

EVENTMB GUIDE TO
**EVENT
ENGAGEMENT**

Designing Experiences, Building Communities
and Creating Lasting Connections

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

EVENTMB STUDIO TEAM

This report is brought to you by EventMB Studio. EventMB Studio is a boutique content marketing service that produces top quality digital content assets for market leaders in the event and hospitality industry.

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excellence.
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DEFINING EVENT ENGAGEMENT

Engagement is one of the most talked-about ingredients of event success. But like some other terms in the event industry — innovation also tops the list of overused buzzwords — it can be difficult to pinpoint what engagement actually means. What distinguishes an engaged attendee from an indifferent one?

Definitions of what constitutes engagement can hinge on a variety of psychological effects, from altering perceptions of time to evoking emotions to sparking conversations.

“Engagement doesn’t happen between the event and the person. It happens between stakeholders at an event. Event design is the design of time. And when you’re engaged in something, it’s like a work of art or a good book: It draws you into the picture and you’re stuck to it. You want to be there. You want to keep turning the page.”

— **Ruud Janssen**, Co-Founder and Managing Partner of the Event Design Collective

“The word [engagement] depicts an emotional involvement or commitment. When we’re engaged, we’re caught up in the associated work, relationship, or effort because we care, rather than for rational reasons such as a paycheck, material security, or social pressure.”

— an excerpt from “The Power of Participation” by **Adrian Segar**, Founder of Conferences That Work

“Think of attendee engagement as the ongoing conversation that unfolds between your attendee and your brand over the course of an event.”

— Shiloh Events

Adrian Segar points out that engagement appears in multiple forms. "One is predominantly passive, characterized as entertainment," he writes in "The Power of Participation." "We can be engaged by a moving performance of a speaker, play or concert; let's call this broadcast-style engagement. The other is engagement that occurs through active participation in an experience with one's peers, which I'll call active engagement." Understanding the difference between active and passive engagement

can be key to effective experience design, but it is one among many ways of thinking about the concept.

While there is no single correct definition for engagement, there is a common thread that can apply to every kind of event. **When your audience is engaged, you have managed to capture one of the scarcest human resources: attention.**

THEN AND NOW: WHY EVENT ENGAGEMENT MATTERS NOW MORE THAN EVER

The concept of engagement is nothing new to the event industry. The need to keep attendees engaged has been a big topic of discussion in pre-conference brainstorming sessions for organizers of all kinds of gatherings — business conventions, educational conferences, and trade shows.

“One of the fundamental goals for any event planner in a rapidly digitizing, globalized world is to better engage audience members,” Greg Oates wrote in a 2016 Skift feature on SXSW.

Fast forward to 2022, and the pace of that digitization has accelerated in the midst of a two-year hiatus from nearly any face-to-face events due to the pandemic. Instead of swiping badges at convention centers, attendees created their own avatars, joined online breakout rooms, and got comfortable inviting complete strangers into their living rooms. In the beginning of the pandemic, the creativity of digital experiences felt new. However, that initial shine from Zoom happy hours wore off quickly. “What felt magical at the beginning with orchestras playing together virtually quickly started feeling ordinary,” Janssen says. “It has become second nature.”

Together with concerns around engagement value came the matter of monetary value. As more events shifted online, many organizations struggled with a key question: What should they charge for the online experience? The answer wasn't simple, and it has created serious challenges for the event industry. “One of the biggest problems that events ran into was that they couldn't articulate what value they created and hence people wouldn't commit their time or their wallets,” Janssen says. “Events started giving away really good stuff and really poor stuff, and many people couldn't distinguish between the two.”

Two years later, the event industry is at a serious crossroads. Face-to-face events are returning, but digital events are never going away. People will pay for experiences that surprise and delight them, that teach them something new, and that awaken an emotional connection — whether they're in person or on a screen. It's time to stop giving everything away and start designing programs with a clear value proposition.

WHAT IT USED TO MEAN VS. WHAT IT MEANS TODAY

“An in-person ‘engaged’ attendee in 2019 was as simple as an audience member not on his/her phone. An attendee was really engaged when they took notes or pictures of the presentation. In 2022, engagement is the most important KPI — not just attendance with a ‘hope’ for engagement — as video fatigue and multi-tasking is the new reality of hybrid workforces. If attendees are not truly engaged and leaning in to event content — and if event hosts are not making every moment valuable and/or entertaining — we are wasting their time.”

— **Cathy Song Novelli**, Senior Vice President, Marketing + Communications, Hubilo

THE PATH TO ENGAGEMENT: NO LONGER ON AUTO-PILOT

“The fact that being at an event could be dangerous all of the sudden makes you conscious of what you’ll attend. Your behaviors have changed dramatically. No one is on event auto-pilot anymore. I’m super conscious of what events I’m going to go to live. I feel like a beginner again. I feel like I’ve hit a reset button of how I behave at events and how I can maximize the time I spend there.”

