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# The future of B2B events:

## STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF EVENTS ELEVATED BY TWO YEARS OF CRISIS



B2BMARKETING.NET

B2B Marketing

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SECTION 1

# The return of the physical event!



**STEVE KEMISH,**
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Without digital events, many businesses wouldn't have been able to survive – and continue to survive – the pandemic. Of course, the pandemic has left its mark, and it's unlikely that any business will go back to functioning exactly as it did before. It makes good sense, therefore, to take stock of the current situation, and consider what's right for the future. How will your events be structured into 2023, and beyond?

There's a lot that is in flux, but one thing that is crystal clear is that events are back and are here to stay! Sales and marketing teams have leaned heavily on them over many years, and the opportunity to put events at the centre of their business toolkit will remain.

The interesting question is: 'in what format?' This report gives great insight and commentary on the current direction of travel (spoiler alert: there are many directions for you to take!), and how a blended and balanced approach will become the norm. Therefore, modern event curation and management will necessitate a blending of old skills (rock-solid planning, coupled with a healthy sprinkle of creativity – be it venue, content, or both) with modern requirements around digital and technology.

The scrutiny on event success will remain, but it's possible that digital events offer greater hope for those striving to prove ROI. Digital transformation has not only provided us with more tools and options to showcase our brand and values, but digital typically leaves us with more data – all of which is useful for measurement, following up and insight. This helps us to prove the direct value of the events we both host and attend.

As an industry, we will likely learn fastest by taking inspiration from live sports, television and theme parks – diverse places where we can benchmark their approaches to multiple-audience-experiences and adapt for our own purposes.

I'd predict that the events that succeed will be the ones that ensure the experience for both the physical and virtual audiences is world-class, even if a different approach is taken for both. In fact, a one-size-fits-all model is no longer acceptable. Consider how TV chat shows or live sporting events ensure the audience in the room or stadia enjoy a world-class experience, without detriment to their television audiences (and vice versa). They may result in a different experience, but both are valuable and can co-exist happily in such entertainment spaces.

With that in mind, why can't the same apply in our more formal and business-centred industry too?

Whilst looking outside of our industry is important, benchmarking closer to home remains vital. After all, we are still in a state of evolution, so keep your eyes open for bright ideas (or epic fails) from your direct competition, as well as via the wider community. Of course, Propolis is one such place to start, providing you with a safe place to learn from others, as well as providing feedback from your own experience. An iterative approach to each event will mean you not only continue to deliver a better product for attendees, sponsors, stakeholders and colleagues, but you can also remain nimble, adapting to trends and subtle changes in consumption behaviour as we go through to this new hybrid era.

Lastly, harnessing technology and coupling it with the vital event curation skills will also be critical. Regardless of the medium, the stalwarts of content and venue (experience) remain the vital focus for events teams throughout the year ahead and beyond.



SECTION 2

# Marketing events are back, but they're different



**PETER O'NEILL,**
lead analyst,
B2B Marketing

Over the past two and a half years, marketing events have changed dramatically. For the sake of clarity, by 'marketing events,' we mean events run by an organisation for its prospects, customers and business partners (usually a one or two-day conference with potentially hundreds, or even thousands, of attendees). When the pandemic began, physical events were put on hold altogether, and the acceptance of *purely digital* marketing events, among both organisers and attendees, has matured much faster.

The accelerated adoption of digital events has led to innovation in both presentation and interaction, changing the expectations of event attendees forever. Gone are the days when businesspeople will sit through hours of simple talking head videos and slide decks; they now expect a modern media experience with content provided in many forms tuned to their context and providing actionable advice on the questions topmost on their minds.

Furthermore, as physical events begin to return to marketing calendars, there are questions about their new role in the marketing strategy. Many companies, for instance, want to combine the advantages of actually meeting up and networking in-person, while still providing that modern media experience to enhance both audience reach and their branding. These 'hybrid events' are becoming a key consideration for all players, as attendees want the choice of attending from home or in-person.

**They key question this report will seek to answer is: what does the future of B2B marketing events look like in a post-Covid era?**

In order to build this report, we did not run a quantitative survey. Instead, we held long interviews with six senior executives in and around the B2B marketing event industry for deep insight into the topic. This report documents those interviews, as well as some insights and additional research I have done as an industry analyst. The interviews were with senior individuals from the following key categories:

**Venue owners:** Venue owners were asked about the expectations they're seeing from their clients: event organisers and event delegates. What are the requirements for running a physical event in 2022 and beyond?

**Event delegates:** Delegates were asked about their reasons for attending both physical and digital events. What drives them to attend a physical or a digital event?

What are their expectations from digital, physical and/or hybrid events. What would they like to see going forwards? What do they think is missing from current hybrid events?

### Event organisers and marketers:

This group were asked why, when and where they run an event. Have physical/hybrid events had to become more selective? Are digital events now an equally important part of the event strategy? How are hybrid events marketed to two separate audiences? What are expectations around pricing, etc? Have the traditional 'big city' locations become less important, as marketers increasingly decide to work from home?

In order to build this report, I also worked with Steve Kemish. Steve has worked in digital marketing since 1997, working both client and agency-side on digital, CRM, marketing strategy and consultancy with many global brands, including Motorola, ADP, Oracle, LEGO, Skype and Capita. As well as his role at marketing agency, Junction, he is a guest lecturer at various business schools, a member of the DMA Digital Council and a longstanding Superbrands and AEO judge. Steve is also the Propolis Hive Expert for Execution & Campaigns.

*"Without digital events, many businesses wouldn't have been able to survive – and continue to survive – the pandemic. Of course, the pandemic has left its mark and it's unlikely that any business will go back to functioning exactly as it did before. It therefore makes good sense to take stock now and consider what's right for the future. How will your events be structured into 2023, and beyond?"*

**Steve Kemish,** Propolis Hive expert, Execution & Campaigns

SECTION 3

# The event venue provider perspective

Imagine the relief across the event venue industry when travel and meeting restrictions were loosened earlier this year. The end of laying-off or furloughing employees, finally being able to set up all logistics as booked and, at last, people walking through the doors. Back to business as usual? Or has the event industry changed for good?

Jeremy Rees, CEO of ExCeL London, certainly doesn't expect a full return to physical events.

