

ANALYSIS OF VIRTUAL EVENT MARKETING OPPORTUNITIES

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Purpose: Analysis of the marketing opportunities in the virtual world, on the example of events.

Design/methodology/approach: The article entails a literature review of the definitions as well as categorization and evolution of events, in the context of the pandemic and the digitalization trend.

Findings: The notion of the concept of events became the background for the considerations. The concept of an event is discussed. Analysis of the existing typology of events forced the selection of events for in-depth analysis, including the use of events in the virtual world.

Research limitations/implications: The text refers to a limited number of studies. The issues presented in the article require empirical confirmation, using more examples.

Practical implications: The literature analysis conducted allows a conclusion that the concept of events has evolved, while the trends and the digital tools supporting events facilitate more accurate achievement of the marketing goals desired.

Originality/value: The conclusions presented in this work constitute an extension of the themes present in the literature on the subject, pointing to the interrelationships the online, offline (face to face), and hybrid (live events with simultaneous online streaming, allowing remote participation) events form in marketing objective building.

Keywords: event, digital event, promotion, pandemic.

Category of the paper: The article is a literature-based review.

Introduction

Events were very popular in the pre-pandemic period. Many organizations were keen on using this form of promotion. The Covid-19 pandemic and the fact that offline events were restricted, due to the sanitation regime, influenced the growth of events organized via online channels. Event organizers have moved events to the virtual space. There are many indications that this is not a one-time investment, because even if traditional events do return, the prospect of staying in the virtual environment will remain.

1. The concept of an event

The first definition of an *event* was formulated by D. Getz and J.J. Goldblatt in the early 1990s. They defined an event as something special, exceptional, unique, beyond everyday experience, something that distinguishes a given time from other, more routine activities, such as work (Getz, 2008, pp. 403-428). Goldblatt referred to an event as "a unique moment in time, defined with ceremony and ritual to satisfy specific needs" (Bowdin, McPherson, 2006). Getz, on the other hand, noted that it involves "an opportunity for leisure, social or cultural experience outside the normal range of choices or beyond everyday experience" (Getz, 2013, p. 4). These authors point to the fact that an event consists of both physical (ceremony, ritual) and psychological (need, experience) aspects.

According to O. Nickel, events are staged events whose [...] main objective is to provide specific experience to participants and to evoke emotions which will positively contribute to implementation of a marketing strategy, i.e., fostering the values promoted by an enterprise or a brand (Nickel, 1998, p. 7). The definition proposed strongly emphasizes the experiential-emotional component. A more detailed definition of the concept analyzed is presented by M. Pfadenhauer, who indicates its most specific features, describing it as a mass spectacle [...], a specific target group, funding, communication of a specific message, presentation of a product in the absence of competition, staging of the world of experiences and sensations (Pfadenhauer, 2008, p. 222).

Ph. Kotler defines events as undertakings whose purpose is to communicate specific information to particular target groups (Kotler, 2001, p. 122). An event should thus be understood as a tool – a carrier of communication (similar to television, radio or press advertising). Events are considered a modern form of brand and product promotion, which help reach new customers and create a positive image of a given place. The notion of an event is connected with the fact that a great number of people participate in it.

Events are thus deliberately planned in advance undertakings, often involving enormous financial and technical outlays, in order to influence specific audiences. They constitute a specific staging, during which a reality very different from that of the addressees' everyday life is presented (Berrige, 2007, p. 6). They are intended to arouse intense emotions in the participants as well as invoke the belief that they are taking part in something extraordinary, worthy of attention and remembrance (Bączek, 2011, p. 13). Such events are characterized by rich symbolism, combining various ways of communication, tailored to the needs and expectations of the audience and taking their way of thinking, feeling and perception of reality into account. Summing up the reflections on the notion of an *event*, one should acknowledge what U. Holzbaaur claimed, namely that the term event does not describe an objectively measurable feature; in fact, the event-like nature of a specific affair or incidence is subjective: an event is created in the mind of every person who experiences that event (Holzbaaur, 2005, p. 6).

