

Competency: Expertise

Digital Immigration:

7 Strategies to Guide You Effortlessly Through the Virtual World

by

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Whether you like it or not, virtual events are gaining in popularity. This means as savvy speakers you can't ignore them - hoping and praying that if you don't acknowledge them, they'll go away. We're here to tell you, it's just not going to happen!

While this certainly does not signal the demise, or replacement of the live events you currently present at, many companies are experimenting with virtual counterparts to supplement, or augment, face-to-face meetings and conferences, as well as provide ongoing content, follow-up opportunities, and a deeper reach into sections of the market they currently serve.

According to the 2010 "Virtual Market Outlook Report (VMOR)" released by the Event Marketing Institute, "the market is still figuring out the full potential of virtual and how best to harness its power. In the face of economic uncertainty and driven by the need to constantly refresh how brands and audiences connect with one another, virtual is a bigger part of the conversation than ever before." *Wired* magazine predicts 2010 will see a 500 percent increase in virtual events. GigaOm.com, a highly regarded technology website, predicts that high-end virtual technology, and virtual worlds will grow from approximately \$50 million in 2009 to \$8-\$10 billion by 2014.

In other words, the meeting industry landscape is changing dramatically, and speakers need to adapt to this ever-changing world.

It might look as though that like magic virtual events seem to have appeared out of nowhere. Actually, they have been around for over ten years. The early primitive versions used very basic technology that needed considerable bandwidth for anyone to participate adequately. Ten years ago, bandwidth was considerably slower and more expensive than today. Virtual events have come a long way over the past several years, evolving from cartoonish environments to streamlined 3D cyber-venues. The technology is now very affordable, and continues to advance by leaps and bounds. This means that staying current, and learning how to use this powerful new marketing tool poses a challenge to the professional speaker.

The Speaker Challenge

How to use the virtual events platforms effectively, and with confidence, poses a challenge to many speakers today. It requires a new set of skills that clients expect you to have ready so that you can easily, and effortlessly participate in their online events.

For many speakers, as with most people, a lack of knowledge of the unknown often leads to intimidation, fear and anxiety. Because new technology frequently takes time to grasp, and see the application, whether for business or every day use, it's easy to exercise the "busyness" excuse to shy away, or avoid it, until absolutely necessary.

Virtual events fall into this category. Plus, they add another level of resistance for speakers who view them as impersonal, and complicated. Some feel that not being in the same room with the audience means that it's difficult, or even impossible to make a real impact and connection.

Alternatively, once you know and understand how a new tool can boost your business, and take it to a whole other level, chances are, you'll embrace, and use it - especially when it speaks to your bottom line. Virtual events give you that opportunity; reaching people and places you never thought possible in the past.

Virtual events also add a deeper dimension to your business model, incorporating sustainability and globalization. For example, when you leave a face-to-face event, you may easily be forgotten. However, your virtual events, when recorded, can take on a life (and revenue stream) all their own.

To help you better understand the virtual event environment, the following seven strategies will guide you effortlessly through the virtual world. They are pointers to help you grasp how this powerful, and exciting tool can give your business a positive boost, especially when bookings may have slowed down more than you'd like.

Strategy #1: Understand the basics

What exactly is meant by “virtual”? A virtual event is “a gathering of many people connected through a common online environment.”

- A virtual event could be a trade show, webcast, online job fair, conference, or other similar events.
- A virtual environment is a computer-hosted, simulated environment, such as Second Life, Teleplace, Protosphere, and other 3D immersive environments.
- A web or virtual meeting is an online meeting tool used for planning, preparation, training, coaching, or desktop information sharing.

(Source: 2010 Virtual Meeting Outlook Report)

In addition to the above, you are likely to come across some of the following terms:

- A hybrid event refers to a physical and virtual component that organizers hold simultaneously or in some combination. This provides a significant solution for remote employees or attendees not able to attend these events.
- Simulcasting or simultaneous broadcasting, refers to a program or event broadcast at the same time over one or more mediums. For example, The Metropolitan Opera House in New York, recently introduced simulcasting of a selection of their live events to be viewed in remote locations, domestically and internationally.
- A webcast is Internet broadcasting. The technology used provides streaming video of lectures in universities, speeches at conferences, and a wide variety of other events.
- A webinar is a web-based seminar, commonly known as online workshops. Many companies offer webinars as an alternative to traditional learning environments.

