

The Future is Hybrid:

AKA, the new normal for the events industry

by **cameron**



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

The future is hybrid

Section 1

The power of events

Section 2

Event design in a digital-first world

Section 3

Event pick and mix: virtual, hybrid, and in-person

Section 4

Sources

Introduction

Nothing beats in-person events. We've all missed them – and everyone is keen to get back to normal.

But the thing is, normal was broken. We just couldn't see it yet.

When the first of many lockdowns hit, we had *a lot* of time to reflect on what a 'new normal' might look like, and how we could make events better than before. The world has changed, our industry has changed – and, if you stick with us, we'll explore exactly what that means for events in the short and long term.

If you organised an event at any time over the last year, you had to two choices: (1) cancel, or (2) to quote Ross from Friends, 'PIVOT' to virtual. The term virtual event

didn't even really exist before COVID; more common terminology was a 'live stream' or a 'webcast'. If you added either of these to your live event, that's when it became hybrid.

But before we go any further, it's important to note that there is a massive a difference between a lives-tream and a truly hybrid event. Hybrid events have the potential to be so much more.

Since March 2020, we have slungshot five years into the future in terms of digital. Coming out of lockdown and returning to an event world where social distancing will be the norm, an event organiser now has three options to include in their event strategy: full virtual, hybrid, and in-person.

The latter two are crucial not just for keeping audience numbers high, but also for accessibility and sustainability, too. With the average attendee generating 181-907kg of CO2 per event day, hybrid and virtual strategies will be crucial as we march towards carbon neutrality.

Over the coming months, you will no doubt be exposed to a whole barrage of information on hybrid events – but we believe the term 'hybrid' will be short lived, because hybrid will become part of all events moving forward. That's the world we live in now, a global community. Eventually the term will be dropped altogether, and your hybrid event will just be an event. But until then, you're going to need to put up with

the term, so we'll start by defining virtual and hybrid events, and explaining how they differ from traditional, in-person events.

We'll then provide an in-depth guide on creating successful virtual experiences, before sharing tips on how you can combine these with in-person elements for a successful hybrid experience.

But first, let's look at why events are important in the first place. Let's remind ourselves why we do what we do.

The Power of Events

Before we dive into best practices, we want to touch on the power of events. Why are they so important globally? What makes this £700 billion pound industry tick? Events have so many brand benefits. They:

1. Generate Business
2. Provide direct access to your core audience
3. Foster brand recognition
4. Boost your content marketing
5. Create opportunities for networking
6. Champion new products through product launches
7. Create emotional connections with your brand
8. Build trust and brand loyalty
9. Offer information cascade and education
10. Smash ROI

But what is it that makes them so popular? We reckon it's the two Cs: communication and connection. Communication is at the core of every single event; it's the reason to hold events in the first place. And connection is the magic that happens when you combine great content with a great experience – whether it's connection to a brand or connection to a like-minded individual, events bring people together.

Bizzabo ran a study last year that showed leadership teams are increasingly seeing the value of events. 85% of respondents in leadership roles have identified in-person events as critical for their company's success, and 61% believed that in-person events are the most critical marketing channel. It seems the future is bright.

But the world is a different place now than before the pandemic – and, while appetite to attend events remains as high as ever, appetite and opportunity for travel remains low. So, what's next?

Event pick and mix, that's what! A mix of in-person and virtual experiences. Because the elephant in the room – the thing that only a few brave event pros are talking about it – is that our industry is contributing to the destruction of the planet.

What if we could help save the planet while continuing to do what we love? What if we completely changed our event strategies; reducing in-person events,

and having smaller local audiences but with remote audiences all around the world? What if some were out and out virtual, and what would happen if every organiser and company did this? What would happen if we did this in conjunction with carbon offsetting?

