



What's next for the events world?

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ThirdSector

Introduction

The events sector had to rethink its entire model during the COVID-19 pandemic to reach audiences that couldn't gather in a single space. This has kick-started a period of reflection and experimentation that won't end any time soon, according to speakers at *C&IT* and *Third Sector's* recent Big Questions Live event on the future of the events industry, held in association with Cvent.

Events experts from across the private, public and third sectors joined forces to discuss the key questions facing the industry, including how to make hybrid events models work and potentially grow your audience reach; how to build emotional connections with digital and hybrid audiences; and how to make the best use of technology and data to deliver impactful, personalised events experiences. In this report, we reveal some of the key takeaways.



“EVENTS EXPERTS FROM ACROSS THE PRIVATE, PUBLIC AND THIRD SECTORS JOINED FORCES TO DISCUSS THE KEY QUESTIONS FACING THE INDUSTRY.”

Learnings from the London Marathon

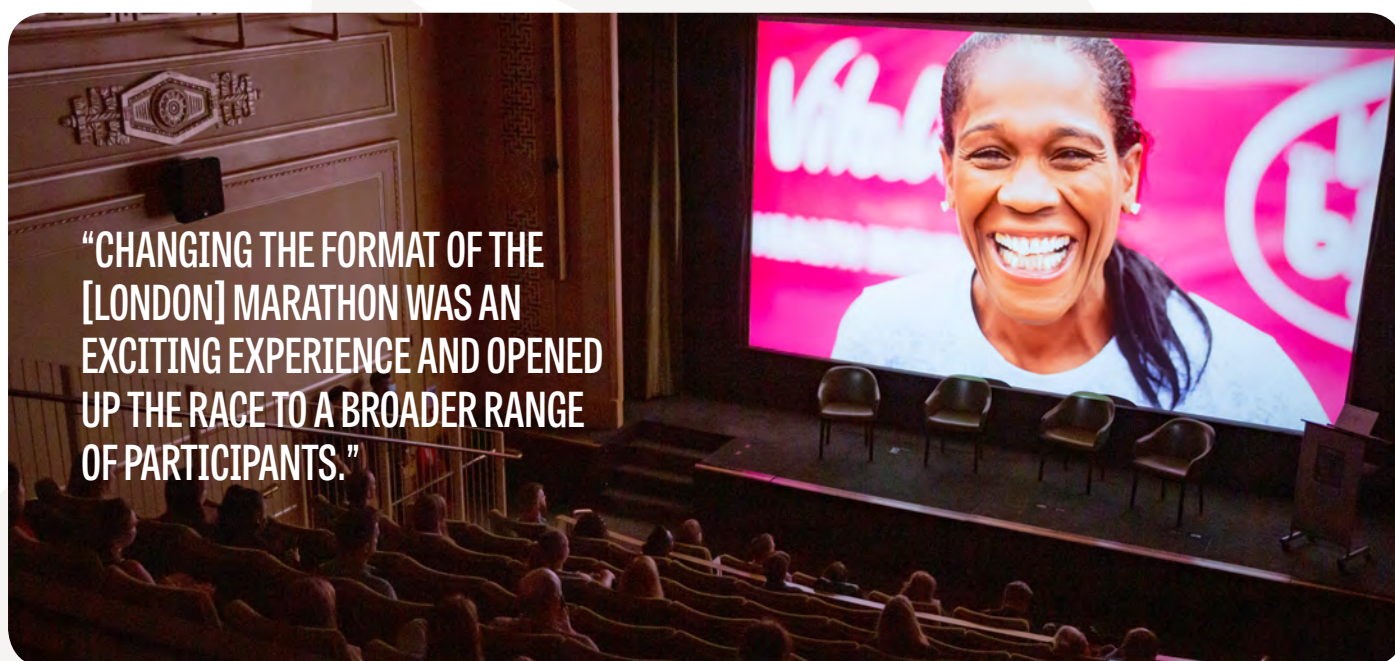
The Virgin Money London Marathon was changed, maybe permanently, by the COVID-19 pandemic. This year, as in 2020, the event is both live and virtual; half of its 80,000 participants will run in London, the other 40,000 will complete the marathon in their own way.

