

Types of Hybrid Events and How to Decide

Not everyone can agree on what a hybrid event is. Hybrid event is simply a word coined to create structure and common understanding for an industry in the midst of change. For now, it's the only nomenclature organizations have to describe the endless possibilities for new event models post-pandemic that reach both in-person and remote audiences.

Many event professionals on social media say they dislike of the word "hybrid."

Why?

- They see it as a "fad" or a trend
- They don't believe it encompasses the specific event design they have in mind

When it comes to hybrid event models, hybrid doesn't have to necessarily mean 50% virtual, 50% in-person. Further, it doesn't need to require reaching two audiences simultaneously.

With hybrid events, event hosts can play with space and time. The event can be in the same place at the same time, in multiple places simultaneously, or spread the event out in a given location over a longer period of time, etc.

Three Hybrid Event Models

Event organizers can generally choose from three types of hybrid events.

Hybrid Event Type	Description	Use Case
Light Hybrid	Only broadcasting the live sessions to a remote audience via a hybrid event platform that includes additional content for consumption.	Events that are session focused vs. exhibitor booths. Also, organizations that have limited additional budget beyond the in-person event.
Sequential Hybrid	A virtual event is hosted to reach remote attendees on different day(s) vs. the in-person event. This can be before or after the in-person event.	Organizations that want to reach both in-person and remote audiences, but do not have the resources to produce both event types at the same time.
Concurrent Hybrid	Hosting both a virtual event and in-person event at the same time.	Events that have a strong networking component. Also, the organizer must have sufficient, time, funding, and

		resources to host both events at the same time catering to two different audiences.
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How to Choose Which Hybrid Event Type Works for Your Event?

Choosing the right hybrid event format for your unique event depends on a combination of event type and goals and resource factors.

Event Type and Goals

- What type of event are you hosting? Are the sessions the primary focus or is an exhibit hall with booths also important?
- How important is networking (meeting other attendees)?
- Where are the attendees located (how far from the in-person venue)? What percent of attendees will likely not travel due to concern for health and safety, budget, time constraints, or carbon footprint awareness?
- Does your event include sponsors? What are their needs and goals?

Resource Factors

- Do you have budget to host both an in-person event and full-scale virtual event? If not, how much budget is available for the virtual event?
- Do you have the time, staff, and resources to host both an in-person event and full-scale virtual event? If not, how much time, staff, and resources is available for the virtual event?
- If your event includes booth sponsors, how much time and resources do the sponsor have to plan and set up for both an in-person event and a virtual event?

Elements of a Successful Hybrid Event

Technology:

- TV is all about action and intimacy – Early TV shows brought in directors from theater but did not understand the new television audience or the new medium being used (more close ups of the actors faces and pull back to see the stage). Work with your speakers and production crew to deliver sessions that cater to both audiences.
- They key is to make sure that the two audiences are on equal playing fields. Can they respond to polls together?
- If the platform can handle both the virtual and physical questions, do you even need the physical microphone for the in-person event (addresses COVID-19 issue sharing a microphone) or should you use a hybrid event mobile app?

- Consider Americans with Disabilities Requirements (ADA) for both your physical event audience and virtual event attendees to make sure your event is inclusive. Virtual attendees may need closed captioning during sessions or the ability to view and navigate the online environment via screen readers.

Physical space: Plan for smaller stages with multiple cameras.

Content:

- After the main stage speaker is finished, host an interview in the hallway at a small interview desk for just the virtual audience. The interview desk can have sponsor logos to push sponsor brands to the larger remote audience.
- Expo hall – If the physical event is operating at a reduced capacity, organizers must think about how the expo hall will work. For example, have a computer or tablet in each booth so the exhibitor's staff member can interact with the virtual audience. They can use their camera to show them around their physical booth.
- Poster sessions: Have each presenter pre-record a 5-minute video for posters with live Q&A. Make them available on-demand for virtual attendees.

What happens during breaks in the action during in-person events? E.g., 30 minutes between sessions where people connect and network in the hallway.

- Have a roving camera crew walk-around to capture what is happening.
- Incorporate a virtual photo booth for virtual attendees.

