

VIRTUAL &

Shelton Fleming

RE-IMAGINING CONNECTED EXPERIENCES

HYBRID EVENTS

06

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INTERACTIVE
LOCALISED
CONNECTED
EVENTS

THERE'S NOTHING VIRTUAL ABOUT A VIRTUAL CONFERENCE. IT'S NOT A WEBINAR. AND IT'S CERTAINLY NOT A CASE OF 'DROP IN WHEN YOU FEEL LIKE IT'. AND IT MUST NEVER BE THE POOR COUSIN TO THE CORE EVENT. SO, WHAT IS IT?

Well, for some companies, it's a 300 million dollar opportunity. Others, 90 million. If you're big, it can save a lot of money. It may even save the planet. But that misses the point too.

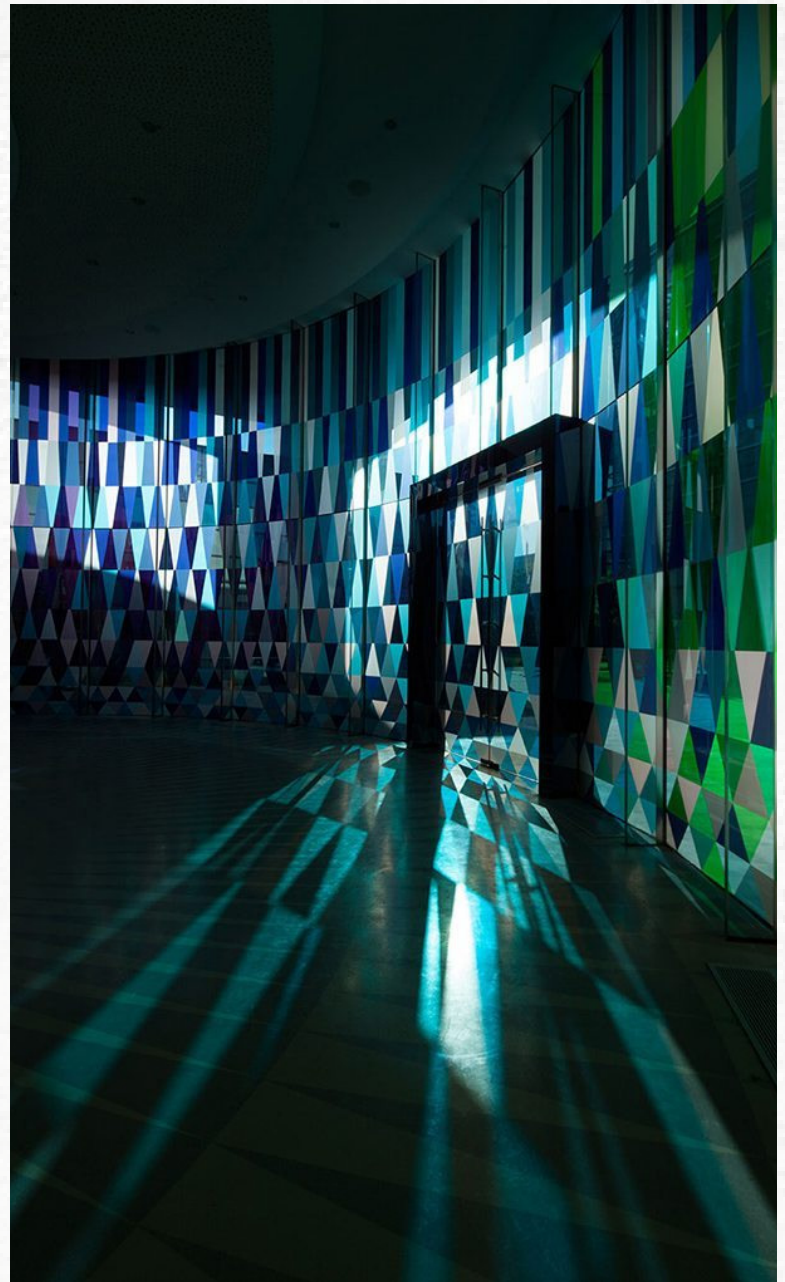
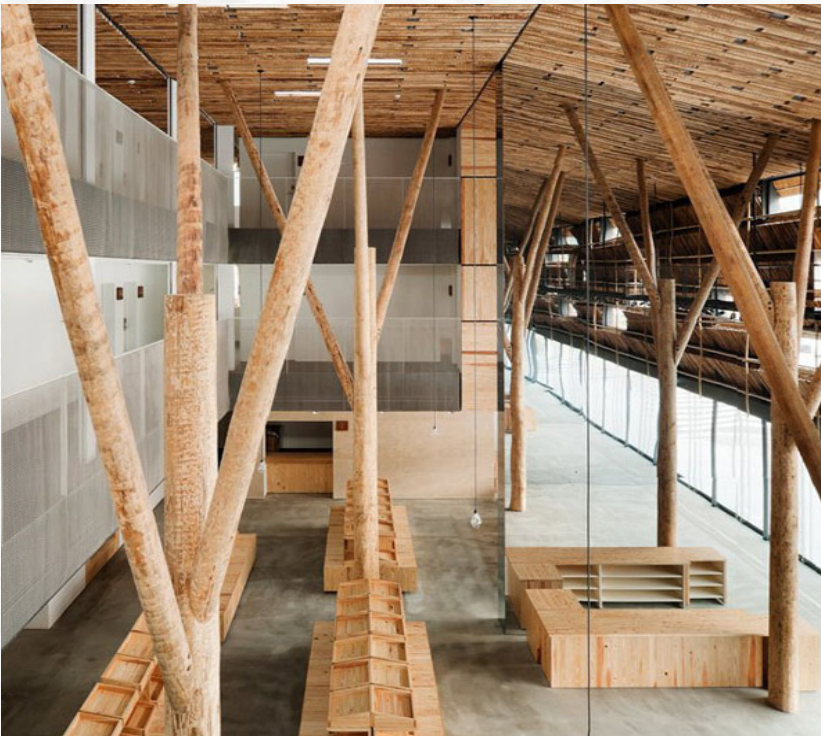
**SATELLITE EVENTS
BECOME AS IMPORTANT
AS THE CORE EVENT.**