— **Ruud Janssen**, Co-Founder and Managing Partner of the Event Design Collective

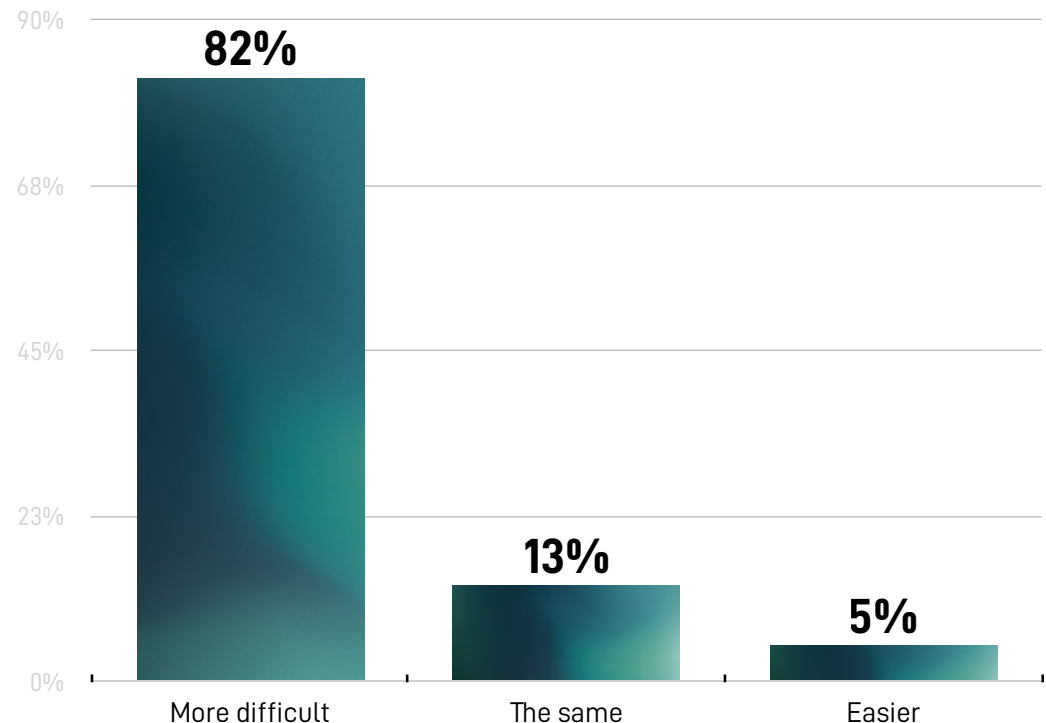
SURVEY SAYS: INSIGHTS INTO TODAY'S EVENT LANDSCAPE

To get a sense of the big picture of engagement, EventMB surveyed more than 400 event professionals about their current challenges and objectives. The results underscore the fact that online engagement is no easy task.

DIGITAL DIFFICULTIES

More than 80 percent of respondents say that engaging online attendees is more difficult than engaging their face-to-face counterparts.

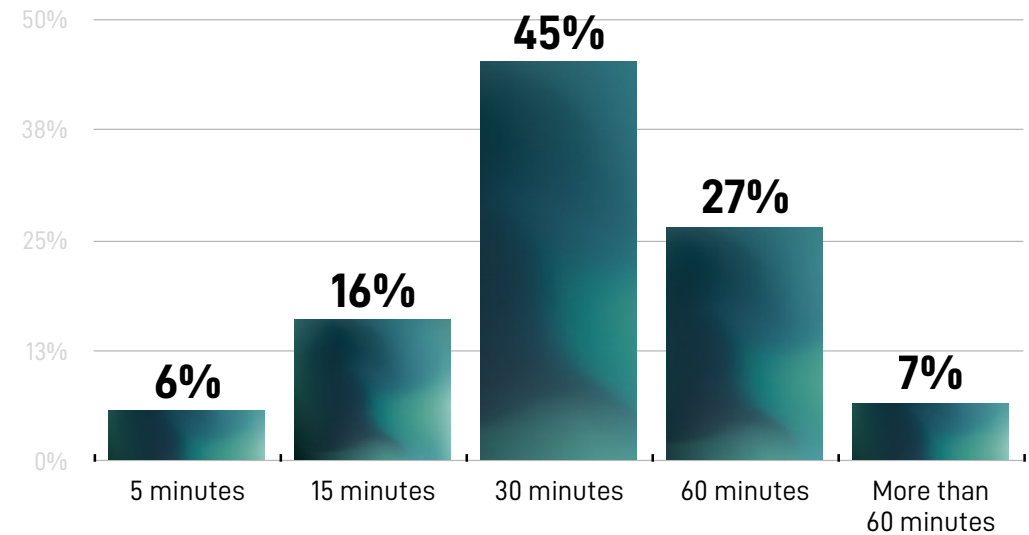
How would you compare the level of difficulty involved with keeping online at-home attendees engaged vs. onsite face-to-face attendees?