*Jeremy Rees: "Even in the olden days where Cisco Live was running in 2011–2012 here at ExCeL, they'd also have an online proposition with thousands more delegates. It has always been nuanced. Think of how people watch rugby: some go to Twickenham, which is an amazing experience, but many more people can be watching it on TV and they have a different experience."*

So, hybrid events are not new. But it is not only the digital event presentations that are changing. Even face-to-face events are now quite different than pre-Covid.

*Jeremy Rees: "Event hosts have had to up their game in order to enhance the proposition and make it more relevant. Quite a lot of the research that I've seen seems to be suggesting that it's also different types and profiles of people that are engaging in online platforms than those that would come to a terrestrial, face-to-face event."*

Indeed, according to the interviews we conducted, the main reason businesspeople want to go to a physical event is to meet their peers, business partners and vendors, and to network in the real world – not behind a screen.

That being said, event organisers still, of course, have to cater for varying levels of needs. For instance; some delegates treat digital events like attending a seminar; others want to meet in person; some want a coffee; and others want to walk around an exhibition and just look.

*Jeremy Rees: "It's about trade and it's about engagement. The ultimate in permission marketing is when someone's left their office in Germany, jumped on a plane, landed at City Airport next door to ExCeL and is keen to be sold to."*

Pre-Covid, conference attendance was a routine pastime, considered as a normal way of doing business and getting better informed. The past two years have dramatically changed how time and travel is valued – some interviewees don't want to go into their office that often, let alone travel to an event venue. Buyers and prospects are more discerning about the time they invest.

*Jeremy Rees: "I think everyone's platforms – shopping centres, airlines, hotels, event and exhibitions – are all focusing on making sure that the experience, the time that's spent there, is as engaging, rich, valuable and profitable as it possibly can be. What do I mean by experience? People are time-poor, and much more judicious about where they spend their time and what they do."*

Eventually, we could see the number of live events and attendance bounce back to pre-pandemic levels. People want to get back together and engage face-to-face. This is apparent across B2B, but even more so in the tech industry.

*Jeremy Rees: "I expect an increased volume of large-scale events by technology companies who want to engage with marketers, channel partners, shareholders and prospective and existing customers: technology vendors with massive ecosystems. And they're going*

*to do it in a way that differentiates themselves from their digital platforms. You will have amazing food propositions and extraordinary music experiences, because leaving an event with an emotional experience is going to mean that you have a high propensity to want to engage in that ecosystem."*

***"I think everyone's platforms – shopping centres, airlines, hotels, event and exhibitions – are all focusing on making sure that the experience, the time that's spent there, is as engaging, rich, valuable and profitable as it possibly can be. What do I mean by experience? People are time-poor, and much more judicious about where they spend their time and what they do."***

**Jeremy Rees, CEO of ExCeL London**

Event location will also play a role in bringing people back together in-person. Vendors are global brands, and plan their events in a series of regional hubs around the world. Delegate's travel experience plays an important role in if they attend an event in-person, with consideration made to restaurants, hotels, bars and entertainment around the event itself. Another consideration is how much other business a delegate can do while on location such as meeting international colleagues on the same trip. With ExCeL being in London, Jeremy is arguably somewhat biased when it comes to hosting events in larger 'Tier One' cities. But his argument holds weight:

*Jeremy Rees: "Tier One cities around the world have tended, historically, to bounce back much more rapidly because they offer more. They also tend to host the Tier One exhibitions and events and conferences, which means they have generally better transportation, bars and restaurants. If as a delegate, you're going to choose to go to one place, you want to go to the right one. It's like a holiday. You're going to choose somewhere which is spectacular where you can do three things rather than one thing.*

*Interestingly, it's also playing to people's personal and professional sustainability agendas when travelling. For instance, you can go to other business meetings outside of the event. You are having, say, 20–30 meetings in one day and being incredibly efficient with your time, sustainability parameters and being environmentally responsible. So, arguably it's carbon negative as well. Tier Two and Tier Three cities, meanwhile, I'm sure will come back as well, but it will take a bit longer."*

Generally, the event industry is reporting that the volumes of event visitors and exhibitors are expected to come back to pre-pandemic levels by the end of this year. Long-term, however, the industry is more hesitant about its future. That said, Jeremy is optimistic.

*Jeremy Rees: "There is a challenge around financial forecasting. But here is a question I'm sure everyone asks themselves at one point: are the fundamentals of exhibitions and congresses going to continue? What's patently clear is that the answer is 'yes.' They've been running for 800 years. They've survived pestilence, floods, pandemics and wars. And they will continue to do so in the future because they add value.*

*"Will they evolve? Yes. Because customers' expectations change. Will you have to adapt and invest? Yes. Which is why we're adding another 40% capacity into the building. We're building something new because our customers are saying they want something different. And there's a whole group of tech companies, major technology and proprietary events that are operating in Europe in the moment that will be coming to ExCeL in so September 2024 onwards, because we're going to build them something new that they've asked for."*

SECTION 4

# The event attendees' point of view

Of course, venue owners only offer one side of the story. So we also spoke to event delegates to understand their drivers for attending (or not attending), and what they now expect from events.

Post-pandemic, event delegates usually have a choice of how they enjoy an event, be it attending in-person or consuming the same content in the comfort of their own office/home via digital platforms. In our interviews, we spoke with Emily Gravel, manager, marketing operations and shared services at technology vendor VMware, and Andrea Clatworthy, global head of ABM at Fujitsu. We explored their preferences and thinking around whether or not they decide to attend an event physically or remotely. For reference, both Emily and Andrea have recently attended a number of events (including those from B2B Marketing). Honesty was encouraged!

While digital events can come close to the physical event these days in terms of content experience, networking remains a key reason for deciding to attend physically.

*Andrea Clatworthy: "For me, normally it's the networking piece, regardless of the topic. But I wouldn't go to an event just for networking, it's also got to be a compelling agenda, where I'm going to learn something practical that I can then think about how I deploy or work into my thinking. I'm happy to take thought leadership stuff virtually, or even on-demand. When attending live, however, I want to hear more practical things – best practices, case studies, stuff like that."*

Another consideration for physically attending an event is the challenge of managing distractions. The modern businessperson does tend to multi-task, but that is not always a good thing.

*Emily Gravel: "As a physical delegate, it's a lot easier to have more intentional conversations, because the warm-up period is so much shorter when you're in person. And the other side of it is there's no distractions. Right now [in our virtual interview], I've got my email open as well, and I have just had two pings. When it comes to attending virtual events, I usually have a split screen, with my email, the event and then other stuff as well. I can't pay attention completely enough."*

Another thing to consider is that, whilst no one would blink an eye at attending a physical conference for an entire day, the opposite is true for digital events.

