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Up Your Virtual Value Prop



By Brandt Krueger

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Deliver the goods and you can charge for online events

Almost a decade ago, I wrote an article about “value.” At the time, I was still working full time for a meeting and event production company and, frankly, needed to vent a bit about how I felt we were being treated by a couple of our clients. It struck me as weird how basically the same event

could be priced so radically differently, with some clients scratching and clawing for every possible discount, and others willing to pay fairly as long as we delivered a quality product.

It took me a while, but I eventually realized that what I was really talking about was perceived value. Some of our clients valued our expertise and what we brought to the table; others felt, deep down inside, that if they only had the time, they could do the job just as well, and probably for a lot less money. For some, it was a badge of honor to see how little they could pay for our services, and for others it was more about the final product, and finding the right partner.

In these days before we're allowed to return to in-person events larger than a small backyard barbecue, planners are struggling with a lot of things: what online platform to use, what features, how much to budget and...how much to charge for their events.

More: [Tackling the Elephant in the Zoom Room: Paid vs. Free Virtual Events](#)

If you're expecting to walk away from this article with a hard dollar value, you will be disappointed. I can't possibly illuminate all the potential events and how much you "should" charge for them. What I can do is give you a few things to chew on that might help light the way (or some other mixed metaphor).

The Event Equation



One of the themes of my writing in the last few months is that attendees have been, up to this point, pretty forgiving of their event producers. Whether it's a local organization that had to take the annual fundraiser online, or a national or international organization "[pivoting](#)" (let me know when it's OK for us to stop using that word) its conference to virtual, attendees have shown over and over again that they're willing to pay the same ticket prices for online events as they paid to attend in person.

But for how long?

If you asked average conference-goers, prepandemic, why they attended, chances are, most of them would say two things: education and networking. The average concert-goer? The entertainment! And the joy of seeing an artist you love with people who are just as fanatical as you are. And then there's location. One of the other big draws of an event is the opportunity to get out of your comfort zone and go to a new location, with new food, new attractions and new experiences.

So, when attendees weigh whether or not to come to your event, they have to parse the cost associated with the tickets, time out of the office, airfare, hotel room—all of that—against the benefits above. Even if their companies or organizations ultimately foot the bill, somebody, somewhere, is balancing the perceived value of the event against the hard costs.

Find more hybrid meeting tips and tools on the [Virtual Events Genius Resources](#) page.

Coming up Short

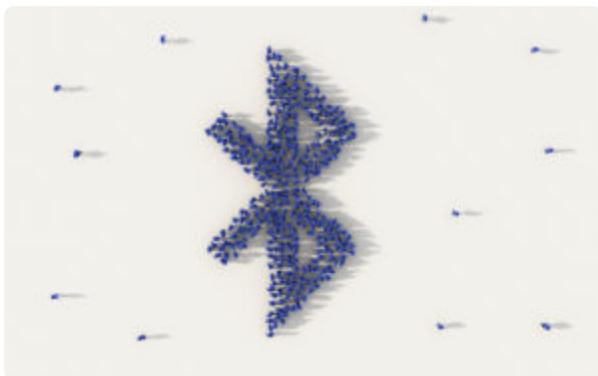
When you take your event online, it's not that hard to provide the first part of those experiences. You can still stuff your agenda with subject-matter experts, or amazing performances, just as you would have at your in-person events. There's a huge value to the professional and personal education that comes from conferences and expos, online or otherwise, and it's still a blast to see your favorite artist or dance group performing live, even if it's in your living room.



But if you're not delivering the same caliber of networking or the shared experience of being with like-minded peers, there are no two ways about it—you're coming up short. Once you've gotten past your "pandemic free pass" of your first event that people had already paid for months ago, will they still be willing to pay the same amount if you're not delivering the same perceived value? Not likely, and even less so if the company is footing the bill.

Now you're left with two alternatives. Lower your prices, or...

Safe Tech Innovations



Could an app help keep attendees healthy? Joe Schwinger, founder of MeetingPlay, the virtual platform that promises to create life-like experiences, suggests considering smart technology solutions that could keep everyone safe for the in-person portion of future hybrid events.

