How to Manage the Return of In-Person Conferences, Tradeshows and Events

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Initiatives: Demand Generation

In-person events are returning; however, the impact of the last two years will permanently shape the future of these marketing programs. Product marketers must develop agile strategies that address ongoing public health guidance while also delivering engaging events to improve awareness and growth.
Data Snapshot

Figure 1: Events Remain the Top-Line Item on a Marketing Program’s Budget

Percentage of Marketing Program’s Budget by Channel

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Channel</th>
<th>Digital Events</th>
<th>In-Person Events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paid Social Advertising (Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter)</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third-Party Digital Events (Virtual Events, Webinars)</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pay-per-Click Advertising (Google, Bing)</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search Engine Optimization (SEO)</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital Display Advertising</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner/Channel Marketing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hosted Events In-Person (User Conferences, Roadshows)</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third-Party Events (In-Person Tradeshows, Conferences)</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hosted Digital Events (Conferences, Roundtables)</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Relations</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Print Media</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadcast Media (Radio, TV)</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content Syndication</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out-of-Home Media (Billboards)</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct Mail</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n = 294, organizations with more than $100M in revenue and marketing channels that are included in marketing plan (Q10A)

Q. What percent of your company’s fiscal year 2021 total marketing program’s budget (excluding staff and technology spend) is being allocated to or spent on each of the following marketing channels?
Source: 2021 Gartner Technology Marketing Benchmarks Survey

Data Insights

Events continue to be a significant investment in supporting goals for demand generation, account-based marketing and customer retention.

- Technology marketers continue to focus on events, both hosted (first party) and sponsored (third party), as critical elements of the marketing mix. Event budgets remained surprisingly flat in 2020 and 2021, and we expect those investment levels to continue.
What You Need to Do

Clients tell Gartner that they value the reach of virtual event delivery models but are eager to return to offering in-person events as well. The uncertainty around when this will happen requires that technology marketers increase their ability to be agile by continuously monitoring the environment along with customer propensity and ability to travel. In addition, technology marketers will need to manage both stakeholder and attendee expectations.

Near-Term Actions

Develop Agile Event Strategies

While conference hosts have a desire to bring in-person delivery models back into their event marketing mix and technology providers are keen to shift back to sponsored in-person events, the expanded reach of virtual delivery models requires a balanced approach to event strategies. Gartner predicts that by 2024, 30% of technology providers with at least $100 million in revenue will extend their reach to additional audiences and roles by shifting to a “virtual-first” event model for both first-party and third-party events, compared to less than 5% before the pandemic. In addition, over the past two years, technology marketers have learned the critical importance of remaining agile, especially with their event strategies. As technology marketers move into the next 12 months, event strategies must include hybrid delivery models (see Table 1), and include the ability to rapidly pivot to virtual delivery models for all attendees if in-person event cancellation becomes necessary.
### Table 1: Definitions of Hybrid Delivery and Hybrid Strategy

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<td>A hybrid strategy includes an event plan with events that are delivered in-person and separate events that are delivered virtually.</td>
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Source: Gartner (December 2021)

When developing agile event strategies, technology marketers must consider:

- **Regional status and ongoing management of the global health pandemic.** When evaluating the return of in-person events, whether first-party-hosted or third-party-sponsored, technology marketers should monitor ongoing pandemic guidance and protocols for the host region/country and monitor travel restrictions for attendees outside of the host region. In a recent MMGY Travel Intelligence study, while less than half of meeting planners intend to implement protocols, 70% of attendees are more likely to attend an event if vaccinations and/or COVID-19 testing requirements are in place. Ensure that you are actively communicating these requirements to ensure all invitees, registrants and attendees are familiar with them through dedicated communications and webpages.

