VIRTUAL EVENTS – THE NEW NORMAL?

FLUID CONTROLS
ENGINEERING CONNECTIONS EVERYDAY



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The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted businesses in many ways. Operationally, businesses have had to restructure their facilities and working to ensure collective safety. They have also had to adapt to remote functioning - for communication within teams and for working from home.

Businesses exist within a wider framework which demands continuous interaction with partners and customers. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed – possibly forever – the way this interaction is done. Digitization has become the "new normal" for customer outreach events – from virtual exhibitions and seminars to virtual B2B events. And the evolution from simple presence on the internet or participation in a physical exhibition has been dramatic.

Exploring the Digital Space

Since the start of the lockdown in March 2020, Fluid Controls has been actively exploring the virtual space. We have adopted a multi-pronged digital outreach approach to our communication with customers and partners which includes:

- corporate mailers
- social media activity
- corporate campaign like #AbAadatDalLo across multiple platforms
- banners on digital publications, and
- participation in virtual exhibitions and conferences.

We have so far participated in two virtual exhibitions - VERE 2020 [Virtual Exhibition on Railway Equipment] organized by CII and the Rail & Metro Technology Conclave 2020 – Digital Edition organized by Rail Analysis. For both events, we adopted a coordinated campaign and all our communication contained hyperlinks to our stall to facilitate customer visits.

Advantages and Challenges

Virtual exhibitions have several advantages: effective to organize, cost effective to participate in and allow customers access to a wide variety of digital collaterals like catalogues, brochures etc. They are also location agnostic as the customers can visit irrespective of where they are located. Virtual exhibitions also enable efficient lead tracking – no need to scan business cards or rely on memory.

Organisation and programming – which are important for physical events – more crucial for digital exhibitions. Organisers of virtual exhibitions need to aggressively market the event as people are accessing remotely and may have other distractions. The registration and login processes need to be simple – a complicated registration process is a deterrent to visitors. And the technology platform needs to be robust to ensure continuous connectivity. The platform should also be up in advance so that exhibitors are given access to their stall early (at least a week in advance) to ensure any glitches are ironed out. One suggestion – which we have not seen so far – is to offer exhibitors the option to customize their stalls – a sort of modular format where the exhibitors can choose from a menu and "build" their online stall. This would take a virtual event closer to a physical event, where exhibitors have the flexibility to completely customize their stalls.



The New Normal?

Physical events and the face-to-face interaction they facilitate cannot be replaced. The touch-feel of products and the personal connections established by physical events are immeasurably important. Similarly, in seminars and conferences, the "meet-and-greet" tea breaks and lunches cannot be replicated by virtual conferences.

There is definitely a space for virtual events to complement physical events. Virtual events offer reach beyond geography and, if marketed well, can increase reach and spread. Organisers could offer exhibitors a physical event for a limited number of days and tag on additional days for a virtual event. Or offer "digital only" versions for exhibitors who cannot participate in a physical event. Conferences – which normally accompany physical events – can be made physical + virtual. Looking forward, it may even be possible to create high profile digital exhibitions which would become an established part of the annual expo calendar.

At Fluid Controls, where we regularly participate in exhibitions, a combination of virtual events and physical events would be ideal, giving us flexibility and greater reach.

In a post-pandemic world, the digitisation of events which has occurred should be built on and nurtured.