*Emily Gravel: "When I consider attending a six-hour virtual event, it's harder to commit to. There's no way I would be able to focus on a screen for six hours of presentations. When you sit in a room physically for six hours, it's so much easier because there are people around you and there's a form of peer pressure to pay attention, as weird as it sounds."*

It's also notable that engaging your audience is a perpetual challenge for event speakers, whether they're virtual or in-person, and this has become increasingly complex with the advent of digital presentations and increasing expectations around 'stagecraft.' The easy assumption may be that it is easier to retain information presented in-person because people remember seeing it live, but the challenge of retention is more complex than that.

*Emily Gravel: "I think it depends. It's like learning styles: you can have visual learners, physical touch learners, 'try and attempt' learners, and others. When you're in a physical environment, more of those learning styles are able to be accommodated for, which I think helps information register a little bit more. Consider the*

*experiences that you've had over the last few years. How many virtual birthday parties do you remember? And then how many physical birthday parties do you remember? So, I think that gives you the same kind of context."*

The combination of physical and virtual also offers benefits to the delegates who can even take advantage of both media channels.

*Emily Gravel: "I think the hybrid end is important. When attending physically, I'm paying attention and I'm not necessarily able to transcribe detailed notes from the session directly. But by event hosts having it recorded for virtual attendees, I'm able to use those recordings to go back to my team and say, 'Hey, here's what I learnt. Here's what we can do next.' Especially with companies paying for travel and lodging, I need to be able to document and provide a really clear ROI of all the new information that I learned and what we're going to use it for."*

***"I think it depends. It's like learning styles: you can have visual learners, physical touch learners, 'try and attempt' learners, and others. When you're in a physical environment, more of those learning styles are able to be accommodated for, which I think helps information register a little bit more"***

**Emily Gravel, manager, marketing operations and shared services, VMware**

### 4.1. Justifying event attendance is important

Proving the return on investment in time and expense when attending marketing events has always been a hurdle for many potential delegates. Savvy conference hosts would provide a justification letter template to conference prospects to help them overcome it.

*Emily Gravel: "Having that digital follow-up is really important now because you need to start proving that out because budgets are so tight. One of my friends was going to go to an in-person session, and her company had her prove the ROI of what she'd get out of it before she left."*

After over two years of mostly digital event production, needless to say there's an element of digital fatigue in B2B which explains the immediate enthusiasm for returning to physical events. But this digital fatigue has also altered the expectations around digital events themselves. Hardly anybody wants just a series of webinar presentations anymore.

*Andrea Clatworthy: "I do like the 'chat' on digital platforms, even if I'm just spectating rather than contributing. I think getting in views of the audience, or peers or whatever – it's almost networking, isn't it – but hearing other people's opinion on something, I really like that. Another thing on digital events, I really like an online/offline mix – sending you some lunch or a cake or something that means you feel compelled to attend and pay attention. Good tactic."*

*Emily Gravel: "I really liked the Adobe Awards thing a few years ago where they sent you a box with champagne, a champagne glass, and that little kazoo. Adding physical engagement to digital events is going to become really big."*

### 4.2. Hybrid events expectations

The challenge for hybrid event organisers is to satisfy two separate sets of audience expectations: the physical delegates want a great agenda, good food, seating and the opportunity to network, while digital delegates' number one expectation is to **not** be treated as a second citizen.

*Emily Gravel: "Sure, we know that we're more of a back seat audience, but you should have the opportunity to ask questions online if you're watching a live session (you do that well in your events like Ignite). The moderator can read out the questions on stage just like any other question from the auditorium. I think that is even an additional benefit of a hybrid environment – you see that you are including more people, and their questions or ideas are really relevant or helpful."*

*Andrea Clatworthy: "For me, the advantage of hybrid is that the whole event is going to be available on-demand, even if I attend it physically. For multiple-day digital events, I register for it and then work out which sessions I want to attend live and which ones I want to do on-demand. When going to a physical event, I do the same – I attend some sessions, meet and network with peers and colleagues, and watch other sessions on-demand afterwards."*



SECTION 5

# Events from the perspective of those planning them

But what about those marketers and organisers actually planning the events themselves? Their point of view is possibly the most important of all three groupings. We interviewed Colette Leong-Son, managing director, events at business services provider InfoPro Digital, Faye Carter, head of experiential at Deloitte UK, and David Clack, head of marketing communications at Ricoh UK.

Our first question was on how things have changed in their process of selecting a suitable venue for physical events.

*Faye Carter: "We are often now looking for venues that are actually bigger than what we perhaps need for our numbers, just to create that sense of space. I don't think people want to be crammed in like they used to be. For instance, we're looking at venues with lots of natural daylight and lots of ventilation. We're also keen for venues to have lots of tech in place to enable remote participation if we need it."*

*David Clack: "We think people are looking for open spaces, in terms of fresh air. So, we need rooms that can open up, and potentially even have outdoor space. People also want to reconnect with others, so we need build that collaboration opportunity into the event for networking with peers."*

*Colette Leong-Son: "I think experience is more important in 2022. We need the ability to convene in smaller groups and have a more participative format, having a breakout and roundtable discussion, rather than one great big packed plenary with people sitting passively."*

When we asked about how they decide whether an event should be physical or digital, we heard some interesting arguments, including sustainability considerations.

*Faye Carter: "The first thing we do is look at the objective of the event. If the objective is purely about building relationships, we might look to do it in-person. If the event is content focused, then a digital event could be the solution. There are also sustainability goals to reflect upon for us as a business. We are questioning in-person events a lot more now since the pandemic, because they incur high emissions. So, if we can flip things over to a digital delivery and do fewer in-person events, that will help to reach our WorldClimate goals. This is our global plan to become net zero across our operations by 2030 and drive responsible climate choices within our organisation and beyond."*

*David Clack: "We didn't do many digital events before the pandemic, but we ramped up quickly, launching a whole webinar series. And we learnt that, if it was digital, then it was far more integrated with our marketing work. We started to build up on-demand content, including sign-ups for a webinar or podcast as part of our ongoing customer nurture programmes. So digital was really good in terms of changing our mindset around events. We used to have a lot of physical events before, but they were somewhat siloed and more aligned with sales demand, not customer programming. As there was no on-demand content, you weren't getting the long-term value out of it."*

It goes without saying that physical events need to be marketed. So, how are our interviewees promoting their events?