We know first-hand the waste that comes out of this industry. For every tonne of CO2 emitted, we should be planting 6 trees. And every delegate generates an average of 181kg of CO2, which means that by pivoting to virtual, Cameron Events and our clients have prevented 7.7 million kgs of CO2 from going into the atmosphere. That's the equivalent of planting 46,285 trees. (And that's a low-end estimate BTW, high-end would be 17.7 million kgs of CO2 and 106,743 trees...so yeah, mull that over for a second.)



7.7m kgs of CO2

Saved from going into the atmosphere by Cameron and our clients by going virtual



= 46,285 trees

That's the equivalent of planting 46,285 trees

Event design in a digital-first world

Before we go into the world of virtual and hybrid, we need to discuss event design. Let's look at the questions you'll need to ask yourself (and these apply to in-person events too, FYI):

1. What are your objectives, and are they measurable? You can't manage what you don't measure!
2. If this event had to achieve 3 things, what would they be? And out of those 3, what is number 1?
3. What are the criteria by which you will judge whether or not the event was a success and worth the investment to attend?
4. What will your KPIs (key performance indicators) be? E.g. percentage turnout, happiness ratings, time on the platform, etc.
5. What will people gain from attending/participating in your event? Consider the local audience remote audience, speakers, and sponsors.
6. What does your communications plan look like? Before, during, and after the event.
7. Do you have any previous data or attendee feedback you can use to inform the design of the event?
8. What can you create or provide that no one else can?
9. What does the attendee journey look like? Both in-person and virtual.
10. Is this a live-first hybrid (with a large local audience and smaller remote audience) or a virtual-first hybrid (with a small local audience and larger remote audience).

11. What will the needs of your local and remote presenters be? How will they differ?
12. What attendee perceptions, opinions, attitudes, or beliefs do you think should be targeted (created, changed, or reinforced) at the event?
13. Are you trying to solve a problem?
14. Are there specific behavioural changes that you would like the event to promote among attendees?
15. Are there any critical issues or topics that you believe must be addressed at the event, and why?
16. What topics should be addressed at the event, and why?
17. What do you want your audience to feel after they leave the event? E.g. rewarded, appreciated, etc.
18. What do you want the delegates to do differently after this event?
19. Why do you think they aren't doing it already?
20. After the event, what type of changes will tell you that the meeting had a positive impact?

Working through these questions is a great way to begin the process, and normally highlights things you wouldn't have expected. It gives you clarity and immediately puts all stakeholders on the same page.

But what about online fatigue, you may ask? Well, we've thought about that as well:

1. Create a programme that genuinely interests people and makes them want to attend your event (we hope that one's fairly obvious).
2. Make space in the agenda for lots of breaks – we can't stress this enough!
3. Allow for audience engagement via polling and Q&As – get the audience thinking, not just listening!
4. Craft an agenda that allows for genuine audience interaction and even delegate-generated sessions. Organisers should provide the framework and space for a genuine two-way exchange.
5. Have concurrent sessions so delegates can craft their own agenda based on their interests, with on-demand options allowing them to go back and view any sessions they can't attend.
6. Include different forms of content and presentation styles: video, slide presentations, panel discussions, short-form presentations (5-10 mins max), long-form presentations (20 mins max), TED talk style storytelling, and so on.
7. Build in a hook or a surprise announcement, and build suspense around what that could be.
8. Add gamification to your event.
9. Offer breakout spaces where delegates can access round-table discussions. Get people in these spaces to help solve problems, or set a challenge and see what the responses are. Include interactive whiteboards where everyone can collaborate.
10. Make room for networking. People need to feel a connection with others, and functions like speed networking really do help.

Although we've been talking about virtual events, all of this applies to hybrid and face-to-face events, too. Whether it takes place on a stage or on a screen, a good event will always consider:

- 1 Who is the audience you want to attract?
- 2 What story are you trying to tell?
- 3 What are you asking the delegates to do?
- 4 Why aren't they doing it already?

But what is it that makes them so popular? We reckon it's the two Cs: communication and connection. Communication is at the core of every single event; it's the reason to hold events in the first place. And connection is the magic that happens when you combine great content with a great experience – whether it's connection to a brand or connection to a like-minded individual, events bring people together.





