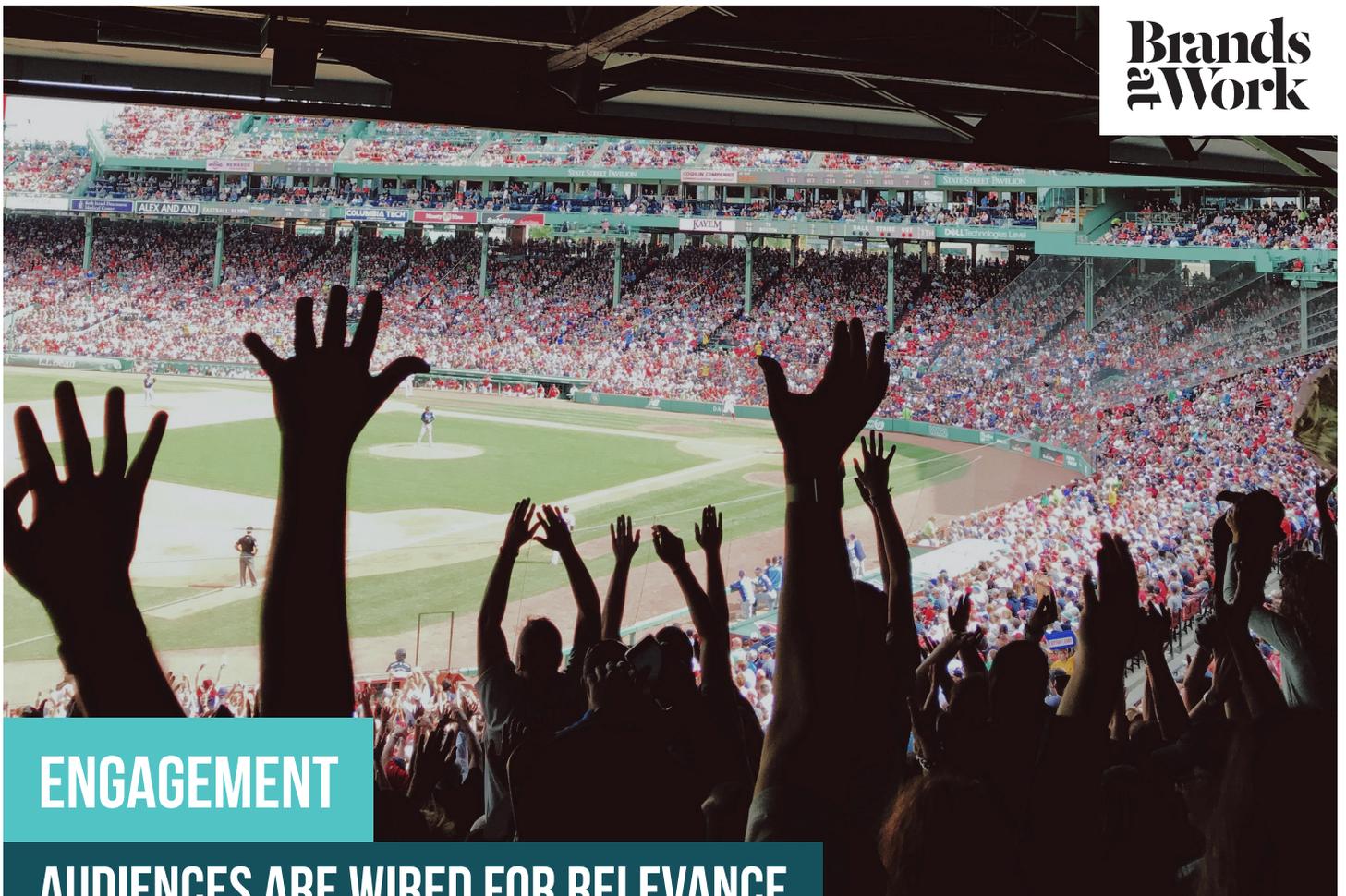
'...what does that actually mean?'