Mobile check-in via boarding groups: Spread out attendee arrival times using a smartphone app that assigns attendees a check-in window, similar to a boarding group designation at an airport. When they arrive, attendees can be notified on their

phones that their check-in request is being processed and badge materials are being sanitized and prepared for pickup. Once the badge has been properly processed, attendees receive a mobile alert to pick up their badges in germ-free bags.

Facial Recognition: Kiosks outfitted with Bluetooth can welcome attendees to the event. To interact with the kiosks without the spread of germs, hand gestures can be recognized instead of touch screen methods. Kiosks can even be fitted with temperature detectors so that when a temperature is too high, it will notify the on-site event team.

Elevate Your Game

I've said it before, and I'll say it again: [Online events](#) aren't "free" just because they're online. Don't throw away your venue budget; use it for your "new" venue—the online event platform—rather than pillaging the AV budget. And just because you don't have catering or centerpieces or airfare or hotel rooms or welcome signage or vodka luges or mini-coach transfers, it doesn't mean you should just red-pencil those numbers right out of your budget, either.

If you're going to make up for the lost value that in-person events hold for your attendees, you better find a way to kick it up a notch.

The easiest way to do this is to work with your presenters and suppliers to increase the production value of your event. For the price of an awards-night centerpiece (sorry, [centerpieces](#), don't mean to pick on you, you're lovely), you can provide a presenter with an upgraded webcam, lighting kit or professional microphone setup. Take that AV budget you had for your general session and pump it into the production of slick, animated opening and closing graphics or testimonials or feel-good pieces about all the amazing charity work your organization is doing.

Can't take your group to Barcelona this year? Take that catering budget, call the local CVB you were already working with, and arrange a gift basket for each of your attendees to deliver a little taste of Barcelona to them. Never underestimate the perceived value of naked bribery!

Finally, all of this depends very much on what type of attendee you have, which is why I strongly recommend including attendees in the planning, and pricing process. It's all about knowing what constitutes "value" for them. Much like those clients of mine all those years ago, some groups are more frugal than others, and are willing to take deep discounts in return for the bare minimum, no-frills, version of their events. Others are willing to pay a little more if it's worth it.

Imagine the thought process: "Well, I could go to ZipCon, but ugh...it's like nine hours of up-the-nose shots on a Zoom call. TeaLCon is a couple hundred more and only runs half days, but it's so much better produced, easier to watch and I feel like I retain a lot more! Plus, don't tell anyone, but they sent me a coupon for a free massage, so..."

Ultimately, it will be up to your attendees to decide whether you deliver on the value equation for your event, so you might want to have a conversation with them about it—sooner, rather than later.

How to Solve the Virtual Engagement Problem

The million-dollar question for streaming is, How do we keep the faces behind the screens from clicking away?

Ben Chodor, president of [Intrado Digital Media](#), the company behind the virtual event platform INXPO, which was used for ASAE's record-breaking [2020 Virtual Annual Meeting & Exposition](#), has suggestions.

“Virtual events need to be designed with an end user in mind,” says Chodor, who has a new book, *Transitioning to Virtual and Hybrid Events*. He invites meeting professionals to close their eyes and envision the attendee sitting in the home office with dogs and kids and doorbells ringing and all kinds of distractions around. The obvious challenge: design something that will keep that person glued to the screen.

Today's platforms can enable immersive experiences with easy navigation and fun gamification. “Even serious people who tell you they don't like gamification like it when you give them a challenge,” he promises.

Regardless of the platform, the content must be high quality. Speakers need to be trained to connect through that lens. “The virtual audience has little patience for content that isn't amazing,” Chodor says.

He offers the example of United Fresh Produce Association, which created United Fresh Live! 365, a year-long marketplace for 7,600 people with virtual access that includes all the senses—taste, smell and touch. Organizers translated the colorful, artsy theme to the virtual interface, included chat options, sign-up lists for mailing food samples and other items normally handed out on expo floors. Vendor “booths” offered 1:1 sessions to engage with visitors and chef demonstrations to bring it to life.

A Sense of Place



Whether virtual or a component of [hybrid](#), streaming meetings don't have to seem like they emanate from nowhere. Smart meeting professionals are partnering with destinations and venues to bring them along for the ride to cities all over the country.

