

HYBRID EVENT MARKETING ROUNDUP

July 2021

As the world reopens due to vaccine availability, 2021 events are shifting from virtual to a hybrid model—in-person events that include digital elements—which is allowing organizers to reimagine future events. eMarketer has curated this Roundup of insights, articles, and interviews with B2B and B2C event marketers to understand the lessons learned from taking face-to-face events online and how these learnings will inform event-planning strategies going forward.

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SPONSOR MESSAGE

This past year has changed the way we look at events and one thing is clear: virtual and hybrid events are here to stay. Alongside traditional in-person events, virtual and hybrid will become fixtures in most go-forward marketing mixes. These new event types create a greater opportunity to reach and engage with audiences that are larger than ever before. But, taking advantage of this opportunity requires organizations to consider their total meetings and events program strategically. [Cvent](#) is the single technology platform to help you simplify and modernize this TOTAL event program, including the events you host *and* the ones you attend, whether they are virtual, hybrid, in-person, or even webinars.

OVERVIEW

As corporate event planners headed into 2021, the general consensus was that virtual will remain the status quo until a coronavirus vaccine is widely available or the pandemic subsides by other means.

The shift to hybrid started in 2021. A Global DMC Partners survey of event planners worldwide, released in November 2020, compared strategies for 2020 with those for 2021. While virtual events were the main touchpoint for most respondents in 2020, only 30% said they would execute virtual-only in lieu of in-person events in 2021, versus 42% who said a hybrid approach, which included a face-to-face program with a virtual element, would be their strategy.

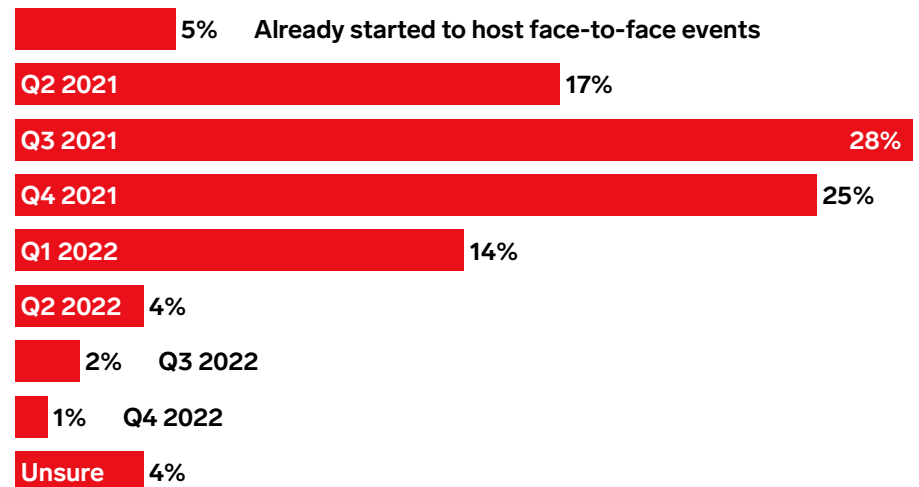
A hybrid strategy allows event organizers to start exploring what future in-person events might look like, while also ensuring the digital component is still a focus. Hosting an event that involves a scaled-back face-to-face element with a virtual extension can also help organizers think about their contingency plans, as laws and restrictions on, as well as attendee comfort with, in-person gatherings change over time.

In anticipation of a hybrid future, venues like convention centers and hotels are looking to expand their digital capabilities to lure organizers back to booking in-person events. The Javits Convention Center in New York City, for example, is offering a control room with digital broadcasting capabilities, staffed with experts who can facilitate the virtual production of an in-person show.

Most sources anticipate that, by H2 2021, small-scale gatherings will commence, but even once companies allow employees to attend events and travel for work, it is not likely that events will return to their pre-pandemic glory.

When Event Planners Worldwide Predict Face-to-Face Live Events/Meetings Will Return, April 2021

% of respondents



Source: Global DMC Partners, "Q1 2021 Meetings & Events Pulse Survey," May 11, 2021

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Similar to our recommendations for crafting a virtual event plan, event organizers who move to hybrid executions must retool the playbook once again. The first step should be defining what the goals of a hybrid event would be and determining how an on-site experience would interplay with virtual elements.

