



How to deliver ROI for hybrid events

Convention bureaux have the know-how to help event planners deliver a strong return on investment in the changed event landscape – here's how to harness their expertise

Photograph: Stewart Donn

Introduction

There is no substitute for doing business face-to-face – and *C&IT*'s recent survey of event planners, in association with Melbourne Convention Bureau (MCB), shows that there is great demand for “getting back to normal” and holding even more in-person events in 2022.

Great, memorable and valuable events depend on drawing an audience and delegates together to experience similar emotional reactions and insights at the same time. In-person events are often more emotionally engaging than their digital equivalents – psychologists call it ‘affiliative social engagement’, when delegates come away with that prized ‘you-had-to-be-there’ feeling.

“While our virtual events have been successful, feedback from all our attendees overwhelmingly indicated a desire to return to in-person events,” says Victoria Blackburn, senior project manager at XSEM. But understandably, caution remains, which is why hybrid events – trade shows, conferences, seminars or meetings that combine in-person and virtual elements – are likely to remain an important tool for event organisers.

Hybrid presents daunting challenges for event planners, from getting to grips with the complexity of integrating different technologies, to creating engaging and inclusive experiences for in-person and remote attendees.

So, if hybrid is the way forward, how can event organisers overcome the challenges to ensure they can deliver a return on investment? And how can they restore the necessary confidence for in-person events?

“Hybrid events present a terrific opportunity to capture content digitally, access potential new sources of revenue and create an event legacy that would have not been realised in the past.”

Emma Bowyer, owner and managing director of conference organiser ICMS Australasia

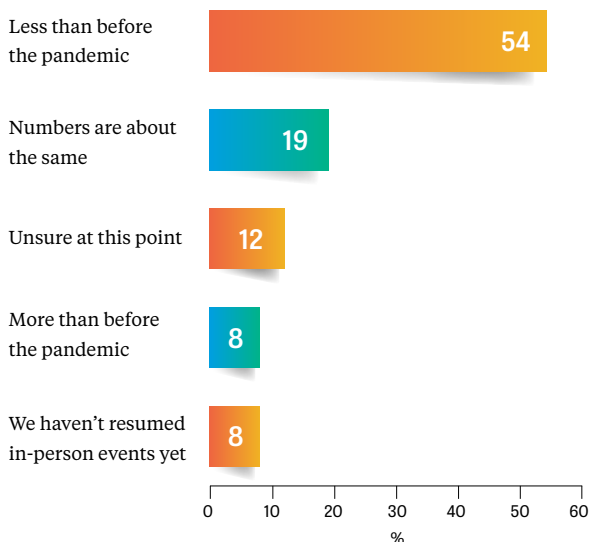


Delivering ROI on the in-person component of your hybrid event

According to our survey, event planners find it more than twice as difficult to measure return on investment from digital events than they do from in-person events.