This new space isn't so much new, as it is integrated. That is, an integrated part of the communal experience for all delegates. It's integral. It's in real time.

In our experience, hip locations, themed venues, funcatering, a dynamic facilitator and live content generation can be expertly orchestrated to bring everyone's experience to life, wherever they are, time zones permitting.

Satellite experiences become as important as the core event. They're an enhancement. They define a new era, where an entire community or partner eco-system can participate and enhance the conversation. The cost savings and environmental benefits are a positive upside.

CONNECTED GLOBAL EVENTS.
EQUALLY COOL EXPERIENCES
AND VENUES. STAGED OVER
SEVERAL DAYS TO ALLOW
ATTENDEES IN DIFFERENT TIME
ZONES TO INTERACT.



VIRTUAL & HYBRID EVENTS

This discussion paper explores how to get the most from a virtual conference. It also takes a more holistic perspective on what defines a virtual conference. We look beyond sitting at your desk or couch with a laptop and headphones or VR headset.

It shows that a successful virtual conference is about being in the here and now. An integral part of the live conversation. And an integral part of the exchange of ideas.

SPOT THE DIFFERENCE: VIRTUAL CONFERENCES, VIRTUAL REALITY AND WEBINARS



A virtual conference is often mistaken for something that happens in a new virtual reality environment. We think many people assume it's a VR solution. It's not. There is a role for VR, but it's limited. Also, it's not about webinars, although webinars are arguably virtual seminars. Our belief is that virtual conferences should be designed as 'fusion experiences'; multiple, simultaneous, inter-connected events which ideally are facilitated. They are a fundamental part of the live conversation and the live exchange of ideas.

Virtual conferences have been around a long time. They started out life as Business TV back in the 90s. The only real difference between then and now is, today, with apps and affordable VoIP communication, interaction is two-way.