This Roundup includes insights, articles, and a special B2B and B2C event marketing panel to help you understand the lessons learned from moving face-to-face events online and how these learnings will inform event planning strategies going forward.

MEET OUR EVENT MARKETING PANEL



Robin Small,
Director of Sales, Inmar Intelligence

Small and her team are laser-focused on helping the sales team sell more and sell faster—building pipeline and growing revenue—throughout lead generation and the use of sales enablement technologies. Over Small's combined 16 years at Inmar, she has held various roles.



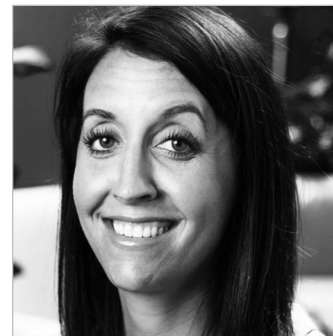
Emily Knight,
Director of Events Marketing,
Boston Magazine

Knight is an event leader specializing in large-scale production and design. She began her career in luxury hotels, sharpened her skills in the catering world, and now creates unparalleled brand experiences in the media industry. Events are her passion, and hospitality is her way of life.



Brent Hieggelke,
CMO, CrowdStreet

Hieggelke is a high-growth tech marketing executive focused on startup and early category innovators and disruptors. He is a seasoned evangelist, keynote, and panelist across a wide-range of topics. He is a former CMO of several leading software as a service companies such as Urban Airship, Brandlive, Webtrends, and Touch Clarity.



Chelsea Rowe,
Senior Director of Corporate Events
and CPG Industry, Catalina

With over 15 years of experience in all facets of the event industry, Rowe previously held event management positions for ZS, Colorado Technical University, and Baxter Healthcare. Rowe has a Bachelor of Science in Hospitality Management from Eastern Illinois University.

A YEAR OF RESILIENCE: HOW POST-2020 SPONSORSHIP MARKETING IS FINDING ITS STRIDE

It's been well over a year since the COVID-19 pandemic triggered a pivot from in-person events to virtual. Today, as the pivot becomes more like business as usual, we asked our event marketing panel to share how they adapted and what they've learned.

■ Inmar Intelligence's Robin Small, director of sales enablement and lead generation

Events are still a key driver for lead generation. As live events started to cancel, we shifted to ensure that we would still use our connections with associations and events to hold virtual meetings and continue our lead-generation strategies. We built a new methodology of creating meetings around when events would normally be held. We trained the sales team on this new strategy and had high expectations for lead generation via virtual events.

When it became apparent that virtual events would be the new normal, our event managers realized that technology would be critical to our success—and that the technology was not “one size fits all.” Every association and trade show seemed to use a different platform, which compounded the complexity. Our event managers had to learn how to set up, manage, execute, and support sellers on a multitude of platforms.

■ CrowdStreet's Brent Hieggelke, CMO

Like everyone, we canceled all physical events and immediately amped up our livestream events, holding monthly large events for all of our various communities. We also launched two to three weekly short interviews with key community members.

We had already been using Brandlive for live events, but we also became power users of Zoom for smaller live events.

Our philosophy was to keep the community connected and engaged more than ever. It worked extremely well. We had a record-breaking 2020 and a very strong start to 2021.

■ Boston Magazine's Emily Knight, director of events marketing

As we shifted to virtual events, we immersed ourselves in the virtual world by using webcast-style technologies, and we relied heavily on video production teams to execute events.

We also learned the promotional campaign lifecycle is much shorter. In-person programming used to benefit from a four- to 12-week marketing campaign, whereas virtual events only needed two to three weeks. With a virtual calendar, attendees didn't have to manage their travel and day-to-day schedules as closely. “Attending event” was as easy as clicking a button.

■ Catalina's Chelsea Rowe, senior director of corporate events and CPG industry

The pandemic completely shifted where we show up, how we show up, and when we show up. It challenged us to find new ways to engage with audiences and try things we had never done before while remaining agile.

We quickly realized that putting all your eggs in one basket with in-person events was not going to provide the ROI we were striving for. We had to reevaluate and pivot on nearly every aspect of events: budget, communication, planning, marketing, execution.

