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Rules of Engagement: 8 Steps to creating captivating and interactive virtual events

In September 2019, the CWT Meetings & Events (CWT M&E) team in Singapore held its inaugural MarketME event, providing a platform for buyers and suppliers in the industry to come together, exchange ideas and learn about the latest products, services, and trends in the market. The event itself was a showcase on how planners can break the mold of boring, stuffy corporate gatherings and instead create a festival-like atmosphere that increases attendee engagement. While the event was held in an upscale hotel ballroom, we replaced the conference-style seating with wooden crates, benches, and swing chairs. Supplier booths were designed to imitate the look and feel of a farmers' market. And alongside the serious discussions taking

place, there were games, entertainment, prize draws, and even a create-your-own cocktail station. Of the 118 attendees who participated, 94% gave the event a positive rating and every single one said they would return to attend the event the following year.

Then, just as we had started planning for MarketME 2020 with the intention of kicking things up a notch, COVID-19 happened. Government restrictions in Singapore forced us to move the event online. While virtual events have certain advantages – for example, they can cost less, allow you to reach a broader audience, and can be more eco-friendly – they aren't a perfect substitute for face-to-face meetings. The biggest challenge, perhaps, is that it's much harder to sustain people's attention and form meaningful connections in a virtual setting. The change meant we had to completely re-think our event from start to finish.

After extensive planning and preparation, we held the [2020 edition of MarketME](#) in October 2020 as a [fully virtual event](#). We had 124 attendees from 26 countries participate in the forum.

Here are eight important things we considered in the process of organizing MarketME 2020, which might come in handy when you're planning your next virtual event.

1. Date & Timing

While MarketME 2019 was attended primarily by people based in Singapore, taking the event virtual this year gave us the opportunity to include participants from 26 different countries. However, this also meant we had to be cognizant of the various time zones, particularly as it was around the time of year when some countries change their clocks.

In our experience, mid-week days yield the highest turnout for corporate activities. Events held on Mondays and Fridays generally see lower attendance as people are either recovering from or preparing for the weekend.

2. Duration

Unlike physical events, virtual gatherings are not very conducive to long sessions (i.e. anything over 4 hours), as attendees tend to have a relatively shorter attention span due to the numerous distractions when interacting with their devices.

More breaks are needed to allow attendees to walk away from their devices and rest their body and mind in between sessions.

3. Format

In a virtual event, we can break away from a typical live event format that starts with an opening keynote, and instead dive straight into more interactive sessions that generate greater participation.

Keynote and content-heavy one-way presentations are not favorable for virtual engagement. On the other hand, live panel discussions, brainstorming, and other interactive sessions tend to work much better.

4. Virtual platform

The profile of the attendees, as well as the event objectives, will help determine which virtual platform may be most suitable. For example, for attendees who are less tech-savvy, a simple agenda-based platform could make it easier for them to find their way around.

Regardless, an easy to navigate platform with a clean and familiar design is always a good idea. You want to make it as simple as possible for the attendees to engage and interact with the content – and with each other.

5. Live vs pre-recorded sessions

Sessions that are broadcast live are naturally more exciting than pre-recorded ones, as attendees are watching the event take place in real-time. On the flip side, the event organizer may have to navigate various infrastructure and connectivity issues which could impact the seamless delivery of live sessions. For example, speakers may be located in countries where internet connectivity isn't great.

To have the best of both worlds, you can consider a combination of live and pre-recorded sessions. Planning segments of the virtual event to have recorded content that can be accessed on-demand gives attendees greater control and flexibility in how they participate.

6. Bite-sized, visually appealing content & use of a green screen

Steer clear of wordy presentation slides – videos, infographics, and other visually-enticing content is the way to go.

The use of a green screen studio to deliver immersive content can also be fun and interactive. It allows you to place the presenter in a virtual environment that is related to the content they are sharing.

7. Gamification

Introduce an element of fun competition into your event by rewarding attendees based on their participation. Completion of quizzes, surveys, and worksheets to win points will keep attendees excited and looking out for more activities to participate in. Adding in a leader board can increase competitiveness between attendees and drive greater engagement.

8. Open networking

In a [survey](#) conducted by [IAEE](#), [PCMA](#), and [The Experience Institute](#), three out of every four of the respondents stated that networking was one of the most important reasons for attending events.

Intimate connections are critical for any event where attendees wish to hold conversations between individuals or organizations. This is where relationships are fostered and opportunities are created.

Virtual networking goes far beyond video calls and text messaging, as instant document sharing, note-taking, and exchanging of contacts can be virtually executed.

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