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Making Digital Marketing Work for Your Exhibit Strategy
Digital connectivity has become such an integral part of our lives that the lines between what happens online and what happens in real life have become blurred.

For younger generations especially — who've never known life without smartphones, social media, and Wi-Fi — the real and virtual worlds have become almost completely interchangeable.

This merging of the real and online worlds carries profound implications for exhibitors. As younger generations come of age — and as digital becomes more pervasive across all generations — integrating digital technology into live brand experiences will become the table stakes for all event marketers. The challenge — and the opportunity — will be to leverage digital technology to build a unified, cohesive story that creates rich, memorable experiences and differentiates your brand.

While exhibitors today have access to powerful engagement-building tools that weren’t available 25 years ago, the key to getting the most out of these tools is employing smart, targeted engagement strategies — before, during, and after the event.
Before the Show: Building the Buzz

In the weeks and months leading up to a live event, exhibitors can leverage a number of digital tools to raise awareness and drive interest. During this stage of the planning process, it's also important to think through any audio visual or event technology needs you have. The sooner you plan for those elements, the more integrated and seamless they will be!

To get started, let's look at the best practices for three key tools: event microsites or landing pages, email, and social media.
Event Microsites or Landing Pages

First impressions matter

Before you begin any digital marketing campaigns, you need to make sure you have an online destination that you are driving people to. A dedicated microsite or even a simple landing page will do the trick. It’s critical that your website makes a positive first impression. A microsite or landing page should:

- Have an eye-catching design with intuitive navigation
- Clearly and concisely convey your value proposition for the audiences you are trying to attract
- Have multiple engagement points such as calls to action and contact forms
- Be mobile optimized
- Employ an SEO strategy to make it easy to find on the web

Exhibitors can also take advantage of digital tools that track the online activity of web visitors. For example, Google Analytics provides such information as how visitors got to your site, where site visitors are based, which pages users visit most often, and how long they stayed on your page — giving marketers insight into the demographics and content preferences of potential attendees as well as the relevance of page content.

If budgets allow, retargeting tools enable marketers to reconnect with website visitors by showing them ads about your live brand experience as they browse the web after leaving your site. Here’s a simple example: A potential attendee visits your landing page but doesn’t register; the next time that person opens Facebook, they see an ad promoting early-bird specials for your live brand experience.
Email

Segment your audience

Using web analytics tools that track the activity of online visitors — not just to your landing page but to your website overall — can help you develop a targeted email strategy, so you can ensure that you’re delivering the right message to the right audience through segmentation. For instance, you might create a grouping of users who visited the same page on your site, who come from the same city, or who clicked on the same ad.

Email marketing involves more than just segmenting your audience and creating customized messaging, however. That’s why you should consider seeking the expertise of a leading email marketing agency, especially if you have a small marketing team or lack the resources to develop the IT infrastructure needed to support an effective email campaign. An email service provider can offer myriad solutions for your email campaign, from HTML coding and database management to template creation, performance analytics, and graphic design.

Social Media

Facebook is the platform of choice

According to a recent survey, 77 percent of event marketers said they consider Facebook the most effective pre-event social media platform, followed by Twitter (48 percent) and LinkedIn (42 percent).

There are a number of reasons for Facebook’s popularity in the pre-event marketing stage. For one, Facebook makes it easy to set up a separate event page with a description of the event and exhibit, relevant links, and any last-minute changes.

Then, because Facebook is video-friendly, marketers can also engage potential attendees by posting compelling video highlights from the previous year’s event. Finally, Facebook is an ideal forum for placing retargeted ads that remind potential attendees of the exhibit at the upcoming event after clicking on the microsite or landing page.

77% of event marketers consider Facebook the most effective pre-event social media channel.2
During the Show: Sparking Conversations

Exhibitors have an abundance of tools at their disposal to help create a richer in-booth experience, influence meaningful conversations, and capture memorable moments in real time. By harnessing such digital technology as digital signage, social media, and virtual reality, marketers can create immersive, interactive brand experiences for their most important audiences.
Social Media

More than just a #hashtag

During a live brand experience, the social media focus shifts to channels that support real-time, digestible updates and cultivate dialogue and interaction among exhibitors, attendees, and speakers. For a large majority of marketers, Twitter is that channel. Twitter's soundbite-driven, stream-of-consciousness format is ideal for sharing memorable quotes and photos in real time, and for highlighting trending content. And the hashtag has become an essential tool to curate event-related conversations and promote the brand experience.

But Twitter isn't the only game in town. A number of social platforms offer features that could make them extremely relevant during live brand experiences. These include Snapchat, with its “My Story” feature that allows users to share an unlimited number of photos and videos over a 24-hour period; Instagram Stories, which lets users post multiple photos and videos that appear together in a slideshow format; and Periscope (recently acquired by Twitter), which enables live video streaming. Not to be outdone by its social brethren, Facebook Live enables users to broadcast live video from their smartphones.

73% of marketers say Twitter is the most effective social media channel during a live brand experience.  