Advancements in virtual event technology over the past 15 months have been mind blowing. The learning curve has been steep and urgent with so many different needs to be met and platforms available.

Expectations on virtual events were realistic at the beginning of the pandemic. People realized that in a virtual world, technical issues were bound to happen. But as we've become more comfortable with virtual, we've become less forgiving. Expectations have increased as people look for a seamless user experience.

BRINGING THE INVISIBLE TO LIFE: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF VIRTUAL

The shift to virtual events put a new burden on marketers: Deliver the value of a live event without the benefit of an in-person experience. From attention spans to attendee retention, our panelists discuss the impact, challenges, and opportunities around virtual events.

■ Inmar Intelligence's Robin Small

Among many issues, two prevalent challenges surfaced as a result of virtual events: technology and Zoom fatigue.

The variety of technology platforms used by trade shows creates ongoing challenges for our event manager, who has to learn the technologies, set up virtual trade show “floors” on each platform, and train sellers on how to use each platform. This requires a lot of time spent on technology adaptation.

The other issue is Zoom fatigue. Sellers, prospects, and clients are on Zoom meetings every day, so the added weight of virtual events compounds the issue of Zoom fatigue.

Our event team develops strategy for the event, manages all logistics and execution, and coaches the sellers on how to use the platform and goals of the event. The event manager also holds post-show debrief meetings to review successes, opportunities, leads, and areas for improvement.

■ CrowdStreet's Brent Hieggelke

Lack of visual contact with the audience makes it challenging to gauge feedback with the content.

Online event platforms do offer audience interaction with chat features, which is starting to feel better as people have figured out how to use it effectively. Although we don't facilitate networking, we do encourage interaction and questions at the beginning of the event and taking an

audience question in the first 10 minutes to show them we are serious about working audience interaction into the flow.

■ Boston Magazine's Emily Knight

One of the biggest challenges for us was managing the expectation of sponsors. In general, the virtual landscape offered us the ability to reach a much broader audience, which was great for overall program impressions. Sponsors were thrilled with the number of eyeballs on their brand. But the personal connection and one-on-one engagement was much harder to foster through the screen. To facilitate networking, we used breakout sessions with moderators.

Finding ways to get brands in hands and sips to lips really tested our creativity.

■ Catalina's Chelsea Rowe

One of the biggest challenges of virtual events is participant retention throughout the event. Gone are the days of having everyone exclusively in one location, under one roof. Virtual events compete with other meetings, daily business needs, and numerous other outside influences. The “tunnel vision” that in-person events create is now challenged. Your content needs to be compelling, condensed, and provocative enough to garner attention and keep it.

On the other hand, virtual events have allowed for much more “real time” content and a larger audience base. Those who may have not traveled previously can now participate from the comfort of their home or work. Virtual events have allowed us to stay more connected and engaged with brands and suppliers across numerous platforms.

THE EVOLUTION OF EVENT ENGAGEMENT

This article was contributed and sponsored by [Cvent](#).



Mike Dietrich,
Vice President of Product Marketing,
Cvent

The pandemic has ushered in a wave of innovation and exciting new opportunities in the event space. The overall event landscape may have evolved, but events continue to remain indispensable for generating growth and

support for your organization. Here we explore the event landscape pre-, during, and post-pandemic, and look at how each event type can contribute to your overall goals in generating marketing-fueled engagement.

Pre-pandemic events favored in-person format

Pre-pandemic, in-person events were typical. And there is a reason for that: research shows that [events deepen relationships and drive sales and interactions](#), and that face-to-face requests are [34 times more successful](#) than written-based communications.

In-person events encourage interaction between attendees, sponsors, and the event hosts. The level and depth of engagement offered by these in-person connections is profound. However, there are some limitations, especially when it comes to the breadth of engagement, because overall engagement data is confined to those individuals who can physically travel to the venue.

Pandemic events went fully virtual

During the pandemic, events pivoted to virtual experiences, resulting in an explosion of scale and competition. 2020 saw a [290% increase](#) in virtual meetings compared with 2019. Organizations that previously had

never hosted virtual events were thrust into the space, often learning on the fly. In fact, [data shows](#) that businesses and consumers alike experienced five years of digital adoption progress in the equivalent of just eight weeks' time during the initial onset of the pandemic.