The idea that the iconic London Marathon could be a hybrid event would have seemed impossible and unnecessary 20 months ago, but the world has been changed by the pandemic. Events producers had a decision to make: embrace a new format for their events, or postpone everything until an unknown post-pandemic future.

Like the team at London Marathon Events, many chose to embrace virtual platforms to a greater or lesser extent. This created an uncertain, experimental environment in which events managers tried new things to see what sticks.

“Over the past 18 months, we’ve learned an enormous amount about ourselves as individuals about what we want, about what is possible,” event director for London Marathon Events, Hugh Brasher, told attendees in his keynote speech at Big Questions Live. “Things that we thought before could never happen, have happened over the last 18 months. I’m standing here today as a theoretical expert on virtual events, but how can I be an expert? We’ve only done one London Marathon this way.”

Changing the format of the marathon was an exciting experience, Brasher explained. It opened up the race to a broader range of participants – people who couldn’t take part due to distance, age or disability. With a hybrid race, those people are able to design their own marathons in their own communities, removing any hurdles they might have faced.



Learnings from the London Marathon *cont'd*



"PEOPLE CAN GET HUNG UP ON THE FACT THAT A HYBRID OR VIRTUAL EVENT IS DIFFERENT BUT THAT DIFFERENCE SHOULD BE CELEBRATED."

Hugh Brasher, event director,
London Marathon Events

It's now a much more inclusive race, that takes the pressure off participants, as Brasher noted. "You've got 23 hours, 59 minutes and 59 seconds to do the event. So you will get a much wider spread of people who are able, for the first time ever, to do the London Marathon."

People can get hung up on the fact that a hybrid or virtual event is different but that difference should be celebrated, said Brasher. 'Different' was one of four keywords that summarised his approach to exploring hybrid.

His second word is 'together'; the need to maintain that sense of community that you can create through in-person events. "We want to embrace the difference, but we also want to make sure it's joined together, our virtual event and our in-person event. How can we make sure that even though they're different, it feels together?"

Thirdly, events teams need to think about 'cause'; find a specific cause that relates to that new audience that you're trying to reach.

In the London Marathon's case, it's the drive to get more healthy and active, as the extended time limit opens the race up to more people. "Make sure that the cause that you want them to run for is one that connects to them as a different consumer. If you keep going to the same consumer who is able to do the 26.2 miles in eight hours, you are massively missing an opportunity that exists in the marketplace."

The final word is 'love'. There will be a level of uncertainty in events over the next few years, and not everything will work. Events teams need to love that process of trying out new ideas, said Brasher: "No one really knows what exactly is going on. We've all got theories. So play with it. Have fun with it, experiment. It's a great new channel."

Creating connections



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Sarah Marshall, global
head of content, Betts



"BY LOCALISING SOME OF IT... THAT REALLY TICKS A BOX WITH THE SUSTAINABILITY SIDE OF THINGS, IN NOT HAVING TO TRAVEL PEOPLE ACROSS THE WORLD."

Claudia Stephenson,
managing director,
INVNT Group EMEA

People have undoubtedly missed the sense of connection that events can provide, be that conferences, meetings, open days, AGMs or other gatherings. This is particularly important in the third sector, where events are an important tool for fundraising and supporter engagement. But the chance to connect, network and join a shared event experience are important selling points, whatever your industry.

Education IT specialist Bett has recently returned to live events after a long absence during the pandemic. In the first of two panel discussions at BQL, Sarah Marshall, Bett's global head of content, said that the return was electrifying. "As we go back live, there will be a real pent-up demand for the live experience," she told the audience and host, *Third Sector* editor Emily Burt. "We really think that people have missed that human connection."