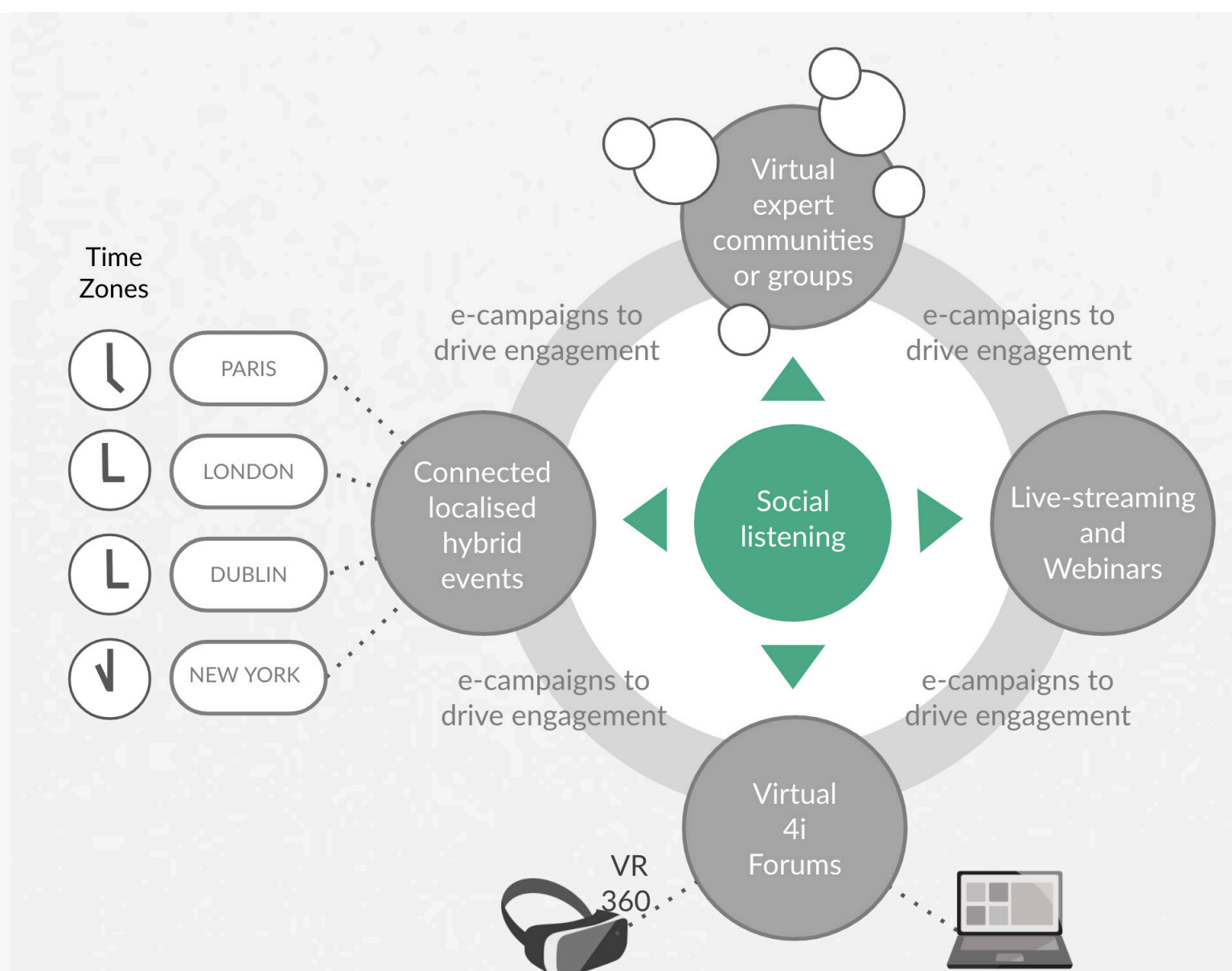
Arguably, there are light forms of virtual conferences, for example, webinars. However, there's a problem with webinars, in that they're too easily signed up to and too easily missed. The difference is that a virtual conference is best defined and managed as something formal. That formality merits it being attended in real time. It bestows value and relevance. Best of all, it allows participants to be part of something in the here and now.

RETHINKING VIRTUAL ENGAGEMENTS

Up until now, the majority of virtual events have been passive experiences, based on the “watch and comment” model. Occasionally there’s some polling. There’s a next generation coming, representing the “watch and participate” approach.

It’s more than a platform: it’s a virtual event ecosystem that integrates digital services, interactive and live broadcast tech, cloud-based ideation and multi-channel experiences, like AR and 360 VR.

Algorithms create team which can communicate in virtual lounges or studios. Tasks can be assigned to teams or cohorts; for example: ideation workshops and facilitated master-classes. Activities drive engagement; especially if the virtual event is happening over several hours or days.



VIRTUAL & HYBRID EVENTS



On the flip side of this model is a customer ecosystem that integrates online communities or discussion groups that are moderated by experts. At the heart of the model there is social listening, to ensure moderated conversations are relevant and timely. And hybrid events, using an interactive broadcast studio, connected to other smaller, localised gatherings, become the face to face experience. These can include a remote audience. The relationship with the consumer becomes more holistic and collaborative.

