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MINUTE MARKETER

How to Use Virtual Events to Engage with Customers and Prospects

15 tactics for getting the best
results from virtual events

30-Minute Marketer: How to Use Virtual Events to Engage with Customers and Prospects

15 tactics for getting the best results from virtual events

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30-Minute Marketer: How to Use Virtual Events to Engage with Customers & Prospects

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TACTICS YOU CAN LEARN OVER LUNCH

Welcome to *30-Minute Marketer* – a resource from MarketingSherpa featuring bite-sized tips for busy marketers.

In this report, we focus on how you can use virtual events to engage with customers and prospects, while also generating high-quality leads.

Many companies are turning to virtual events out of necessity, as budget restraints force them to find economical alternatives to expensive live events. But they quickly see the benefits and advantages of doing virtual events. You can attract a much larger group of potential attendees, since location and ability to travel are no longer factors.

Plus, most people are at least reasonably tech savvy today, and many feel more comfortable doing business or interacting with others online.

In this report, we'll show you:

- Why virtual events are becoming more popular with both organizers and participants
- How to enlist sponsors, and encourage them to interact with participants
- Types of virtual events
- Tips for recruiting attendees via email

We know you're in a hurry, so let's get started. Here's to a great virtual event!

Bobbi Dempsey
Editor, *30-Minute Marketer*

About *30-Minute Marketer*

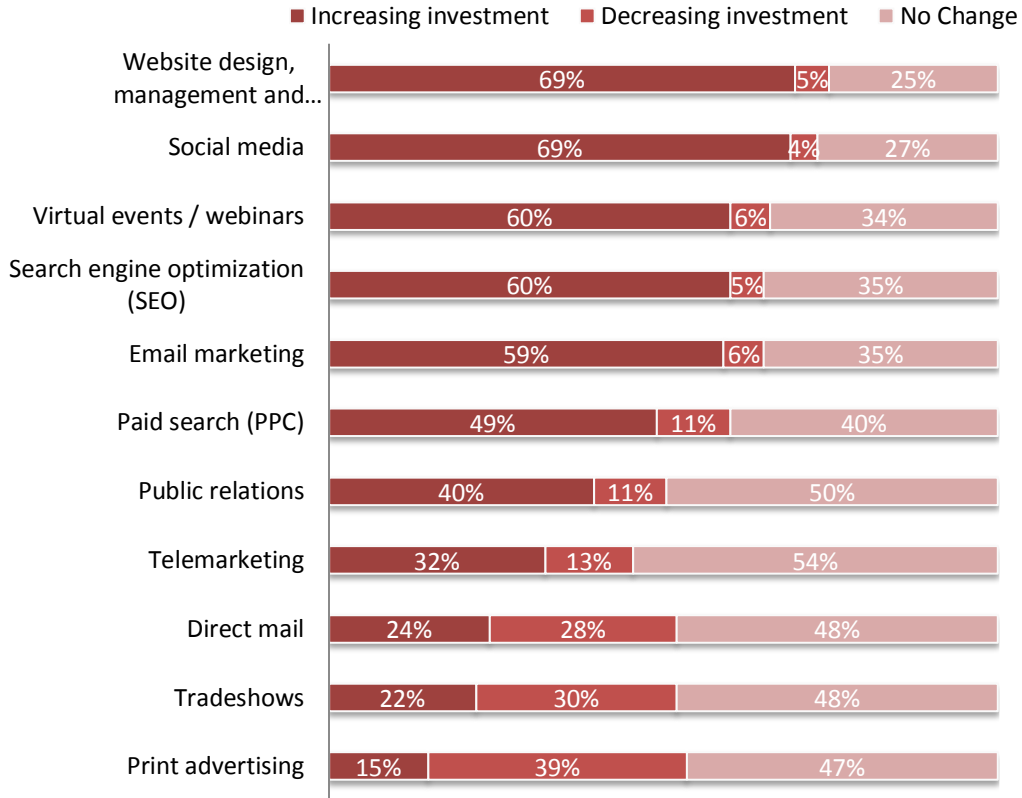
MarketingSherpa's *30-Minute Marketer* is designed with you, the busy marketer, in mind. We know you have a lot to do and not a lot of time in which to do it. You need quick, simple tips that you can put into action right away.