Event pick and mix: virtual, hybrid, and in-person

Virtual events vs. webinars vs. Zoom

Over the last year, we have all become virtual natives – whether we liked it or not. But do you actually know the difference between a webinar, a Zoom meeting, and a fully-fledged virtual event? If not, we'll tell you!

The first step is to make sure you think about your event objectives when building your event design – you may be happy to stick with a simple webinar format or to host via Zoom, and that is totally fine. Not every event or meeting requires a comprehensive platform, full production, and two-way communication. However, if you do go down the virtual event route – and want to create one that offers all the features of an in-person event – then you're going to want a platform that has these features:

1. Built-in registration
2. A reception area
3. A main stage or plenary room
4. Breakout spaces
5. Ability to run concurrent sessions
6. Networking capability
7. Meeting scheduling function
8. An exhibition area
9. Audience engagement tools
10. An app

Last time we checked, there were over 160 virtual platforms on the market – and that’s expected to rise to 400 by the end of 2021 – so picking the right platform or production partner based on your objectives and your event design is crucial for event success. Each platform has its own advantages and disadvantages, as well as varying price points, but if you choose a platform that is secure, has good data analytics, is scalable, and has the above features, you really can’t go wrong.

And just in case you’ve been hiding under a rock for the last year, here are our top 10 reasons to continue to choose virtual – even when more options open up:

- 1 They cost less to run – who needs a physical venue, when you can have virtual one?
- 2 They are a lot easier to scale – you won’t be limited by the four walls of the conference room.
- 3 They take less time to plan, promote, and launch.
- 4 They attract greater numbers of attendees.
- 5 They make it easier to access new markets and locations.
- 6 They provide a greater variety of pricing/ticketing models, meaning greater accessibility to your content.
- 7 They are *soooooo* much better for the environment – we’ve said it before, and we’ll say it again!.
- 8 They produce lots and lots of rich, actionable data.
- 9 They are much more time-efficient.
- 10 They can go out live, but still be available on demand after the fact.

Look, we know people want to get back in a room – we want to get back in the room, too! – but full virtual still needs to be part of the mix.

Enter: Hybrid Events!

As great as Virtual Events are, we can do better. Introducing Hybrid.

With true hybrid events, the idea is to create a unified experience. In-person and virtual audiences are very different; but with the right platform – and good event and programme design – you can create a valuable experience for them both. We’ve already looked at some elements of good event design, and these will help you to balance the needs of delegates that are in the room and at home. Once you’ve considered these elements, you can choose what platform suits your needs.

Remember, two-way communication is a must. You need to make sure the remote audience is able to network with the local audience, and the local audience is able to participate in the event chat and any Q&A or polling sessions. You should set out to create a singular community around your event; if you’re not careful, you’ll end up with two.