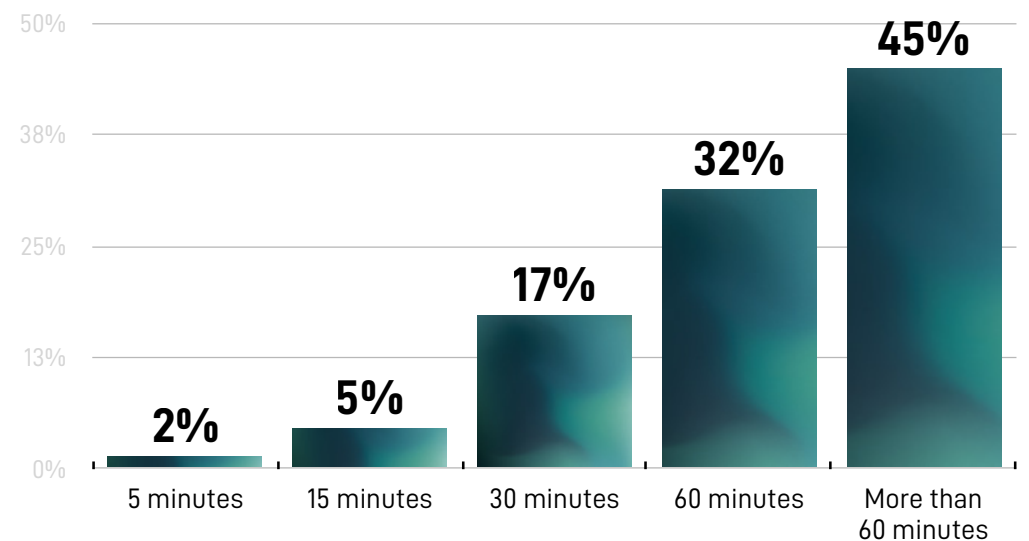
THE CLOCK IS TICKING

Screen fatigue sets in much faster than in-person exhaustion — 30 minutes tends to be the cutoff for engagement with an online audience.

→
How long can you typically keep your ONLINE audience engaged for?



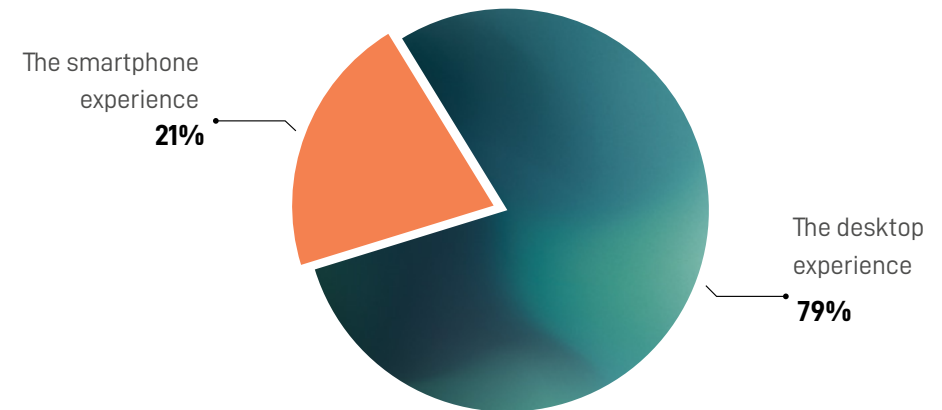
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How long can you typically keep your ONSITE audience engaged for?



A BIG SCREEN EXPERIENCE

Event professionals are still designing for desktops — a strategy that may continue to resonate with current attendees. However, it could present a challenge in terms of attracting a new generation of mobile-first attendees.

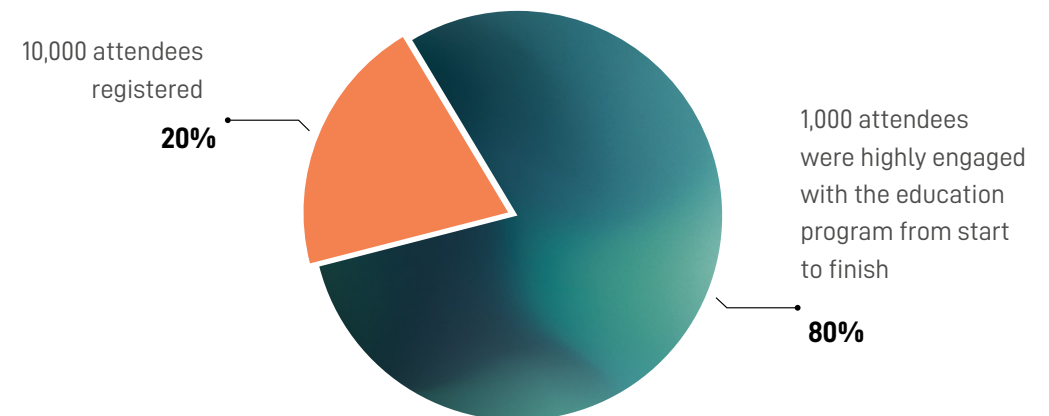
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When thinking about keeping your online audience engaged, the first thing on your mind is:



ENGAGEMENT NUMBERS > REGISTRATION NUMBERS

While event professionals want to attract crowds, they are more focused on the quality of the engagement than the quantity of the attendance.

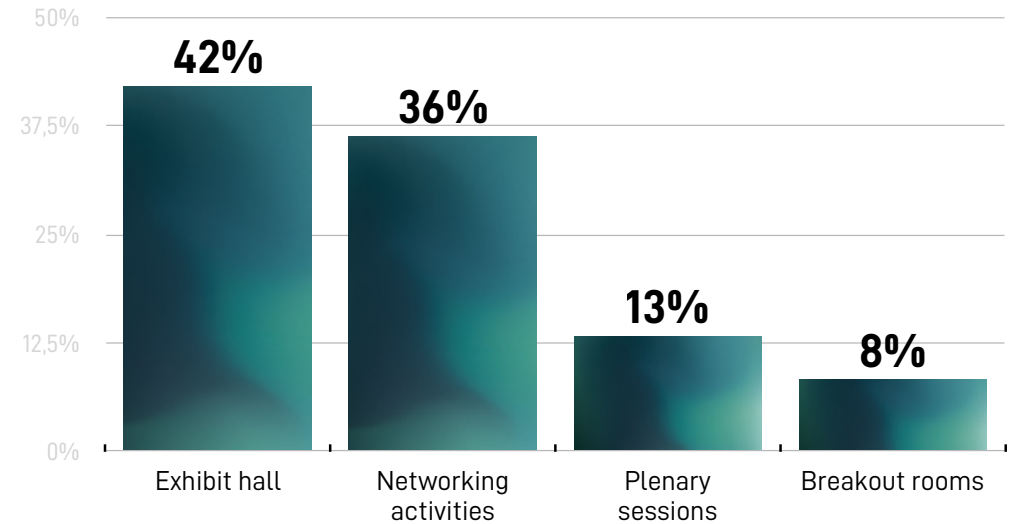
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What would you rather tell your sponsors?