Let's hammer that out a bit more.

An in-person event offers the opportunity to engage in the experience with all your senses. So imagine that: you're in the moment, seeing, hearing, touching – hell, even smelling and tasting. You're up close with your fellow guests (ahem, 2m distance please), playing off the chemistry in such a way that 'networking' doesn't feel like a corporate activity, it's just a natural way of being. Keynotes aren't stilted, they're powerful on-stage performances. Content isn't just shared, it surrounds you – pockets of experience to discover; moments of serendipity that make the day memorable.

And virtually? Imagine there was no stuffy, all-too Covid-friendly plane to board to get to your location. Commutes, registration queues and the ungodly stasis of a venue's air conditioning are all replaced by the simple lift of your laptop screen. And in a second, you're wired in. To the event, to your colleagues – even the ones hundreds or thousands of miles away. It would be concerning if an entire world were bursting out at you through this one portal, unmanageable and relentless. But actually, it works the other way. You choose what to engage with where, when and how. With the click of buttons over hours, days and maybe even weeks, your experience unfolds at your own pace.

At the end of it all, you've pretty much learnt the same things. You just took a different journey to get there.



ENGAGEMENT

AUDIENCES ARE WIRED FOR RELEVANCE

'I get the principles, but I'm not sure I see the value'

Right, time for an analogy or two.

Take sports. There are only so many fans you can have in a stadium. In popular sports, there's an exclusivity to attending (and that's without mentioning the cost of it all). But the boom in broadcast means that not only do fans around the globe avoid missing out, they get to enjoy an entirely different experience of the same game.

In the stadium you're part of the electric atmosphere. You're surrounded by likeminded individuals and you get that intense, sensory experience. But if you can't make the game in person, you still get to choose how you watch (on a comfy chair), where you watch (at home or in a bar) and who you watch it with (your best friend). In the stadium you get the 'I was there' visceral feeling of joy as points are scored (even if you're being rained on or you're stuck behind a pillar). On screen, you get all the best angles, the tactical analysis, and you're the first to get the post-match reaction. We could go on, but you probably get the point. Two very different experiences that ultimately have the same outcome.

Not a sports fan? Take supermarket shopping. Again, in the supermarket you get that sensory experience. Want a tomato? Well, just go and see how good the tomatoes are. Give them a feel and make your decision. It's a world of immediacy and immersion that demands all the senses to be in play. And there's a social aspect to it as well (not always a positive one when you inevitably bump into that person you're trying to avoid).

But where would we be without online shopping these days? Again, the outcome is the same – you're just buying your groceries. But the experience is entirely different. On a practical level, it's a safer activity. It's more convenient and demands less effort. But behaviourally, it lends itself to those who like to plan in advance and strategise their weekly shop. Neither experience is less valuable than the other, and the value of each experience for the different audience types is immense.

Hybrid events work in just the same way. It's not the same experience across every channel. You can dial your channel mix up or down depending on your ambitions and audience needs, and create the most effective content experience to match those channels and audience types.

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ENGAGEMENT

CONTINUED

'But aren't in-person events more engaging anyway?'

Let's say you're thinking about designing a hybrid event and you think 'well, my last virtual event didn't quite hit those networking levels I'd hoped for, so this time I'll focus on the in-person experience first. The rest can just watch.' Stop right there! It's time for a re-think.

None of your audiences should simply be observers, they should all be participants. When we say that, we don't mean everything has to be interactive at all times (though that helps). We mean that your audience shouldn't be passive in the way they experience your content.

Back to first principles: we shouldn't ever let the technology or the venue drive the audience experience. We must design our experiences for humans first.

And really, that was half the challenge this last year. Most event agencies spent their planning time unearthing and refining virtual platforms, squeezing out as much intuition from them as possible. After all, these platforms were primarily broadcast ready tools and not many of them had much of a user experience to speak of.

