

Embrace the new language of digital experiences

The coronavirus is not just an episode. Its aftermath will accelerate changes in the way we organise and interact. Overdependency on movement of goods and people will be reconsidered and the live and events channel will see a dramatic turn to new forms of virtual interaction.

If we see this change as a simple 'analogue' in which the form and formats of the event are translated to digital – think webchats and livestreams in place of meetings and keynotes – we'll make serious errors. Just as podcasts are not radio, YouTube is not scheduled TV and the Instagram marketplace is not a shopping centre, a digital-first event or conference must respect the channel's native dynamics. Live events offer a unique way to reach and engage an audience, one that's become more and more prized partly because digital clutter has made attention a scarcer commodity.

So, how can we build a native digital event experience while retaining live / experiential's unparalleled levels of attention, immersive and sensory engagement?

We're going to address these questions over a series of articles with the aim of helping businesses and event managers recognise the traps and plot a course to thrive in the new environment. Recent history shows us the success of digital incumbents over slow manoeuvring digital transformers in business, but brands needn't run through the same grooves as they look to evolve events in the virtual domain.

Many will, but those who get this right will win a rare opportunity to cut through amidst the noise of others' mistakes.

Start with objectives

Unlike ad agencies who've long outsourced creative production, event professionals blend strategic and creative skillsets with a commitment to realising their own concepts in execution. Digital, likewise, benefits when concept and realisation are held close through good project management. The trick is to avoid slipping into an executional mindset early in a project.

Staying focussed on the business objective means finding the right strategic and creative answer before jumping to execution.

Each brief is different and the challenges and opportunities depend on the specifics of product, brand, service or organisation but Live is unique in providing a sense of occasion and exclusivity, a spectacle. None of us should underestimate the challenge the coming months pose as we look to deliver this same magic in the remote context.



Consider the typical objectives we face

Objective

The Digital challenge

Product launch and education

A 'tangible' product experience in a virtual environment

Demonstration and facilitation of Brand Partnerships

Substituting the 'electricity' of live with forms of digital participation

Internal team connections, training and announcements

Balancing the exclusivity of limited access with networked forms of digital community

Excite and inform press and investors

Without addressing each of these with rigid prescriptions, we can see some key approaches that will help us cross the digital barriers.



TIME ON DIGITAL FORMATS
INCREASED
45%

Providing a sense of 'occasion'

This may be the key challenge. An event is by nature exciting, a break from the norm, a spectacle and opportunity for chance and serendipity.

Sitting in front of digital content, whether at our home desk or office is nothing new. And this is ever-more the case as time on digital formats has increased by 45% during the lockdown (Econsultancy, Stats Roundup, April 4).

Guests to your event may or may not be compelled to attend but either way, we face a battle for their attention in digital.

Think about the most effective ideas to emerge from the lockdown. From friends gathering for video conferenced pub quizzes to YouTube workout sessions. #getbritaintalking collecting short personal video messages and broadcasting them on Ant and Dec's primetime ITV show or The Charlatan's Tim Burgess holding 'Twitter Listening Parties', where fans of a classic album follow the hashtag to share their passion for the LP. None of these leans on flashy,

cutting edge AR or VR technology, they are simply compelling human concepts enabled by accessible and familiar channel behaviours.

The need is no different for B2B or internal team interactions. Amid the digital noise we only earn attention by sweating the concept and context. So, ensure your digital events have this resonance and wrap them in a strong concept built from cultural and channel-driven insights. Following the lead of consumer marketing, these should be both advertisable to draw attention and sticky to keep audiences engaged.

Storytelling or utility

In consumer advertising, where the audience's attention is by no means a given, digital communications have crudely fallen into two camps: storytelling-driven content that stretches out beyond the confines of the traditional 30 second ad; and digital utilities like apps. Nike is as likely found releasing a running app as it is a stirring short film about inner city football. We can think in a similar way about the value we create for the participants of our events.

Launching and demonstrating a product may call for a digital utility. The automotive industry's car

configurator format, for example, gets consumers closer to product in some ways than a showroom allows. 3-D animation for product discovery and specification bridges a gap in the virtual.