Marshall also expects a rush for quality events; organisers will go the extra mile to make their events an experience that audiences are really drawn towards. Claudia Stephenson, managing director of INVNT Group EMEA, agreed that

demand for quality events is rising – and that by blending live and virtual models, it's possible for big events to offer more targeted content, while also reducing carbon footprint.

"If you think about those large conferences, there's always the plenary, where people are getting a global message that's relevant to all; then there are breakouts where countries or regions are coming together to talk about problems and solutions for their particular market," she said. "By localising some of it – having it by country or region or sector – that really ticks a box with the sustainability side of things, in not having to travel people across the world."

In-person fundraising events have not yet bounced back as expected, said Daniel Larcey, head of mass participation at NHS Charities Together, so more effort is going into virtual events. As he explained, one of the biggest changes since the first lockdown is the rise of 'Facebook events.' These are hosted within Facebook groups and put the focus on community building and creating an emotional connection with people.

Creating connections *cont'd*

Many nonprofits don't have the digital infrastructure that private sector organisations do, he explained. Mass-participation events have traditionally worked well for a small group of larger charities, but Facebook fundraising has created opportunities for smaller charities to host more events in the digital realm.

"It has democratised challenge events," said Larcey. "It's brilliant to see these other charities involved, but now maybe we're getting slightly saturated. There are lots of very similar challenges that have been posted on Facebook, and somehow we have to continue to move beyond that."

It can also be tricky to create a strong human connection in the virtual space. Stephenson pointed out that the pandemic has accelerated the improvement of virtual networking and community-building elements of platforms and applications. Events organisers now have the ability to recommend content to their attendees, for example, which really helps with engagement. Virtual networking rooms and chat boxes offer opportunities for bonding and connection. But as Stephenson noted, the audience needs to meet you halfway.

"You do need to have the audience be willing to engage and commit themselves," she said. "There needs to be other ways to connect with individuals before the event, to ensure that people show up."

If 60% of registered attendees turn up for

an online event, you're doing very well, Stephenson noted. And you need to maintain continuous engagement if you want people to turn up. Marshall agreed: "We'd be happy with a conversion of 14% these days. It's not that people aren't watching it; they're probably watching it on demand, but they're certainly not watching it streamed when we choose to broadcast it."

Larcey believes that for organisations to really reconnect with their audiences, live events should still be a priority. Hybrid shouldn't have to be a consideration at this time, he said. For smaller organisations or those with limited resources, building a successful online presence is a great place to start. "If you have a really successful digital community, start bringing that into the real world, and start finding ways for people to connect in person."

Data is becoming more important for ensuring your events connect with their audiences, observed Marshall. "The past 18 months have been the marketer's payday. They're finally being listened to... Because to know what your target audience needs are, is where you absolutely have to start."

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Daniel Larcey, head of mass participation,
NHS Charities Together



Harnessing technology

By embracing virtual events and the latest event technology, the events sector has access to richer sources of attendee data than ever before. How can it turn this into meaningful action as we emerge from the pandemic? And what can be done to capture more data in the live events space?

“WE NEED TO SHIFT FROM LOOKING AT EVENTS AS ONE-TIME THINGS AND START LOOKING AT THEM AS ENTIRE ‘FACILITIES’.”

Graham Smith, creative technologist, Shelton Fleming

C&IT editor Calum Di Lieto asked panellists how they would approach this in the digital, hybrid and live environments. A key insight was that the events sector can learn a lot from Netflix – from personalisation to keeping attendees engaged beyond the event itself.

“We need to shift from looking at events as one-time things and start looking at them as entire ‘facilities,’” said Graham Smith, creative technologist for Shelton Fleming. “If you think about how many touch points you have over the course of an event, and especially over a series [of them], there’s absolutely no reason why we shouldn’t be repeatedly asking them the same questions. Good customer service is giving people what they need, before they’ve even asked for it.”