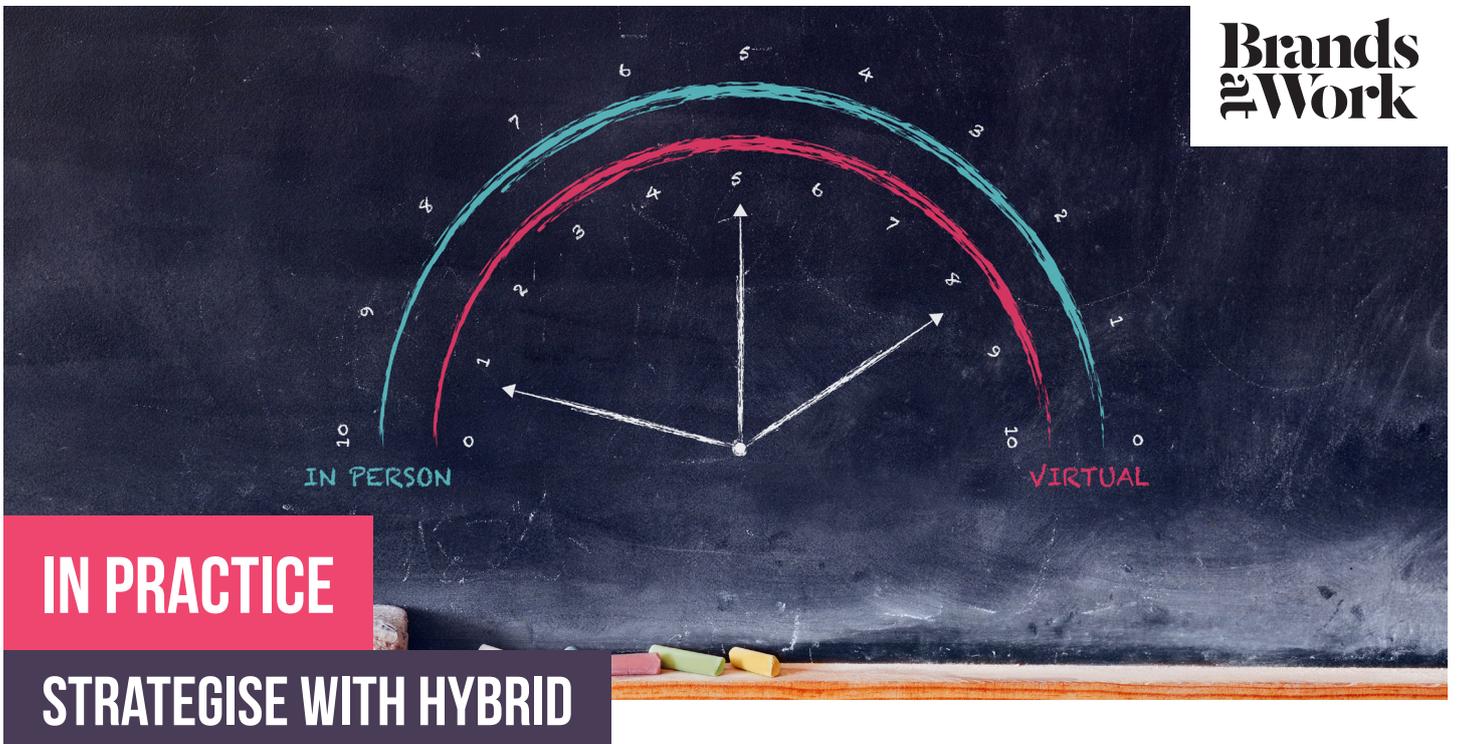
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It was a bit like buying a suit off the rack and taking it to a tailor to get it fitted. We took these platforms and adapted them to be fit for purpose, refining customer journeys, integrating third party technology, re-designing the look and feel, pushing for speedy innovation where experience points weren't quite up to scratch. All to cater for the human experience design.

The great news is, that innovation never stopped. These platforms have now evolved into multi-faceted experience solutions. There are new and wonderfully clever digital tools that exist to make compelling, purposeful and imaginative virtual networking a reality (rather than a tumbleweed group call).