THE HARDEST PARTS

Making educational content engaging has become a standard move for event professionals, but translating trade shows and networking receptions to the online format is proving to be a bit tougher.

Which of the following formats is the most challenging to make engaging for online attendees?



THE PSYCHOLOGY OF EVENT ENGAGEMENT: LOOKING THROUGH YOUR ATTENDEES' EYES

Addressing the challenges of engagement begins with thinking about what is going on in the lives of your attendees. As more employees work from home at least some of the time, it's crucial to recognize that your pathway to engagement must overcome some major roadblocks. According to research from printing company Mopria Alliance, 69 percent of remote employees get distracted with household chores, and 66 percent of them are distracted by their pets.

While thinking about the appropriate design decisions for your event, consider what your audience is going through — in the workplace but also at home. Work with a diverse event committee to include a wide range of perspectives and considerations. Ask your CEO what they would want from an event, and ask your entry-level employees about their priorities. If you work at a member-based organization, include your membership team in the process, as they may have an ear to the ground with a real sense about what makes your community tick.

Here are some questions to help you step into your attendees' shoes:

- ☐ Has the childcare shortage forced some of them to balance working while handling parenting duties?
- ☐ What's their current level of burnout?
- ☐ What are the major sources of stress that keep them up at night?
- ☐ Are they attending events simply because they need to add up continuing education credits for some kind of professional certification, or might they be looking for deeper inspiration to help awaken a new sense of purpose?
- ☐ What are the major moves that have impacted your industry over the past six months? And what do they mean for the career trajectories of some of your attendees?
- ☐ What causes — unrelated to your event or your organization — does your community care about?
- ☐ What are some activities that might be more important than your meeting? (Be honest with yourself — there are a lot.)

HOSTING CONVERSATIONS THAT AREN'T ABOUT WORK

Being empathetic involves thinking beyond the shared professional objectives of your attendees. To truly unite a community, help them discuss what's happening in the world — even when those can be challenging conversations.

Consider Zendesk, which used employee events to help create a stronger sense of community. The events — called empathy circles — included six gatherings with discussions unrelated to the company's software offerings. "Themes have ranged from racism in America, to the role of intersectionality in EMEA and APAC, to combating racism and violence against the Asian American and Pacific Islander community," Inamarie Johnson, the company's Chief People & Diversity Officer at the time, wrote in *Fast Company*. "But these discussions can cover any topic you wish to shine a light on."

Johnson recommends using a facilitator to guide the discussion, but also leaving room for free expression: "The conversations are generally unstructured, which leads to open dialogue; however, it's helpful to have a pair of facilitators open the discussion with historical background or factual news. They can share personal stories or motivations to set the tone and create group trust."

"The competing factors for audience attention are different [than before the pandemic]. They include family, pets and even the Amazon delivery driver. There is more of a blur between home life and work life, and this means that sessions have needed to be amended. Having two to three full days back-to-back in the virtual world doesn't have the same attraction as in the physical world."

— **Sophie Ahmed**, Senior Vice President, Marketing Strategy, Hubilo

"You need to think about the user, put them at the center and be very empathetic. It's like living in a perfectly designed, architectural top-notch house versus one that hasn't been thought through. The architect thinks of everything — how the light comes in, the vibe and how the home feels. If you have the opposite living situation, you could feel pretty miserable — even if the house is the same size."

— **Ruud Janssen**, Co-Founder and Managing Partner of the Event Design Collective

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT VS. EVENT ENGAGEMENT

Your event might happen for three days, but what about the other 362 days of the year? Engagement is not something that simply turns on with an event. Instead, think of your event as one of the most crucial pieces of the full puzzle. It's when your community can be most engaged, but you need to maintain that connection with touchpoints that occur more frequently than flagship events once or twice a year. These two types of engagement feed each other: The closer your community feels when they're apart, the more likely they will want to come together at your event.

Thinking about community engagement involves some key questions:

- ☐ **How does your audience spend their time when they're not at your event?**
- ☐ **How regularly do you communicate with your audience about topics other than your event?**
- ☐ **What can you do to better connect your participants when they are not together in person or in a chat box?**
- ☐ **What are the most valuable benefits of being part of your community other than your event?**
- ☐ **If your audience didn't interact with you next week, what would they miss? What about next month? (If the answer is "not much", it's time to reflect on what you're really offering and what you need to do to become a more vital piece of their lives.)**

SUBSCRIPTIONS: RECURRING REVENUE AND REGULAR INTERACTION

For some organizations, the biggest benefit of an annual membership is a discount on the annual meeting. That won't cut it in today's instant-gratification landscape. To keep your audience engaged, consider borrowing a lesson from the biggest names in media. A monthly subscription model makes those payments easier to digest while giving subscribers incentives to come back for more content — they'll want to get their money's worth.