So, whilst we're getting more accustomed to maintaining relationships with others online, either by daily video calls or by playing videogames with friends (and strangers) – maintaining business relationships through digital tools has gained traction. However, to harness the full power of business relationships through virtual engagements, we follow the 4i principle:

Inform

Interact

Immerse

Ideate

But how to put this into practice? We can demand real-time participation, engage audience at regular intervals and preferably create a sense of belonging before the event. We should try to make the event as interactive as possible: encourage peer to peer collaboration (use algorithms to pair the delegates accurately) , introduce gamified participation through recognition system and competitive tasks. Allowing access to a full content library for the event, including agenda, speakers' profiles or reports could also be a good idea, especially if we provide means for our participants to generate content themselves.

With immersive tech, intelligent UX and UI design, and inspiring content, virtual events no longer need to be the poor cousin to the face to face event. They're a format, complementary and effective in their own right. By embracing them, we can truly harness the power of business relationships in a brand-new way.

WHAT DO VIRTUAL CONFERENCES DISRUPT?



Virtual conferences are a potent disruptor. But what do they disrupt? Essentially, if they disrupt any market, it's the market for business meetings. They enable more people to attend, engage, learn, contribute and become empowered. In the process, you'll also cut the cost of travel and remove concerns about safety and security, while reducing environmental impact.

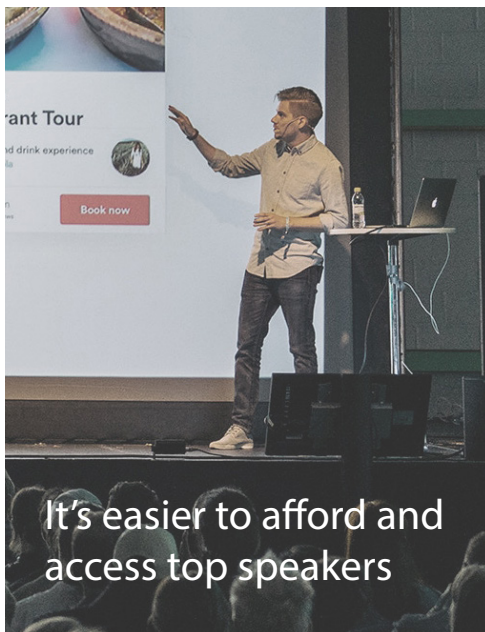
According to BBC News, "One survey showed 87% of 10,000 executives ready to go virtual." "It is still an evangelical market, but the recession has helped businesses see the value of virtual environments,"

Sharat Sharan. (1)

"Think about all those savings from hotel rooms to airfares, for attendees, to meals and conference space. One of our biggest technology clients had a sales meeting earlier this year where they generally spend \$5m (£3.2m). They spent a tenth of that by holding a virtual conference," Mr Sharat told the BBC." (2)

Empresa-Journal reports that, "Telework also represents a great way to show your most harried and valued employees that you care both about their life balance AND about greening your business. (3)

VIRTUAL & HYBRID EVENTS



But first, let's convince the naysayers. They will try to tell you that if your physical conference is streamed to satellite audiences, then you'll deplete the numbers attending your physical event. This is just not true.

People attend live events for all kinds of reasons. Networking, face-to-face meetings and live demos are just a few. If they really want to attend in person, having the content online won't stop them. Indeed, you may well increase attendance at future events, as people see what they're missing and decide to attend next time.

The truth is, there will always be a demand for live events. Humans crave physical interaction and remote access means they can think more carefully about the events they attend physically.

There's another big bonus to hosting a virtual conference. It might just help you get the top speaker you couldn't afford. Because if they don't need to travel, you don't need to pay for travel time and costs.

Which brings us neatly to the hot topic of pricing. If your virtual conference is open to third parties, outside of your organisation, then you should charge for attendance? If you're charging people to attend physically, then why jeopardise their goodwill by allowing free attendance online? Especially as the online audience has saved the expense of travelling. Why shouldn't they pay to access your valuable content? You'll find that, for a quality experience, remote viewers are happy to pay for a front row seat, without the travel or accommodation costs.

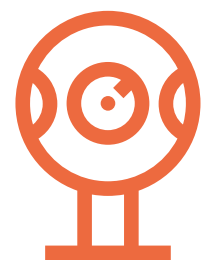
If the conference is for an internal audience only, and yours is a multinational organisation with local budgets, then you should consider charging virtual internal audiences to help cover your costs.