2. Categorization of events in the light of the subject literature

Despite the existence of a range of very diverse events designed for promotion purposes, the literature on the subject does not provide a clear classification of events. The *Encyclopedia of tourism*, edited by J. Jafari, introduces a two-phase division of events. The author distinguishes main types of events, dividing them into three categories. The main types of events are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.

The main types of events distinguished in the Encyclopedia of Tourism

Event type	Events within a given type set
1. Cultural	Festivals, carnival, celebrations, religious events
2. Business and trade	Business meetings, conferences, trade fairs and expositions, customer and trade shows
3. Arts and leisure	Concerts, festivals, galas, award ceremonies
4. Education and science	Scientific conferences, seminars, lectures and interpretative events
5. Political	VIP visits, political summits, political conventions, royal events, gatherings of political organization members
6. Sports and recreation	Olympic Games, world and continental championship finals in professional and amateur sports, recreational games and entertainment
7. Private	Weddings, parties, family events, social gatherings

Source: J. Jafari, *Encyclopedia of Tourism*, Routledge World Reference, 2000, pp. 209-210.

Apart from the above types of events, J. Jafari classifies events according to three categories (Jafari, 2000, pp. 209-210):

1. Special events – events having significant meaning for the organizers or participants; usually one-time events, not deviating in nature from the participants' daily routine;
2. Hallmark events – events distinguished by the place, the function or the special organization thereof;
3. Mega events – events planned on a large scale, attracting audiences from all over the world, having impact on the economy; an event of this type is closely related to national (or international) media involvement (e.g., the Oscar Gala).

Another typology of planned events was identified by D. Getz, who divided events into four main categories, in terms of venue/facility use (Getz, 2013, p. 34). Getz listed four main types of planned events and proposed a division into four categories, based on the scale and effect of event impact. The case discussed is presented in Figure 1.