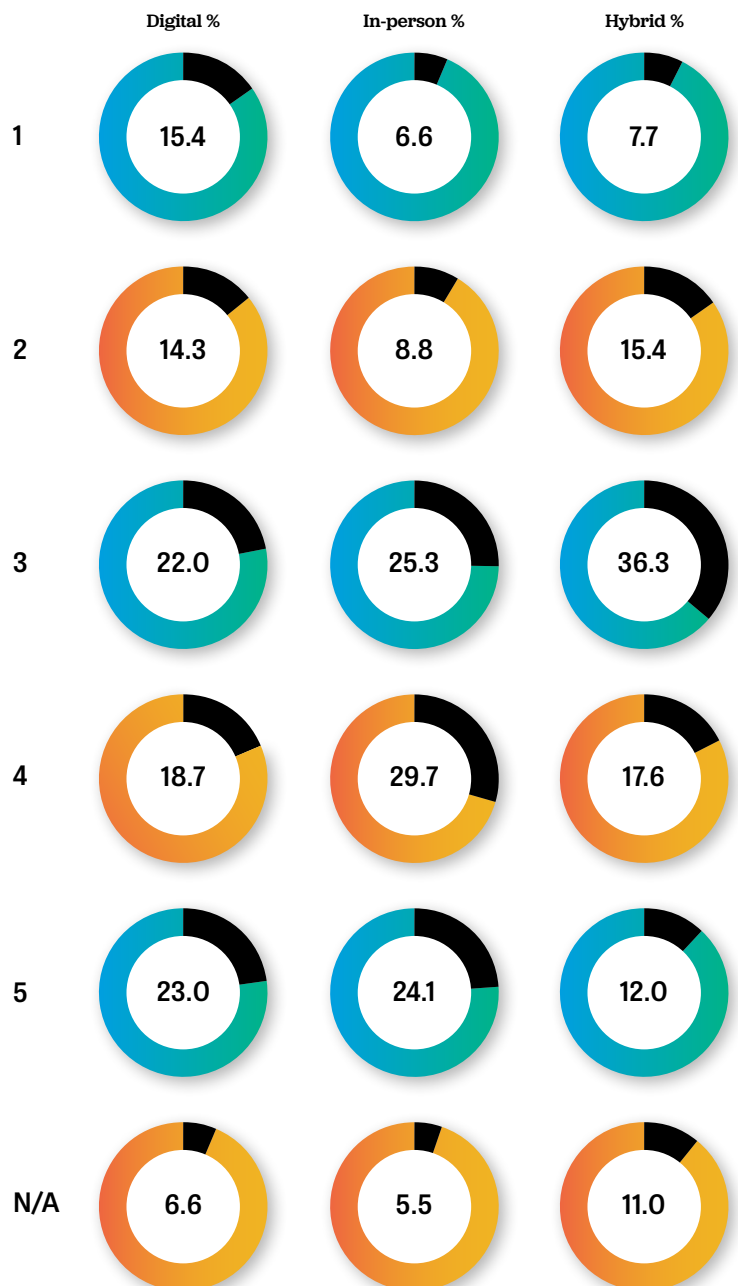
But driving registrations, attendance and engagement at in-person events is still not easy. Optimism among event planners has more than tripled since the start of 2022, according to the most recent Pulse survey by NorthStar. But more than half (54%) of respondents in our survey say attendance numbers at in-person events are still down on what they were before the pandemic. However, 77% say they believe demand for in-person events will either return to, or even exceed, pre-pandemic levels.

How have you seen in-person event attendances changing at recent events, compared to before the pandemic?



How easy do you find it to measure return on investment from the following types of events?

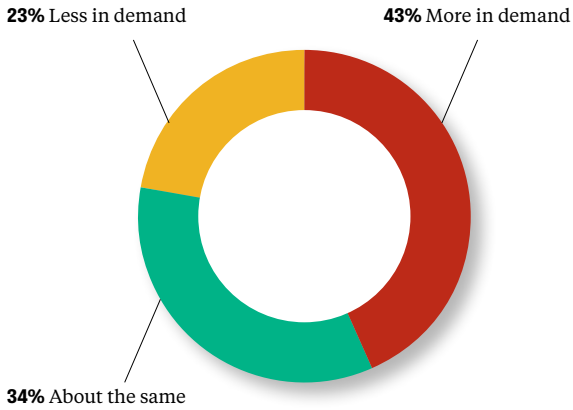
Rank from 1 - not at all easy - to 5 - very easy*



* Total 91 responses



Do you think in-person events will be more or less in demand in future, than before the pandemic?



