



INTERNATIONAL
LIVE EVENTS ASSOCIATION

Exceptional Experiences

A report from the International Live Events Association (ILEA)

February 2021

Introduction

Welcome to the Exceptional Experiences Report from ILEA. This study is an analysis of the results from our global survey, conducted to support Reed Exhibitions' programme of online content during IBTM World Virtual, which took place on 10 December 2020.

As the exclusive event association partner for this virtual brand experience event, ILEA carried out an online survey amongst members, asking a series of 25 questions to gain insight and understanding into the trends most likely to dominate the next 12 months and beyond.

Almost 250 event planners, agencies, hoteliers, venues, marketing managers and suppliers from EMEA and North America responded, providing detailed answers on factors including, how businesses have been impacted by Covid-19; whether or not digital audiences will still be coveted once in-person events return; what technologies will form part of the new event planner toolkit; how events will become more sustainable; and the value of face-to-face in this accelerated digital landscape.

The results are a window into the world of the post Covid-19 meetings and event planner and show how the role has evolved, from organiser to virtual technologist and digital marketing expert.

The findings also reveal how planner priorities have shifted from budgetary and sourcing concerns to technology, health and safety and sustainability requirements, as physical events slowly reawaken against a backdrop of human behaviours that have been changed by the pandemic forever.

The respondent

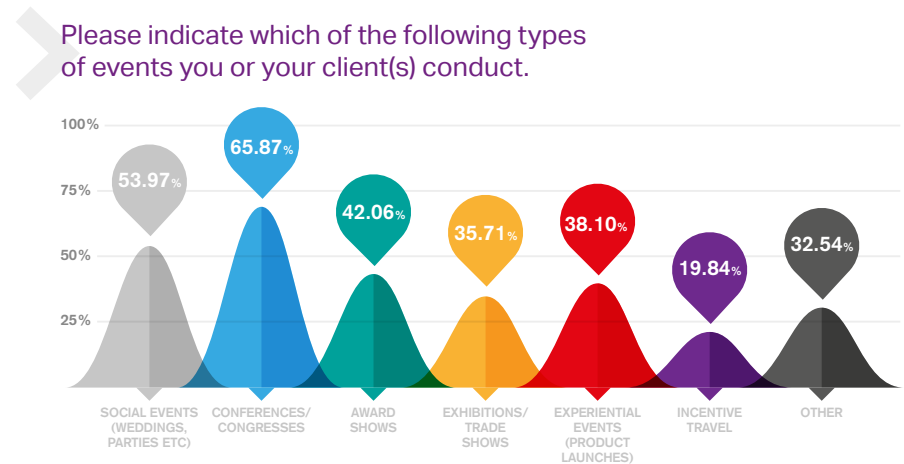
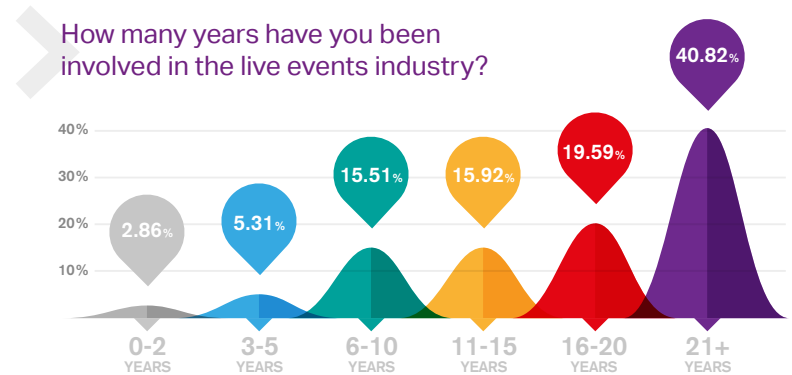
Allow us to introduce you to our survey respondents.

They are an experienced group, with a third (35.5%) having worked in the events industry for between 10 and 20 years and a majority (40.82%) having working in the sector for longer than 20 years.

This means that around 75% of respondents would have experienced the impact of the 2008 global financial crash on the worldwide live events market, and at least 40% would have worked through the 2001 recession, caused by the collapse of the dot com bubble, plus the 9/11 terror attacks.

Still, nothing would have prepared them for the events of 2020, caused by the global coronavirus pandemic.

By spring 2020, global economies were grinding to a halt, populations went into lockdown and thousands of fatalities were being recorded. In late September, worldwide deaths caused by Covid-19 surpassed one million. And, as we approached Christmas, new variants of the virus and second waves saw much of the world retreat back behind closed doors.