Virtual events are powerful tools for reaching large swaths of attendees. They feature event assets that persist outside the time boundaries of the event itself and offer significant breadth of connection and engagement. These events provide the ability to gather engagement data on a much larger group of people than in-person only events. However, virtual events are not without their limitations, as they see a reduction in depth of engagement and interaction.

Approaching post-pandemic events with a hybrid format model

As we come out of the pandemic, hybrid events—those that combine both in-person and virtual formats—are rapidly increasing in popularity. Event decision makers say that [59% of events](#) will be hybrid post-pandemic. Hybrid events unify the in-person and virtual event experience by offering attendees the best of both worlds. These events provide both depth and breadth of connection and engagement by expanding an event's geographic reach and time horizon, encouraging a variety of interaction methods, and encouraging engagement throughout the entire event program—before, during, and after. Hybrid events truly offer something for everyone.

The key to success in the modern age is to utilize all of these event formats within a total event program, allowing you to get the most from the breadth and depth of engagement.



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EVENT BUDGETING, BEFORE AND AFTER THE PANDEMIC

Strategic decision making around 2021 events took a new direction post-pandemic, particularly around budgeting and resource planning. At a global level, Global DMC Partner survey data late in 2020 showed that hybrid events—i.e., live events with some form of virtual component—would triple in popularity in 2021. And although drastically fewer event planners expected to host virtual-only events this year, the number of those who do is still at a significant 30%.

Three-quarters (75%) of brand marketers have resumed in-person, experiential marketing efforts, according to AnyRoad data cited by MediaPost. This includes experiences like classes, tours, and workshops, as well as in-store events.

Why it matters:

- With so many brick-and-mortar stores on the verge of closure, **some retailers are going experiential out of necessity**. For example, after closing 26 stores in 2020, **Dick's Sporting Goods** opened a new store in April with an indoor rock climbing wall and batting cage, hoping to lure customers back to in-store shopping with activities.
- Others are voluntarily turning to experiences as a way to **reconnect with consumers after a year online**. Even **Google** is planning to open its first retail store this summer, hoping to capitalize on the **6.3%** rise in brick-and-mortar sales that we expect for this year.

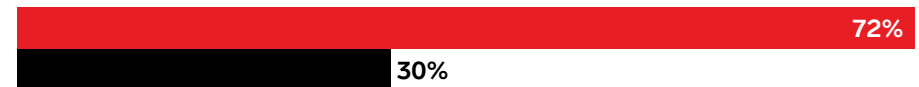
What's next: Still, the year of Zoom events will have a lasting impact on in-person experiences going forward.

- According to a November 2020 survey by Global DMC Partners, **drastically fewer global event planners expect to host virtual-only events**: Only **30%** have plans to do so this year, compared with **72%** that did in 2020.
- But hybrid events—live in-person events with some sort of virtual component—will triple in popularity with **42%** of event planners planning to host one in 2021.

Are Event Planners Worldwide Planning to Host Virtual Events in Lieu of In-Person Events?

% of respondents, 2020 & 2021

Yes



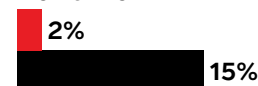
Hybrid—they plan to host face-to-face live programs with a virtual component



No, they have no plans to go virtual for meetings/events/incentives



Don't know



■ 2020 ■ 2021

Source: Global DMC Partners, "Q3 2020 Meetings & Events Pulse Survey," Nov 10, 2020

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We asked our panelists how their budgets have evolved since the pandemic and how the hybrid approach is helping to shape their 2022 planning.

■ Inmar Intelligence's Robin Small

Prior to spring 2020, 100% of Inmar's trade show budget went toward in-person events. As we plan for 2022, our preference is still in-person events. However, this will depend on the organizations and associations we work with, as to their movement to in-person events.

Our budget process is the same as it was in the years prior to the pandemic: We evaluate each show's success and ROI and then determine if that show is a strategic investment in the next year's show schedule and budget.