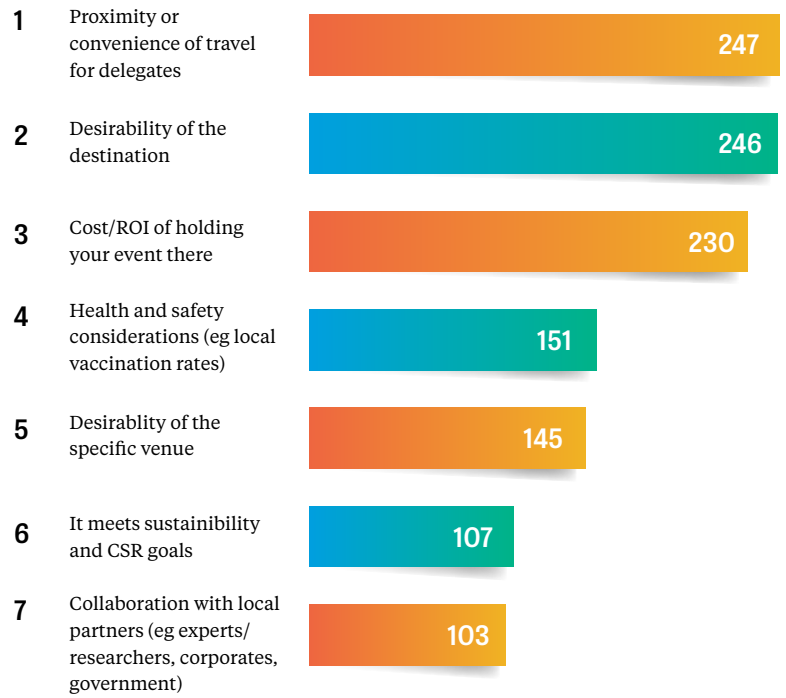
Critical choices

So, what are the key decisions to make, if event planners want to ensure a good ROI on their in-person event, or in-person component of their hybrid event?

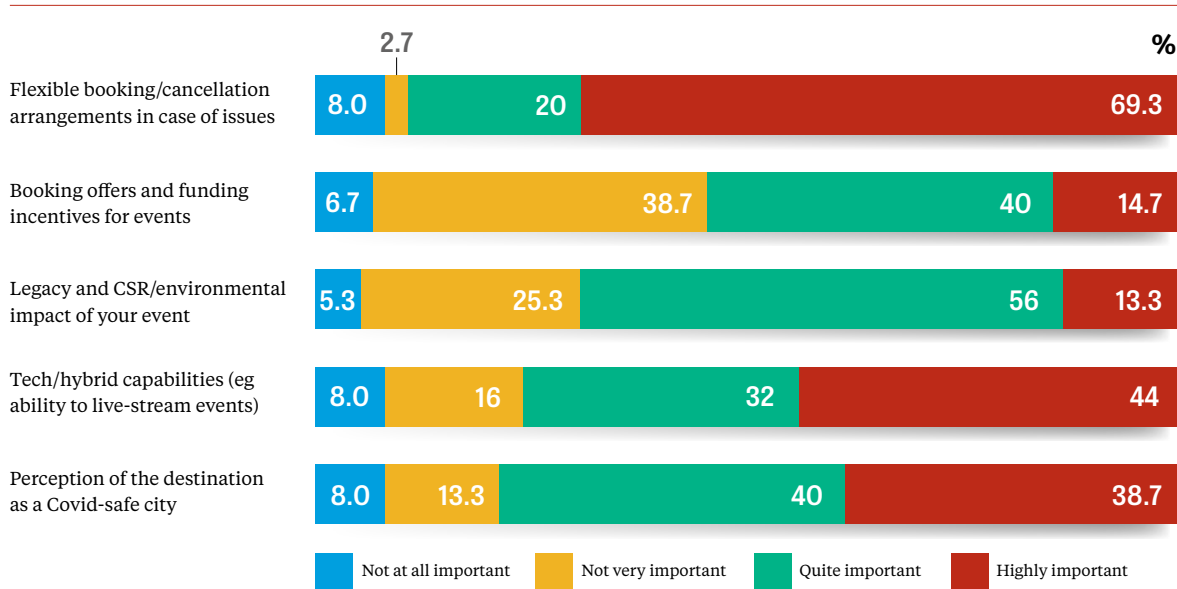
Our survey suggests that choosing a destination with delegate appeal is crucial. When deciding on a host city for an event, the most important factors were proximity/convenience of travel for delegates, the desirability of the destination and the cost/ROI of holding the event there.

When deciding on a host city for an event, which of the following are the five most important factors for you?

Ranked in order of importance – 1 being the most important and 7 the least important



Please rate how important the following attributes are in terms of delivering added value/ROI when booking an event destination.