For each *30-Minute Marketer*, we scour the vast MECLABS library of marketing research, from MarketingSherpa case studies and benchmark reports, to MarketingExperiments optimization tests, and edit the research down into an actionable piece for helping you improve your marketing performance right now...or, at least, by the time you're done with lunch.

As many companies are forced to slash their budgets for both travel and events, an increasing number of organizations are turning to virtual events as a more affordable and convenient alternative to live trade shows.

Chart: B2B marketers increasing investments in inbound tactics

Q. Please select the statement that best describes how you expect your organization’s budgets will change for the following categories in 2011.



Source: MarketingSherpa B2B Marketing Benchmark Survey
Methodology: Fielded Aug 2010, N=935

As this chart from the [MarketingSherpa 2011 B2B Marketing Benchmark Report](#) shows, 60% of B2B companies plan to increase their investment in virtual events and webinars this year.

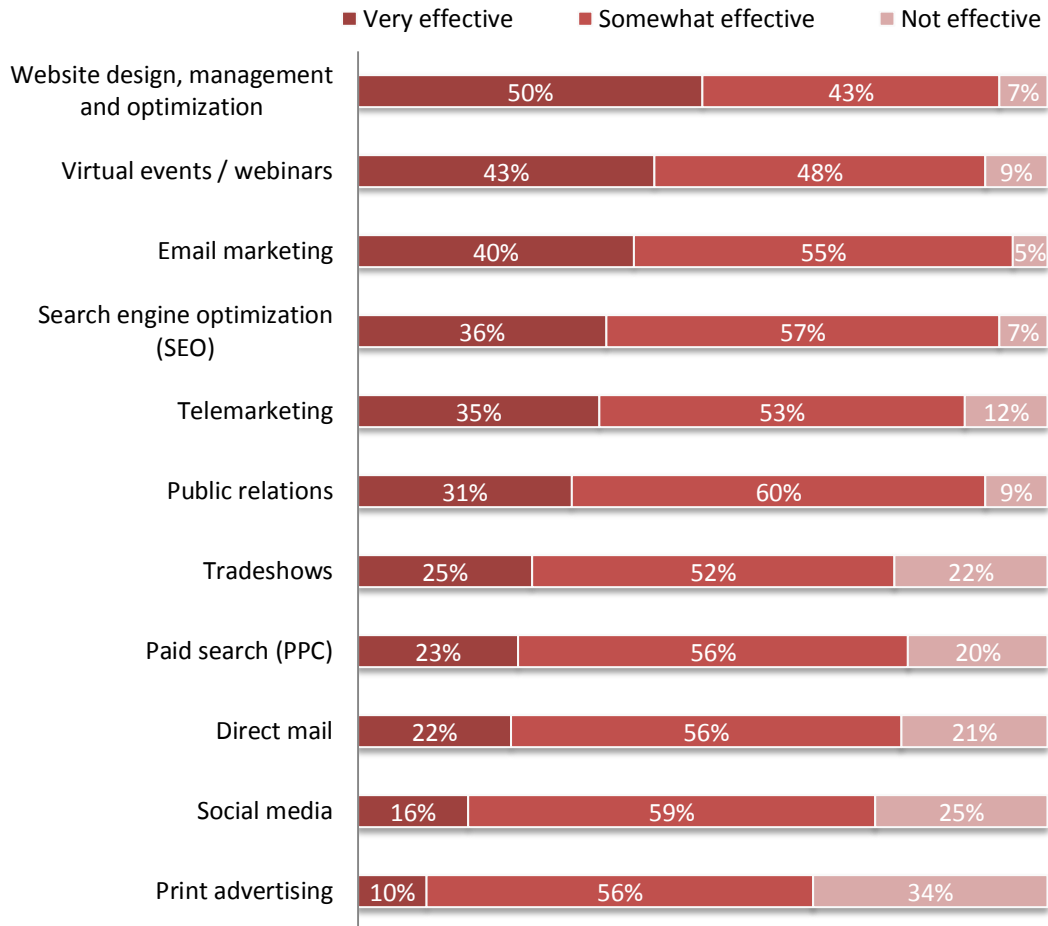
Before going any further, it would probably be a good idea to clearly define “virtual event.” In the MarketingSherpa blog post, ["B2B Marketing: Take established trade show best practices and adapt them for an online audience with virtual events."](#) Daniel Burstein asked Chris Chariton, Vice President of Supplier Marketing & Marketing Services at GlobalSpec, an engineering search engine, to explain.