And as we come into the hybrid world, our focus now shifts to connecting both the virtual and in-person audiences together. All that development work, all that evolution, has provided us with technology that facilitates that interaction. Whether it's mobile app versions of platforms for all audiences to engage together in real time, or the ability to bring in and spotlight your audience (even in their hundreds) on screen for direct conversation. What we're talking about here are 'digital portals' that bridge the gaps between audiences and even venues.

Ultimately, there's a parity emerging. So, your perspective shouldn't be 'we must focus on in-person first, and the digital audience second' or vice versa. There may be different degrees of emphasis for each audience type in terms of their needs, but there should be a balance in how much thought is put into engagement planning for each of them.



IN PRACTICE

STRATEGISE WITH HYBRID

Let's return to that principle we mentioned earlier - that a hybrid event isn't one size fits all. If we look at the whole spectrum of event design, from in-person to virtual, you can see how different forms of experience can be strategically used to achieve specific goals. The examples we're sharing certainly aren't exhaustive. But they do represent real life projects that we're working with our clients on as we speak.

1. The fully virtual experience

We won't spend much time on this one. But to reinforce the point – sure, some brands remain keen to invest in the purely virtual space. It's a particularly potent method of communication if you're trying to tell a big story or educate a workforce with a campaign of content. Just remember that it's not just about choosing a platform, dialling into your audience and talking at them. People consume their content through digital channels every single day. Expectations are high, so plan your story and methods of engagement carefully.

2. The fully in-person experience

Ah, fully in-person events. What a nostalgia fest. Some countries are already back to holding in-person events; others aren't far behind. But while we're all excited by the relaxing of country and corporate restrictions, we should be equally as mindful of audience appetite. One thing's for sure though: if your ambition is purely to get people together, network and celebrate, we all know that in-person does this better than any other channel.

3. Virtual with a small in-person experience

Here's where things get really interesting, because you can start to be very strategic with the way you employ a hybrid event. And really, this all comes down to determining your needs vs understanding your audience. For this example, let's focus on a thought leadership event aimed at the C-suite level. How do you decide which section of the audience to get in the room? By geography? First come first served? Both decent enough options. But what if you focused your in-person experience on your 50 most high value customers?

Immediately the dynamic of your in-person event experience and content design will change. Naturally, you'll want to create a more exclusive, immersive and VIP in-person experience for that high value audience to ensure you're matching their expectations and your business goals.

4. In-person with virtual reach

Then there's the other way around. And we're not just talking about a scenario of a big national or regional event cascaded to a smaller digital audience (though that's a reasonable option). This could also be about designing a series of in-person events that are connected to one another virtually. In other words, a live 'hub and spoke' scenario where limitations on location and capacity are broken down through the intelligent use of technology. And no, we don't mean just putting in a relay screen. We mean designing an event that genuinely and seamlessly connects multiple venues together in an immersive experience. In other words, leaning on the power of the physical world, and then breaking its boundaries to increase audience engagement. Pretty cool.

5. The fully hybrid experience

And then there's the big guy. The main event. The head honcho. Again, what a 'pure' or 'fully' hybrid event looks like could be any number of things for any number of reasons. But in essence this would be what we call an 'omni-channel' approach. By which we mean experiences and content created and curated across a mix of channels. This is where we create ultimate balance between the two worlds – purposeful, channel specific engagements that have a symbiotic relationship.

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OUTCOME

REAP THE BENEFITS

We're going to hazard a guess that you're now thinking, 'gosh, this sounds like a lot of work. What's in it for me?'

Here's our swift breakdown of the benefits you can expect to see from a well-executed hybrid experience.

Greater reach

If you've been putting on virtual events for the last year, greater reach will be something you're very familiar with. It's tough to justify turning your back on that, both on a business and sustainability level. But that's the beauty of hybrid: you get to retain that benefit. Except even better, you have the best of both worlds. Maintain that reach through digital channels, while bringing together a selected audience for the power of face-to-face engagement.

