

A 'one size fits all' approach to events will not pass the test in the education world

The virtual events space blew up during the pandemic, with platforms like Hopin being valued at \$7.75B when just two years old. A number of other hybrid and virtual event platforms have mushroomed over the last 12 months, with most of them optimised for the lucrative conferences, expos and webinars market.

They are a hit or miss for other event types. But as in-person events ramp up, we see the need for hybrid engagement in every event. Will the one-size-fits-all approach work for every type of event?

Different folks, different strokes

The way we live, learn and work are going to be "hybrid" for the foreseeable future; perhaps forever. Over the last two years or so, we embraced virtual alternatives for several aspects of life, including events. With limited choices, we made the effort, sometimes begrudgingly, to familiarise ourselves and

make them work.

Initially, virtual events focused on replicating the in-person experience as best as they could. However, as we emerge from the pandemic fog, the requirement now is to make every event truly engaging, irrespective of how someone is attending it. This requires a deeper understanding of the needs of the attendee and the event organiser in every given context, for every single event.

The campus has gone hybrid

The education industry was transformed in a matter of weeks by the pandemic as *millions of students* were forced into online learning. With many universities recently deciding to never return to full-time in-person teaching, aspects of university life will become increasingly hybrid. Demand for hybrid events in higher education are on the rise.

To meet this demand, a number of solutions are being used – most are repurposed conferences and webinar platforms. However, none truly caters to the realities of student engagement. In order to help and support students across the country, we must move away from a generalised offering as they fail to engage and will inevitably lead students to question the value they are getting from higher education.

There's already a lounge and many networks

Many popular hybrid and virtual event platforms mimic large expos or conferences featuring reception areas, lounges, multiple stages, breakout rooms, booths and so on – some in 3D virtual worlds, and other with simple icons. While such skeuomorphism worked well in the early days of virtual conferences and corporate events, they now feel gimmicky and underwhelming.

In higher education, these platforms have little appeal, especially *when students* have grown up with PS4s and Oculus headsets. Despite some platforms' efforts towards a more simplified UI approach, the references to lounges, stages, breakouts and booths still continue. Whilst that might work for SXSW or Dreamforce, this type of set up with a smorgasbord of features adds little to the overall attendee experience where higher education events are concerned.

The vast majority of popular hybrid and virtual event platforms focus on lead generation and networking. Students do not need another platform to connect

with each other. What they need is an events solution built specially for them that captures the spirit of their campus, affirms the sense of community, aids discovery and encourages collaboration.

Students have been one of the most negatively affected populations by the pandemic. They were shut off physically from their world, networks and purpose - learning. It is essential now that the tech industry - including event tech - supports higher education in providing solutions that make a difference. Without proper engagement, relationships and support networks can never be formed, which can have devastating implications for learning and the overall student experience.

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