- **The audiovisual (AV) requirements of hybrid delivery models.** Bringing digital and in-person audiences together requires not only the event technology platform to deliver content, but also the appropriate AV equipment to ensure that the on-stage, in-person content is captured and streamed as high-quality digital media. Technology marketers planning for hybrid events should engage a venue or third-party AV provider during initial planning to set expectations and understand budget implications. This is especially true when seeking to bring virtual speakers to the in-person stage and to bring the audiences together to support Q&A, chat and networking/social sessions.
Redefine success metrics. In-person audiences will be smaller than years past. Often, event success is measured by volume; however, this should shift in 2022. Success measures should be adjusted to align to business objectives moving forward. For example, AWS re:Invent 2021 returned to Las Vegas in December and was available virtually as well. Initial estimates indicated 20,000 attended in-person, about one-third of its traditional in-person audience. New success measures may include level of engagement within target accounts, progression of pipeline deals and customer retention.

Planning for a modified, smaller number of attendees. Use a pre-event survey to ask your invitees in advance about their ability to attend (their employer’s willingness to allow and pay for attendance) and their desire to attend. When managing and estimating food and beverage, and hotel rooming commitments, adjust down from survey response results and be prepared for changes. Also, manage venue space to address any social distancing requirements while also ensuring that the space is not too large for the group size.

Technology marketers must remain vigilant to assess risk with hosting in-person events. This requires monitoring the event landscape, the ongoing shifts in attendee preferences, and global and regional restrictions impacting their event strategies. Contingency plans will continue to be required into the next year as external forces impact event hosts, sponsors and attendees.

Set Clear Expectations for Stakeholders

Internal Stakeholders. First-party (hosted) events require cross-functional collaboration and alignment. Therefore, technology marketers must set clear expectations for all stakeholders. It’s critical that executive sponsors, sales, product marketing, product management and corporate marketing all understand that 2022 in-person events will offer a very different experience than 2019 events.
External Stakeholders. Technology marketers should engage channel partners and sales stakeholders to align on sponsorship benefits for exhibitors as well. Key factors, including the number of attendees and sponsors, may be lower than in prior years, and exhibit halls will be less crowded. Smaller, more intimate events may enable increased engagement with high-value attendees in greater depth, which requires new messaging and sales enablement for marketing the event to sponsors. In addition, the energy and excitement of an exhibit hall floor is challenging to replicate when there's extensive open space. To ensure the exhibit hall is a high-energy area, evaluate reducing the exhibit hall floor size from prior years. In addition, stakeholders must understand that the sponsor benefits will need to be adjusted, as many vendors have started to host their own events, and thus, competition for their time and investments is broader than in the past. For example, assess expanding the size of the exhibits, offering more speaking opportunities and ensuring that sponsors will have the opportunity to engage one-to-one with key attendees as well as your own executives. Finally, clearly articulate cancellation and postponement policies, in addition to publishing a schedule for sponsors to understand the timing of these decisions.

Set Clear Expectations for Attendees

Before the pandemic, in-person events had a clear social contract. In exchange for travel costs to attend a hosted conference, tradeshow, meeting or event, attendees were able to participate in general and breakout sessions on topics of interest, expected reasonable on-site meals at the expense of the host and very likely received invitations to participate in off-site dinners and/or events. In addition, attendees expected to have networking time to engage with colleagues, peers and others with similar interests. This social contract no longer exists. Virtual event attendees are still shaping the social contract and learning what is expected of them and what they will get in return. In addition, virtual attendees are demanding more engagement and networking opportunities than what has been available to them in the last two years. And sponsors of virtual events continue to demand improvement in benefits and return on sponsor investment (see “How to Get the Most Out of Your Virtual Event Sponsorship”).

Gartner definition: A social contract is the set of common, explicitly or implicitly understood principles that describe how we feel our society should work.

Since the social contract no longer exists for in-person events, it’s unclear what to expect in the following areas:
- **Networking and meals** — Evaluate social distancing requirements, while also balancing the desires of the attendees. For example, hosts may consider issuing color code wrist bands for attendees that prefer to follow the “6 feet rule” versus those who are comfortable with shorter distances. Also, provide table setups that allow for this varied approach.