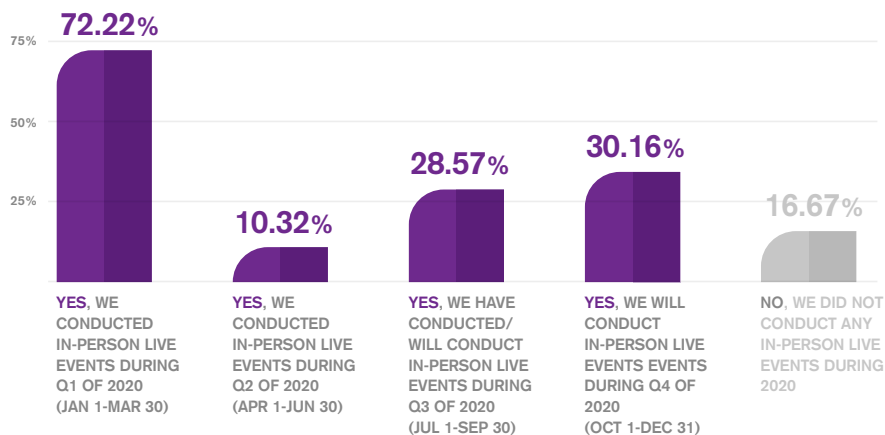
The respondent continued...

The impact on the events industry and its global supply-chain has been both devastating and disrupting in equal measure. Worldwide cancellations and postponements have seen businesses disappear but have also cleared the way for a rise in virtual alternatives to in-person activity, with new skillsets acquired to ensure the survival of the global live events planner.

In a typical year prior to Covid-19, a majority (41%) of respondents would be organising more than 50 domestic events, with 85% also planning a handful of overseas activity.

By Q2 of 2020 however, only 10% of global respondents were still staging in-person live events.

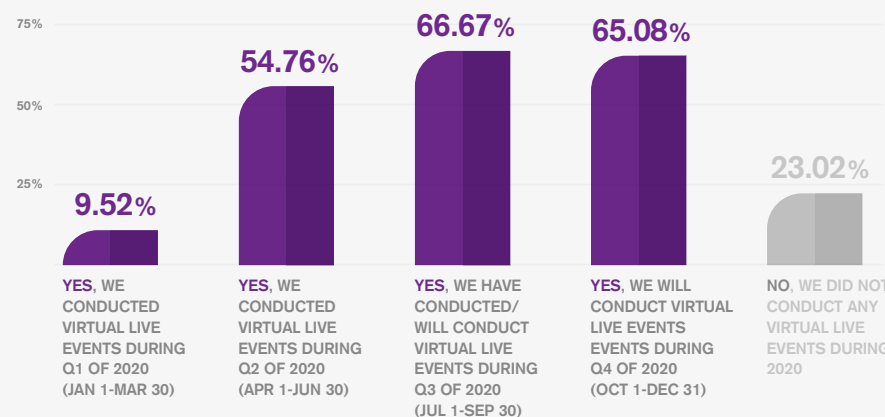
Have you or your client(s) conducted any in-person live events in 2020?



Although the easing of restrictions in certain countries for short periods allowed 28.5% of respondents to conduct in-person live events between July and September, and 30% to run events in Q4 of 2020, a return to live activity for the 72% of planners who were staging events in Q1 of 2020 isn't now anticipated until at least Q3 of 2021.

Instead, by July 2020, 66.6% of respondents had pivoted to staging virtual events, which remained consistent throughout Q4.

Have you or your client(s) conducted any virtual live events in 2020?



Almost a quarter (23%) of respondents however, told us that they weren't involved in any virtual event activity, giving rise for concern over this segment of the supply chain who haven't been able to translate their live offer for online audiences.

Adapt to survive and thrive

Throughout 2020, as our planner respondents grew in confidence, having up-skilled themselves in virtual event practices, they could begin to look again at which events would succeed online for 2021 and beyond, what technology is available to help them and how face-to-face marketing objectives can be translated for the virtual world.