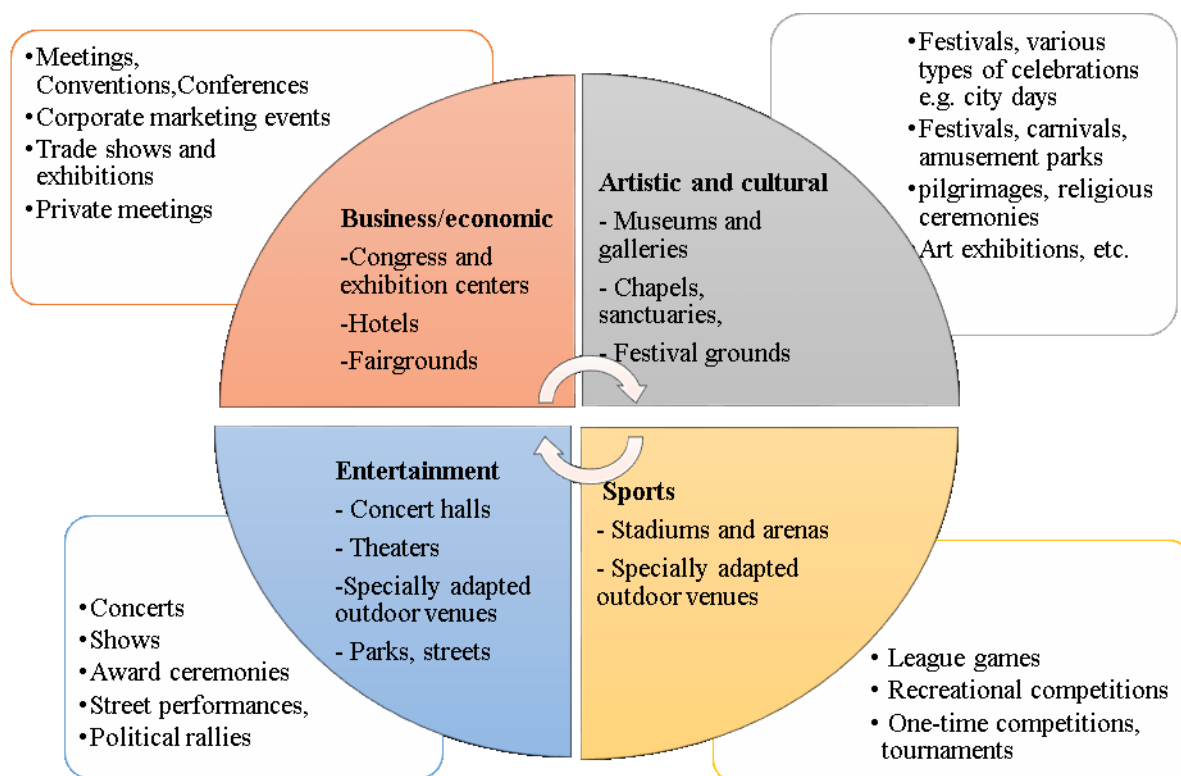


Figure 1. Main types of planned events, as per D. Getz; Adapted from: D. Getz, *Event Tourism: Concepts, International Case Studies, and Research*, Cognizant Communication Corporation, New York 2013, p. 34.

Within the dimension of event impact scale and effect, D. Getz distinguished four types of events (Getz, 2007, p. 19), the first of which are the so-called mega events. According to M. Roche, these are "large-scale cultural (including commercial or sporting) events which have a dramatic character, mass popular appeal and international significance" (Roche, 2000, p. 17). He also noted that such events have significant consequences for the host city, region or country and generate media interest. Getz consolidated the definition provided by Roche, adding that mega events are events whose "volume should exceed one million visitors, their capital cost should at least \$500 million, and their reputation should be of a must-see event" (Getz, 1997, p. 57). Such events include the Olympic and Paralympic Games, FIFA World Cup, UEFA Euro Cup, the Expo Trade Fairs.

Another type of events are the so-called hallmark events, identified with the spirit of a given city or region, considered an inseparable part of both the cities and their inhabitants, contributing to multi-fold increases in the cities' income from tourism many times over.

Major events is another type of events distinguished by D. Getz. Because of their scale and media attention, these events attract a significant number of visitors. They also contribute to the resultant financial benefits and appropriate amount of media coverage. For an event to be considered significant, it must attract public interest, both national and international, owing to the participants and viewers who are present at the venue as well as those watching the media coverage. Important events exert decisive impact on the schedules of international competitions

in a given sport. This category of events includes, inter alia, the World League volleyball competition, or the Formula 1 race at the Silverstone Circuit.

Local/community events include all events that cover a community of one region only (communes, housing estates, cities).

Due to the large scale of this phenomenon, it is difficult to organize events into a clear categorization. They are into different categories, nevertheless, they all focus on planning and organizing an event that brings people together, at a specific time and place, for a specific purpose. Along with the growing popularity of events, another typology has been proposed as part of an educational project *The International Event Management Body of Knowledge*¹, which reviewed and grouped the types of events accordingly (Silvers). The case discussed is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2.

Types of events distinguished by The International Event Management Body of Knowledge

Event type	Description
Business and corporate	Events supporting an organization's business goals (management, communication, training, marketing, PR, motivation, interpersonal relations, customer relations).
'Socially involved' and charity-related	Events organized for or by charities or socially engaged organizations in order to raise funds, support activities or raise public awareness on a given issue.
Trade fairs and exhibitions	Events that bring buyers and sellers and other interested persons together, to present or sell products and services (organized for a specific industry or a wide audience).
Entertainment and recreational	One-time or cyclical free or ticketed performances, concerts, exhibitions, award ceremonies and other entertainment events.
Cultural events	Secular or religious events organized by and/or for the public (festivals, carnivals, religious ceremonies, parades, anniversary celebrations).
Governmental and civil	Meetings organized by, by or for political parties, communities, local and governmental institutions.
Marketing	Events facilitating contacts between sellers and buyers or build awareness of brands, products and services (road shows and others).
Meetings and conferences	Gathering a group of people for educational purposes, information exchange, a debate or a discussion, an agreement reaching or a decision making, relationship building.
Social or Life Cycle related	Private meetings, by invitation, to celebrate or commemorate an occasion (cultural, religious, community, social, family); anniversaries.
Sports	Purely spectacular or active participation recreational activities or sports competitions.

Source: own elaboration based on: <http://www.juliasilvers.com/embok.htm>, accessed: 20.04.2019.

