

## **A virtual meeting of minds**

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Snow delays, straitened travel budgets, arbitrary security crackdowns and the knowledge that they will never match George Clooney's air miles in *Up in the Air* have left more than a few business travellers wondering whether their next trade show trip looks quite so appealing.

The exhibitions business has been one of the corners of the traditional media sector least damaged by digital technology. Even as social networks from LinkedIn to Facebook consume ever more time at their desks, people have not lost sight of the value of pressing the flesh.

Events attendance has always been susceptible to travel interruptions from Sars to terrorist attacks, however, and the downturn has created a new focus on whether costs and travel requirements can be taken out of the equation while preserving the experience of doing business face to face.

The outcome can be seen by visiting the shimmering venue where Information Week, the magazine, recently ran a "dark reading and black hat" event on data security threats. Inside the cavernous exhibition hall, delegates milled round booths, inspecting white papers from exhibitors such as Novell, AT&T and Imperva. Off to one side, contact details were exchanged in a networking lounge while in a darkened auditorium the audience listened to a keynote panel discussion: "Data is valuable: bad guys want it."

But the show was not in London's Olympia or New York's Javits Center but entirely online. The visitors and exhibitors are avatars moving round a virtual environment where booths offer "content racks" of podcasts, business cards are "V-cards" and presentations are webcasts.

The most physical of media forms is going virtual. From a standing start three years ago, some of the industry's biggest global organisers have begun offering hundreds of online-only shows, often using specialist developers such as CGS, InXpo, ON24 and Unisfair.

In 2008, United Business Media ran 15 virtual events, says David Levin, chief executive. Last year, that number increased to 48, and in 2010 he expects to run more than 100 such shows.

Sharat Sharan, chief executive of ON24, estimates that the more than 300 virtual events and 30,000 webcasts it has organised to date are driving 30-40 per cent growth in its annual revenues: "2009 was the first year virtual events really took off," he says.

The data on these early events have impressed industry veterans: the average visitor will spend more than two hours in a virtual event. "This is a tool that's here to stay," Mr Sharan continues. "It's going to have the best of the physical environment and the best of the virtual environment, such as social networking," he enthuses.

If the idea sounds familiar, it may be because similar claims were made for Second Life, the much hyped virtual world that just a few years ago was supposed to become the new meeting place for everybody from warlock-fancying hobbyists to car salesmen on training courses.

But the Second Life experience made many events organisers wary. "We tried that. It was interesting. It was a trial – in that case, an expensive one," says Mike Rusbridge, head of Reed Elsevier's events business.

Mr Levin recalls that UBM's online events experiments began in 2007 with a few "incredibly expensive" events in Second Life for a specialist technology audience. "It cost us more than \$1m (€730,000, £660,000) per event, but the good news was we were getting more than

1,000 attendees. We liked the level of engagement but didn't like the complexity of Second Life. It wasn't business-friendly."

UBM's response was to buy a Chic-ago digital design studio to develop its own user interface to create a more focused business version of a virtual world. Using this platform, which it renamed UBM Studios, and others designed by specialist firms, it has begun to learn what role virtual events can play in its portfolio and what makes a successful event.

"If we host an event in a ... hotel, the only guarantee is it'll cost us a lot of money," says Mr Levin. "Content, structure, the quality of the audience and facilitation during the event is what it takes to make it great. The same is true in the virtual event world. The technology is an enabler but doesn't do any more than that."

Virtual events are not about to replace UBM's biggest real-world shows, he adds, but are proving valuable for smaller gatherings on specialist topics.

Mr Sharan describes the events ON24 organises as "lead-generation solutions", tightly focused on driving new business opportunities to exhibitors and sometimes customised for a single sponsor. Also, he adds, virtual events offer valuable information that no physical show can match. "None of this works if not for the data. You can slice and dice the complete history on what visitors did at the event."

Virtual events typically have a longer life than the few days a trade show lasts, as people who missed the live event check in over the following weeks. Some organisers supplement the original content with "live days" every month to keep people coming back.

This can make such shows labour-intensive, cautions Mr Rusbridge. "From an exhibitor's point of view and an organiser's point of view, you've got to have somebody constantly available online to respond to questions," he says.

He also remains doubtful about the financial model. "I've not come across anybody who's hit paydirt on this. There is an argument that some of these virtual products being tried out there will end up in the same place as Second Life," he says.

There is less dispute about the value of hybrid models, in which event organisers provide an online dimension to physical shows. If you missed LegalTec in New York last month, for example, you could catch up at Virtual LegalTech, a day of vendor webcasts and seminars being organised by ALM for mid-March.

As Susanna Kempe, chief marketing officer of Emap, the media company and conference organiser, puts it: "The website ensures that the conversation between buyers and sellers – your visitors and exhibitors – continues and builds throughout the year. Rather than having one moment in time when everyone gets together, the event is the culmination of conversations that have been happening all year. Then digital isn't disintermediating, it's building."

Reed Exhibitions is investing heavily in a web platform to support its shows, and has so far launched more than 400 event sites. "We see it as enriching, extending and enhancing the physical event," Mr Rusbridge says. But even virtual events organisers admit that Facebook-style networking will not replace doing business face-to-face. "For certain things face-to-face meetings are important," Mr Sharan says. "I went to Philadelphia yesterday for a 90-minute meeting because it was something I had to do in person."

A social media event

Use Twitter and you will soon notice the phenomenon. Suddenly, several of your industry peers all start using the same hashtags. In the technology and mobile business, for example, it was #CES in January and #MWC in February. For those not familiar with the Consumer Electronics Show or the Mobile World Congress the messages look bewildering, but for delegates, tweeting has transformed how much they get out of events.

“Trade shows have always been about sourcing and discovering the next big product or supplier,” says Susanna Kempe, chief marketing officer for Emap. “What social media does is allow visitors to tweet, saying ‘I’ve just seen this amazing thing at booth 10.’” Visitors are looking for such “visitor-validated” tips.

Exhibitors are also harnessing social media. At the Bett show in January, one put out a message offering a free digital whiteboard in the next 10 minutes. Like twittering birds, delegates flocked to the stand.

**Fonte: Financial Times, London, Mar. 3<sup>rd</sup> 2010, Management, online.**

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