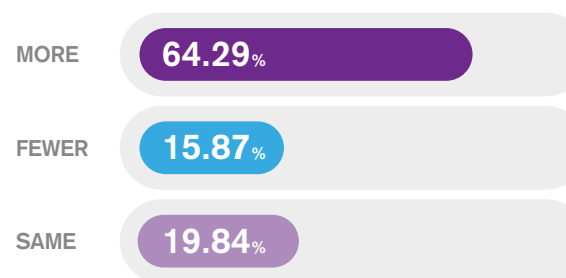
No doubt this process of taking one step back to take two steps forward has for many, been a rewarding and eye-opening experience.

It has given planners the time and space to question the original goals and KPIs of their activity and scale each event down to its original purpose - whether that be training, networking, knowledge sharing or internal corporate communications.

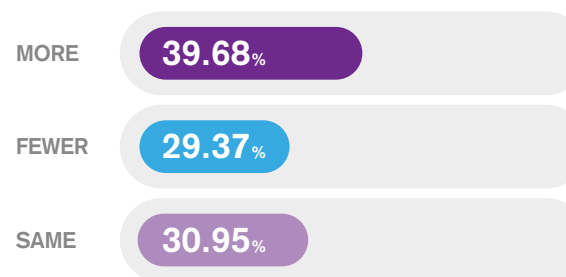
Help has come from marketing departments, already used to running webinar programmes and able to offer tech stacks and marketing best practices to planners entering this new virtual world.

As a result, the virtual event format is now here to stay.

Compared to a typical year, are you or your client(s) planning to run more, fewer, or the same number of virtual live events in 2021?



Compared to a typical year, are you or your client(s) planning to run more, fewer, or the same number of virtual live events in 2022?

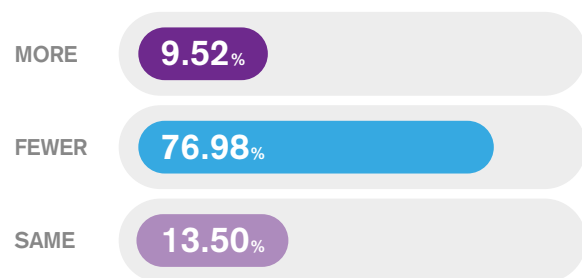


A majority of our respondents (64%) tell us they're planning to run more virtual live events in the year ahead, whilst 70.6% are also planning more or the same number of virtual events into 2022.

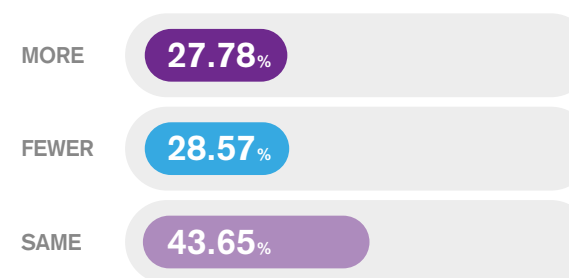
Adapt to survive and thrive continued...

Contrastingly, although perhaps not surprising, 77% of respondents anticipate running fewer in-person live events in 2021.

Compared to a typical year, are you or your client(s) planning to run more, fewer, or the same number of in-person live events in 2021?



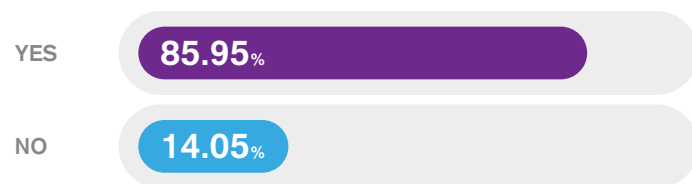
Compared to a typical year, are you or your client(s) planning to run more, fewer, or the same number of in-person live events in 2022?



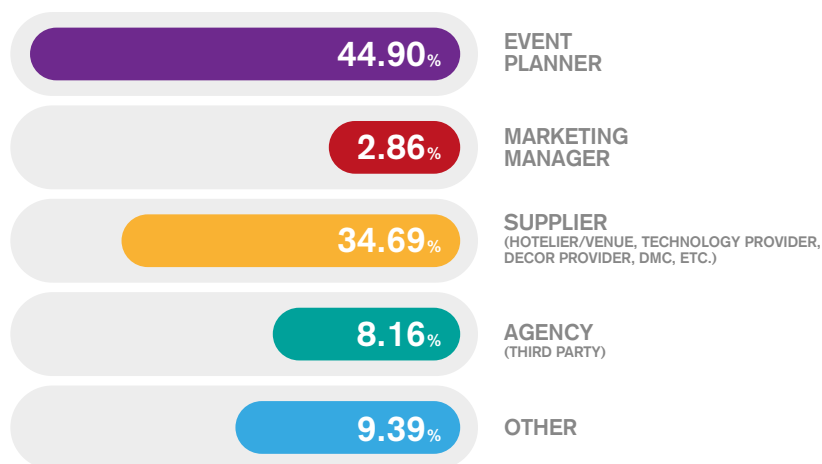
By 2022 however, over a quarter of respondents (27.7%) expect the number of in-person live events to be back on the rise, which is likely to usher in the age of the hybrid event format.