"Virtual trade shows go beyond a webinar or webcast, as they include elements of both an educational conference and a trade show," says Chariton. "A typical webinar lasts between 30 and 60 minutes, and is usually focused on a single topic. On the other hand, virtual trade shows encompass a “conference” portion featuring many different educational sessions with a variety of speakers, as well as a “trade show” component including exhibitor booths,

live chat and networking. The platform for virtual trade shows is much more comprehensive, the interactive capabilities are greater, and they offer additional multimedia opportunities, including video."

Chart: The effectiveness of B2B marketing tactics

Q. Please indicate the effectiveness of the following marketing tactics for your organization.



Source: MarketingSherpa B2B Marketing Benchmark Survey
Methodology: Fielded Aug 2010, N=935

The combination of interactive advantages, convenience and affordability make virtual events an attractive option, especially when they get results. As the chart above from the [MarketingSherpa 2011 B2B Marketing Benchmark Report](#) shows, 91% of B2B marketers said virtual events/webinars were very effective or somewhat effective as a marketing tactic, with only website design, management and optimization achieving a higher ranking.

Tactic #1: Get your team on board

In one aspect, virtual events will be an easy sell to team members involved with budgeting. Compared to live events, virtual versions are less expensive to organize and produce. Not to mention, you will save the costs (and

travel time) of sending staff to operate an event. By contrast, the main cost of a virtual event involves the technology resources (much of which you probably already have) and the man hours of the IT team and other staffers who will be involved before and during the event.

Even though the investment will be lower, you will still need to demonstrate ROI, especially if this is a new type of project for your team. Fortunately, you should be able to gather metrics fairly easily. Since participants will need to register and log in to your event, it will be easy to identify them and then track them by pointing them to dedicated URLs.

Tactic #2: Use virtual events for a variety of different functions

Once you've put a system in place for organizing virtual events, and feel comfortable with the process, you may be pleasantly surprised when you realize the myriad types of events you can hold in this manner. You may soon discover this is a more efficient way to conduct your own events and meetings. (Bonus: this will also help you justify the expense of any resources needed, as the more uses you can find for this system, the better your ROI.)

In the MarketingSherpa article, "[Virtual Events: How IBM's marketing department quickly responded to the economic downturn](#)," the team from IBM described using virtual events for many functions, including:

- Product launches
- Full-day events
- Multi-day meetings
- "Always on" virtual briefing centers
- Exclusive C-level executive training
- Briefing center with 24/7 access to consultants

Tactic #3: Assess your tech resources and abilities

You should do a realistic assessment of your technology resources, capabilities and staff to figure out exactly what elements you can include in your event. It is better to err on the side of simplicity, as opposed to making ambitious promises that you cannot deliver. It's a good idea to start off small, and then consider adding more "bells and whistles" once you become comfortable with the basic process.

At the very minimum, your virtual event should involve some sort of chat or IM feature that allows attendees to interact with speakers and staff. Live Web streaming is a common virtual event tool. And, of course, you'll want to be able to incorporate social media, such as having your team post live Tweets throughout the event.

Tactic #4: Combine virtual and live events

Even if you will be hosting an in-person event, hosting a virtual component simultaneously can be a smart move. In the MarketingSherpa article, "[Five Steps to Double Conference Attendance: Inject Virtual Webcast and Trade Show](#)," Nigel Clear, Commercial Director, Elsevier, and his team was preparing to host an annual three-day conference. However, they realized that limited travel budgets would force many prospects to skip the event. Plus,

they wanted to reach people worldwide—including some in developing nations, for whom travelling to Boston for the conference would be impossible.

Clear and his team developed a free Vaccine Virtual Congress held during one of the three days of the Boston event. It featured audio and video presentations streamed live from the conference, and a virtual trade show complete with online chats and visits to sponsors' booths.

Tactic #5: Consider (and try to minimize) tech challenges for attendees

One drawback of virtual events is that—as with many projects involving computers—there are technological issues to consider. While there are things you can do on your end to try and make the experience as smooth and “glitch-free” as possible, you cannot control conditions on the user's end, such as the computer setup they will be using to access your event. Address this in advance by providing registrants with ample warning as to any minimum tech requirements, or special equipment/software they may need.