An example of Polish classification of marketing events can be found in the article by D. Kolberg, published at the Marketing Communication Agency website, which provides professional marketing communication and communication tool assistance to practitioners (see Table 3) (Kolber).

¹ This project presents a knowledge domain structure as a captured and therefore explicit starting point for a multi-national and multi-disciplinary discussion on a global Event Management Body of Knowledge (EMBOK).

Table 3.
D. Kolberg's event classification

Criterion	Event type
1. Places	- connected with/related to (unambiguously associated with a place) - itinerant - stationary
2. Time	- single-day - multiday - staged/phased
3. Recurrence	- one-time - multiple time/recurrent - cyclical
4. Audience	- internal (for employees) - external
5. Availability	- closed (ticketed, by invitation) - open
6. Reach	- private/cameral - group - mass ² - global
7. Purpose	- image (brand, policy) - pro-sale - non-profit (charity, ecological, religious) - as a pretext (to publicize a product whose advertising is limited) - guerrilla (achieving maximum publicity with a scandal)
8. Area of activity	- online/multimedia - offline
9. Interaction with audience	- active - passive
10. Customer loyalty to the event	- permanent, (Procom Open, athletics events in Żywiec) - random
11. Publicity	- media - focused on direct participants only
12. Corporate commitment	- sponsoring - own
13. Main benefits for participants	celebrities, freebies, competitions, rivalries, artistic experiences, entertainment experiences, spectacles, shows, feasts
14. Industry, types/forms of events, music events	sports, recreation, picnic, spectacular, extreme, visual, multimedia, installations, performing, light and sound shows, pyrotechnic shows, shows for children, fairs, festivals, galas, theme shows, film shows, anniversaries, feasts, games, happenings, etc.

Source: D. Kolber, *Event marketing – organizacja imprez, czy coś więcej?* <http://www.epr.pl/event-marketing-organizacja-imprez-czy-cos-wiecej,event-pr,1226,2.html>, 18.12.2021.

² Pursuant to the provisions of the Polish Act of 20 May 2009 on mass event safety (Journal of Laws of 2013, item 611, as amended), mass events are artistic, entertainment and sports events, including soccer matches. Recognition of an event as a mass event depends on its nature, the venue of the event, and the number of participants:

- an artistic and entertainment event is a mass event, if the number of the places/seats reserved for participants is not less than 1000 in a stadium or an open area venue, and 500 in a sports hall or other venue/building;
- in the case of sports events, the number of seats is not less than 1000 in a stadium or other open area venue, and 300 in a sports hall or other venue/building;
- due to special principles of event organization and safety assurance, soccer matches, where the number of the seats available to spectators is no less than 1000, are also considered mass events.

In sum, it should be noted that the event classification can be expanded, depending on the event nature and the goals set by the organizers. Due to the fact that event marketing is interdisciplinary in nature and is shaped by individual viewpoints and particular situations, anyone can develop one's own proper event classification.

3. Evolution of the concept of an event

The COVID-19 infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus, declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on the 11th of March 2020, has irreversibly remodeled both processes and business relationships. The global spread of COVID-19 has prompted many countries to close their borders, partially or completely. This has resulted in a significantly reduced cross-border passenger traffic. According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the number of international tourists in 2020 decreased by 74%, compared to 2019. The largest decrease in the number of the people traveling abroad was recorded in April – by as much as 97%, compared to the same month a year earlier³.

The coronavirus pandemic has almost completely shut off the meeting industry. It is estimated that the meeting industry will be one of the last industries to return to normality. The situation which the event organizers found themselves in caused a transformation of traditional events. Events began to be organized in virtual reality, which became everyday reality for most people and for almost each of the target groups the organizers want to reach with an event. Meetings and events have changed in their nature – today it is difficult to imagine any business interaction without the use of online channels.

The demand for new technology has caused people to experience their lives in the real world and in digital reality simultaneously, both of which have become commonplace. Increasingly often events are moving into the virtual world, nevertheless, this does not change the fact that they still remain events, with all their features. They are still live events, attended by people who are just as real and emotional. In the era of progressive digitalization and the changing reality in which the world has found itself, events should also be considered from the perspective of the activity areas in which they are organized.