The age of hybrid

Once you return to physical events, will you or your client(s) continue to employ a digital strategy to maintain your virtual audience (i.e. make your event hybrid)?



Please select which of the options below best describes your role in the live events industry:



Over 88% of respondents cited hybrid and virtual technologies when asked what new tech they'd consider implementing into event experiences during 2021. Whilst almost 86% of respondents told us that once a return to physical events gets underway in 2022, they will continue to deploy a digital strategy to maintain virtual audiences.

Coupled with the fact that 43.6% anticipate a slower than expected return to in-person, likely fuelled by greater corporate scrutiny over sustainability initiatives and a reduction in air travel, the landscape for blending in-person activity with online experiences for virtual audiences will certainly be a fertile one.

Just as our planner respondents had to adapt to survive and thrive in the virtual world, they will once again need to adapt for the age of hybrid.

This time however, they'll be ready. This time, they'll have double the skill-sets and this time, they'll be able to use all of their virtual know-how to plan with a clear understanding of both online and in-person audience expectations, content delivery, personalised engagement and stakeholder objectives.

When asked to explain the need for a hybrid event strategy, planner responses included:

.....
“We anticipate **a reduction in travel over the next two years**. As long as that is a concern, we will continue to have virtual elements.”

.....
“We have seen the need for virtual to extend well beyond the return of live due to **cost, accessibility, and it will take time to rebuild confidence in travel and gathering** in larger numbers.”

.....
“There will now always be people who want to continue to **‘work from home’**. This will allow people the option to also **‘attend from home’**.”

.....
“The hybrid model is the wave of the future, blending key learnings from **producing virtual event programmes with new opportunities to engage a broader audience** in addition to those who chose to attend in-person.”

.....
“Even when live events return, **hybrid opens up certain types of events to wider audiences** who may benefit from a lower entry price point or who are restricted from corporate travel.”

.....
“It is the future. **We see a much higher registration conversion rate** when we offer a virtual option.”

The age of hybrid continued...

Alongside hybrid and virtual technology, respondents cited other ways in which they will look to use new technology in order to better engage in-person and online audiences. These included gamification (44.6%), multi-sensory (31%) and Augmented / Virtual Reality (29.7%).

Hybrid audiences are likely to engage more with gamification (the insertion of game dynamics and mechanics into non-game activities to drive a desired behaviour), via dedicated mobile event apps.

People spend a great deal of time playing games on their mobile devices so incorporating a fun gaming element into an event app could drive in-person attendees to attend more sessions in order to collect reward points, plus keep virtual audiences better engaged in targeted content.

Virtual Reality meanwhile has had several false dawns already during the past decade. However, in order to compete as a viable alternative to attending an event in-person, VR may well hold some of the answers when devising exceptional online visitor experiences.

A sustainable future

When asked to name ways organisations were incorporating sustainability into the live experience, responses included:

.....

“We partner with local not-for-profit organisations to give-back to the neighbouring community.”

.....

“We’ve replaced printed materials and brochures with QR codes.”

.....

“Guests are asked to bring their own reusable cups and glasses and receive discounted drink prices in return.”

.....

“Our business has introduced a Sustainability Working Group.”

.....

“The introduction of hybrid event formats will reduce travel-related eco waste.”

A sustainable future continued...