Also, when possible, be sure to offer alternatives to accommodate tech-related limitations. For example, if users encounter buffering issues with video, perhaps you can offer the information in another format, such as a PowerPoint presentation or an audio recording.

Tactic #6: Spread the word on social media

There's an old saying along the lines of, "If you want to catch a fish, you go where the fish are." Likewise, if you want to find people to attend your online event, you start with those who already spend time online. Promote the event on your social media accounts, and be sure to highlight any cool perks or benefits you are offering to attendees, such as freebies or giveaways. It might even be helpful to post a "sneak peek" video that gives people a taste of what your event might be like.

Tactic #7: Promote the event to your existing lists

For their virtual event, the Elsevier team targeted their in-house database of customers and prospects. They sent a series of three emails.

The first HTML email message included:

- Introduction to the virtual congress concept
- Program of the online sessions
- Description of the interactive features
- Hotlink to an online registration page

The second email invitation was sent one week before the event. In addition to the program information and link to the registration page, this message included graphics and videos that demonstrated the look and feel of the virtual environment.

The last email invitation was sent two days before the event. It featured a final reminder that pre-registration was necessary, and a large call to action that brought prospects to the registration form.

Once someone registered, the team wanted to ensure they actually attended the event. The team used three messages to encourage attendees to log in on the day of the event:

- The first reminder went out three days before the event. It included a confirmation of the attendee's registration and a basic reminder of the schedule and login procedure.
- The second reminder was sent the day before the event. Message copy emphasized that there was only one day until the virtual congress, and reminded attendees to run a system check to make sure their log-ins were working.
- The final reminder was sent four hours before the start of the event. It included the URL for logging in.

Tactic #8: Allow attendees to mingle and network

One of the best parts about conferences and trade shows is the chance to network and make connections with others in your industry. Try to provide attendees with similar types of opportunities, using instant messaging, discussion forums and online lounges. Such opportunities are often the aspects of an event users will remember (and talk about) the most.

EXAMPLE: ELSEVIER VIRTUAL CONGRESS NETWORKING LOUNGE



Tactic #9: Test different options

For their first virtual conference, the Elsevier team (from the MarketingSherpa article, "[Five Steps to Double Conference Attendance: Inject Virtual Webcast and Trade Show](#)") streamed six presentations. They offered full streaming for three of them. For the other three, they offered audio and online slides only. They gauged the responses to each to determine which was more popular and effective with participants.

Tactic #10: Invite sponsors to create virtual booths

Having sponsor "exhibit" at your event helps recreate the atmosphere of a live trade show (while also helping to offset some of your costs). Since some potential sponsors may be unfamiliar with virtual events, you may need to educate them about the process and potential benefits. If you can show results from prior events, that will be helpful. If not, you may need to offer them a very good deal for the first event, just to get them onboard.

Tactic #11: Encourage interactivity

Obviously, your own staff should be prepared to interact with attendees as much as possible. But you should also encourage sponsors to take an interactive approach.

In the MarketingSherpa article, "[Primer on Virtual Event Marketing: 10 Tactics, 3 Strategies to Draw Visitors, Sponsors](#)," Malcolm Lotzof, CEO, InXpo, a provider of privately-branded virtual events, says the more interactive the virtual event, the more repeat attendees you'll have. "The most important part of driving traffic to the event is a great event experience."

To improve interactivity, incorporate:

- Video chat
- Text chat
- Web casting
- Blogs
- Forums
- Q&A after presentations

"What we're finding is more user-generated content in a booth," he says. "Like a chat room in a booth, a survey in a booth, or a forum in a booth."

People will return to a booth that offers discussion. The only effort it requires from an exhibitor is someone to monitor the discussion and answer questions.

Tactic #12: Gather lead-qualifying during the event (but do it sparingly and carefully)

You'll want to gather lead-qualifying information for your own purposes, but the ability to provide this information will also help you attract exhibitors and sponsors. Lotzof advises against trying to gather too much lead-qualifying information during the registration process, as you will risk scaring off potential registrants.

“Find a balance between getting key questions answered and then expanding on that throughout the rest of the process,” he says. When an attendee comes to a booth, for example, the exhibitor could have them answer a few more questions. When attendees go to a presentation, ask a few more questions. Entice them with a sweepstakes. Say: “Fill out this survey to win ...”