“Both Netflix and Spotify provide a monthly subscription that provides monthly recurring revenue, so this model ties into the 365-community, subscription-based model that so many event organizers are striving towards, to stay closer to their markets whilst providing a new revenue stream for increased ARR [annual recurring revenue]. Also, by having their consumers interacting regularly on their platforms, their customer insight is greatly increased, allowing for more tailored messaging and increased persona-based marketing to provide increased revenue. They have many ‘upsell’ opportunities and tier subscriptions to allow for increased revenue.”

— **Sophie Ahmed**, Senior Vice President, Marketing Strategy, Hubilo

ONLINE VS. IN-PERSON EVENT ENGAGEMENT

What does it look like to be engaged if an attendee is sitting in a ballroom or sitting in front of a screen at home? Event professionals have been able to take the pulse of in-person engagement levels with simple cues. Did most of the audience stay for the entire presentation, or did a lot of them walk out halfway through? Did hands immediately raise during the Q&A portion, or was everyone silent? Was the exhibit hall packed with traffic, or did it occasionally feel awkwardly empty?

In-person attendees have access to multisensory stimulation — shaking hands with others, eating at a table together, singing along with the band and dancing at an evening reception, raising a toast, and more. This means that these experiences can often have a leg up over digital alternatives. “The digital events, quite frankly, are not satisfying customers,” David Audrain, CEO and partner at trade show management firm ExpoDevCo, said during EventMB's Future of the Event Industry: 2022 Outlook Summit. According to Audrain, “Getting people back together again is more than just a nice thing to do. It’s a necessary thing to do.”

However, there are ways to increase the satisfaction of online participants, and the right strategy will depend on the context.

BE A TEACHER

In some cases, effective event engagement might begin with spending more time educating trade show representatives on the ins and outs of online communication. Many of these representatives may be accustomed to making in-person sales pitches but feel uncomfortable initiating casual digital chats and calls. Consider hosting a workshop for exhibitors to walk them through best practices for connecting with your audience when that audience isn't physically in front of them.

CREATE ONLINE EXCLUSIVES

In-person participants have access to benefits that online participants simply cannot enjoy — casual meet-ups at the hotel bar or the chance to snap a selfie with the keynote speaker. Think about what you can do to make your at-home audience feel like they're getting something special. Take a cue from events like SXSW and PCMA's Convening Leaders and select a dedicated host from a studio for a television-style experience, with exclusive interviews and behind-the-scenes material that can only be found online.

BE CONSCIOUS OF TIME ZONES

It's easy to plan the timing of a production for in-person attendees: Start the morning program with enough time for the late-night, post-reception crowd to catch some sleep. However, the live portion of your broadcast might be happening "live" for someone an ocean away. If you are focused on expanding in a certain region of the world, be sure to consider the time zone when scheduling marquee speakers or other elements where you're hoping to encourage real-time participation.

“We have to take virtual/hybrid engagement as seriously as we take in-person activations. The pandemic redefined work-life balance, and we need to work that much harder to deserve their attendance and engagement at events — whether in-person or virtual — by utilizing the technology that current and future generations expect, and turn events into next-generation experiences.”

— **Cathy Song Novelli**, Senior Vice President, Marketing and Communications, Hubilo

ENGAGEMENT TOOLS AND EVENT DESIGN STRATEGIES

As engagement has become the most important piece of the event puzzle, event professionals can fuel their efforts with tools and design tricks to get attendees talking, listening, and interacting.

DESIGNING FOR ENGAGEMENT

UX: Everyone has spent too much time on video calls. As you design your online environment, it's crucial to think about a user experience that will feel more energetic than those day-in, day-out digital windows. Look for a technology that can help distinguish your online format with a fresh, yet intuitive, interface.

Built-in breaks: Your onsite attendees already have breaks — walks between sessions, lunches, and networking activities, as well as other casual opportunities to disconnect from the content. Your online audience needs a chance to refresh, too. Consider 10-minute online guided meditations, stretching breaks, virtual dance parties, and more. Part of keeping attendees engaged is making sure that they can recover from the mental strain of absorbing large amounts of information over a short duration.

Real-time adjustments: Part of an effective engagement strategy is being nimble enough to switch when that strategy is coming up short. While you may not be able to make major changes to the onsite experience at the last minute, you have more flexibility online — along with an enhanced ability to see if attendees are tuning out. Are a large number of attendees dropping off a certain session at the same time? Is the chat drying up to nothing? Is an AV glitch making it impossible to hear or see the speaker? Start your event with a Plan B and Plan C to address any issues that arise.

Personalization: Think about every e-commerce site you interact with today that includes a “You Might Also Like” recommendation with products and services that seem like good candidates based on your buying and browsing behaviors. A similar level of personalization is playing an increasingly large role in creating events that are tailored to the specific needs of individual attendees. As your audience interacts with your brand, everything they do — or don't do — represents one more insight into how you can better serve them.

When it comes to a three-day program with 10 educational tracks, 120 sessions, and an exhibit hall featuring 450 different companies, personalization isn't

simply a nice-to-have feature — it's the only way you can help your attendees navigate all the options for an experience that answers the question on everyone's minds: What's in it for me? Even if you haven't collected a vast amount of intelligence about your audience in the past, be sure to integrate a personalization strategy for your next event by asking the right questions during the registration process. Ask them about which topics interest them most, which challenges they are most concerned about, and what their primary goals are at the event.