- **Health protocols** — If COVID-19 vaccines are required, you must communicate which vaccine manufacturers will be accepted and must define “fully vaccinated” for the purposes of the event. And, clearly communicate how vaccine and public health requirements will be verified by event staff:
  - Will you offer mobile device confirmation?
  - Will you allow QR code check-ins, or will you require a physical vaccine card?
  - How will this vary based on the home country of the attendee?
  - In regard to testing, what type of tests and timing of the tests will be required?
  - Will you provide attendees with the option to test at the close of the event to meet travel requirements back to their home locations?
  - What, if any, adjustments will you make for attendees who recently had COVID-19 and are able to provide documentation to that effect?
  - Will masks be required?

- **Session content and availability** — Specifically, when using a hybrid delivery model, technology marketers must prepare attendees for the accessibility of content in-person versus virtually. Will sessions be made available to all attendee types, or will access to breakout sessions be made available only to in-person attendees? While bringing speakers into an in-person event via virtual technology may allow for higher-profile speakers, attendees should receive information about this plan and the access they will have to content, based on their registration.

- **Cancellation and refund policies** — Technology marketers should clearly communicate these policies and consider their impact on the propensity to register for an event. What are the cancellation and refund policies for ticketed, fee-based conferences and events? Policies should reflect both attendee cancellation (are there specific reasons a refund would be issued?) and host cancellation or any impact on fees if a scheduled in-person event were to shift to virtual delivery models.
Longer-Term Actions

Over the next two years, event strategies are expected to evolve rapidly. Technology marketers must develop long-term strategies that reflect the impact of the pandemic on events. When evaluating whether to host or sponsor an in-person event, technology marketers must be realistic in forecasting future event participation. Although attendee interest in returning to in-person events is a factor, the return of attendees to in-person conferences is likely to be impacted by ongoing uncertainty as well as the constraints of travel budgets and employers’ willingness to allow their employees to travel. Companies have realized extensive travel savings since the onset of the pandemic, and those budgets aren’t likely to return quickly. In a CFO poll across North America, Latin America, Asia/Pacific and Europe conducted by the Global Business Travel Association, “About half (52%) of respondents reported they expect their company’s business travel spend to reach 2019 levels in 2022.” Or, viewed another way, close to half of CFOs do not expect the return of business travel spend in 2022. In fact, the Global Business Travel Association BTI Outlook indicates global business travel isn’t expected to make a full recovery until 2024.

Consequently, technology marketers need to set clear expectations for stakeholders and attendees, clearly communicate these expectations, and monitor external market forces by developing agile event strategies to improve the impact of their events.

What You Need to Know

Evidence

The results presented in this document are based on the 2021 Gartner Technology Marketing Benchmarks Survey. It was conducted online from 1 March through 15 June 2021 among technology-focused organizations with more than $10 million in revenue located in Canada, the U.S. or the U.K. The survey respondents had to meet the following requirements:
Respondents were required to have one of the following primary job functions or roles:

- CEO/president/founder
- Demand/lead generation
- Marketing leadership
- Sales leadership
- Web/digital social marketing
- Marketing operations/analytics

Respondents were also required to have knowledge of the marketing budget and spend for their companies or business units and knowledge of the marketing campaign or program's tactics. At the country level, quotas were established to guarantee a good distribution in terms of product offering (software, technology services and hardware) and company size (revenue).

A total of 500 responses were collected. This report is focused on the 326 respondents in organizations with more than $100 million in revenue.

The survey was developed collaboratively by a team of Gartner analysts and was reviewed, tested and administered by Gartner's Research Data and Analytics team. Results of this study do not represent global findings or the market as a whole, but reflect the sentiment of the respondents and companies surveyed.

1 Should I Require Vaccine Proof and More Top Questions, Associated Luxury Hotels International

2 AWS re:Invent 2021: Keynote Live — Heroes Bowed, Clouds Endowed & Crowds Allowed, Computer Weekly

3 The Global Business Travel Association (GBTA), BTI Outlook, Global Business Travel Association

Recommended by the Author
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