By limiting your physical audience, you can hire smaller more intimate and interesting venues. This will not only help to build your virtual audience, but also make attendance of your 'hot ticket' live event even more desirable. And if they're all paying, then it's a win-win solution.

Of course, there are considerations. If the topic is sensitive and highly confidential, opening the discussion to satellite attendees can potentially give you less control of who has access and what is recorded. But these are considerations you can manage with an approved guest list, a tight schedule, an expert moderator at the core event, and well briefed facilitators in satellite locations.



360 VIRTUAL REALITY



360 Virtual Reality has a place in the new world of the virtual conference. But it's best used in short bursts. Technologies like the OZO 360, with a VR headset, can give the participant the feeling of being in the main plenary, or in break outs, in the core environment, or with other satellite groups.

360 VR is great for attending panel discussions or workshops, where all the headset wearing participants can feel like they have a virtual seat at the table or a front seat in the audience. They look around them and see everything going on. They can also talk to the group. However, to wear this headgear for more than 20 minutes can be disorientating. So short bursts are best.

IT'S ABOUT COMMUNITY

Virtual conferences should augment, not replace live events. Virtual conferences are all about community, because they allow more people to participate. They're a dynamic force in a business environment that demands you engage with a wider eco-system of partners in the supply chain. Virtual Conferences can make this wider participation easier.

According to the Harvard Business Review, "Cisco, HP, Nortel, and telepresence-focused players like Teleris have developed impressive, beautiful systems that make you feel like you're in the same room with your colleagues." (4)

If you choose, third parties can be brought in for discrete sessions, but not necessarily all, of the conference. This is not so easy to manage if everyone is physically flown in to one destination. And while you'll certainly need powerful bandwidth, the success of the Virtual Conferences depends on more than infrastructure issues. Real success depends on hip locations, facilitation and interaction between sites.

WHERE WILL THIS GO IN THE FUTURE?



Eventually, digital clothing and projection mapped environments could – in the fashion of the film Total Recall – replicate the environment of the core event. Technology in the satellite venues could project and replicate aspects of the core environment and vice versa.

In time, connected clothing might tell the moderator and presenters how the audience is feeling and respond to their reactions, both in the core conference and in the satellite locations. Eventually, hyper-real avatars could take you into the other locations and environments.

Already, existing 360 VR technology offers headsets fitted with sensors so you can move around a space, avoiding furniture, other objects and people within the space. This technology will dramatically improve in the next five years, as capabilities to deliver an out of body experience are developed further.

LOCATION, LOCATION & SATELLITE LOCATIONS

One critical consideration is the location. Choose cool venues. Get people out of the office, if possible. Or convert the office into a cool festival space for the duration of the event.

Make sure you invest the same time in finding inspiring satellite locations as you do in finding a cool, unique venue for the central, core event. For sure, it could be done in a meeting room. But experience tells us that satellite attendees will feel less like poor relations if you treat them the same as the colleagues and peers invited to the hub event.



According to Forbes, "Cisco, AT&T, and the Marriott Corporation have announced a deal to create 'GoThere Virtual Meetings' in 25 hotels around the world, with many more locations to follow in subsequent years. This will allow managers to drive to a nearby hotel to virtually meet with colleagues or customers from around the world." (5)

DELIVER A CONSISTENT EXPERIENCE

Brand the venues, whether core or satellite, in the same way. Make the catering cool, and fun. If everyone, in every location has a bag of popcorn, they're sharing something. If you don't want to include other brands, even snack brands, give everyone a nice, crisp apple.

What really matters is that all audiences, whether live or remote, are treated with the same respect and consideration. This also has crucial implications for speakers and content creators.

Importantly, have facilitators in each satellite location, working with the moderator in the core location. Structure the agenda so the people in the satellite locations are doing cool stuff too. Put them through the same break-out sessions. Let them report back to the main forum and any other satellite groups.

This means satellite audiences aren't just listening to what's going on in a central forum, they're participating too. It means they're part of a series of connected events.