How are organizations using virtual events?

As organizations look to adopt the virtual environment into their meeting and event strategy, they have three options - to *supplement*, *complement*, or *replace* their physical counterparts.

According to VOMR's research study of 889 marketers, "the most popular use of virtual technology is for presentations (61%), internal meetings (56%), training and education (53%) -

typically delivered via webcasts and webinars, followed by more robust solutions, conferences (48%), and trade shows (32%).”

Microsoft, Amazon, Cisco, Accenture, and others, hold career fairs with keynote and breakout sessions in 3D spaces. Manpower Staffing has an entire campus in Second Life dedicated to recruiting talent and providing career search programs.

Strategy #2: Grasp speaker opportunities

What opportunities do virtual events offer speakers?

Meeting planners look to speakers to provide insights, awareness, and cutting-edge information, whether live, or virtual. To this end, speakers need to understand the virtual technology enough to make suggestions, and offer solutions. For example, encouraging a meeting planner to use a virtual meeting when timing isn't right for a live event. Recently, a trade show organizer wanted to organize an exhibitor training program just prior to the start of their show. Exhibitors have myriad things to take care of before a show, attending a live training program interferes with more important activities. However, the organizer agreed to meet virtually several weeks beforehand allowing exhibitors to learn essentials to use before, during, and after the show - a far better use of their time and resources.

Whether, your clients supplement, complement, or replace their in-person meetings with virtual counterparts, these extra events, offer speakers multiple opportunities to sell their services. Plus, virtual events provide longevity. Once over, the meeting can live on the organizer's website for extended periods, giving your words of wisdom a greater life span, and reach.

HIMSS (Healthcare Information & Management Systems Society) organizes virtual conferences in addition to their major MedTech, in-person tradeshow. The live show draws nearly 30,000 people, however, HIMSS discovered their virtual events didn't compete with their physical equivalent. In a survey conducted after the event, between 70% and 80% of the virtual attendees never attended the physical event even before HIMSS offered the virtual option.

Strategy #3: Learn how to adapt your speaking style

At a recent virtual event, a Disney representative voiced his dilemma finding speakers and trainers with virtual experience. He referred to the lack of this experience as “one of his greatest challenges in putting on successful events.”

Motivational speakers rely heavily on the energy, and dynamics of the live interaction. This scenario changes dramatically in the virtual environment. Equivalent to a radio interview, you often find yourself talking into thin air. Your energy motivator lifeline no longer exists. Your face-to-face audience now consists of other avatars, or if you are using a video delivery, or perhaps, just your dog, cat, or goldfish. However much you adore your pets, they just don't ignite the dynamism of a live audience, despite any training.

What this means is, that to work virtually, adapting your speaking style to the technology is essential. In the same way you would adopt a different delivery style when presenting to a group of ten, versus an army of thousands, you need different skills. Does this mean you can't share your inspirational message virtually? Absolutely not! You just need to modify your tempo to the environment. However, to sound engaging as you talk to your computer screen is most definitely, a practiced art.

In addition, keynote speakers who shy away from, or resist using presentation software, such as PowerPoint, or Keynote, will find that virtually, these are essential tools along with others, you may need to help convey your message.

Strategy #4: Get started

Due to the tight economy, you may well find that many of your clients are turning to the virtual environment to save money with their meetings and events. This means that there's no time like the present to put your big toe in the water, and get started learning and practicing the skills you need to add virtual presentations to your service offering.

Due to the plethora of webinars, and virtual offerings currently available on the Internet, chances are you've already attended at least one, such as those organized by NSA University.