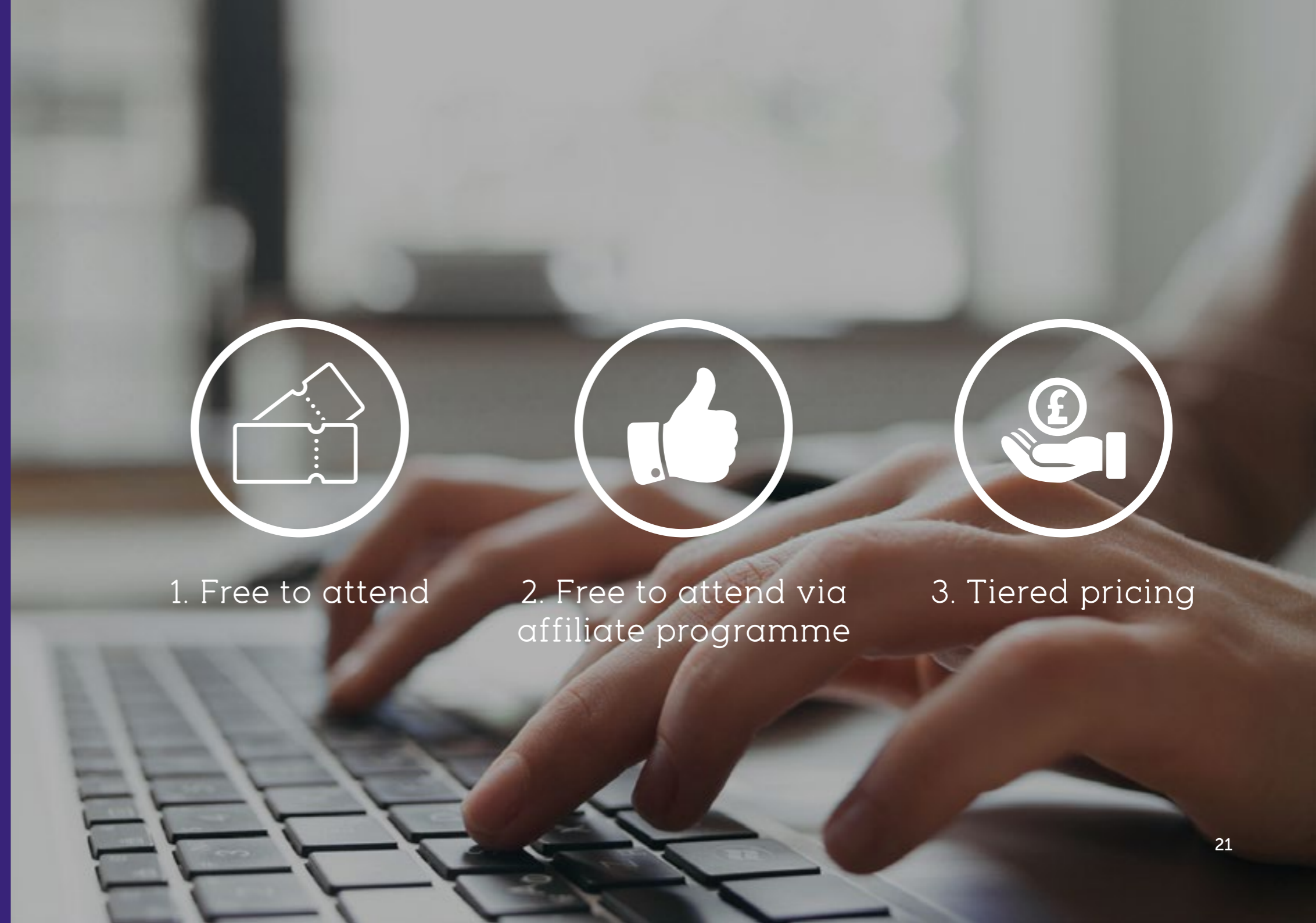
Event pros have two choices in this regard: to create a truly inclusive event, with active two-way communication (i.e. a true hybrid event) or go for a more passive approach in which viewers are simply watching at home, perhaps with the opportunity to participate in Q&A via a text box (i.e. an in-person event with a simple livestream). Again, your event may not warrant the full hybrid experience – but it’s important to know the difference.

Types of ticketing:

Now let's talk about ticketing for hybrid events (and this applies to virtual, too). Creating tiered pricing makes ticketed events more accessible to more people. For commercial events, early data suggests that free events have lower engagement than paid-for events – so don't be afraid to add a value to your event, and charge what you think it's worth.

- 1 Free to attend
- 2 Free to attend via affiliate programme (free in return for promotion)
- 3 Tiered pricing:
 - Live in-person full access ticket
 - Live in-person single-day ticket
 - Live in-person multi-day ticket
 - Virtual full access ticket
 - Virtual single-day ticket
 - Virtual multi-day ticket
 - Virtual ticket for specific session (e.g. price per keynote)
 - Virtual on-demand ticket (content only viewable after the event)

If you're looking to entice more delegates into the venue and away from their laptop screens, consider employing some clever marketing tricks to introduce a bit of FOMO (fear of missing out). Offer a limited numbers of tickets for the live element, with a waitlist, to make it seem more exclusive.



