

A hybrid events calendar bri

With the UK's vaccination campaign working to contain the worst effects of Covid-19, the ICT industry is itching to fill the calendar with live events, awards dinners and networking gatherings. But this does not spell the end for digital events.

While face-to-face events are key to strengthening industry bonds, the pandemic has seen online events evolve into a useful tool for sharing key information with a wide range of partners regardless of geography.

With this in mind, we asked this month's contributors the following question - are you embracing face-to-face events once more or are you content to learn, meet and greet online?



AMELIA EBDON
ENREACH UK

At Enreach we have found that a hybrid approach has suited us and our customers in every area of the business – including events. We've found that by being adaptive to both types of event, we can get the benefits of both. Online events allowed us to speak to customers right across the UK from the comfort of their own spaces. In-person events help us connect with and assess a customer's potential needs on hand with a dedicated team. Demonstrating products and software works well on both platforms and the huge improvements in video calling technology have allowed people to feel more connected and comfortable with this method of communication. We believe being flexible and agile with events going forwards is the way to continue reaching a diverse and connected audience who are keen to find out more and want to have the choice as to how they do so.



CHERIE HOWLETT
JOLA

We are certainly attending face-to-face events once more, however, we are still seeing high attendees at our monthly webinars. During the pandemic we engaged in multiple online events and hosted our own. Also, our sales team are continuing to be very productive running meetings on Teams. I have seen an improvement in the quality of online events and new software has helped audiences engage, however, there is no substitute for face-to-face meetings in my view. We forget sometimes how many of our channel relationships have been forged in person over dinner or drinks. For me, online meetings are much more efficient, which is great once relationships are established but face-to-face meetings are an opportunity to establish trust, uncover opportunities and do great business.



WILL MOREY
PRAGMA GROUP

As always, it is about a hybrid approach and tailoring your events to the best medium and offering choices for the attendees. The pandemic drove the need to adapt to remote meetings and I think we have had our eyes opened to how much can be done remotely. Online events can deliver the content which is often all that is needed, however, the informal networking and fun that goes with getting a group of people together are key drivers for many attendees deciding to participate in an event. We are looking forward to hosting more in-person events again, like our Annual Conference at the end of April and attending more channel events like Channel Champions, Comms Vision and others. The response we've had from our customers for us to host in-person events again has been really strong. People are looking forward to gathering and having conversations over a beer or glass of wine.



ANDRE ARMSTRONG
MAINTEL

I think that pre-pandemic, many face-to-face events were mediocre. Attendees came away with tidbits of knowledge that had a limited impact on their jobs or lives. During the pandemic online events significantly increased and we saw the rise of virtual platforms like Hopin for large scale events. We also saw numerous creative ideas employed by organisations to drive attendance to smaller events, such as cooking virtually with a professional chef or wine tasting. Yet many people grew increasingly tired of online events and for organisers it became harder to drive up attendance. Now it is time to embrace face-to-face events once more. I think we'll still see challenges with in-person events due to legacy COVID, hybrid working and increasing costs. Organisers and individuals will adapt to this and I'm hoping this drives more engaging events where the emphasis is placed on attendees gaining knowledge that can make real impact to their jobs or lives.



BERNIE MCPHILLIPS
PANGAEA

Taking a physical event and making it digital requires flexibility, creativity and a boatload of hard work. So huge kudos to teams that ran events over the last couple of years. That said, the pandemic proved just how much of our communication is nonverbal. Tone of voice, gestures, posture and facial expressions all lose effectiveness with fully digital events and when it comes to striking deals, educating partners or just making friends, it's much harder doing it through a Zoom letterbox. The best approach is a blended approach. Take Mobile World Congress 2022: you could stream all 17 hours of their keynotes on-demand from home (no missing valuable content just because you can't make it!), or you could go to Barcelona for the full networking experience. Partners should keep attending webinars and Q&As online and as many big events throughout the year as possible. Best of both worlds.