1-to-1 Sponsor Connections: You aren't just trying to get attendees to engage with each other. The companies sponsoring your event want to be part of the conversation, too. Rather than offer opportunities to make your audience aware of their brand, consider finding tools to help them engage with the sponsor's team. Examples include video chat functions embedded into the sponsor profile or virtual booth on your platform and event app, as well as sponsored interactive breakout rooms. By facilitating one-on-one connections, you can offer sponsors the real advantages they want from a partnership: going from simple recognition of a company name to the beginning of a meaningful, personal connection.

ENGAGEMENT TOOLS

Chat: Online attendees get the benefit everyone wished they had in school — the chance to talk throughout the lesson plan. Chat capabilities lay the foundation for online engagement, giving attendees the convenience of sharing perspectives on the content in real-time. However, harnessing the full power of chat messaging relies on appointing a moderator for each session to encourage participation and break the ice between at-home participants. Additionally, the moderator can be the liaison with the speaker, funneling the most thought-provoking questions from online attendees to the presenter for consideration.

Audience Response Polls: Audience response polls offer the immediate benefit of taking the temperature of the room. From speakers asking for an audience's perspectives on a new trend to your organization requesting input on potential changes to your bylaws, these are easy-to-implement anonymous solutions that give attendees the chance to voice their opinions. Additionally, it's a fun way to highlight how the in-person polling stacks up against the online audience's.

Gamification: If you want to be engaging, you need to be fun — and what's more fun than playing games? Use gamification to insert a level of friendly competition that inspires everyone to get more involved in the program. Trying to steer more traffic to your virtual exhibit booths? Consider a scavenger hunt that rewards online attendees with points for each visit. Aiming to collect more survey responses after each session? Offer points for completing them in the mobile app.

Additionally, gamification can be a way to bring both in-person and remote participants into a shared experience on the platform or event app, with the option to create a sense of friendly rivalry between the two groups by highlighting their registration type in their leaderboard entry. How about creating a competition between online and in-person attendees to track their activity within the mobile app? If you're trying to raise donations for a charity, perhaps you can even pit the two segments against each other to see who can raise the most money to help make the biggest impact.

Some of your gamification elements can be incentivized simply with the sense of pride that comes with feeling like a winner, but for others, you might consider real prizes such as discounted registration for next year's event.

Q&A: Content is everywhere, and when it comes to some of the most sought-after main stage keynote speakers, you might already be able to find their presentations online. To make sure that your audience is actively involved in the content, carve out more time for question-and-answer sessions. These make your attendees feel like they're part of the show rather than disconnected viewers.

Matchmaking: Meeting new people is one of the key selling points of events, but for introverted attendees — and for those tuning in from home — making new connections isn't easy. However, there are mobile apps and other tech solutions designed to help recommend attendees with shared interests. Instead of leaving it up to serendipity at a networking hour, help your attendees find each other. After all, there is nothing more engaging than finding new friends of like mind.

Video Chat: While nothing can replace an in-person meeting, it is possible to generate a "face-to-face" connection remotely using video conferencing. Ideally, both in-person and remote attendees should be able to call each other using a video chat function right on the app or platform. Beyond one-on-one conversations, interactive breakout rooms can also be a great way to encourage participation and a deeper sense of connection between all event stakeholders — whether it's through roundtable discussions after a buzzworthy session, or a two-way product demo with sponsors who can field attendee questions in real time.

THE ENGAGEMENT ECOSYSTEM: BUILDING A PRE- AND POST-EVENT STRATEGY

Engagement doesn't begin when the opening session kicks off. If you really want to engage your audience, you need to focus on every step along the way — from the first announcement of your keynote speakers to the posting of the program in your on-demand education library.

MAPPING THE JOURNEY

“Here’s what we think your situation is six months before the event, and here’s what we think it will be the day after the event. This is how the event is going to change your behavior. If you understand that curve, you know how to design the curve to get from A to B.”

— **Ruud Janssen**, Co-Founder and Managing Partner of the Event Design Collective

BEFORE

In order to engage your audience before the event begins, it's necessary to deploy effective marketing strategies, including:

Segmented emails: Your attendees aren't all the same, which means they shouldn't all receive the same messages. Work with your marketing team to divide your audience into buckets with shared interests and career challenges. For example, if your event brings together a wide spectrum of professionals in the advertising industry, what sessions will be most appealing to the creatives who produce commercials versus those in charge of gauging the performance of those commercials? Alternatively, if your event is focused on a healthcare specialty, how can you divide your messaging to appeal to those at different stages of their career — residents and young professionals on the one hand, and the mentors and veterans of the field on the other?

Social media: Think of your Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Instagram (and any other channels your organization is using) as an opportunity to start a conversation instead of a place to post promotional materials. These

channels all represent an easy way to crowdsource ideas for your event and a place to help attendees feel connected before the event begins. Are you planning on having a happy hour with a DJ at the close of one of your program days? Invite your audience to submit requests of their favorite songs. Will you be hosting a Q&A with your keynote speakers? Have your followers and fans submit their questions ahead of time in the comment section.

Analog activations: While many of your attendees might be tuning in remotely, you can use the lead-up to your event as an opportunity to establish a connection that feels much stronger than a Wi-Fi signal. Work with your speakers to determine appropriate props that might help online attendees feel more interactive during breakout sessions. And if your budget allows or you're working to engage VIP attendees, consider mailing food and/or beverages for your networking time. It doesn't have to be alcohol, either. Consider a coffee tasting for an early morning session. If the bag of beans is branded, your attendees will remember that session for many mornings after.