*Faye Carter: "We use all of the typical social media platforms to market our events, especially LinkedIn and Twitter. We often have a dedicated website for that event that tells people more about the agenda and what they can expect. Often our most powerful tool is the conversations our partners and*

*practitioners have with their clients to invite them to an event that is relevant to them."*

*David Clack: "I think people are wanting to naturally get back out to events, as long as you can make clear the value of why you're bringing them together and what they're going to learn from the day. The networking element is really key to it as well. But it is the content, relevance and timeliness that really count. You must answer the question: 'why would I want to invest the time in coming out to a physical event?'"*

When we asked about marketing digital events, we heard similar responses – the marketing process is the same. However, our interviewees did point out that the decision barrier for a physical event was much higher than a digital event. Delegates evaluate time investment, plus travel costs, plus justification arguments before deciding to attend an event physically. With that in mind, the marketing for physical events requires more specific targeting and deeper value propositions.

Many B2B marketing teams are now setting up a mix of physical (but usually also hybrid) and digital events across their calendar. The tendency towards hybrid is driven by more than the desire to offer recordings to the participants. Often, it's driven as a 'plan B,' a fallback option in case the physical event must be cancelled again due to a resurgence of pandemic conditions. The greatest fear that marketers now have when planning a hybrid event is the ROI. Many see a hybrid event as essentially paying twice for the same thing. The physical event needs its event logistics costs and time invested, while the digital version needs a software platform to host it, as well as AV teams in place. In addition to this, if the digital event looks too compelling, they run the danger of cannibalising the physical event, as their prime target attendees could decide to attend virtually instead.

Our interviewees had their own thoughts on hybrid events, considering them a tough proposition based upon their recent experiences both as organiser and delegate.

*David Clack: "I think they are very difficult to execute because they are two very different experiences. You need to map out the touchpoints for both and create a journey for each experience – digital and physical. Plus, they have two different hooks to perhaps different sales teams. And then, on the event day, you have to try and bring those audiences together as well, even if they have their own experiences."*

*Colette Leong-Son: "I haven't been to anything that I would call a world-class hybrid event. I think it's very tricky. Do people want to be the fly on the wall and just observe? I think it's difficult to please both a live audience and an online audience in one swoop, but it does give you the opportunity to collect registration data from people who will never attend the event in-person. Of course, they may log on for an hour, or they may not, but at least you've got that data or attracted them to the event."*

*Faye Carter: "You must recognise that both audiences have very different needs and make sure that there are different experiences created for them, but of equal quality. A camera position at the back of an auditorium is not a hybrid event. You must create more for those remote participants. I also think there's an opportunity for both audiences to connect with each other, and that's going to enhance the audience experience, both in-person and remote. I think that a lot of businesses are still trying to get this right, and we're still in the relatively early days of this sort of hybrid world. It's going to take a while to find that sweet spot."*

***"I think experience is more important in 2022. We need the ability to convene in smaller groups and have a more participative format, having a breakout and roundtable discussion, rather than one great big packed plenary with people sitting passively."***

**Colette Leong-Son, managing director, events, Infopro Digital**

We then asked the practitioners what they thought were the main challenges in terms of their event marketing strategy in 2022 and 2023.

*Colette Leong-Son: "I think data is a big challenge – building it up. We're looking at the top of funnel – how do we engage with the target audience to help them through their journey? Participating in our event products, engaging with our content, webinars, even awards. There's lots of activity, but you need good data to support those activities. Having the right rigour and discipline around data is probably our biggest challenge."*

*David Clack: "The challenge is having clear direction on how we are going to carry on with digital, and when we should offer physical events. There is a strong need for physical events. We need to get people together again and have time with our customers. Digital events have their place now, because of the on-demand content, short content, timely content and evergreen content you can generate, but getting the right balance between that and physical will be important. It will probably be more important than the hook and the venue considerations."*

*Faye Carter: "I think the biggest challenge – and not just for 2022, I think it's always been in place – is the challenge of staying fresh and relevant, and making sure that we stand out in a crowded marketplace. So, we are now looking at putting our brand personality and sense of purpose at the very centre of all our marketing campaigns, in order for our activations to resonate on a more personal level with our clients."*

Historically, events were often seen as nice-to-have vanity-driven exercises of corporate PR. Now, however, events are part of an overall customer engagement strategy, so marketers will want to see personal and account engagement metrics over a series of events. Many companies have been integrating their events calendar into their overall marketing programme, seeing events as a new channel of engagement instead of being somewhat peripheral to marketing.

*David Clack: "Events were always kind of standalone, and we would market them to customers separately from products and services. When we moved to digital, events became far more integrated because of the on-demand content that you could put into the customer nurture programme. So, certainly from an events role perspective, it is now far more integrated with the whole marketing mix than before."*

*Faye Carter: "I see events – digital, hybrid, in-person or otherwise – as an integral part of the marketing mix. We're very much integrated with our marketing colleagues and consider digital events to be part of our overall marketing strategy. We have events that pivoted to a webinar series – a sort of virtual delivery at the beginning of the pandemic that arguably won't go back now to face-to-face, because, actually, what we found is that those webinar series are reaching a much bigger audience. It's created more accessible experiences for a wider audience. So, there's a lot of arguments for some of our event programmes not to go back to in-person for that very reason."*

My own recent research on marketing events, involving a survey of 1500 business decision-makers and interviews with dozens of marketing event platform vendors, resulted in these insights or observations:

**Covid accelerated the already-inevitable move to virtual.** Virtual is part of a new marketing paradigm where events will be more numerous, impactful and measurable than before. Digital marketing plans will include events as standard in customer engagement programmes to collect market/customer insights at scale, and to maintain a buyer/customer relationship over a longer period than just a buying cycle.

**Hybrid event strategies will prevail, but the definition changes.** Marketers think 'hybrid' is more than just mobile apps for on-site attendees. They mean: a mix of on-site with virtual attendance, with attendees treated equally; a calendar with on-site and virtual events coordinated in a hub and spoke engagement strategy; plus, the ability to switch to virtual at short notice if pandemic circumstances change.

**Events elevate to integral component of engagement strategy.** New KPIs will need to be created for event engagement, value capture and customer insights.

