Hybrid Events – The Future

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Summary

Over the next decade, hybrid events will cease to be an industry innovation, becoming an industry standard. Through careful design of the hybrid experience, utilising 3D immersive technology, the hybrid format will become the structure that is most able to fulfil participant needs, reflecting an industry wide change in focus.

Description

While the industry is traditionally reticent in implementing new technologies (Pearlman & Gates, 2010), the concept of hybrid events, in its most simple form, has been around for almost a decade. If this is the case then why has it become an industry buzz word? This is due to changes in the macro environment, issues such as economic instability, terrorism and the increasing costs of fuel have all been key drivers for change (Codrington, 2012), affecting the ability of delegates in attending events. Amongst this has been the fact that technology has now caught up with our imaginations (Codrington, 2012). We are currently experiencing a rapid period of technological evolution and costs are dropping dramatically (Codrington, 2012). It has been this perfect storm of environmental factors which has resulted in the emergence of hybrid events (George P Johnson, 2010). While hybrid events are already being implemented, and have been described as one of the fastest growing industry segments (Hanson & Doyle, 2011), adoption has been slow with only 30% of organisers stating that they will be using virtual and/or hybrid events in the future (MPI, 2011). This is partly due to the issue of cannibalisation, where it is feared that adding virtual elements will reduce in-person audiences. Another challenge has been a lack of industry education and confusion over what a hybrid actually entails. Crucially hybrid events must allow for interaction, webcasting is not enough. It will be this level of interaction that will drive future format objectives. A feature of this will be in designing the hybrid experience around the needs of participants, particularly as the industry becomes more participant focused in line with the meeting architecture movement.

Essay

The industry is currently poised for an evolutionary shift (Vanneste cited in Congrex, 2011); disruptive forces in the external environment have become forces for industry innovation and growth (Codrington, 2012). Emerging trends for the next decade can already be seen in the Meeting Architect movement where the importance of meeting content and design have been highlighted (Congrex, 2011). To this end, the industry is moving away from the 'how' towards the 'why' and a focus has been placed on the participant experience in creating return on investment (ROI). Through this, only formats that are able to meet delegate event objectives will survive. In this climate, hybrid events will lead the industry to such an extent that every conference will contain a hybrid element. For this to happen, an evolution of the current format is needed.

Hybrid events are events serving an in-person and online audience, occurring simultaneously and creating a collective audience that have the opportunity to interact with one another (adapted from Barta, 2011 and Hanson & Doyle, 2011). Interaction is a key feature and this is currently done through social media sites, streaming platforms and online communities such as creating Google hangouts using Google+. However, as with any format, hybrid events will need to evolve to ensure that delegate needs are being met.
Currently presented as the solution to the virtual vs. face-to-face debate (Hanson & Doyle, 2011), the implementation of hybrid events is largely endorsed in terms of client benefits for example, in extending the reach of the event and increasing event audiences (Pearlman & Gates, 2010; Altenstrasser & Korte, 2011). However, within the future framework of meeting content, hybrids will need to be designed to specifically meet delegate needs. These needs (ROI) can be understood within the context of event attendance motivation theory. A wealth of research has highlighted that the key event objectives of attendees are networking and learning (Jago, 2005; Crystal Interactive, 2007; Yoo & Chon, 2008; Severt, Fjelstul & Breiter, 2009; Mair, 2010; Yoo & Zhao, 2010), these will now be examined.

The nature of a hybrid event enhances the learning experience for delegates. Through interaction between the virtual and in-person attendees information and links to relevant information or documents can be shared between people who otherwise may never have been able to meet. Typically event content is also shared via the website allowing delegates to revisit slides and presentations further enhancing the learning environment.

Networking on the other hand, is not so easily achieved. While clearly people can meet via social networking sites i.e. in responding to people's tweets using the event hash tag, many argue that the quality of networking via this medium is inferior to the in-person experience. For example, Ball (2004) states that "there is no better way of getting to know a person than by meeting them in person", in essence the social aspects of reading people's body language and talking whilst queuing for the buffet, just aren't there. This is a key area where hybrid events can evolve. 3D immersive technology and holograms are already here, what will need to happen within the next decade will be the application of these for virtual participants of hybrid events. Clearly this may not be possible for the average online delegate however; a key feature of the hybrid event within the next decade, already being trialled by the Event Camp events, will be the use of event pods. Event pods are Clusters of people meeting in locations other than the conference venue and collectively attending the event virtually (Balestra, 2011). Here not only is networking possible but holographic technology, perhaps included in the venue hire, could be used to allow virtual access to speakers and in-person participants creating that face-to-face experience. The benefits in implementing this format and technology would be to increase networking capabilities and to allow for face-to-face meetings through virtual means. Of course, this depends on the decrease in technology costs, however as we are currently in the middle of a technological revolution (Codrington, 2012), costs will decrease as newer innovations reach the market.

The traditional conference coined 'death by PowerPoint' (Ball, 2009) where a passive audience listens to the speaker and where one-way communication reigns (Hilliard, 2006), will become extinct. Audiences are no longer content to sit through untailored presentations with little interaction and this will likely remain a long-term trend. For example, the Convention 2020 report found that 77% of respondents expect a totally personalised event experience by 2020 (Talwar & Hancock, 2010) something which is not possible through the traditional format but which is more than attainable using the hybrid structure. The longevity of hybrid events is even more acute in considering the mix of generations currently within the workforce. In meeting the needs of Generation X and Y, hybrid events are the only solution.

Generation Y are 'digital natives' (Codrington, 2012) and not only expect technology but use this for ‘their knowledge acquisition process’ (Fenich, Scott-Halsell & Hashimoto, 2011). Both
Generation X and Y want a say in the event, value interaction with speakers and peers and expect instant results (Davidson, 2009). These are all features of a hybrid event as through the use of social media and platforms, online participants can interact with the in-person attendees and audiences can give instant feedback during the conference. For hybrid events to become the norm, the use of virtual emcees will need to continue to be explored to ensure that these feeds are being incorporated into the event and that the virtual element does not become an online 'death by PowerPoint' scenario. The future will see virtual emcees selected as carefully as event speakers and the continued development of the virtual experience in an edutainment format. While this is currently beginning to emerge in the form of interviews during conference breaks and gaming platforms, the future will see this developed further for example, in organisers developing platforms modelled on tools such as Google Hangouts, to create online communities, the objectives and benefits being to facilitate discussion and networking in a more personal way. For example, multiple 'hangouts' could be arranged and online delegates could be assigned to particular groups, after a time they would be instructed to switch by the virtual emcee, again to facilitate interaction and discussion. To aid interaction between virtual and in-person audiences, areas in the conference venue could be set aside to stream conversations, allowing interaction between the two.

Ultimately, instability in the macro environment arising from issues such as the increasing global population (Klunzig, 2011) and the depletion of natural energy sources (Mukherjee, 2009), will ensure that the hybrid format will emerge as the format of the meetings industry. Hybrids can help the industry weather these uncertainties through giving participants greater flexibility in how they attend an event. The format also allows for increased participant engagement and interaction and will permit delegates to meet key event objectives such as learning and networking. Through meeting participant ROI, overall ROI can then be achieved for the client, increasing revenue streams.
References