AFTER

The event may be over, but your engagement efforts should never close up shop. Consider the post-event period as a springboard for building your year-round community.

Post-event appreciation and follow up: One of Janssen's suggestions was to foster a sense of connection and mutual commitment by making your event feel like going to a friend's house for dinner. What's the first thing a friend would do after a special evening? Send a thank-you note. Part of engaging your audience is showing them how much you appreciate their time and their willingness to share their perspectives and invest their money. And like any good friend, you'll want to plan ahead for the next get-together. So, craft a post-event survey that asks tough questions about how you can improve instead of simply asking for a rating. While it feels good to open the stage to a round of applause for a job well done, you'll unlock the real value of a survey by getting participants to share feedback on what you can do better.

On-demand education: Digesting an entire event while it's happening is impossible – particularly if the program includes hundreds of concurrent sessions. For your in-person and online audiences, it's essential to point out

what they missed while the event was actually happening. However, it's not as simple as taking every piece of content and automatically posting each one in your online library. Instead, think about repackaging some of that content into smaller, bite-sized chunks that your audience can consume in 10 minutes. And be sure to have your event team work collaboratively with a video editing team to determine which portions of the session might fall flat for an on-demand audience. For example, if the session includes a 15-minute chunk for live participants to brainstorm new ideas, that section doesn't need to be part of the recording.

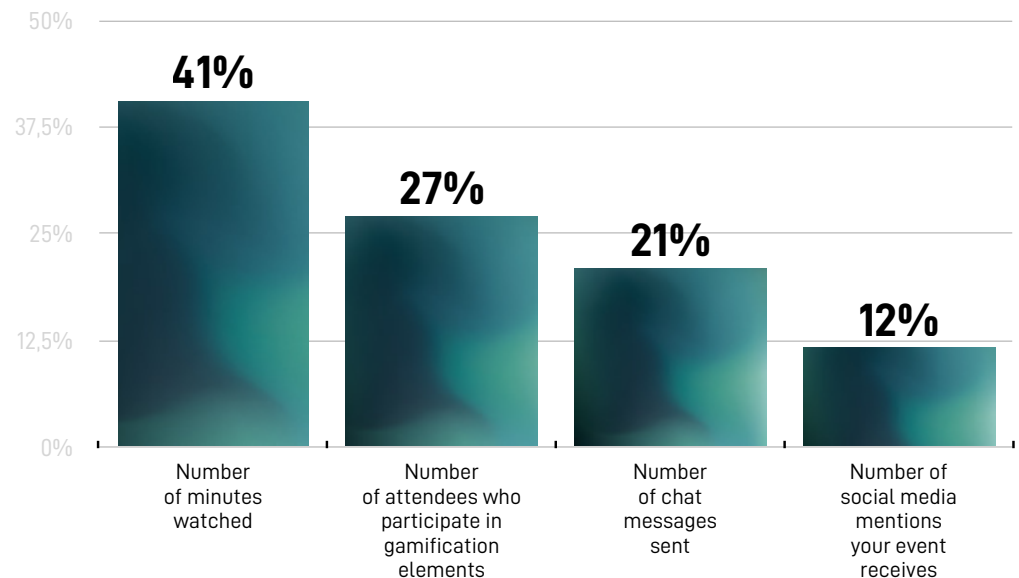
Listener-friendly content: Podcasts have exploded in popularity, and getting in on the action is easy, thanks to low-budget audio recording software. Consider recording short audio-only episodes with some of your speakers during the event to share after it's over. It's a formula that can serve up two wins: You'll be in your audience's pocket, and you'll be able to point them back to the session recording at the end of the podcast.

MEASURING YOUR SUCCESS

It used to be fairly difficult to assign an accurate grade to the effectiveness of your engagement strategies. Sure, you could survey your attendees, but asking them how engaged they felt would lead to subjective answers — you might end up learning more about each attendee's tendency towards high (or low) ratings than anything else.

Thanks to advancements in event technology, we now have a whole suite of analytics we can turn to for more concrete insights. But before you try to gauge your success, it's important to define what that success really means for your organization. Consider how respondents to EventMB's survey look at the most valuable metrics for monitoring engagement:

Which metric do you find most valuable in assessing your event's engagement?



Understanding your engagement levels requires a deeper search than a simple Net Promoter Score questionnaire can offer. In addition to combing through post-event evaluations, appoint members of your team to look at every report about how participants spent their time.

Here are some questions to get you started:

- ☐ Which sessions were the biggest draws?
- ☐ How many one-on-one networking meetings happened?
- ☐ Who were the most active players in your gamification?
- ☐ What percentage of online participants tuned in from a mobile device?
- ☐ What percentage of in-person participants downloaded (and actually used) the mobile app?
- ☐ How many collective hours were spent in the exhibit hall, broken down between the onsite and the virtual booths?
- ☐ How many qualified leads did each of your exhibitors receive?
- ☐ Can you measure the post-event brand sentiment of your sponsors?
- ☐ What was the click-through rate for in-app advertisements? What about the conversion rate?

Separately, your data points are just numbers, but together, they tell the most important story: how engaging your event was—and how to make your next one more compelling and more valuable for all of your stakeholders.