The first such area is Event 1.0 (live events), which involves any type of event during which participants meet at a designated location. Depending on the target group, it serves different purposes: educational, communication, engagement building, brand awareness, employer branding, business and corporate. This was the most popular form before the COVID-19 pandemic. Offline contact, in the real world, brings people together and allows them to get acquainted better with one another. Face-to-face meetings can serve many marketing functions:

³ International tourism and COVID-19, <https://www.unwto.org/international-tourism-and-covid-19>, 2021-02-10.

brands strengthen their expert position during trainings, information events are aimed at branding, but also at sales and leads⁴ acquisition, in the case of product or service promotion. Live event strengths principally include the participant involvement.

Event 2.0 (online event) is an event or a meeting, during which participants connect via the Internet. It can be conducted in a form of a training, a meetup, a workshop or a conference directed by the company to its clients, employees or partners. It differs from a webinar, which is performed as one-way communication - it engages the participants, almost as much as Event 1.0. Different types of such events can be indicated, inter alia, e.g.: webcasts and slidecasts, audiocasts, virtual fairs (for products, services, work), webinars, virtual conferences and meetings. The strengths of online meetings undeniably include the reach and convenience, as the participants can join in from almost anywhere in the world. Their cost can be lower, owing to the limited catering or conference room expenses. Online events do not require the tedious task of checking multiple locations or traveling. Such events eliminate the borders in the world, increasing the potential number of event participants and providing easier access.

Event 3.0 (hybrid event) is a combination of an online and offline event. Part of the group invited to the event is engaged in online participation (from their home office or office), while the others arrive at a given venue. In this case, the organizer takes care of the interests of both groups and provides the same access to interaction with speakers and other participants as well as the same forms of engagement and feedback. With the growing popularity and cost-effectiveness of online meetings, hybrid events have become a popular way to increase participation in traditional events, at a relatively low cost. Such events also allow participation of those, who may not be able to physically attend an event, due to travel or time zone restrictions. During hybrid events, the online attendees can access live audio or video streaming of presentations and materials as well as ask questions via video calls or chats. Event content can also be recorded and shared online, so as to support further post-event discussion, enabling a knowledge portal for the attendees, and helping promote the next year's edition of the event, by sharing the highlights from the current year. Hybrid events are intended for all those, who cannot be present on the site. They enable incredible reach, which can be directed exactly where the target audience is. Properly selected digital tools allow effective promotion of events and the building of an event engaged community.

⁴ Lead generation in marketing entails the generation of interest or inquiries for product and service offers. Leads can be created to build lists of potential customers, acquire newsletter subscribers, or as sales leads.

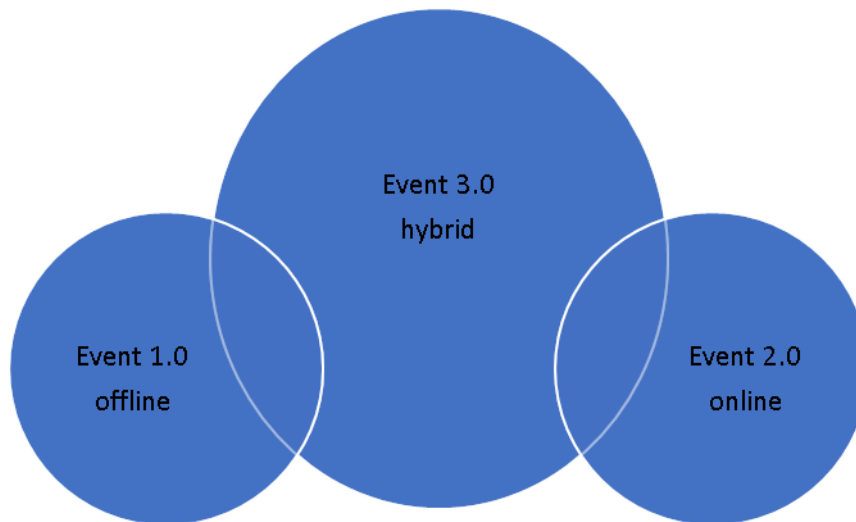


Figure 2. Event concept evolution. Source: own elaboration.