Speaker Prep:

- Organizers have trained speakers for in-person, they trained for them virtual, now organizers need to train speakers to deliver sessions to both audiences at the same time.
- Make sure speakers say good morning and acknowledge both audiences. Look at the physical attendees, then turn and look at the camera for the virtual attendees.
- Write a script for the speaker to remind each audience that the other is present. Do this at the beginning of each session.
- Make sure the speaker repeats the in-person question, so the remote audience hears it.
- Make sure the room and content are designed for both audiences in mind:
 - Speakers should not use a laser pointer or point at the screen that is next to them because the remote audience will not know what they are talking about.
 - Think about having a countdown clock in the back of the room. If you do not start the next session on time, there is a good chance you will lose your virtual audience even if it's a minute late.

Build your team:

- Organizers will need the same players as before:
 - Speaker manager
 - Expo manager
 - Registration team
 - Session chat moderator

- New:
 - Project manager responsible for the overall meeting and making sure the event comes together.
 - A dedicated project manager for just virtual and just the physical event.
 - Consider adding a COVID Compliance Officer to ensure safety and health procedures are being followed onsite.
 - Event MC that is there to speak to both the physical and virtual audience, so they are pulled together,
 - Plus, a virtual host for only the remote audience. For example, a sideline reporter standing on the floor of the ballroom talking to just the virtual audience. When that break was over, he/she can throw it back to the physical event MC on stage. The goal is to make sure there is no dead airtime for virtual attendees.
 - Trusted AV partner and trusted virtual event provider.

Cost:

- There are new costs to think of including:
 - Extra AV staffing, MC, streaming bandwidth (negotiate with the venue contract up front if possible)
 - Virtual/hybrid event platform
 - All the extra content for the virtual audience – roaming MC, etc.
 - Onsite
 - Pandemic safety
 - Health screening
 - Cameras to capture sessions for streaming
 - Potential Cost Savings:
 - Less F&B for a reduced live audience size
 - Speakers may not be there in person (T&E)
 - New revenue streams:
 - Repackage and sell the content that was at the meeting on-demand
 - New tools for sponsorship – interview desk with sponsor logos

- Charge for virtual – it's the same content
- Expand geographic reach – no travel limitations (overseas)

How long will your sessions run?

Will the sessions be an hour? A half-hour? Organizers want to strike a balance in the session lengths. They should be long enough that all the information you've prepared can be shared, but they should also be concise enough that virtual attendees remain focused and engaged.

How many sessions will you host per day?

Onsite attendees will be more likely to want to attend more sessions, as they traveled a great distance to attend in-person. However, virtual attendees will likely have a shorter attention span as they are sitting in front of a computer screen. One solution is to offer fewer live sessions per day for the virtual attendees. Instead, offer more sessions on-demand they can access at their leisure.

Avoiding Common Hybrid Event Challenges and Pitfalls

There are a few common dilemmas that planners face when putting these hybrid programs into action. Below are the most common along with tips and tricks to help you avoid these pitfalls.

Make Sure It Is One Event, But Two Experiences

Make sure that your virtual attendee experience is not an afterthought to the live event.

Hybrid events are a balancing act. They balance between in-person and virtual attendees and, therefore, they must balance these two experiences. Partner with a strong AV crew and virtual conference platform to capture and stream the sessions. Also make sure that your presenters are prepared to be recorded and to speak to both audiences. However, you do not want your hybrid event to feel like two entirely different events – it is one event with two experiences.

Navigate Time Zones

One of the benefits of hosting a hybrid event is that participants can attend virtually from all over the world. However, this poses the challenge of accommodating your virtual attendees' different time zones. It will be difficult for an attendee based in California to attend a keynote speech live at 8:30 a.m. ET. Ensure the sessions you are offering to your virtual attendees can be accessed on-demand. If possible, offer the same session live multiple times so people can attend at a time that works for them and experience it live.

Hybrid models will make events more inclusive than ever before. Whether people decide not to travel out of a concern for health and safety, budget, time constraints, or carbon footprint awareness, they will all be part of the event experience as one community.

Creating a successful hybrid event takes a lot of work, and you should think of yourself as the designer of this event program. You are in charge of creating an agenda that caters to both in-person and virtual attendees, and it is up to you to design a program that is engaging and effective.