



## **“Convention Center or Cubicle? Online Events Improving, But Not the Same as Being There”**

At a conference hosted by a company based in Menlo Park, attendees listen to keynote presentations, interact with vendors at the exhibition hall and have the opportunity to engage other conference-goers in discussion at the lounge. It may sound like any other professional networking and info-gathering event, but Unisfair Inc. conducts its various conferences over the Internet.

"Businesses are just more comfortable interacting online," says Brent Arslaner, Unisfair's vice president of marketing, who claims that the seven-year-old company is on track to host 250 of its total 550 events this year. "People are working from home and more companies have global satellite offices."

So the question is if virtual conferences and seminars are the answer for cash-starved companies looking for ways to trim costs without missing out on business development and networking opportunities. Limiting in-person events obviously cuts out travel expenses and lost time, but is the online experience a good-enough substitute for actually being there?

According to a wide cross section of professionals experienced in both formats, it really depends. They almost unanimously say nothing completely replaces the immediacy of human-to-human contact, but that attendees should fully understand what they hope to get out of the event before deciding whether to hop on a plane or simply log on.

## Virtual Events Come of Age

Self-described "personal business freedom strategist" Milana Leshinsky, who consults executive and life coaches on how to run a business, has held both in-person and virtual conferences. While the physical events cost between \$800 and \$2,000 per attendee, the "tele-events," as she calls them, cost roughly \$600. When you add up the cost of hotel accommodations, airfare, meals and time away from the office, the savings alone are substantial.

One common complaint about virtual events is the inability to ask presenters questions, which Leshinsky resolves with the help of instant messaging.

"To make a virtual conference more connection-oriented and people friendly, I created discussion topics and had the speakers get on the phone and answer the same questions," says Leshinsky, who is based in York, Penn. "I also provided my instant messenger address, so I could quickly get questions to the presenters."

Technology has continued to advance at a rapid clip, while several years of online events have helped organizers determine what works and what doesn't. Technology researcher Daniel Burrus expects the visual limitations of virtual events to become less of an issue in the near future, as high-bandwidth connections become ubiquitous and as high-definition video goes mainstream.

"All of those systems are getting better and better," says Burrus, founder and CEO of Del Mar-based Burrus Research. "So instead of just having a Web cast, with Power Points and audio, we'll start integrating video more and more."

And while the online format can never completely replicate the physical experience, its proponents afford it some key advantages, aside from cost. The flexibility of not having to travel means organizers are better able to assemble an A-list of speakers, even if globally dispersed, Burrus says. Interior designer Wendy Hoechstetter - who has attended both virtual and in-person industry events - says she prefers the accessibility of the information at online events, as opposed to shuffling handouts and taking notes.

Perhaps one of the biggest advantages of the virtual format, however, is time flexibility, several sources say.

"It's more convenient for me and I go at my own pace," says Martha Hanlon, president of Sunnyvale-based Market Out Loud, who likes being able to download presentations to her digital audio player and listen to them while driving to work. This flexibility also allows her to multitask, she says, for example checking email while listening to a forum discussion.

Also, more online conference providers, including Unisfair, are implementing social media components similar in functionality to LinkedIn and Facebook that enable better networking.

## **What the Internet Can't Replicate**

Online events quite simply cannot facilitate the act of physically interacting with other humans in the same time and space. Although most conference-goers interviewed for this article say virtual events have their place, nearly everyone agrees that there is no substitute for in-person networking.

Neil Ducoff, CEO of Strategies Publishing Group Inc., gives executive and leadership coaching seminars both in-person and online. He says the online business has picked up considerably in the past year or so, likely due to rising travel costs and tighter budgets, but insists that the physical events - which typically cost more - are much more substantial.

"I still believe you lose or at least severely cut down the contact, camaraderie and networking opportunities [in an online environment]," says Ducoff, who is based in Centerbrook, Conn.

Duane Kuroda, co-founder of Mountain View-based Deal Side Kick, says he attended a few online conferences in order to find new suppliers and service providers. Besides experiencing some technical glitches, he says it felt much less personal, with "no ability to really

connect or build any sense of trust in the person or company."

Trust and confidence are perhaps the most important aspects of in-person networking, says Berkeley-based executive coach, speaker and author Carol Kinsey Goman.

"In face-to-face meetings, our brains process the continual cascade of nonverbal cues that we use as the basis for building trust and professional intimacy," Goman says, adding that people who shake your hand are much more likely to remember you.

Professional speaker Michelle Nichols says in-person conferences are necessary when the presenter wants to appeal to the attendees' emotions, for example motivating attendees to increase sales or to change an organization's culture.

Several sources that regularly present at conferences say the visual cues they get from a live audience helps guide the discussion and gauge whether or not the attendees are finding the information valuable. And while Leshinsky uses instant messaging to relay attendees' questions to presenters, most say that interaction between presenter and attendee is compromised in an online setting.

## **Knowing When to Fly and When to Click**

At least within the context of a struggling economy, business professionals should first consider what they hope to accomplish from any given event. If there is no online option, Burrus says, then the question becomes whether the information or the networking opportunities are most important.

"I think there's nothing better than human to human meetings; that's the best. The reason we'll still be doing a lot of those in-person events is, number one, networking," he says. "But if my goal with you is just to inform you, I'm wasting your time by having [an in-person event]."

Even beyond the need to network with one's peers, Burrus says, professionals may choose to attend a live event if the purpose is to "share experiences, gain trust, motivate,

entertain or inspire."

Prospective conference-goers also need to consider their own comfort level with the technology, Kanatsiz says. Supervisors need to be careful not to discriminate on the basis of age, but younger employees might be perfectly comfortable soaking up Web-based information and networking with professional peers online, he says.

"Your demographic and industry need to be technologically savvy. You take an industry like financial services, and they would adapt well to an online format," he says, nevertheless conceding that face time is valuable when building relationships.

But if traveling to Las Vegas, Phoenix or New York is not in the budget, testing the online event format perhaps is better than doing nothing.

"I absolutely think it's the wave of the future," Hoechstetter says. "For businesses short on funds, it's the way to go."

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