“People are ready to go out and experience everything the world has to offer again. Holding an event in a city such as Melbourne in Australia offers the wow factor that delegates need to encourage them to attend in person. Once delegates arrive it’s easy and convenient to travel throughout the compact city with so much being accessible by foot. It invites delegates to explore with all amenities and experiences in close proximity to Melbourne’s convention district. “It’s also easy to travel to Australia with no pre-departure COVID-19 testing requirements or quarantine for fully vaccinated international visa holders,” said MCB chief executive Julia Swanson.

Our survey of event planners suggests delegates are most attracted to destinations that offer authentic, truly local cultural experiences (77%), followed by work-related tours and networking (73%), socially impactful and environmentally friendly activities (68%) and luxury experiences, such as fine dining (61%).

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Julia Swanson, chief executive, Melbourne Convention Bureau



“There is a big pent-up need for face-to-face contact, to re-energise and reconnect after digital burnout.”

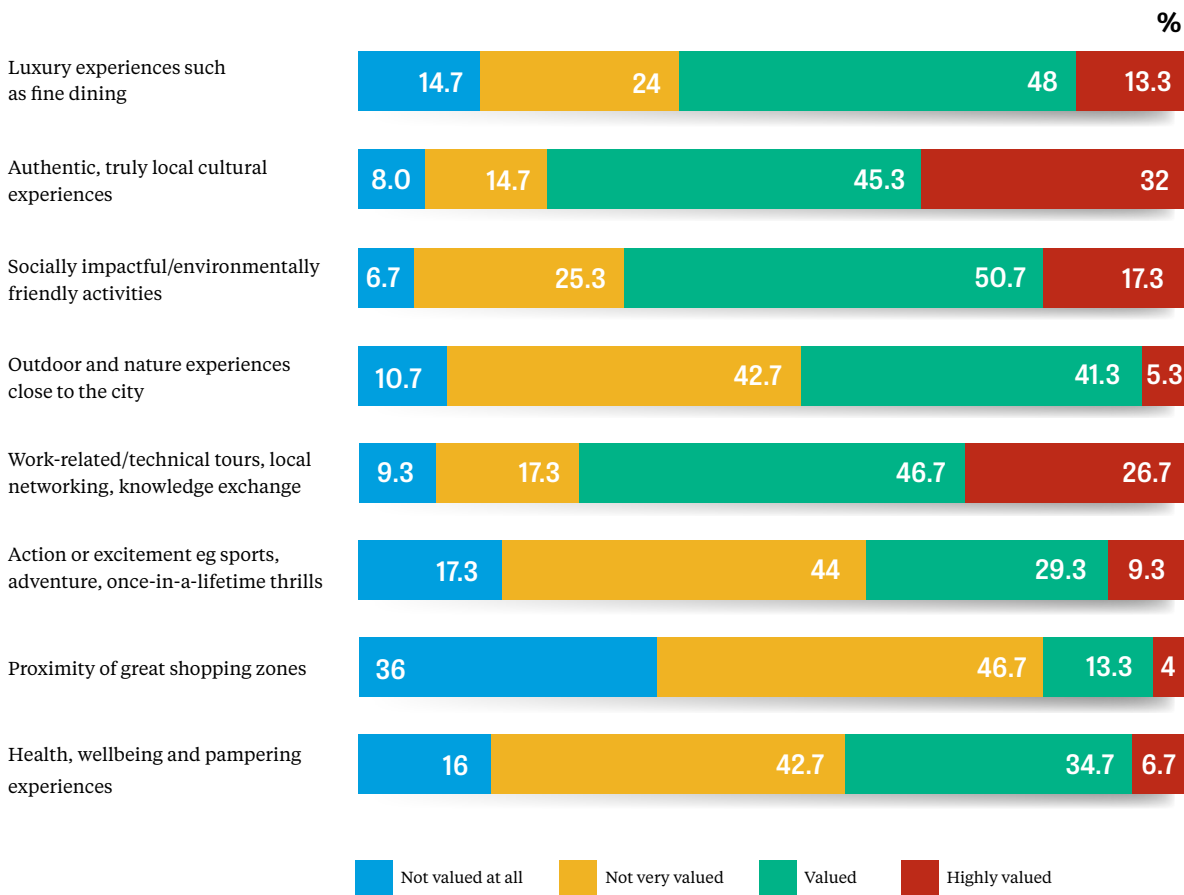
Lajos Borocz, secretary general, Hungarian Hospitality Association