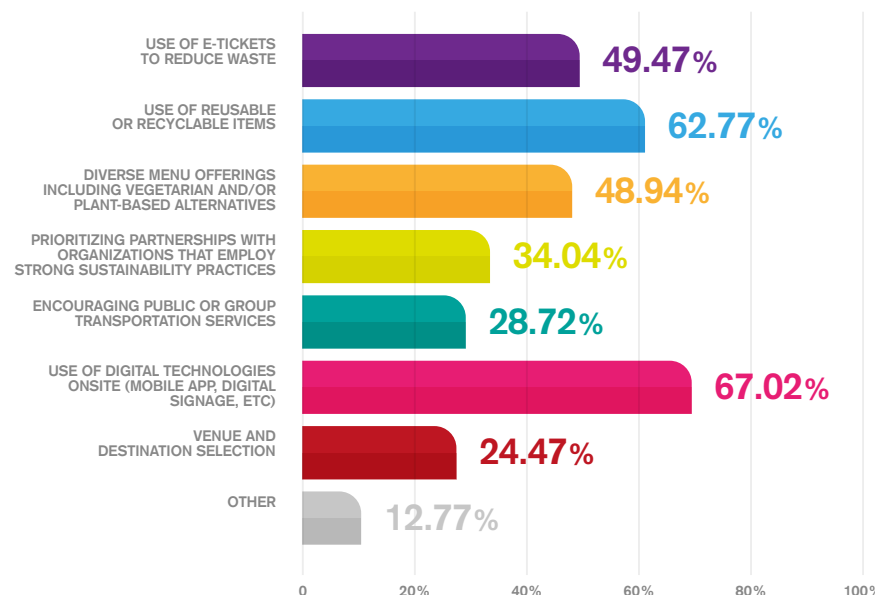
The biggest impact on live experiences during 2021 will of course be the ability to keep attendees safe and well, as prioritised by almost 40% of our survey respondents.

Beyond 2021 however, we will see a new dawn for CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) and environmental considerations, as companies adapt to their customer’s evolved expectations for more meaningful brand contributions, at both a local community level and how they treat the wider planet.

Having moved from in-person to a fully-sustainable model of virtual events during the pandemic, our respondent planners will be forced to think harder about how to ensure that once we return to hybrid or in-person formats, sustainability remains a key consideration.

Virtual meetings and events have proven that we don’t need to print off materials to run this activity. The use of e-tickets to reduce waste (49.4%) is already the third most popular way in which our respondents’ are incorporating sustainability into the live event experience. We should all ensure that where possible, we do not print anything ever again for event planning.

What are the top ways in which your organization is incorporating sustainability in a live event experience?



A sustainable future continued...

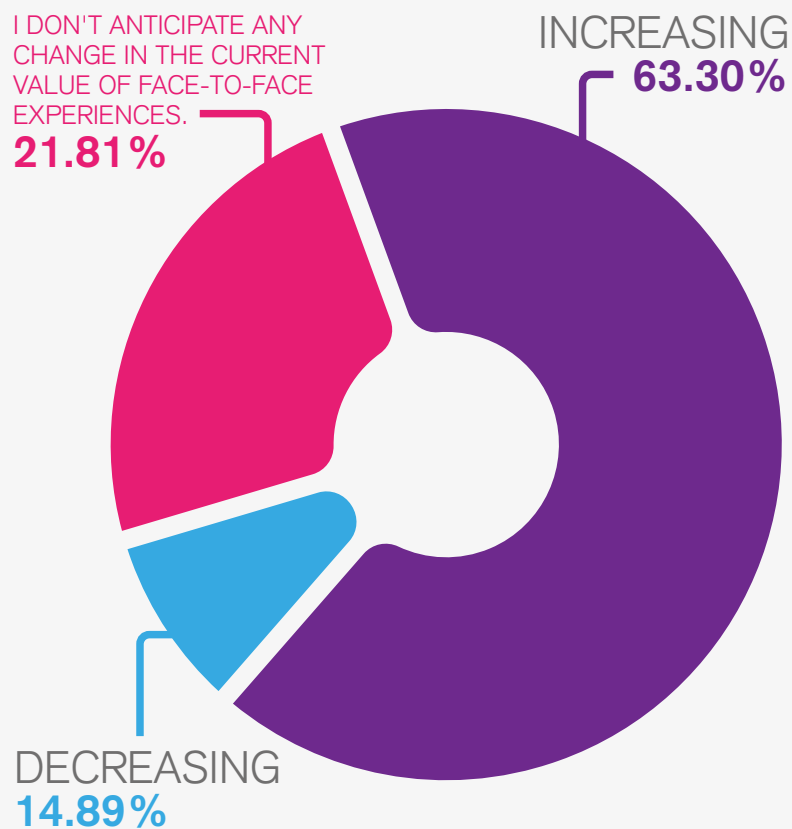
Further areas of sustainability to those cited by our respondents, which we anticipate will be prioritised once we return to in-person events, include how venues reduce food waste, how suppliers minimise their carbon footprint and how in-house event teams are capturing and evidencing CSR improvements and key performance indicators.