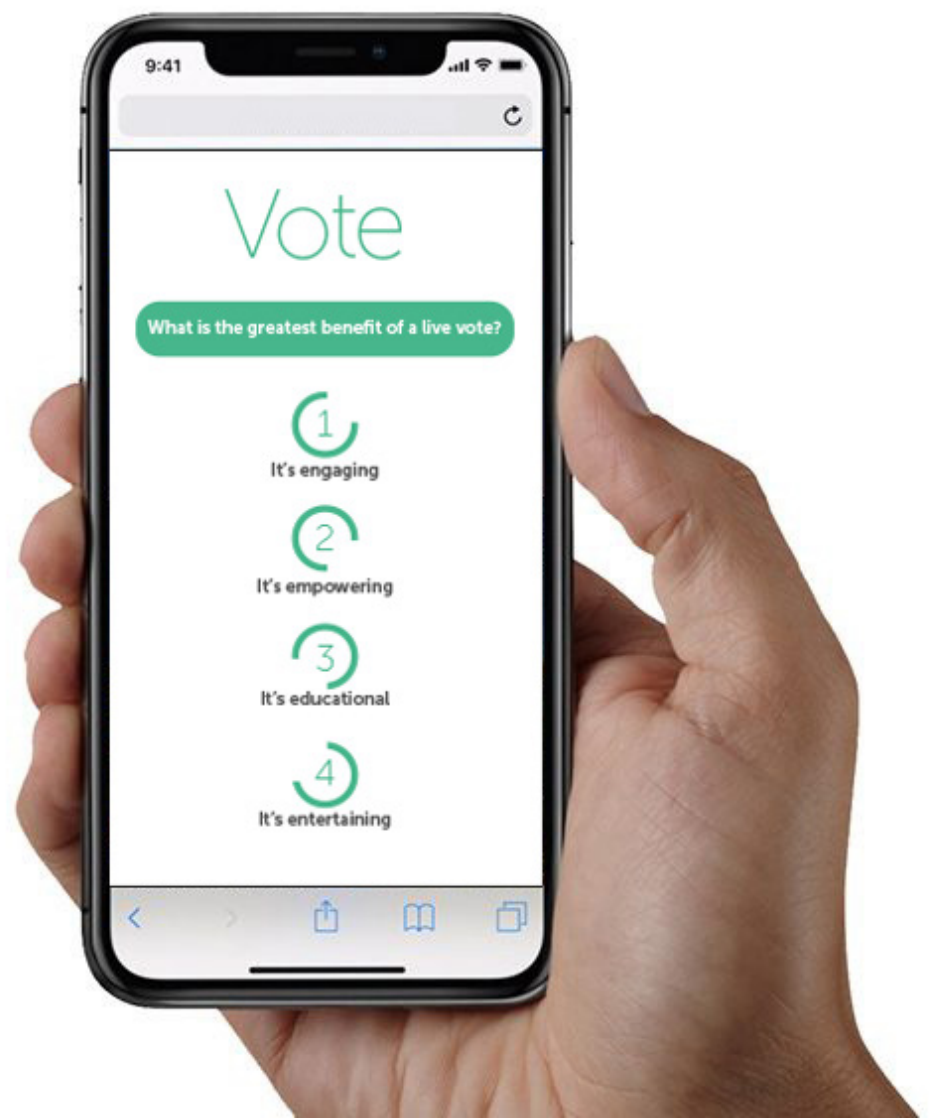
TIPS FOR SUCCESS

Experience tells us you should position your event as being about building a community from the start. Drum up excitement and encourage attendance by promoting the conference in advance with teaser video trailers. Like the movies, create curiosity and excitement. Recruit event evangelists. Position the event as unique because of its content. Highlight the value of interaction with such a large group of influencers.

Encourage people to submit questions in advance. To avoid people not showing up, make sure questions are two-way, from the core conference to the satellite hubs. Use apps to track attendance and answers.

Virtual conferences allow you to use that community to extend your conference well beyond the event itself. Subsequent satellite events can be connected to build on the agenda you nurtured. This will further build your community.

A virtual conference solution will certainly enable you to build on the ideas triggered by the event. Of course, you can record the event, as well as edit and share key learnings and highlights.



MODERATOR = PREPARED, PLANNED AND STRUCTURED

Expert moderators are worth their weight in tweets. Use one in the central forum, but also have well briefed facilitators in the satellite locations.

This gives you more control of your audiences' experience and their participation. It's also empowering for satellite attendees to feel and believe they have a champion in the main forum. The moderator can do that.

The key is to make all audiences 'active participants'. To enable remote audiences to interact, ask questions, challenge and engage, as much as the participants at the live event. If you can turn passive viewers into active participants, then you'll have created a truly interactive virtual event.



