

Virtual exhibitions: coming (back!) to a computer near you soon

Virtual exhibitions, online exhibitions, online events – those of you who have been in the events industry any length of time will be getting a sense of déjà vu about now. Haven't we been here before?

Well, yes and no. With developments in online marketing, accessibility to broadband and the increasing pressures of time and resources on prospective buyers, it seems likely that online exhibitions will be enjoying a come back.

So what do we mean by a virtual exhibition? Simply put it's an exhibit of products or services that can be viewed over the internet!

Ecommerce catalogues or directories are well established in the broader marketing environment but can be the offshoot or post-show offering of the event brand i.e. Spring Fair, www.springfair.com.

Popular in the US are exhibitions (tradeshows

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and expos!) held only online over a few days with same content as a physical event – exhibitors, webcast presentations and seminar, lounges, special show promotions,

interviews and forums for visitor-to-visitor and visitor-to-exhibitor dialogue. These are successful for niche interests and where the potential visitor base is spread over a wide area, avoiding travel costs and other commitments.

An ideal use of a virtual event is to take advantage that most exhibitions are part of a broader brand or industry sector i.e. magazine, TV show, awards, directories etc, and reward users for their commitment to the brand, recommending others etc. With a year-round dynamic site for loyal brand participants with updated content, news and promotions, the visitor will keep returning to the site, keeping your brand at the forefront i.e. Ideal Home Show www.idealloyaltyclub.com



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So what are the benefits and why should an online event be considered:

- It's a great research tool for the organiser – gather information and create content in a niche sector, develop the proposition and generate the business case for a physical event
- Maintain a visitor community when a physical event can no longer sustain the operation costs in a declining market
- Continue the momentum of the show and create a loyal base of brand advocates.
- Increase your brands search engine optimisation, and that of your sponsors and exhibitors – increasing their ROI and making it easier to secure their buy-in for future activities

As has been observed many times before, people buy from people so nothing will replace that showfloor experience but, as an organiser, if you have a germ of a good idea but the business model of a physical show isn't developed yet, you want to create a year round industry resource or community, or don't feel the market is ready to kill off a declining industry event, then explore the full range of online options with some creativity and an open mind.