The 3-Step Process

Attending an event is step one in a three-step "getting started" process. Find events where you can participate and observe. Log in to learn, whether on a webinar, attending a networking event, or signing in for a class in a 3D virtual world, like Teleplace, or Second Life.

The second step is to present your own program material through services, such as Business Expert Webinars, Copper Conferencing, or others who share the front work of marketing your events.

The third, and final step is to organize your own program using services such as, GotoWebinar, Adobe Connect, or Elluminate. As with everything you do, practice makes perfect.

Once you feel confident presenting in the virtual world, it's time to let your clients know you're all set to participate in their virtual meetings.

Strategy #5: Get creative with fees

Going hand-in-hand with the tight economy, you're all too familiar with budgetary cuts, which force many of your clients to eliminate, or cut back on hiring speakers. Appearing virtually, saves everyone time, money, and provides the convenience of connecting experts with those seeking the information.

Imagine, no travel hassles, as you show up online at the appointed time, present your material for 60-90 minutes, then you're done, and can enjoy a home-cooked meal with family or friends. Obviously, there's still your preparation, follow-up activities with the client, and or, audience participants. You can also offer a follow-up virtual event to your face-to-face events with little or no additional cost, allowing you to maintain or raise your fees. Not having to leave your home office when you present virtually proves an extra bonus, plus you can do more virtual events in one day, than you could in-person. With this type of convenience, it's worth incorporating a more flexible fee structure to appear virtually, especially when you could exceed your daily, or per event fee presenting to multiple audiences.

Strategy #6: Start thinking smaller

When you approach your business as a content provider, rather than just a speaker, it's easier to envision the multiple platforms where you can offer your content to those seeking it. Virtually, you have the opportunity to deliver your content using different tools. If you currently conduct longer programs – several hours, days or weeks, you'll have to break your material into smaller chunks to deliver it in multiple sittings.

As you look through your content, start thinking byte-sized pieces. For example, can you deliver a face-to-face session and follow up with virtual coaching? Can you deliver three, 90-minute sessions, instead of an all day speaking or training event? Can you provide homework to allow participants to begin applying the new skills, and then start your next session with success stories, or group sharing?

Can you create video pieces to introduce your participants to a particular topic before you hold a webinar, or virtual world session, or host a live video streamed follow up to answer more questions a week after your session? The possibilities are endless.

Strategy #7: Understand the consequences

Naturally, deciding not to be apart of the virtual world is always an option you can choose. However, before making any rash and final decisions on the subject, it's important to know and understand the consequences.

The biggest consequence is possible extinction as you lose your market share to savvy new, and perhaps younger competitors hungry and eager for action. The rising Gen Xers in the marketplace embrace the technology that many Baby Boomers find scary, and want to avoid. Many of them see the opportunities, and recognize the needs to establish themselves as virtual speakers.

Those under the age of 35 are native to this technology, and gravitate to it naturally. It doesn't mean that they like it, but they have grown up in the age of video games and online communities. Those over the age of 35 are immigrating into this digital landscape a few at a time; some embracing it with a sense of adventure, some coming along griping, kicking and

screaming, and of course, there are those who refuse to leave their comfortable, yet emptier, homesteads.

In conclusion, the more you get in tune with virtual events, and what they can do for you, and more importantly, for your business, the better off you'll be. The technology is definitely here to stay. It's constantly changing, improving, and being made available to greater numbers of people, whether you like it or not. The question is, "will you embrace it, or will you ignore it?"

Take time to get to know and understand what being apart of the virtual world can do for you. Start small, but definitely give it a try. Choose one new virtual delivery platform or tool for a month. Dive in, learn as much as you can, then play and have fun. The more you know, the less it'll intimidate, and scare you. In fact, quite the opposite, you might even develop a liking for the technology you once avoided. According to author, Susan Jeffers, "feel the fear and do it anyway." Hopefully you'll discover a whole new world of opportunities that can take your speaking business to a new, and greater level of profitability. The sky's the limit in the virtual world, and as Past NSA President, Scott Friedman, said, "Enjoy the Journey!"

Wishing you much virtual success!

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