TRAIN PRESENTERS IN 'NEWSCASTING'

Presenters, moderators and facilitators will benefit from newscaster training and coaching. Each 'performer' in each location needs to be coached to remember they have virtual audiences too. Because, in effect, they're presenting to satellite audiences, as well as a live audience. Simple things help. Like looking into the camera and directly addressing the wider audience. Talking more slowly. But keeping the pace through short Ted-style presentations.

Wider audiences need to feel involved and acknowledged. Moderators and facilitators can achieve this by referring to specific satellite locations and the people in them. Ask them questions. Give them tasks to think about. Offer feedback. Make them feel like they're equally important.





MOST COMFORTABLE HEADSET?

Given the current VR tech on the market, we believe VR has limited use in the virtual conferencing sense. However, it's ok and novel for short bursts, like sitting in a panel discussion for 15 to 20 minutes. So, for 360 VR based participation, we love the Google Daydream Headset. It's lightweight. It works across different smartphones. And it's easy to use.

Maybe the Google Daydream is slightly less sophisticated than the Samsung Gear or Oculus Rift, but it's more versatile, working with more smartphones than most. Also, it's lightweight making it comfortable to wear.



GET THE TECHNICALITIES RIGHT

With a multi-layered audience, PowerPoint and other presentations need to be prepared with care. The AV communication needs to be highly effective and clear. It needs to work harder. And the agenda needs to be clear and well structured.

Have tech support on close hand. You don't want delays in people joining. Everything needs to be synchronised, otherwise the satellite attendees can end up out of step with the central forum and your agenda. It seems obvious, but allow a few seconds between questions, to accommodate any delay in the system.

Poor timekeeping is a serious mistake. To be left waiting and fidgeting is bad news for live audiences, as well as for audiences in satellite events. But remember, online audiences have a choice. If they log off, or worse still, log off because they think the live stream just isn't working, then they're unlikely to waste their time with you again. If your timing needs to be flexible, then make sure you can communicate with your audience to keep them in the picture.

Polling software will encourage interaction and allow everyone to contribute, again fostering a sense of community.

Contracts with speakers need to include your right to record, distribute and stream the sessions. It's much easier and cheaper to agree this up front.

Finally, keep the sessions short. We think that 30 minutes is the maximum. Build in a number of breaks, as satellite attendance through screen-based or even VR media can be tiring.

WORKPLACE BY FACEBOOK

Workplace by Facebook is a new inexpensive subscription service designed for businesses that want to encourage collaboration, but in a familiar Facebook-style setting. It's a closed, secure space you can use for sharing ideas and stimulate conversations.