Virtual (Digital) events (online and hybrid) are supported by the social network expansion. Such events can have global reach, through live streaming, while users can participate virtually, via the social media, even if a given event is physically taking place at a remote location. This can increase the organizers' international visibility. The planning process for virtual and hybrid events initially resembles traditional offline event planning. It is important to begin social media communications well in advance.

In addition to building and carrying out an event, the organizing company also acquires any data about the event participants, which allows to measure its effectiveness, compare it to others, and verify whether it is worth investing in an event of such formula in the future. Organization of virtual events allows perfect measurement of their effectiveness, owing to such elements as the event websites and mobile applications, the registration/ticket sale process, the e-mail or text message reminders and notifications, surveys, chats.

4. Event trends

Technology is starting to become not only an important part, but also the backbone of communication and interpersonal relationships. Not only the way of participating, but also the manner of interacting with the event as a whole is therefore changing. In the era of progressive digitalization, the role of e.g., mobile applications, which allow the sharing of the activity during events, is appreciated more than traditional gadgets. Among the main trends in events, the following can be principally included:

- Precise marketing – digital technologies allow precise adjustment of the event offer. User activity tracking facilitates development of personalized content. Mobile applications allow the participants to interact with one another, generating even more mobile traffic.
- Influencer marketing – the use of event support from popular people, celebrities, and opinion leaders has been favored for years, especially during event promotion.
- Multimedia – generate traffic before, after and during the event. Multimedia libraries, which can be disseminated and used online, enable constant access to knowledge via video content sharing (owing to self-sharing and online recommendation).
- Live streaming – live broadcasts and video content sharing are extremely popular on social media. They generate more user engagement, which results in extended event life or in outward video execution. It enables virtual meetings for people who cannot attend a given event in real time.
- Artificial Intelligence (AI) – the availability of bots and their success enable improvement of their performance in increasingly complex areas of human interaction. AI also excels in events, as an ideal way to offer digital and personalized consumer experience. It entails content tailored to consumer interests, better group segmenting, and relationship building with consumers, on their terms.
- Mobile first – is a trend that has been developing for several years. Mobile technology has become inevitable in events, i.e., an event must be accessible on mobile devices. The decision to attend an event is often made while browsing the social media, therefore, recipients must be able to register and learn the details right away.
- Virtual and Augmented Reality Technology – augmented reality is a technology developed for entertainment. Just as artificial intelligence, augmented reality is increasingly used in the meeting and event industry, enjoying tremendous potential in providing the consumers with engaging experiences, in which they can actively participate and interact in the event space. As such it increases the likelihood of developing an emotional connection between the customer and the brand being promoted.
- Digital Experience – the user experience when using a website or a mobile app during an event can be crucial when making purchasing decisions. New digital experiences must entail even higher user engagement.
- Transparency – access to information is easy nowadays. It does not require much involvement on the part of the user. Transparency policies have become a real trend among event organizers, as they strengthen trust and build brand loyalty.
- Micro-moments – are a novelty in the perception of the customers' purchasing process. Such instances are understood as a few seconds, when Internet users expect answers to the needs that have arisen in a given moment. Micro-moments are ideal for events, since consumers strive to get relevant content from companies and brands immediately.

5. Conclusions

The time of the pandemic has not only been a time of traditional meeting freezing and blockage, but also a time of dynamic changes. From today's perspective, it can undeniably be stated that it also entails development of virtual channel events. Not long ago, most of us were feared virtual events, but nowadays, they seem completely natural. Along with the development of technology, when people have become accustomed to mass use of the Internet, event marketing has gained a new meaning and another dimension. For the majority of users, participation in events, despite the detachment from the online world, still entails a search for sensational experience. Everyone strives for interesting, unforgettable experiences and unique moments. New technologies are now becoming a key event element, whether at the stage of activity planning, promotion, or monitoring. Online and offline events can be one of the most effective ways to achieve marketing goals. Today's digital marketing capabilities enable registration of more venues, building of more hype, and chatting with a more targeted audience than ever before.

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