Creating connections

Digitally, people are more connected than ever, but people have been deprived from many of the connections they truly desire. “Attendees want to

network, so planners need to provide ample time and space for individuals to engage with each other before, during and after the meeting,” says Swanson. “Just a short walk from the [Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre \(MCEC\)](#), the central business district is home to the city’s famous lanes and alleyways, which are adorned with colourful street art and house a number of hidden cafés. Melbourne is extremely proud of its arts and culture scene, with a huge number of galleries and unique venues dotted around the city.”

Which experiences are most valued by your delegates when visiting a destination for a business event?



In terms of delivering added value/ROI, event planners in our survey favoured, first and foremost, flexible booking and cancellation arrangements, but also legacy and CSR/ environmental commitments, followed by tech/hybrid capabilities. “Event planners should look for destinations that can offer a strong legacy programme. The focus has clearly shifted from the explicit tourism benefits to the value of what these events actually achieve for organisers, participants and host communities,” explains Swanson. And in the shadow of the pandemic, it’s critical that event planners assure delegates that their health and safety will not be compromised.

“There is a real want and need for attendees to meet in person everyone is desperate to get back to ‘normal’ and requests are coming in thick and fast.”

Kelly Stewart, executive account director, Identity Group

“Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre (MCEC), for example, has developed a detailed and comprehensive [VenueSafe Plan](#) to ensure event attendees can continue to enjoy Melbourne as a leading events destination,” says Swanson.



Case study: AIME 2022

Asia Pacific Incentives and Meetings Event 2022 (AIME) was the first international trade show to be hosted in Melbourne and Australia after the country's international borders reopened. While the main focus was on the in-person experience, AIME also added an online component to accommodate attendees who couldn't travel to the event. AIME Online was not held concurrently with the in-person event, but rather a week later, and was designed to fulfil a specific role for those attending virtually as opposed to providing a full re-creation of the event.

The in-person component of AIME had a heavy focus on delegate experiences: international arrivals were greeted by the faces of Melbourne's celebrated arts and cultural hub, from a ballerina moving through the crowd with grace, or a Wes Anderson-inspired concierge highlighting the city's world-class hospitality to a graffiti artist creatively working on artwork inspired by Melbourne's famous laneways.

On the Sunday before AIME, the renowned MCB Uncover Melbourne programme commenced with a spectacular lunch at Rippon Lea Estate hosted by [Showtime Event Group](#), followed by more than 30 experiences showcasing the city's unique product offerings. More than 2,000 delegates, 220 exhibitors and 320 hosted buyers attended AIME in person at the MCEC – 50 buyers attending online, sharing that they were glad not to have missed out on the opportunity to be part of the event.



Q&A

HOW DO YOU DRIVE ROI ON YOUR HYBRID EVENTS?

Emma Bowyer, owner and managing director of conference

organiser ICMS Australasia

“We have prioritised four areas, creating a bespoke programme that delivers different in-person and virtual content to create a hybrid conference and clear value differentiation for registrants.

So that includes:

- Two different programmes for a proper hybrid event;
- A sponsorship prospectus that offers both in-person and virtual entitlements that yield the best return for the event and are priced accordingly;
- A marketing plan to maximise delegate numbers across both registration categories of in-person and virtual;
- A post-event plan to maximise revenue opportunities – within 30 days of the event – to sell highlights and curated content to non-attendees.”



Delivering ROI on the digital component of your hybrid event

Northstar’s Pulse survey shows that almost 30% of event planners are increasing the number of virtual or hybrid events this year. However, our survey suggests that almost half of event planners organising virtual or hybrid events say these types of events have reduced opportunities and reduced ROI for sponsors.

Convention bureaux can help event planners restore and improve ROI on their hybrid events – taking the pain out of its organisation and ensuring all boxes are ticked, from health and safety and sustainability to technical expertise.