Joe Lara, founder of The Knowledge Exchange invitation-only market trade shows and executive producer of Mission Critical interactive experiences, knew he didn't want to produce another boring webinar from an undisclosed location. "People are visual by nature. They want to see that life is going on," he says.

When his event was canceled in April, he gathered his dream team of television production-level AV experts and brainstormed how they could do something that really engaged—short, morning news-style segments with entertainment. On a whim, he called a contact at [The Heldrich Hotel & Conference Center](#) in New Jersey, a few minutes from his house. It was May, and it had just reopened. Three staffers were on property. He asked if he could do on-location transitions from different rooms between educational presentations.

"Six months ago, this would not have mattered; no one would have been impressed by hosting from the lobby of a hotel, but at that point in time, going on a virtual journey for a site inspection was exciting," he says.

His goal was to reach 150 to 200 people. In the end, there were 1,000 registrants. Then it got crazier. At the wrap meeting he learned that 2,500 people watched using the link he posted to the website. Another 3,000 viewed the content on demand.

For Mission Critical Episode 2, in July, he elevated the experience. He worked with country music star John Rich's Redneck Riviera Nashville venue and Hudson Yards in New York City to

ground the broadcast. To add a sense of taste, he gave away 1,000 Grub Hub credits so attendees could order breakfast or lunch while following the action on screen.

The filming was not without complications. [Nashville](#) shut down two weeks beforehand, and 25 watch parties had to be sidelined. Still, stationing hosts in these two iconic locations added to the excitement between interviews with Bob Bejan, corporate vice president of global events, production studios and marketing community with Microsoft, and Janae Henderson, director and head of conference and event marketing with RBC Capital Markets.

The experience was emotional for Lara personally. He was streaming live from Edge at The Shops and Restaurants at Hudson Yards. It was the first time in over four months he had gone into the city. “Everything is different in Manhattan,” he says. The subways were sparkling clean. The streets were not the bustling places of before. The venue opened on March 12 and closed on March 13. Everything was still wrapped in plastic. He had to go through infrared sensors to enter and filmed alone in the room so could take his mask off.

The moment of truth, however, was when he stepped onto the highest outdoor sky deck in the country for 360-degree views of the city. “I stood 100 stories above Manhattan scared sh*!\$%less,” he says. “My feet became frozen in place. I have an enormous fear of heights and the glass floor makes it look a loooong way down.”

Adding a thrill to a hybrid event doesn’t require you to hang in the air, Lara adds, but something visual should be included to create excitement. “That creates a sense of place. We can’t just talk about the experience; we need to reach through the screen and touch people. Attendees still want wow.”

Mission Critical Episode 3 will be hosted this month from Atlantic City and Las Vegas. “We want to show that meetings can be safe,” Lara says. “People are starting to thaw from the panic and looking for how they can do this again.”

In addition to showcasing his team’s custom-event capabilities, he sees the programs as a way to support his hospitality partners. “We ask a lot of hotels when we are producing events. Now they need help.”—JT Long

Virtual Meetings You Can Pin on a Map

2020 [Republican National Convention](#) in Charlotte, North Carolina, for more than 300 delegates at Charlotte Convention Center worked with National Special Security Event, FBI and police to secure the venues, including Westin Charlotte. The highlight was a live roll call from the floor that was filmed from multiple angles so anyone in the country could feel the excitement as if they were



there. The experience was packaged for Monday morning television networks to showcase the venue and the city.

2020 [Democratic National Convention](#) at Wisconsin Center District was an opportunity for Visit Milwaukee to show off the city through the livestream. But another highlight was the state roll call that featured 30-second vignettes from mayors, celebrities and scenery, not to mention a platter of fried calamari from Rhode Island.

The 59th Annual International Congress and Convention Association Congress, titled Transforming Global Events Together, will be streamed and

presented at seven hubs all over the world, with the event centered as planned (pre-COVID) in Kaohsiung, Taipei. Six weeks of education and exploration will culminate in the creation of a document, The Kaohsiung Protocol, which will act as a framework that identifies major trends and key strategies to enable the international meetings industry to thrive, now and into the future.

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