**To immerse or not to immerse, that is the question.** Many virtual event vendors like to demo and create 3D, CGI-like, avatar-driven, conference environments. A debate will prevail throughout 2022 among marketers and attendees/speakers/exhibitors as to whether or not this is necessary. Already, a good proportion of marketers will opt for a more pragmatic experience – something like a Netflix. They want to create a content hub or corporate streaming platform over time where recordings can be leveraged in campaigns or even just be discovered.

**Virtual events encourage further globalisation.** Most virtual events attract and discover new attendance from international audiences. This raises new challenges for event organisers (and the platform they select) around localisation, supporting synchronous and asynchronous presentations and meetings, as well as compliance issues such as using attendee and engagement data.










SECTION 6

# Achieving a balance between marketing event technology and strategy

In that global survey, which was in Q3 of 2021, I asked 1500 businesses decision-makers: "How many different software vendors does your company work with in your current marketing event management stack, counting all tools supporting virtual meetings, video conferencing, conferences and events, and trade shows?" Marketing event management (MEM) refers to a wide range of processes involved in the management of all customer events, such as lead generation events, trade shows and conferences. MEM software solutions help enhance the quality of virtual and physical events and meetings, as well as providing enhanced management visibility for the event organisers. The applications can streamline the planning, scheduling and overall event organisation, including:

- Event registration and ticketing.
- Event planning and logistics.
- Event marketing.
- Speaker management.
- Support for presentations, chats, demos and exhibitions.
- Analytics and reporting.
- Event content management.
- Meeting management.
- Meeting recording.

More than half of the companies have between six and 10 such vendors to manage. Companies have been working with multiple MEM solutions because most did not have a centralised procurement strategy for this topic. We expect this to change in the next 18 months. When many companies ran virtual events during the early days of the pandemic, their immediate goal was to cover an already-planned live event with an online alternative as a work-around. Many executives made short-term decisions about the platform, and optimisation wasn't yet part of their strategy – just getting it done was the focus. Generally speaking, event participants and speakers were just pleased to be able to log in to any platform and be able to discuss business topics again.

Whether organising an event or presenting at one, the general experience was that most of event platforms deployed were not purpose-built for virtual events. They were originally designed to provide other services, such as webinars, e-learning course management, or just event registration. Over the past few months, however, many MEM platform providers have been releasing new, dedicated software, to better support virtual events of all sizes – fuelled, of course, by massive injections of venture capital into several of these vendors.

## 6.1. Reviewing the MEM technology vendor landscape

In my own, separate, research report on MEM based on the survey and interviews, I pointed out the following challenges that many MEM platforms vendors are facing:

**The MEM vendor landscape bewilders, and so vendors must tell better stories.** The over-100 MEM vendors out there have a variety of roots. Some have just repackaged traditional offerings through new product positioning. Others, meanwhile, are meeting platforms that are good for that core purpose, but not necessarily fit for larger events, or vice-versa. Most are challenged, however, to communicate the benefits of their technologies to business-oriented marketers.

**Integration into marketing stacks will become paramount.** In most companies, MEM will become part of the martech stack by 2023, and vendors will be required to connect with CRM and marketing automation systems. Marketing will also want to pull real-time event data into their customer data platforms (CDPs) and will want reports/analytics on event impact, right up to consolidating the overall impact of event programmes.

**MEM will move from a project business to an enterprise business model.** The events business was traditionally aligned to projects across an events calendar. When events become part of a holistic marketing strategy, CMOs and procurement executives will force more of a software/hosting licensing model based upon usage and impact. Then, they will even want to negotiate towards a value-based pricing relationship. Savvy vendors should plan to collect engagement and attendee data for themselves to support this desire.

**Vendors must manage growth expectations as the turbulence dies down.** In 2020–2021, MEM vendors enjoyed growth numbers of 100–300% in customer numbers, revenues and headcount, and many of them are now set up with venture capital to invest strongly in R&D, sales and services. Investors tend to drive towards their own exit strategies and may pressure their clients to continue their momentum, which can lead to overpromising, and/or buying market share through discounting.

**Vendors must also manage growth pains.** Any company with that growth experience must usually deal with growth challenges like integrating new employees, standardising their offerings and maintaining customer relationships.

I was able to produce the following (alphabetical) list of market-leading platform vendors, as scored by both the respondents and myself:

- Accelevents.
- Airmeet.
- Bizzabo.
- Certain.
- Cvent.
- Kaltura.
- MEETYOO.
- Notified.
- ON24
- RainFocus.
- SpotMe.
- vFairs
- Zoom
- 6Connex.

The vendors CadmiumCD, Circa, Hopin, Splash and Microsoft were also rated highly by the survey respondents. The overall vendor landscape for MEM listed above is a broad mix of vendors, with a wide variety of claims: you will likely need more than one of them to cover your entire marketing event calendar.

The other clear variation of vendors is based upon target markets. For instance, many only sell to the tech industry, where marketing is the most sophisticated. Others, meanwhile, focus on the needs of marketers in other industries. As always, it also varies according to whether you are a medium-sized company or a large international enterprise.

SECTION 7

# Words of wisdom from Skip Fidura



**SKIP FIDURA**
Propolis Hive ambassador, Execution & Campaigns

**Peter:** Skip, I know that you have hosted plenty of marketing events, virtual, hybrid and physical. Which of these do you think delivers the most value to an organisation, and why?

**Skip:** That really depends on the goals of the organisation. During the pandemic, all events went virtual. What that meant was that marketing departments were no longer hoarding their best content for their live events. This content became accessible globally and I think a lot of companies were shocked by how much attention their virtual events got from outside of their core markets. If your goal is to broaden your reach, then you need to have some virtual component, whether that is totally virtual or hybrid.

At the same time, there are things you can do in real life that deliver brilliant experiences which are hard to replicate virtually. If your goal is to create a memory that will connect your brand with a great experience, then a physical event may be the best way to deliver that.

**Peter:** Do you think the relative impact of the digital event formats has changed over the past years?

**Skip:** Yes, prior to the pandemic, a digital experience typically meant a disembodied voice talking over the same slides that were used for a physical presentation. No real thought was given to the needs of the audience. It was just a way to give your content a longer shelf life. Now, the brands that have always been event heavy are not only hiring event companies to manage the physical event, but they have teams of writers, directors and producers from the TV and film industry to produce their digital events.