“Event organisers that understand that a hybrid event will mean greater digital outreach to appeal to registrants and other stakeholders that cannot attend their destination in-person, will ensure increased returns for all stakeholders.”

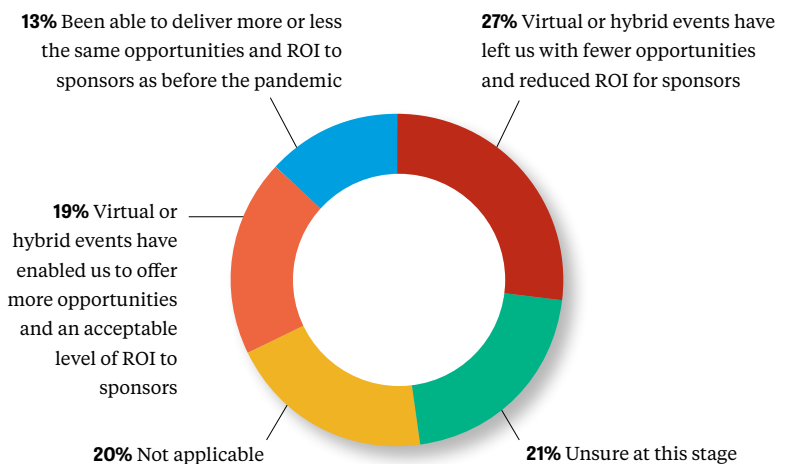
Emma Bowyer, owner and managing director of conference organiser ICMS Australasia

As a full-service convention bureau, the MCB team provides advice and assistance in acquiring international and national association conferences and can provide all the support needed to deliver conferences and events.

Plan for success

Digital tools can help you with initial planning. Somewhere between a video showreel and a choose-your-own-adventure book, [MCB’s Ready. Set. Melbourne](#) for example, is a new interactive video experience that integrates engaging clickable options for business events professionals to access information about

Thinking about delivering ROI to event sponsors, which statement best matches your experience since COVID-19?



Melbourne’s and regional Victoria’s capabilities as a business events destination.

Deepening the connection to viewer-led and tailored content, the interactive video experience allows association decision-makers, appointed event planners and attendees to select the video that resonates most with the information they are seeking in a specific moment of their planning journey. All videos are infused with further interaction points, providing in-depth local knowledge that help viewers to host, plan and attend a conference or corporate incentive program in and around Melbourne.



Offer value

Remote attendees expect more than a talking head on screen, and sponsors expect to have a presence and make meaningful connections. Seek out a venue with the digital tools to engage remote attendees and ensure sponsors are seen and heard, such as apps to bring remote attendees into the room to contribute; live Q&A sessions; chat rooms; direct connection to other attendees; and speakers and sponsors' access to event-exclusive resources.

“Delegates and sponsors are more flexible than ever and they are willing to flex to conditions and changes that they are not used to, or in previous meetings would have been thought of as ridiculous. However, open and clear communication is 100% vital.”

Tim Hancock, executive director at ASN Events

MCEC offers a flexible and scalable service, including a state-of-the-art [digital event platform](#) tailored to suit the needs of every planner, cutting edge production equipment and a team of dedicated digital event managers. With in-house experts and high-quality equipment under one roof, it can provide a full-service experience to help organisers begin planning a seamless hybrid event.

Build atmosphere

The look and feel of your event is critical to the experience, in-person or remote. Ensure the venue has spaces that allow for branding, visual backdrops, theming, lighting, furniture and props to create an atmosphere for people in the room – and a digital events platform that can create a welcoming and engaging on-screen experience for remote attendees.

MCEC, for example, can help with content, design, layout, logos and backdrops. “Consider adding elements on screen such as ticker tape for news, key messages and Twitter feeds. Think about what’s on screen between sessions. Add a pre-recorded video loop, sponsor videos and messages, event information, or even an MC to let people know what’s coming up and connect with your remote audience,” says Mark Higgins, digital event manager at MCEC.