“The digitization of events and the rise of event technology has allowed for greater event analytics. How many people came to a session? What was the average amount of time per session? Who logged on and back in again? What were the most reacted-to moments? What percentage of the audience completed the polls? How many asked questions? Who shared the most on social media? These data points are all becoming part of the event world, and event organizers now have access to all of these to provide real-time feedback and close the feedback loop. Plus, these analytics allow for greater insight to put into the future event strategy and design.”

— **Sophie Ahmed**, Senior Vice President, Marketing Strategy, Hubilo

FINAL THOUGHTS: HOW ENGAGEMENT HAS REALLY CHANGED

In the face of unprecedented market pressure over the last two years, the industry has responded through a combination of adaptation and experimentation. Throughout the pivot to virtual and the gradual evolution of hybrid formats, attendee engagement has stood out as a top challenge. Have we learned anything more than bare-minimum survival skills?

As the final question of our engagement survey, we asked an open-ended question to gauge how much the last two years have transformed event engagement: What is the biggest change you have made to the way you think about engagement since the pandemic?

While a handful of respondents said that they had not changed their approach to engagement at all — and some even seemed offended by the question's assumption that the pandemic had been transformational in

any way — the vast majority of respondents indicated that they have adapted their thinking in significant ways.

One of the most common threads was that the challenges of the pandemic have only underscored just how important engagement is. "Events and engagement were always synonymous; now it's just a lot more obvious why engagement matters," wrote one respondent. Echoing this sentiment, another said that the biggest change came in "[u]nderstanding that our business is engagement and not planning events. At the core of planning events is engaging the audience and the stakeholders."

Further, many had more specific thoughts on how engagement tactics have evolved; the two biggest areas of focus were on content and the design of the event agenda.

PUT MORE EMPHASIS ON POLISHED CONTENT

Many respondents emphasized the need to offer relevant, highly tailored content. On the one hand, highly informative content can be essential for an event's educational or brand awareness goals. On the other, content that adds value for the audience is also key to keeping them engaged. It is a bit of a "chicken and the egg" scenario, but most agree that the two are highly interdependent — and the transformations of the last two years have forced event planners to be even more strategic in their approach.

"We all know 'content is the King', but we now know very well that 'engagement is the Queen'. Never forget that the wife rules the house," wrote one respondent.

"We have tried and tested all kinds of solutions for better engagement and some of them are definitely successful and here to stay but in the end the only way to keep your audience really engaged is great content and delivering what you have actually promised in your event invites and comms," wrote another.

TIPS FOR ENGAGING CONTENT

Here are the best practices our respondents shared for delivering engaging content:

- ☐ **Keep it relevant to current issues and audience pain points**
- ☐ **Add interactive elements that allow the audience to participate in the ideas behind the content — not distract from them**
- ☐ **Make it as concise as possible — attendees value their time more than ever**

"Engagement means clocks and eyeballs turned on, participation means actively belonging to the action and hopefully creating experiences that grow that feeling."

— Anonymous survey respondent

DESIGN THE AGENDA WITH A NEW APPRECIATION FOR THE ATTENDEE'S TIME

If there was one key source of tension in the responses, it was in the effort to balance engagement elements with the effort to be as time-efficient as possible.

"I think more about what I am competing against (attendees are multi-tasking all the time)," wrote one respondent.

Another was more direct in addressing the challenge of incorporating interactive activities while also respecting the attendee's time:

"People lose interest more quickly online and need to be brought back into the room — an activity or interactive element can help, or an ice breaker. For all my meetings/ events now I try to insist on a timed agenda so people know what to expect. Keep to the agenda; keep it relevant; keep to time. [...P]eople's time is not always valued — while it is nice to have extra 'elements' to an online meeting, ostensibly to increase engagement, often you will have more attendance/ more focused attendance if you make it shorter and more to the point [...]"

Many event planners also noted that they have a new appreciation for the limited attention span of their audience — both online and in person.

TIPS FOR MAKING THE MOST OF LIMITED ATTENDEE TIME

Here are the top tips our respondents shared on finding the right balance between interactivity and efficiency:

- ☐ **Choose times of day that are convenient for the audience**
- ☐ **Offer more than one time option if the audience is international**
- ☐ **Break content down into small, digestible chunks**
- ☐ **Provide a precise agenda so attendees know exactly what to expect when**
- ☐ **Add interactive elements strategically**
- ☐ **Respond to audience feedback or gather it in advance through a pre-event survey — some attendees appreciate a wellness break or a short entertainment segment, while others may prefer to stick to business**
- ☐ **Use an engaging and high-energy speaker to create a seamless blend of informational value and attention-grabbing interaction**

THE FUTURE OF EVENTS MEANS AUDIENCE CHOICE

While opinions differed on just how much event engagement strategies have changed, the general consensus was that digital channels will remain relevant as the industry returns to in-person events.

A handful of respondents indicated that they plan to avoid offering digital channels for fear that they will cannibalize their in-person audience, but the vast majority felt confident that the in-person experience will continue to hold appeal regardless of digital offerings — these merely extend

opportunities for engagement, both for fully remote attendees and in-person visitors who want to stay engaged beyond the initial event.

Because hybrid formats and online event communities are still in their infancy, now is the time to shape the direction of what hybrid engagement will mean in the longer term. Event planners have already begun figuring out how to combine digital and in-person engagement channels, and those who dare to think outside the (Zoom) box will only become more effective over time.

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