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The Future of Hybrid Events is Accessibility



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Let's be honest y'all: the zoom fatigue is real, and if you're like me, the last thing you want to do for fun these days is join a virtual event from my desk. What was a lifeline for many of us four years ago, can today feel like a tired tactic in a world that's fully returned to in-person experiences. But there are some advantages of virtual events that I think we should hold onto, even in a world that's grown weary of them. At ROCK+PAPER, accessibility is something we pay special attention to in our experiential

strategy, and we find that it encourages more creative and dynamic experiences. That's why I think our focus should be on thoughtfully making events more accessible, not just checking a box with the inclusion of a "virtual" component.

Importance of accessibility

In a [2022 survey of event professionals](#), 35% said they would prefer to host their future events in-person, 34% said hybrid and 29% said virtual. The virtual events of the pandemic era had a major upside: They opened up new audiences and made events accessible to attendees who wouldn't have been able to make it to an in-person event, even if it were possible to hold one. People with disabilities—[who made up 12.6% of the American population as of 2015](#)—or people who didn't live near the event location could get access to experiences that were otherwise difficult to attend. For an event marketer, virtual events allowed brands to reach a larger (and different) audience than they could have with an IRL activation.

We don't want to lose this access to a broader and more diverse audience, and we don't have to. By planning thoughtful hybrid events, event marketers can have the best of both worlds, and so can customers and fans.

Improving physical accessibility

Physical accessibility goes beyond choosing a wheelchair accessible event location. Event floorplans should also account for guests with a variety of mobility limitations, leaving enough room for guests using mobility aids to navigate the space, even amongst crowds, and designing key event elements to be accessible to guests at different eye and reach levels. Experience designers can also get creative about making A/V components accessible with personalized audio or clever braille integrations.

Accessibility for neurodivergent guests

Some of the best experience designs have a diversity of avenues for guests to participate—this reflects our recognition that audiences generally respond differently to stimuli. We can take this even further with thoughtful allowances for neurodivergent folks. Crowd experiences can be balanced with more individual experiences, and sensory experiences modulated in intensity across aspects of the program to make the experience both more successful AND accessible.

Incorporating virtual elements

Live events by definition can't be universally accessible—even the most ambitious tours cannot reach every city where fans or customers are found. That's why I don't see digital and virtual event extensions going away completely. But I do encourage our teams at ROCK+PAPER to think outside of the Zoom screen—that medium can't inspire the kind of memorable and exciting consumer experience we want. Livestreams of an event, when done properly, can bring virtual guests into the experience in a participatory way, but there's much more we can do. Real time social content aggregation and participation, gamification, and creatively integrated virtual spaces can help online guests to feel like they're experiencing something unique and tailored while extending the audience beyond the IRL attendees.

What do you think? Where do you see virtual events going next?