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IAN ROWAN
WILDIX

It's been a tough two years, but as a whole the channel, as with other challenges it has faced, has adapted well and moved quickly to ensure that online services replaced those face-to-face meetings. During this time Wildix has enhanced its product range to offer more services that customers required such as tiled view with conferencing, webinar services for mass audiences and improvements to our Wizzyconf station by adding third-party support for conferencing. These changes let our partners and customers have the best possible experience during the imposed restrictions. Now these restrictions are over, the desire to meet in person seems to be at an all-time high and this is encouraging for the market as this converts into business. As good as the tools you have, and I think we have the best, you can't do better than in-person interactions to build and develop relationships.



DARREN FARNDEN
CITYFIBRE

In response to the pandemic we had to rethink and rewrite our strategy regarding both internal and external events to adhere to mandatory obligations and keep our employees safe. As the guidelines were observed our use of applications such as Teams and Zoom increased and proved to be essential in connecting with our customers and colleagues. Although these applications remain invaluable in connecting people, we are striving to see each other face to face more to collaborate and to continue to build relationships. We do so of course against the backdrop of Covid still impacting our lives and, as a company, we're maintaining a considered and careful approach in order to keep our employees and those we meet as safe as possible. Nonetheless we're positive and excited about bringing our teams and partners together at our own as well as major channel events in 2022.



JAIME WILLIAMS
GAMMA

The pandemic accelerated a hybrid/online approach to events: the success of which can be attributed to the impressive capabilities of available (and often under-utilised) technology. We were aware of the benefits of using webinars to remotely promote updates to our partners, but the pandemic was, sadly, the catalyst that highlighted the need for this technology and the impressive impact it has on user experience. It was the push that forced businesses to invest in it. After pivoting to fully digital events, we quickly learnt that online environments are great for content consumption, but at the same time, they can't emulate the type of engagement and relationship-building of an in-person event. There's definitely a place for virtual events moving forward and we will be continuing with our extensive webinar programme, however, there's no replacement for face-to-face interaction for building and strengthening ties within the industry between our customers, partners, and peers.



MARK DRESSEL
VIRTUAL1

We have missed the networking that comes with face-to-face events: plus, channel parties are always a good time! This year we're making a big push to attend and host events in person. It's true that software like Teams and Zoom are easy, cost-effective ways to stay in touch; but they could never be permanent solutions. I'm sure we all remember Zoom fatigue! After all, speech is just one ingredient in a conversation. Body language plays a huge role and it's especially important for building rich, trusting relationships between partners. Plus, when you're face-to-face, you know the person you're talking to isn't sneaking a quick look at their emails or getting their Twitter fix. At Virtual1, we're striking a balance between the two: using virtual solutions for day-to-day comms but meeting face-to-face for the big stuff wherever possible. All the benefits of digital transformation, while keeping the value of traditional meetings.



CAMILLA KARM
REDSQUID

After two years of being online we are once again embracing face-to-face and have merged to becoming fully omnichannel in our approach. We find that digital and physical events go perfectly together and create the opportunity to meet new and existing customers wherever they are. Both channels have their unique capabilities and as we are a nationwide reseller, online events and meetings have allowed us to meet our customers frequently throughout the pandemic, whereas, we now are seeing a bigger appetite to meet face to face. Many are craving real-life interactions and when taking a new organisation through the digital transformation, face-to-face allows us to be on-site with our customers to get a 360-view of their requirements to see where we can make the biggest difference to them and build on a long-term partnership as their trusted advisor.



ELLIE ALLSEYBROOK
INFORM BILLING

Although there is definitely a place for virtual events, face-to-face will always be my preference and we were back embracing them at the first opportunity. The pandemic brought improvements to platforms, much greater exposure to virtual events and now that a lot of the fatigue has passed, there is definitely a greater acceptance to attending events online. Virtual events can also be great when time is tight and sessions can be held in bite-sized chunks. Inform Billing has successfully run demos and training sessions online for years, but for larger events involving more delegates, true engagement is still challenging – it's far too easy to be distracted and much harder to ensure commitment. Ours is a social industry and for me events are an opportunity to build relationships, loyalty and trust – all of which are easiest done in person.

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