EXAMPLE: INXPO EXHIBIT HALL



Tactic #13: Do a post-event assessment

As with any other event or strategy, you will want to measure the success of your virtual event. You'll want to gauge the effectiveness of not only the overall event, but also individual elements and features. Fortunately, the fact that the event is online makes this fairly simple to accomplish. In fact, you can see what is (and isn't) popular with attendees, almost in real time.

Watch where they go and how long they stay there. See if they seem excited to engage with speakers and other attendees via chat, discussion boards or other means. Your tech team can gather hard numbers after the event, but you should be able to get a decent sense of how the event is going as it unfolds.

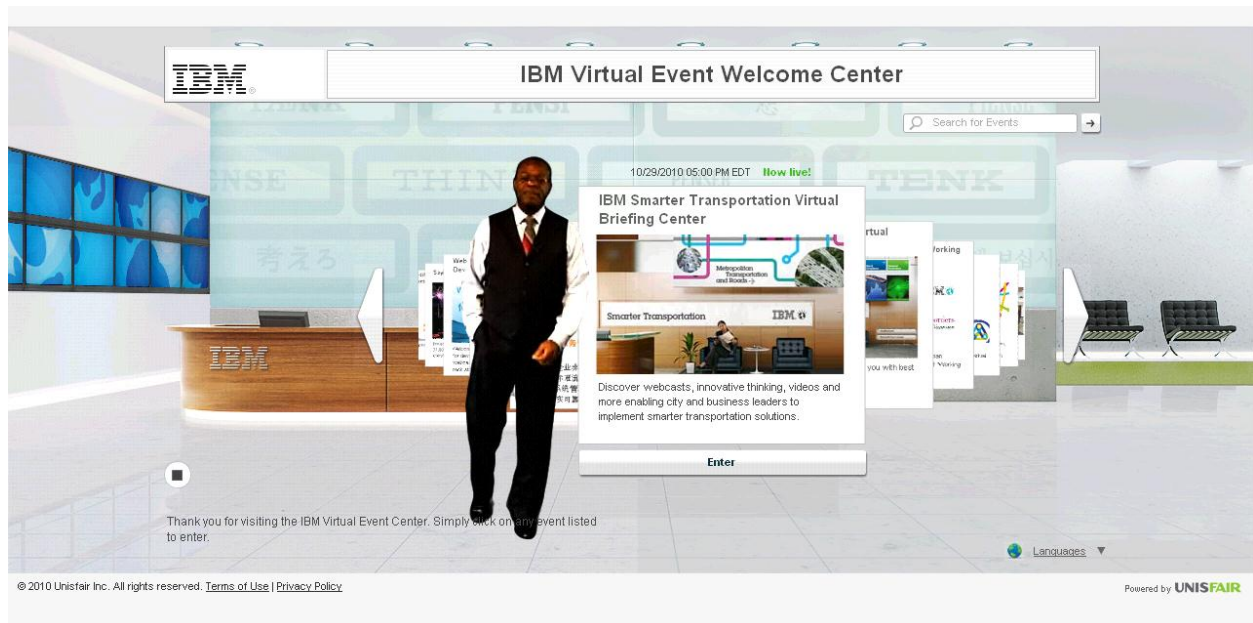
You should also send out a follow-up survey to attendees after the event, to get some insight as to changes you may want to incorporate into future events.

Tactic #14: Create an organization-wide solution center

Chances are, there are many teams within your organization that could benefit from hosting virtual events. It's also likely that after one group experiences success with these types of events, others will want to follow suit. Rather than making each team duplicate each other's efforts, it would be more efficient (and cost-effective) to create a "virtual event center" with resources that all teams could access.

IBM created the [IBM Virtual Event Center](#), which is used by IBM teams worldwide.

EXAMPLE: IBM VIRTUAL EVENT CENTER



Tactic # 15: Make event content available for future access

One way to increase your ROI from a virtual event is to keep an archived version of event content available on your website so participants can access it as an ongoing resource (you would provide them with login information that would allow them to access this material).

To entice others to register for future events, you may also want to offer select portions of the content that can be viewed by site visitors who provide basic registration information.

Useful Links and Resources:

[Exclusive: Nortel Tests Virtual Trade show \(Instead of Webinar\)—Tactics and Results](#)

[B2B Marketing: Are Trade shows on the Way Out?](#)

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