1. Free to attend



2. Free to attend via affiliate programme



3. Tiered pricing

Hybrid on-site considerations:

Moving onto the on-site checklist for hybrid events – what do you need to consider?

1 Health & Safety

- Full risk assessments will be required (by all companies involved in the event).
- All delegates will need to abide by local COVID measures (social distancing, face masks, etc.).
- Decide whether you want to carry out pre-event testing, as well as on-site testing.

2 Registration process

- Will you need thermal imaging devices?
- Will you need a traffic management system?
- Will you provide a contactless registration system?

3 Event flow and layout

- Venue capacities will obviously be reduced under social distancing, and any bottleneck areas – like registration and tight corridors – with need extra planning.
- Socially distanced seating will also need to be managed. Laying out spaced-out rows in a theatre style can look clinical, so try arranging them in an arc or a semi-circle to make the room feel more appealing. With capacities being dropped substantially due to social distancing measures, having tables in the room isn't ideal for saving space – but, as various studies have shown, they're much better for collaboration, connectedness, and therefore engagement.

4 IT and connectivity

- Does the venue have dedicated lines in each room with enough bandwidth for streaming?
- Do they have any redundancy back-up lines in case of failure?
- Do they have sufficient Wi-Fi infrastructure to allow guests to use the event app?
- Is your chosen platform scalable, and able to cope with the expected numbers?
- Will the venue have dedicated on-site IT support?
- Will you have dedicated event app support for your delegates?

5 Production equipment

- You would think that with fewer people on site, the production costs would lessen too. However, while social distancing is in place, you'll still need to allow for max numbers in terms of the technical design. For example, a ballroom that could hold 1,000 people might now only be able to hold 300 people – but they will need to be spaced out according to local social distancing measures, so the PA system still needs to cover the entire ballroom, and screens and projectors must be big enough for everyone to see as well.
- You'll need to adhere to local noise management guidelines (these differ across countries).
- In order to get as many delegates as possible in the room, production companies will need to reduce the number of staff within the main space. Remote moving-head cameras controlled from another room are a good way of reducing that headcount.
- Of course, when you have cameras, you will need to factor in additional lighting on the stage too; you'll need front light and back light to ensure the best results for the broadcast.
- If you have breakout areas, you'll need to factor in equipment for those spaces too – catering for both the local and the remote audiences.
- The installation and de-rig times will no doubt increase – so, when looking for a venue, it may be more cost-effective to find one with equipment built in.
- And don't forget about ventilation – can you open windows and doors, and is there local control of the air conditioning systems?

Clearly, taking on a Hybrid event is a lot of work – double the work, in fact. So why do it?

In addition to all the virtual benefits we mentioned earlier, hybrid events are also the only way to keep up delegate numbers and ensure that speakers can still attend while social distancing and travel restrictions remain in place. They also provide a greater variety of ticketing models, which means greater accessibility with regards to your content.

In short, the benefits far outweigh the negatives!



Hybrid: Two Strategies, One Powerful Marketing Product

Hybrid events bring the ultimate flexibility, cost savings and reach, while allowing brands, sponsors and exhibitors to capitalise on business objectives and generate maximum event ROI. When done right, they can be a critical component of many brand strategies and help increase the reach of experiential marketing. They have helped eradicate limitations that came with physical events and forced the industry to be more innovative in order to deliver memorable, sustainable experiences.

In the 'new normal' future, people will increasingly want a choice – to attend in person, virtually or in a hybrid format. Hybrid events can offer the most sustainable solution – combining the best of both virtual and live events but, crucially, giving people the choice.

Cameron is ushering in a digital transformation era, with the emphasis on hybrid events, harnessing technology to connect people not only in the UK, but around the world. As a company and indeed, as an industry, our digital capabilities are far more advanced now than they were pre-pandemic and this can only be good news for us, the industry, the environment and you!

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