3 Ibid.
Because social media has become such an intrinsic part of promoting and experiencing events, it's critical to develop a social media strategy well before the event takes place. Tasks that should be completed months before the event include:

- **Assembling your social media team**
- **Deciding which social media channels to use (and how to use them)**
- **Developing a timeline for social media posts**
- **Tapping into an event hashtag (or hashtags)**

**Lead Tracking and CRM Integration**

With lead gen being a major focus for all exhibitors, lead tracking and CRM integration is a key consideration for any in-booth experience. Exhibitors who want to be able to manage their pipeline on the fly need to consider a real-time lead-tracking app or interface as part of their technology plan. Consider tools that allow you to ditch the badge scanner and instead use your mobile phone or tablet, or power up with contact-less lead retrieval with Near Field Communication in which attendees hold NFC chip-bearing badges near digital display. Take lead management to the next level with immediate, customized email follow up, all integrated into your CRM system to generate reports and data on how the exhibit performed for your pipeline.
**Digital Signage**

*The next wave in non-traditional sponsorship*

Considering a sponsorship at your next event? Then you need to consider digital signage options provided by the event organizer. Whether it’s touchscreen wayfinding signage or walls displaying event-related social media content, digital signage enables exhibitors to gather analytics on the frequency of when they were searched for and who touched their logo or requested more information.

New iPad-like technology enables sponsors to easily capture metrics by placing devices in front of wayfinding units, while also incorporating traditional sponsorship in floor clings that cover the pads. With digital signage in sessions and social walls, technology now allows the signs to change language and customize ads based on the audience walking by.

Sponsors also can capture demographic information via facial-recognition technology. And they can drive audience engagement by providing sponsor-specific games on wayfinding kiosks, with the goal of increasing kiosk dwell time while also driving users to the sponsor’s booth after winning the game. Digital signage can also be incorporated within the booth for another layer of interactive tech.

**Virtual and Augmented Reality**

*The future of event marketing?*

More and more, the concept of event marketing is being labeled “experiential marketing,” which speaks to the enormous value of rich, in-person experiences in a world dominated by digital interaction. As virtual reality and augmented reality become more accessible, the marriage of this technology and experiential marketing could be a perfect fit.
By enabling virtual product demonstrations, interactive educational experiences (imagine speakers using 3-D holograms instead of PowerPoint decks to illustrate their presentations), and other unique mixed-reality experiences, virtual and augmented reality hold the promise of making exhibits more interactive and exciting. This technology is the ideal application to allow attendees to experience something that might be too big or too dangerous to bring onto the show floor. For example, bringing a real F-16 fighter jet onto the exhibit floor could be tricky due to elements like cost, lack of space, and security concerns, but a VR replica can let attendees look at it from every angle, see inside of it, and get more information about different parts of the jet. VR and AR also allows exhibitors with a smaller booth footprint to still have an immersive experience that gets deeper into their brand, or to take attendees to an entirely different place.

**Location Mapping**

*Enriching the event experience*

When enabled by the show organizer, inexpensive Bluetooth beacon technology such as Apple's iBeacon makes it possible to understand how attendees move through the trade show floor. Exhibitors can harness the technology to provide attendees with instantaneous information that's keyed to their proximity and guide them to places of interest based on their behavior and history.

**Technology Bells and Whistles**

Want to create a wow-worthy experience in your booth? Consider incorporating cool tech like projection mapping or 3D displays to dazzle and attract attendees. Go beyond the flat-screen with cool Pufferfish spherical displays, or tap into motion technology and other interactive equipment to create a more engaging experience and drive more traffic to your space. LED lighting or uplighting can be used to create a certain mood while even basic tech — like iPads and tablets — can create serious engagement opportunities when used in a strategic way.
After the Show: Crunching the Data

Perhaps the biggest benefit of the digital technology available to exhibitors today is its capability to capture data on audience feedback, satisfaction, and participation. The tried-and-true post-show debriefing session is the perfect opportunity for your marketing team to analyze the feedback data provided by email marketing, social media channels, and other digital technology to create more personal, tailored content for next year’s event.

Exhibitors can continue to leverage digital technology after the event to keep the momentum going throughout the year. A few strategies include:

- Sending a follow-up email the day after the event thanking guests for visiting your booth or event. Don’t forget to link to photos, videos, social media posts, and other information from the event.

- Keeping the conversation going on social media by posting highlights, promoting additional insights, and asking for feedback (a majority of marketing executives said Facebook is the most effective post-event social media channel4).

- Finding out which sessions were most popular, and relating the topics of those sessions to your products and services as fodder for content, by creating or curating blogs and articles.

4 Ibid.
The New Normal

We live in a digital world.

Smartphones, mobile apps, and social media platforms have become an intrinsic part of our daily lives, and experts foresee a future in which information sharing over the Internet will flow through our lives “like electricity.”\(^5\) For younger generations who’ve grown up with digital technology, the real and virtual worlds have merged completely. These trends are creating a new normal for exhibitors — an environment in which digital is no longer just a tool in the toolbox, but instead is a core, critical component of the live brand experience.

The key for marketers is to have an intelligent, targeted plan for leveraging technology — one that combines the best of traditional marketing practices with the exciting capabilities of today’s digital, mobile, and social tools — and to develop separate strategies for before, during, and after the live brand experience. It also helps to have a strategic partner with the expertise, resources, and technology to create immersive and interactive brand experiences. Using this guide as a framework, and with the help of a strategic partner, you can take audience engagement to a new level and make digital technology work for you.

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let’s get digital

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