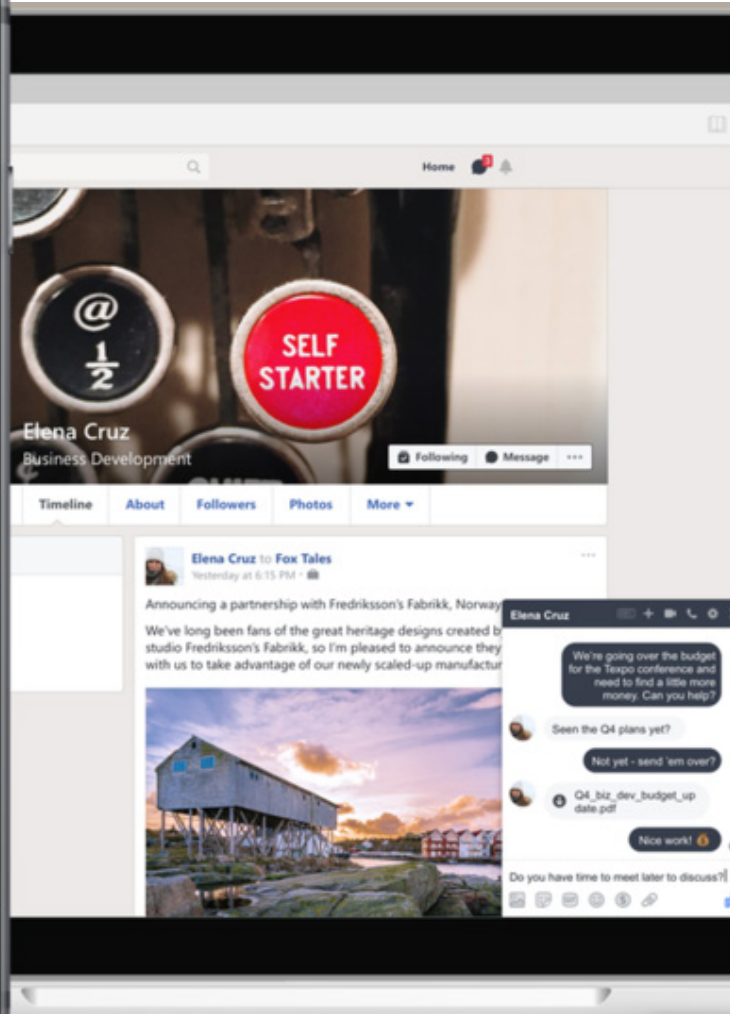
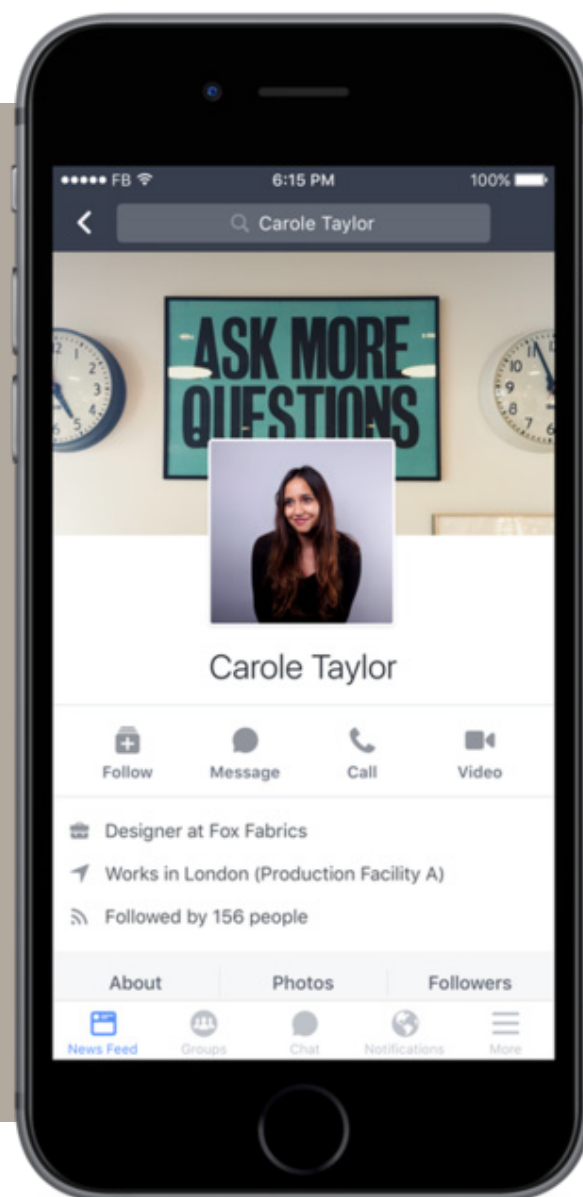
In contrast to other online collaboration hubs, it's super easy to use because it's so familiar to Facebook users. This means participants can get going quickly, whereas other event apps can take more time to understand and navigate, explaining lower adoption rates.



@workplace
by facebook

According to CNN Tech, "Facebook is using its new camera tools to launch its own augmented reality platform. Instead of putting on goggles, you will hold up your smartphone and watch as it overlays graphics on the world in front of you in real time."

(6)



NOW, YOU'RE VIRTUALLY A LEGEND...

As an integral part of your live event, virtual conferences can be both a potent disruptor and a unifying catalyst. They can empower and invigorate a larger audience and challenge the status quo. But also unite and inspire them through collaboration, as they work towards common goals.

The secret is to always consider the satellite locations and participants as integral to the hub-event. Ask their opinion, demand their response, value their input and make their voice heard. Use a central moderator and, if possible, satellite facilitators to orchestrate harmony – and discord. The results will be legendary.

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Shelton Fleming is a boutique creative agency that connects B2B brands to expert audiences, through intelligent live events. We specialise in the application of technology and architecture for exhibition booth design and live events.



Download our other recent publications on live events and collaboration.

Issue 2 on 'Your Unfair Advantage in Event Management'; published January 2017.

Issue 3 on 'The evolution of social brands and the live experience: Social Brand Engagement 5.0'; published July 2017



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