■ CrowdStreet's Brent Hieggelke

Before 2020, our budget was about 90% in-person and 10% virtual. Going forward, I would estimate it to be closer to 60/40.

■ Boston Magazine's Emily Knight

Zero percent of our budget was virtual prior to the pandemic. We're pivoting back to in-person events in Q4 of 2021 and forecasting around 80% of our programs will be in-person in 2022 with a more limited calendar of virtual or hybrid events.

■ Catalina's Chelsea Rowe

Ahead of spring 2020, I would estimate that nearly 90%-plus of our event budget was for in-person events. Naturally, given the current environment and pandemic-related unknowns, we have a strong desire to return to in-person events but realize hybrid and virtual events can provide incredible value for our business as well.

Several factors come into play when looking at our event portfolio and how it will shake out—safety being of the utmost importance. We will also look at how the industry is showing up, travel statuses of our clients and future clients, and participation numbers, to name a few.

“As we plan for 2022, our preference is still in-person events. However, this will depend on the organizations and associations we work with.”
—Robin Small, Inmar Intelligence

LINKEDIN IS THE LATEST TO TAKE ON CLUBHOUSE

In March, LinkedIn announced its own social audio feature to compete with Clubhouse, making it the third Big Tech company after Twitter and Spotify to invest in the social audio space. The news also came shortly after LinkedIn announced several updates, including a new “creator mode” profile aimed at making it easier for influencers to communicate with their audiences.

LinkedIn could be taking a risk by trying to target a business audience, given that Clubhouse is already so successful among professionals. Other competitors have done the opposite, trying to attract an audience that's not heavily present on Clubhouse. Twitter's Spaces rolled out its first tests to marginalized groups like women and people of color, and Spotify's acquisition of Locker Room is geared toward sports, a topic area that Clubhouse doesn't see too much of.

But LinkedIn could differentiate itself by focusing more heavily on structured professional events like conferences and webinars, areas it already shines in. While Clubhouse has positioned itself as a more casual place to chat, structured conference-style rooms have begun popping up. Clubhouse “does feel like a conference panel at times, if it's moderated well,” said Karen Staughton, West Coast engagement director at digital agency Grow. And LinkedIn has the home-field advantage when it comes to these kinds of events.

- For one, LinkedIn already has the existing infrastructure to support live digital events, something the platform has been working on since before the pandemic. In 2019, it launched an Events feature and a video broadcasting tool called LinkedIn Live. A live audio tool could be a natural extension of these features.
- LinkedIn also has a higher capacity for content moderation, something Clubhouse has struggled with. Requiring users to sync with their existing LinkedIn profiles could be a major deterrent for the kinds of harassment and abuse reported on Clubhouse, which could also help attract a more professional audience.

These two factors also make LinkedIn more appealing for B2B marketers looking to host sponsored digital events.

“There's an exciting opportunity for brands and agencies to show up in this space and be the facilitators of thought leadership and innovation and drive things forward in more of an event space,” Staughton said of Clubhouse. “But my spidey senses go off when it comes to brand safety here.”

LinkedIn's advantages in digital event hosting and content moderation could give marketers many of the same opportunities as those on Clubhouse—but in what might feel like a safer and more established environment. However, that may come at the expense of the casual, “post-work drinks” vibe that makes Clubhouse so appealing.

Want to learn more about LinkedIn's social audio plans? [Listen to the Behind the Numbers podcast episode.](#)

THE PANDEMIC PUSHED XR USE BEYOND FUN AND GAMES

Extended reality (XR) technologies—including virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and mixed reality (MR)—are still in the early phases of adoption, but they are evolving quickly. While most use cases for VR and AR are still related to gaming, entertainment, and social media, the variety of applications is expanding as more consumers and businesses test out immersive experiences.

Because the pandemic has forced many people to work, socialize, study, and shop at home, they're using XR experiences to replace in-person ones. This year, 58.9 million people in the US will use VR at least once per month, and 93.3 million will be monthly AR users.

Though VR and AR are different technologies growing at different rates, the pandemic appears to have galvanized the market for both.