Empowered audiences

Hybrid empowers audiences by giving them the opportunity to engage and participate in an experience in a way that is relevant to them. To some event organisers, that might sound a little scary or out of control. But it shouldn't. We're not saying your audiences get to do what they want; we're saying that they have become accustomed to making choices within an experience framework that fit with their needs and ambitions. They will appreciate you all the more if you develop a thorough and well strategised content experience with them in mind.

Targeted content

Just saying 'content is king' doesn't quite cut it. Content is more your omnipotent global overlord. It's the beating heart of a memorable event experience, no matter how that event comes to life. A hybrid experience is the perfect conduit for your content as it offers an omni-channel approach. That means you can tailor your content and messages for each channel and each audience. People learn in very different ways and the more you know about your audience, the more tailored and personalised you can be in the content you create and experiences you design.

Sponsorship

Sponsorship also had an uptick through this last year of virtual events. Collaboration and cocreation allowed sponsors to spin off master narratives with relevant branded content. Hybrid offers just as potent an opportunity, with sponsors able to create robust digital campaigns alongside a physical presence at an in-person event. Not only does this amplify the channels through which sponsors can engage, it also extends their time of engagement. Plus, it enables them to turn entirely to digital should the landscape change without such a detrimental impact on their ROI.

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OUTCOME

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Inclusivity

Whether it's the breadth of geographies, navigating cultural nuances, or planning for good old fashioned individual availability, the omni-channel approach that hybrid offers ensures your experience is inclusive to all. No more missing out for those who can't travel or who have mobility issues. No more hard to reach audiences or insurmountable logistical challenges. Your audience isn't one-dimensional, so your event experience shouldn't be either.

Campaignability

Your event shouldn't be a single moment in time, it should be the peak of a sustained conversation. That has always been the ideal, but too often emphasis has been placed on that one event day or week when your audience will arrive at the venue or log onto the platform.

If we fully embrace the power of an omni-channel approach, we should be engaging with audiences well before the live event and a long time after too. This is how you develop momentum and legacy: seeding conversation before the event, diving into and starting new conversations at the event, continuing those conversations after the event, and going all the way through just like that to the next one, and the next, and the next. It drives evolution, purpose, relevance, but above it's what helps you to build a lasting community.

Increased ROI

The cherry on top. Are there additional costs to producing a hybrid event? Potentially (there are efficiencies to be had too). But the return on your investment should be much more significant. This is partly common sense. After all, if you're creating omni-channel experiences and content with your audience in mind, extending your reach, and lengthening the time of your engagement, you should see greater impact.

Still, genuine ROI demands intelligent evaluation. So it's worth remembering that when it comes to event measurement, the real work comes at the start of the project. Get under the skin of it all. What is the ambition for your event – its purpose? What are the outcomes you need to see in order to have a meaningful impact on your business ambitions?

Events without ambition (or those produced 'because we've always done them this way') won't cut it. Dig down to the core of what you're trying to accomplish and why. It's this early strategic thinking that helps make the digital measurement tools we've come to expect and enjoy actually worth their salt.

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GETTING STARTED

THE TIME IS NOW!

The world is changing. And while calling it the ‘new normal’ might go some way to easing how terrifying that sounds, as a term it just doesn’t do justice to the opportunity on our hands.

Bringing people together, sharing strategies, telling stories, embedding behaviours – live communication is the lifeblood to so many businesses and brands. So, we ‘pivoted’ (promise, that’s the last time we’ll use that word) last year and found that there was genuine power in recrafting those stories for virtual channels, even if it came with some limitations too.

Well, it’s time to pivot (oops, we did it) again. The promise of hybrid events brings together the best of both worlds. Not simply as a means to amplify in-person events, but as a method of even greater immersion and audience engagement.

Don’t be daunted by this next phase of evolution. This is a positive and perfectly attainable new landscape of opportunities to engage audiences.

Embrace this new era of hybrid possibilities. And don’t forget: we’re the ones who get to design what this ‘new normal’ looks like. So let’s make it anything but normal.

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