Events teams has already learned one big lesson from Netflix, said Dax Callner, strategy director at Smyle: elevated content. The pandemic period has given teams the opportunity to assess the content they are delivering, and look at ways to improve its quality. Digital events should allow their audience to preview the content more, he argued. That might mean giving people a short synopsis, so they can make informed decisions about the event content they consume.



Left to right: Felicia Asiedu, Dax Callner, Hina Mistry, Graham Smith, Calum Di Lieto

Harnessing technology *cont'd*



"IF YOU KNOW WHAT YOU WANT TO FIND OUT, IT CAN HELP FILTER OUT THE NOISE. USE IT TO BRIEF YOUR TEAMS TO BE ABLE TO PULL THAT DATA TOGETHER."

Hina Mistry, project director, Imagination

"Netflix understands that we are all individuals and we all have different tastes," Callner said. "It therefore has a really intelligent engine – which I wish we had in events – to deliver an experience that speaks to each individual it engages with."

When it comes to data, events teams can sometimes be overwhelmed by its volume, and it can be difficult to draw meaningful conclusions. So how can they cut through the noise? A lot of that is happening through the deepening relationship between planners and marketers within events teams, said Felicia Asiedu, European marketing manager at Cvent (*above left*).

"I've seen more of that across the industry, where people have been saying: 'we've got marketers on the call,'" she said. "Whereas before it would be planners on the call, saying 'I want to buy this', now the

marketers are in the room, too. It's really nice to see that relationship growing."

The panel also discussed the credibility of data, however; some metrics lack the context that would make them meaningful. For example, dwell time doesn't tell you much about whether someone was actually engaged with your content in an online space. You need human understanding, and scrutiny, to derive the right actions from your data.

Data can be a rabbit hole that it is easy to disappear into, warned Hina Mistry, project director for Imagination. Before events managers even think about looking at data or using analytics tools, they need to be clear about the goals and the story that they want to tell. If you know what you want to find out, it can help filter out the noise, she said. "Use it to brief your teams to be able to pull that data together."

Harnessing technology *cont'd*

People want choice, said Asiedu – and that even comes down to how they want their data to be captured. Events can use beacons, apps, lead scanning and heat mapping, among other technologies. Bringing that information together, and reading the right messages from it, is crucial, and that requires collaboration. “If we don’t work with the creative industries and partner together properly, then it will be siloed.”

That will help to paint a truer picture of how people are engaging with event content. It is also helpful to know how and when they are disengaging. This is as true in for in-person events as it is for virtual ones; you have to expect at least 25% of people will stop paying attention during any given session, said Callner. “We have to kind of be okay with that,” he noted, but was clear about one thing: “We need to entertain people. This is theatre!”



**“WE NEED TO
ENTERTAIN PEOPLE.
THIS IS THEATRE!”**

Dax Callner, strategy director, Smyle:
elevated content (bottom, centre)

Key takeaways

Don't be afraid to experiment with event formats; live, hybrid and virtual are all still important options in the new events era

Virtual and hybrid events can broaden access to and democratise your events programme, as well as **boost sustainability** – but people have missed the excitement of **high-quality live happenings**

Building digital communities can help you connect with live ones, and continuous engagement with attendees is key to success

Be more Netflix: personalise and preview your event content, and give people **plenty of choice**, to drive attendee engagement

Don't be daunted by data analytics – setting defined event objectives, and having a **clear story to tell**, will be as important as ever in shaping your strategy

To make the most of today's event technology and rich data, a **collaborative and critical approach** will be key

About Cvent

Cvent is a market-leading meetings, events, and hospitality technology provider with nearly 4,000 employees and 23,000+ customers worldwide.

We offer software solutions to event planners for online event registration, venue selection, event management, mobile apps for events, e-mail marketing and web surveys. Our solutions optimise the entire event management value chain and have enabled clients around the world to manage hundreds of thousands of meetings and events.

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