**Peter:** Do you think that marketing should now completely own the event function?

**Skip:** Not to sound like a politician, but I disagree with the premise of the question! I don't think there was ever a time when the marketing department should *not* have owned events. Events are just another channel for delivering content. Marketing should own content creation and delivery.

Parking that rant, however, I do think that event management needs to be a specialised function within marketing. To run a large hybrid event, you are going to need set designers,

lighting designers, sound techs, lighting techs, video playback techs, stage managers, front of house staff, producers, broadcast directors, camera operators, network admins and video editors. I am sure that I am forgetting some people, but the point is that running a hybrid event requires some highly specialised skills that have to all work together from the planning stages to deliver a great event.

**Peter:** What do think about my prediction in the *Recommendations* chapter that large marketing events (not webinars) need to become more entertaining and provide a greater experience, almost TV-like?

**Skip:** I absolutely agree, and I think the word 'entertain' is a good one to use. We need to focus on both definitions of 'entertain'. First and foremost, we need to deliver our content in a way that is enjoyable to the audience. I've been to events where it feels like all the creativity was used to get me in the room and not enough thought was given to keeping me there. I think audiences are going to be much more discerning and give you feedback with their feet.

We also need to focus on the other definition of 'entertain' – to give attention or consideration to. Different parts of the audience have different needs, which we need to consider.

When we take a half hour networking break at the in-person event, we need to offer content to our online audience. This not only keeps them engaged, but also gives them content that is exclusive to that experience. However, we should not stop at just the different venues. We need to think about the different needs of the audience within each venue. For example, maybe a sign language interpreter could make an event more accessible for the in-person audience.

**Peter:** And the proposal that marketing events recordings will become a content feed for some sort of Netflix-like content library where prospects and customers can browse and enjoy curated videos on-demand. Do you think that will happen and, if so, what sort of new skills will that require in content marketing teams?

**Skip:** I think it must happen. We spend a lot of time trying to guess what phase of the customer journey a prospect is in at any given moment and then deliver the right piece of content. A better approach is to make all your content available and guide them to the information they need. I think of this like playing darts (or at least me playing darts). If you always aim for the bullseye, you will miss more often than not. On the other hand, if you're aiming for the board you will be much more successful.

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# EXECUTION AND CAMPAIGNS: MARKETING MATURITY DIAGNOSTIC

The following framework seeks to define the different stages of maturity when it comes to execution and campaigns, and map them against different criteria required for success. A framework such as this is being created for all eight Propolis Hives and competency areas.

This framework is a flat or static version of the interactive Marketing Maturity Diagnostic, which is part of your Propolis membership. This assessment is designed to help you determine your specific level of competency against these criteria, compare them against other Propolis members and highlight areas to focus on for improvement.

If you've not taken your Marketing Maturity Diagnostic yet, please contact your account manager or Propolis customer success manager.

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# EXECUTION AND CAMPAIGNS: MARKETING MATURITY DIAGNOSTIC

## INTEGRATION OF DIGITAL CHANNELS

| BUSINESS CONTRIBUTION | 1. BUILDING | 2. DEVELOPING | 3. PERFORMING | 4. IMPROVING | 5. EXCELLING |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Is there a multi-channel strategy? | There are no multi-channel campaigns deployed. | Work is underway to ensure more campaigns adopt a multi-channel approach. | The majority of campaigns use multi-channel touches. | All of our campaigns are multi-channel by design. | We have a full understanding of which channels to use, and all campaigns are optimised for best-fit channel(s). |
| How well is technology integrated? | No integration between marketing technology platforms (such as CRM, email marketing and web analytics). | There is some integration between some of the marketing technology platforms. | We have a roadmap to integrate all the marketing technology platforms. | We have fully integrated marketing technology platforms, but cannot derive a single customer view. | All martech platforms 'talk to one another' and enable deep personalisation of campaigns via the single customer view. |

# EXECUTION AND CAMPAIGNS: MARKETING MATURITY DIAGNOSTIC

## CAMPAIGN RESOURCE PLANNING

| BUSINESS CONTRIBUTION | 1. BUILDING | 2. DEVELOPING | 3. PERFORMING | 4. IMPROVING | 5. EXCELLING |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| What is the level of skills, experience and knowledge in the team? | We have not assessed the level of skills, experience and knowledge in the team. | A process to understand current skills versus gaps has been implemented. | Fundamental skills/ knowledge improvement plan for marketing staff has been implemented. | An advanced level of skills/knowledge improvement programme has been implemented. | The required skills/ knowledge is mapped to internal resources on a regular basis and we can 'top up' knowledge and gaps with external resources as required. |
| How developed is the campaign briefing process? | The process is ad hoc with no documentation. | Work is underway to create a consistent briefing process. | A consistent briefing process is deployed for internal or external (agency) resources in most but not all campaigns. | All campaigns use the same briefing process and a programme to optimise experience-based learning has commenced. | All campaigns use the same briefing process and we collect feedback to help continuous refinement and improvement. |

# EXECUTION AND CAMPAIGNS: MARKETING MATURITY DIAGNOSTIC

## CAMPAIGN MANAGEMENT AND INTEGRATION

| BUSINESS CONTRIBUTION | 1. BUILDING | 2. DEVELOPING | 3. PERFORMING | 4. IMPROVING | 5. EXCELLING |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| How integrated is campaign execution? | Different elements will go out at different times. | There is some coordination of the execution across channels. | The majority of campaigns have integrated planning to ensure joined-up execution. | All campaigns have integrated planning to ensure joined-up execution. | All campaigns are integrated and we ensure insight and learning from each campaign goes into the approach to future campaigns. |
| How integrated is campaign content? | All campaign content is siloed. | Some content across some channels is coordinated. | The majority of campaigns have consistent content. | All campaigns use the same content. | We have a centralised 'playbook' process where all content is created to not only be consistent, but is devised based on all campaign channels being utilised. |