Using video storytelling content for your event will allow you to punctuate a speaker and panel schedule with 'hero' pieces – animated infographics, talking heads etc. These allow you to manage the tempo of communication from pre-event launch, through a 'live' period and into post-event.

Realtime vs on-demand

Briefed to create a 'TV-style' platform for the web 15 years ago, chances are you'd have conceived some form of scheduled content platform. Not the on-demand, personalised interface of Netflix or the social, subscriber channels of YouTube.

So why should a digital event run over seven-hour days with items at hour-long intervals? In fact, this synchronous format, using livestreams to deliver one after another panel and keynote, risks reinforcing the absence of live experience, as viewers wait between speakers, unsure if sessions are running to time.

Total dependence on a live format (even when content is shot 'as live') may rob us of the peaks and excitement provided by genuine live items in a schedule that draws on the range of formats suited to whatever device we need to reach our audience on online. Audience participants can interact by sharing not just written commentary but also recording and sharing video and other forms of rich media. One of the unforeseen outcomes of the lockdown has been a huge surge in the numbers of us creating and uploading video content ourselves – up 15% (Globalwebindex Coronavirus Multi-market study, April 2020).

Collaboration tools like Slack and Microsoft Teams enable groups to share content via a working group, offering a creative format for workshops. Partner media brands, brought in as collaborators to an event, will usually have their own websites with the ability to reach highly targeted audiences and advertising media to drive awareness and ticketing.



Community vs spontaneity

Digital thrives on community and can connect groups across distance whereas Live thrives on chance and proximity. Digital events will buzz if they're able to drive this community interaction.

That's hard to achieve if all your content sits behind an event 'paywall', so consider opening up elements to a wider audience. This is commonplace for many of the world's most iconic conference events such as South by Southwest, the annual music, film and digital innovation gathering in Texas. Their crowd-sourced 'Panel Picker' initiative, in which applicants submit panel concepts to be voted on by a public audience, widens participation and brings down barriers to access. They then make scheduled sessions accessible online via live streams in social media, with viewers invited to participate by submitting questions remotely.

We might choose to deliver hero content for our event - high value speaker or celebrity contributions, say - in the gated live period of an event. We might then deliver infographics, animations and interviews ahead of the event to build anticipation and set context. Crowd-sourced contributions might be accepted during the gated live event to be published on an ungated platform afterwards.

Build the buzz around an event - pre/during/post - and the live happening itself will crackle with digital's own version of real-world electricity.

Some brief rules for content

Online content formats should be shorter and more dynamic. They should provide the opportunity to replay or serve on-demand, to allow for the impact of distraction in the home or office environment. Consider the creative requirements of mobile where video is watched in portrait format, often using captions to substitute for audio.

To bring live formats to life it helps to think of content using some of the conventions of broadcast TV; with interview settings, screen title cards, interstitials, all helping to situate your content when the audience lacks physical proximity. These also provide the assets that will bring brand to life visually.

Finally, the nature of the content we consume has evolved under lockdown. ComScore reports that streaming media, social media and messaging have all jumped with Facebook reporting a 50+% growth in messaging activity in some countries. Video conferencing service, Zoom, has rocketed from 10m users to 300m. This all makes sense in our present context. But though they are channel - not content - observations now, this has implications for the content we make in the future. The normalization of new formats and the acceleration of digital change it brings about should guide thinking about the form of future content.

Conclusion

It is clear digital events are no simple analogue of the time-bound live event format. Change and evolution of formats is happening faster than ever, bringing new levels of sophistication in real-time delivery to the digital content environment and we see event professionals among those to drive this forward.

But digital is not either/or in regard to content timelines. If digital community must deliver the spark previously found in the human proximity of live, then we need to blend real-time and on-demand, gated and open access content.

Some things we knew won't go back to normal - cinema, conferences, sports, concerts, clubs won't just snap back into action the moment the lockdown is lifted. This will breed new formats. Agencies, event managers and company leaders will all play their part

in bringing these to life to serve business objectives, because business' need for dynamic and immersive communications will remain.

Join us as we interrogate the opportunities and dip into the specifics of this changing space as they relate to your business over coming weeks. Forthcoming articles will address the formats and technologies you need to understand in the production of digital events and strategies for creating content and communications in the new world.



THINK
OUTSIDE
THE BOX