This is a huge opportunity for the global events sector to intertwine the evolution of hybrid event formats with the protection of our planet so that, as an industry, we're leading on best practice, rather than fire-fighting accusations of wastefulness and neglect.

With accelerated corporate consideration around sustainability issues, every one of our respondent job roles will have a big part to play in proving the case that face-to-face marketing effectiveness in environments such as trade shows, conferences and experiential events can be carried out responsibly and with environmental care in a post Covid world.

The value of face-to-face

Do you see the value of face-to-face experiences increasing or decreasing in a growing digital world?



Having adapted for more hybrid, sustainable event formats, 63.3% of our respondents believe that the value of face-to-face experiences will increase in a fast-paced digital world that continues to evolve.

After all, face-to-face interaction offers brand marketers a valuable opportunity to form deeper connections, which are simply not possible over email, zoom or social media.

Face-to-face is the Ying to digital marketing's Yang and it forces us to lean in and experience rather than look down and switch off.

When asked to explain why they believe that the value of face-to-face live experiences won't change, responses included:

.....
"People crave gatherings. Sitting at a desk watching a virtual event is not the same as moving from session to session and networking along the way."

.....
"Face-to-face matters. The opportunity for better face-to-face interactions, supplemented by virtual experiences is huge and will be the new normal."

.....
"Society understands the importance of being with each other and the genuine connections that it creates."

.....
"There is only a limited amount of expression and body language that can be translated to virtual. Face-to-face provides more opportunities for connection and spontaneous conversation."

.....
"People miss people. People miss experiences and people miss making memories."

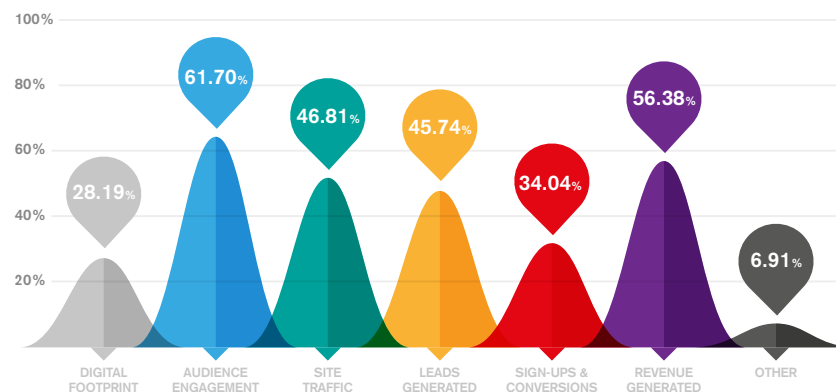
The value of face-to-face continued...

By the end of 2021, we expect to see B2B marketing budgets reallocated back into live events with additional investment in virtual elements for hybrid formats.

As with other forms of marketing, this extra investment can often be reliant on event teams being able to prove ROI or ROO (Return on Objectives). So it's important to set measurement goals and have relevant KPIs in place.

For our respondents, the most popular metrics tracked for optimisation and the calculation of ROI are: audience engagement (61.7%), revenue generated (56.3%), website traffic (46.8%) and leads generated (45.7%).

In your organization, what metrics are being tracked and used for optimization and calculation of ROI?



The value of face-to-face continued...

In addition, other KPIs for generating useful measurement data may include, increases in event registrations, registration to attendee conversions, attendee satisfaction scores, brand mentions across social and other media channels, plus post event feedback.

While contributing to a sales pipeline or revenue bottom line may be the ultimate end goal for many marketing directors, focusing on attendee engagement and attendee satisfaction can produce wide-ranging benefits.

A highly satisfied conference attendee for example, will more likely become a future customer, return to subsequent events or be retained as a customer. Meanwhile, brand awareness and brand mention tracking can measure engagement across various event types—from product launches and roadshows to field marketing and event sponsorship.

Live events (along with their virtual counterparts) are also now gold-mines of information about attendees. At every touch-point, delegates leave digital breadcrumbs that provide crucial insights and data to help you create more personal, targeted experiences.

No global pandemic will alter these facts. Human behaviour dictates that we are sociable creatures and face-to-face interaction in the form of live events will continue to be the most effective and trusted marketing channel for generations to come.

In order to meet our responsibility to safeguard each other and the planet, this trusted marketing channel now just has a permanent virtual add-on, which the global live events industry will continue to embrace and evolve to ensure future added value and enhanced exceptional experiences.