# EXECUTION AND CAMPAIGNS: MARKETING MATURITY DIAGNOSTIC

## CALENDAR MANAGEMENT

| BUSINESS CONTRIBUTION | 1. BUILDING | 2. DEVELOPING | 3. PERFORMING | 4. IMPROVING | 5. EXCELLING |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| How integrated is the campaign calendar? | Campaign development is ad hoc. | Campaigns are planned on a quarter-by-quarter basis. | There is an annual campaign plan with some campaigns joined up when possible. | The annual campaign plan has all campaigns joined up with one another, as well as with other marketing initiatives. | A fully integrated planning process is embedded with continual updating/refinement, giving a full view of all marketing activity that also integrates and wider comms (PR, etc). |
| How is content scheduled? | There is no content plan or scheduling. | Some content scheduling in place, but in isolation or on a campaign basis. | There is a centralised content schedule in place. | There is a centralised approach to both content creation and curation, with applicable measurement also in place. | There is a rolling content schedule for creation and curation visible to all stakeholders/ contributors. It works with content syndication tools for other departments to 'lift and use' content for social selling, etc. |

# EXECUTION AND CAMPAIGNS: MARKETING MATURITY DIAGNOSTIC

## ATTRIBUTION MANAGEMENT

| BUSINESS CONTRIBUTION | 1. BUILDING | 2. DEVELOPING | 3. PERFORMING | 4. IMPROVING | 5. EXCELLING |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| How are campaigns measured? | There is little or no tracking or measurement of marketing campaigns. | Some campaign metrics are recorded (click, open, follow rates, etc), but not reviewed. | All campaign metrics are regularly reviewed by marketing, but management KPIs are not yet in place. | There are both campaign metrics and management KPIs in use on a regular basis. | There is centralised and consistent campaign reporting, which is reviewed regularly to seek and share learnings for future activity. Management KPIs are used to help show marketing's commercial contribution to the business. |
| How is business value/impact from campaign/marketing spend assessed? | There is no knowledge of whether campaigns are delivering business value (sales, leads, etc). | Measures of campaign business value are being developed and there is a plan to model campaign attribution. | A relative business value for each campaign is assumed from the campaign metrics, but it is not a clear business contribution. | A system to measure ROI for all marketing campaigns is in place, based on spend. | There is full attribution for all campaigns and marketing activity, and ROI can be reported for all activities. |

# EXECUTION AND CAMPAIGNS: MARKETING MATURITY DIAGNOSTIC

## CROSS-ORGANISATIONAL COORDINATION AND COMMUNICATION

| BUSINESS CONTRIBUTION | 1. BUILDING | 2. DEVELOPING | 3. PERFORMING | 4. IMPROVING | 5. EXCELLING |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| How developed is sales and marketing alignment? | There is little or no sales and marketing dialogue and engagement with no shared plans or goals. | Work is underway to build closer ties through goals and measurement setting. | There is measurement of both sales and marketing goals, but these are not connected. | There are documented and agreed shared goals between sales and marketing. | Marketing and sales have shared goals, plus regular strategic and tactical collaboration on campaigns with a two-way SLA in place. |
| How effective is co-ordination with other teams (product, finance, customer service and IT)? | There is little or no cross-department engagement with siloed project work and goal setting. | There is some cross-department engagement and meetings do occur, but only on an ad hoc basis. | Marketing and other-department stakeholders have been identified and regular meetings are scheduled in advance. | Cross-department requirements, goal setting and shared project timelines are implemented for all projects. | There is a culture of shared goals and ownership with internal communication from marketing to all stakeholders/interested parties and regular cross-department calls/meetings to work on current and future objectives. |

SECTION 9: PETER O'NEILL

# Recommendations

Planning a marketing event calendar for fiscal or calendar 2023 is probably going to be one of the more strategic programmes for many B2B CMOs and marketing directors over the next months. Many in marketing used to see events as nice-to-have vanity-driven exercises of corporate PR. In future, it will be an integral part of an overall customer engagement strategy.

Future marketing plans will include both physical and digital events as standard in customer engagement programmes; to collect market/customer insights at scale and to maintain a buyer/customer relationship over a longer period than just a buying cycle. A B2B CMO I've met recently talked about future plans as more of a 'media strategy' than a marketing strategy. I know of several large tech vendors that already have concrete plans into 2024 for large scale, multi-media, highly-branded events accommodating thousands of delegates and providing an outstanding conference, networking and banqueting experience for business partners and customers alike.

Virtual marketing events will become part of a new marketing channel, scheduled and atomised across the whole calendar and much more numerous, impactful, and measurable than before.

The interviews documented in the body of this report contain a series of recommendations for you to take note of, but I would like to add a couple more strategic thoughts. You may not need to do it this year, or even next, but I suggest that you should be at least considering the following initiatives over the next two to five years:

- **Recruit media talent.** The largest B2B companies will be creating their own 'Netflix' websites with full presentations and atomised videos of the speakers who have featured in recent marketing events, plus further thought leadership and educational content. Over time, the expectation among all B2B buyers will be to enjoy the same type of experience. So, when further recruiting content marketing staff, you should be looking for people with video management and editing skills, or providing training for these capabilities.

- **Configure event data into your customer data management strategy.** As you extend your customer data management (CDM) processes and strategy, ensure that the CDM team are able to collect and collate event engagement data as well. This requires process design and ensuring that the selection criteria for new event platform software includes this requirement.

- **Don't neglect the content expectations of your ecosystem members.** While the intent to provide an entertainment and memorable experience in future marketing events is understandable, savvy marketing executives will also continue to generate content that provides deeper information to technical buyers and product or service user/consumer-personas.

SECTION 10

# The event tech vendor perspective



**FELICIA ASIEDU**
senior marketing manager, Europe, Cvent

Collaboration, networking, dialogue, and discussion. It's no surprise that in-person events resumed their rightful place as one of the best performing marketing channels. But what is interesting is that they have transformed into meetings of a different kind. Whereas in the past content was certainly king, now a healthy balance of networking opportunities and roundtable style discussion alongside a compelling agenda filled with best practices and case studies (rather than thought leadership) go hand in hand at the top of the list of attendee requirements.

It's great to hear feedback such as this from across the industry, and this report enables us to understand how to move forward with the hundreds and thousands of events that are due to take place over the next year. There was a worry of how the pandemic would affect the return to in-person events. But venues are seeing that live event frequency and attendee numbers are bouncing back to the same levels as they were pre-pandemic because of this need to get together, network and collaborate.

Now that marketers and event organisers are armed with more information around when to go hybrid, which events suit a digital-only format and the level of targeting and depth of value proposition required to run in-person events, it's clear to see that it is not about the rise and fall of one format over another. Virtual is not dying, hybrid is just getting started and there is no room for pitting the varying formats against each other. Instead, it's about how to shape a total event programme that is tailored to the needs of your audience and event objectives.