Photograph: Stewart Donn



Immersive experiences

The best events – whether in-person, digital or hybrid – are those that deliver memorable experiences that are thoughtful, immersive and personal. **Showtime Event Group**, one of Melbourne’s leading events companies, provides interactive ‘Out of the Box’ activities, including virtual cooking classes with pre-supplied ingredients, themed lunches and event dinners delivered direct to an attendee’s door.

And networking doesn’t have to be the preserve of in-person events. Remote attendees of hybrid events can enjoy all the networking opportunities of a traditional in-person event at the touch of a button, which enables them to create discussion groups with shared interests, connect spontaneously with one-click chat, book one-to-one meetings, and spark conversations with breakout rooms and digital workshops.

Partnership working

The sooner you start talking to your venue, the sooner it can help you plan an extraordinary event. Talk to us early, says Higgins. “If you only have high-level ideas, that’s OK. We can show you what’s possible with our spaces, technology and

events software and help you choose the platform and features that best suit your conference type, size and complexity.

“Talk to your venue about the conference’s purpose and who will be involved. Discuss what you want to achieve – for your organisation, attendees, sponsors and for yourself. And share with your venue the level of interaction you want available – do you want your remote audience to watch or have the choice to interact?”

Don’t be afraid to ask for help

Venues have local information on the ground and the most up-to-date and relevant information when hosting your event. To support the creation of a unified experience between in-person and online audiences, MCEC provides event organisers with a dedicated digital event manager and continuous support from its award-winning onsite event and tech teams. “We configure the platform, manage the technical details, handle live production and broadcasting and offer real-time troubleshooting throughout the event,” explains Higgins.

Planning a hybrid event can be daunting, whatever the scale, but by partnering with a venue and team that has delivered thousands of world-class events, event organisers can focus on achieving maximum impact and ROI, with minimum stress.



Case study: Harry the hirer

Melbourne's events industry works in partnership to help event organisers create high-quality video productions such as live crosses between studios and locations, and livestreaming of event presentations. **Harry the hirer**, Australia's largest event and exhibition hire company, evolved during the pandemic to support digital and hybrid events, including a live runway show as part of the Melbourne Fashion Festival.

They created an immersive, floral film set with ultra high-end catwalk, allowing video to be streamed as part of the hybrid event. Harry the hirer also set up a 'live cross' that brought the Melbourne surfing scene direct to China, allowing Chinese travel agents to experience Australia's first surf park. Its in-house programmers innovated from maintaining internal software for sales and HR to developing wearable 'Smart Badge' technology that helps planners deliver Covid-safe events with confidence. The technology provides instant contact tracing, updates on room capacity limits and social distancing alerts, helping clients feel at ease during events.



Q&A

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Tim Hancock, executive director at ASN Events

“I see the future of hybrid events, and therefore ROI, being built around restricted access to only the best presentations, keynote or educational sessions. We’ve been proven time and time again during virtual or hybrid events, that delegates are unable to, or choose not to dedicate their diaries to the event, with most trying to juggle their normal work-day around watching some of the event online.

In reality, this never works and event organisers, particularly as the events industry recovers from COVID-19 shutdowns, find themselves providing very costly livestreaming to a disproportionately small number of virtual attendees.

I think that restricting access across the breadth of the program, and therefore reducing livestreaming and technical costs, will increase the desirability for virtual attendees to view only the best of the presentations and I believe they will make time for this, rather than a full day programme.

The benefit of this approach is that it acts as a marketing tool for subsequent meetings, with virtual attendees getting a small but valuable taste of what being on-site is like, with the ideal outcome of driving greater in-person attendance at the next event.”



MELBOURNE CONVENTION BUREAU'S KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Choose desirable, accessible and relevant destinations
- Partner and plan early with a full-service convention bureau
- Consider ROI opportunities on the hybrid competent of your in-person event to access new sources of revenue and reach to new audiences
 - Give online attendees a bespoke, immersive experience
 - Offer flexible booking arrangements
 - Ensure networking opportunities for all

For more information about how Melbourne Convention Bureau can help you deliver your next conference, corporate meeting or incentive program contact:

info@melbournecb.com.au or visit
[www.melbournecb.com.au/
discover-melbourne](http://www.melbournecb.com.au/discover-melbourne)