Attendees interviewed for the report are clear with their needs and articulate well what drives them to attend different events. They do well to provide suggestions on when each format works for them and what can be provided before, during and after events. This feedback should be taken seriously and should be shared with marketers, event organisers, venues, suppliers, and board members alike. Listening to this attendee feedback gives all organisations the keys they need to unlock the attendee engagement that drives event and organisational success.

People value their time now more than ever, and venues and marketing event management software vendors have a job to do to help event planners create special, easy-to-get-to experiences that satisfy the needs of attendees. They need to make it easy for organisers to understand what is on offer from space, food and entertainment to sustainability measures, technology specifications and collaborative tools.

This report does a fantastic job of outlining the challenges that exist within the technology landscape of too much choice, with not enough explanation, so vendors must tell better stories to make their offerings clear. It is good to see that there is a renewed focus on integrations into marketing stacks, as capturing the right data from events will help to alleviate one of the top challenges outlined in the report of data strategy and discipline.

Cvent is pleased to be a part of such important research and are excited to see how venues, marketers, planners, and technology vendors continue to collaborate to meet the needs of both organisations and attendees.

# About

## B2B Marketing & Propolis

B2B Marketing was founded in 2004, starting life as a print magazine. It has since evolved into the world's go-to resource for B2B marketers looking to become best-in-class at what they do, and place themselves at the forefront of marketing evolution.

B2B Marketing produces a number of products, including: insight reports; interviews with the best minds in the business; *The B2B Marketing Podcast*; webinars; conferences; and even Awards programmes.

The latest product in B2B Marketing's extensive portfolio is Propolis – an exclusive community for B2B marketers. Propolis gives you instant access to unbiased experts, training, technical resources, research and peer-to-peer learning, all supported by a dedicated customer success manager.

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## Cvent

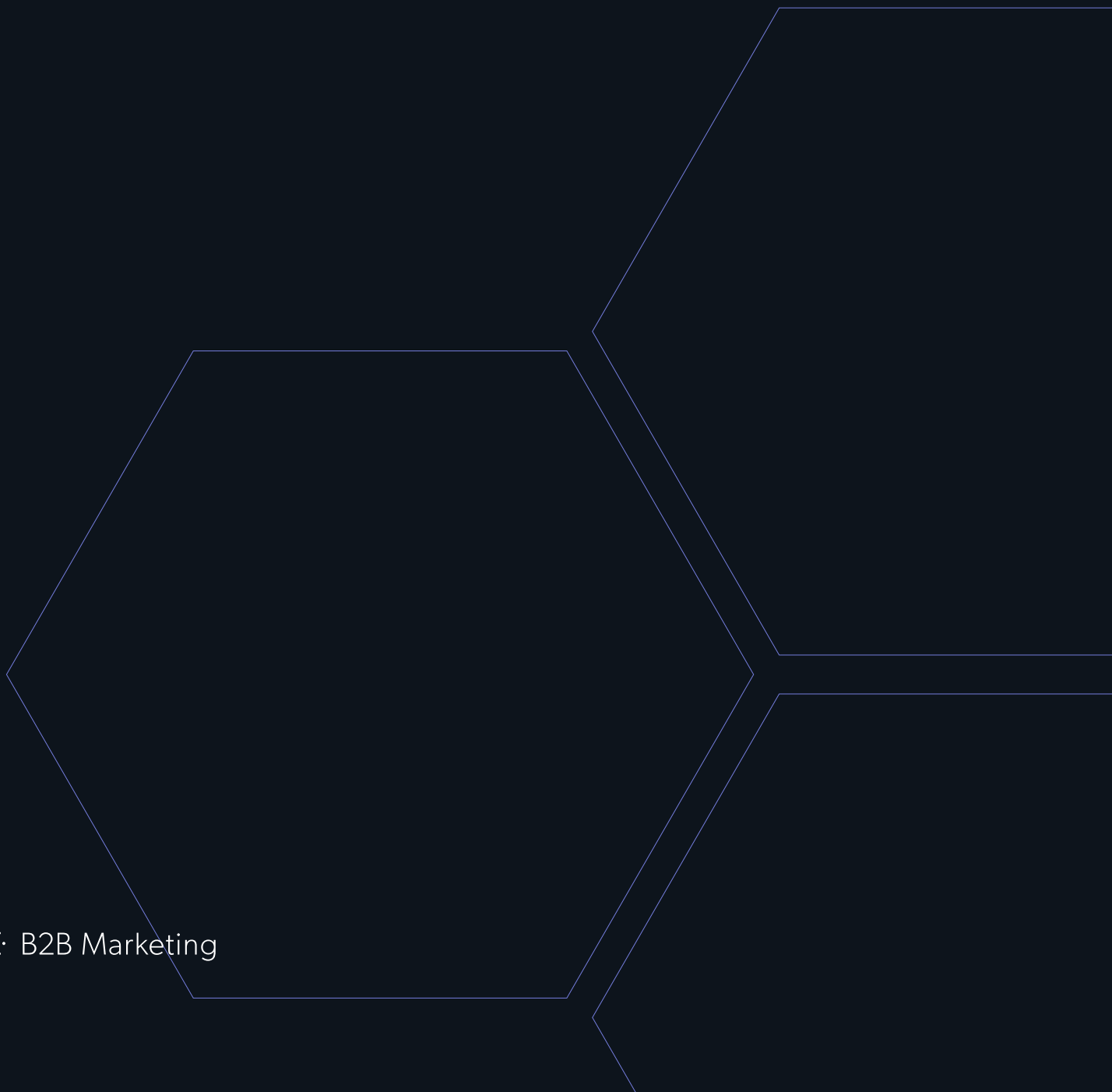
Cvent is a leading meetings, events and hospitality technology provider with more than 4,300 employees and nearly 21,000 customers worldwide. The comprehensive Cvent event marketing and management platform offers software solutions to event organisers and marketers for online event registration, venue selection, event marketing and management, virtual and onsite solutions, and attendee engagement. Cvent's suite of products automate and simplify the entire event management process and maximise the impact of in-person, virtual, and hybrid events. Hotels and venues use Cvent's supplier and venue solutions to win more group and corporate travel business through Cvent's sourcing platforms. Cvent solutions optimise the entire event management value chain and have enabled clients around the world to manage millions of meetings and events.

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