Established use cases have increased

VR and AR usage has grown as more people stay home and pursue activities aligned with crowd avoidance and social distancing, including playing video games, consuming entertainment, participating in social VR, using AR features on social networks, and experimenting with virtual try-ons, virtual shopping, and 360-degree travel videos.

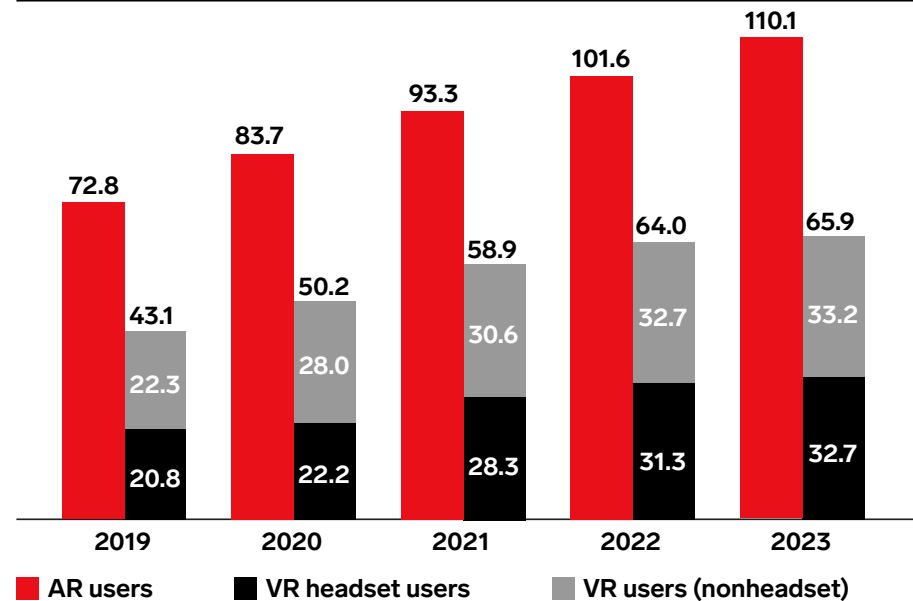
For example, June 2020 research by Ipsos and the Global Myopia Awareness Coalition (GMAC) found that 58% of US children and teens spent more time with smartphones, 53% spent more time with video game consoles, and 15% spent more time with VR headsets since the pandemic began. In general, people who owned VR headsets used them more; others explored nonheadset options or considered buying headsets.

New use cases are attracting interest

The move to remote and virtual work, studying, and other home-based activities has created interest in new and more useful applications of VR and AR beyond gaming. Virtual fitness, business collaboration, and distance learning are just three of many examples. With more development and more demand, VR and AR are increasingly seen as viable replacements for in-person training, meetings, events, conventions, customer service, healthcare, and other activities.

US AR/VR Users, 2019-2023

millions



Note: individuals of any age who experience VR content at least once per month via any device; AR users are individuals of any age who experience AR content at least once per month via any device

Source: eMarketer, March 2021

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Big Tech sees big opportunity

The pandemic has turned XR into an even more important growth area for Big Tech. While Facebook is on its way to becoming the VR leader in the US with its Oculus ecosystem, it is also investing in AR. Other heavy hitters, including Apple, Google, Microsoft, and Samsung, are all reportedly racing to introduce their own VR, AR, and/or MR solutions to grow the market and capitalize on increasing demand.

5G is becoming more available

XR developers are optimistic about the rollout of 5G wireless service—both in the US and around the world. Higher-speed 5G networks are expected to eliminate many persistent technical difficulties and boost XR's viability. In an April 2020 survey conducted by Toluna and Advertiser Perceptions on behalf of Verizon Media, 44% of US adults cited streaming VR content and 36% cited AR experiences as expected benefits of 5G technology.

Likewise, a majority of adults in South Korea, the UK, and the US found the idea of subscription-based VR and AR at least somewhat appealing, according to a January 2020 Nokia poll conducted by Parks Associates. Nearly three-quarters (73%) of respondents found a subscription to VR experiences appealing or very appealing, while 70% and 65% said the same for AR experiences and VR sports, respectively.

VR and AR are increasingly seen as viable replacements for in-person training, meetings, events, conventions, customer service, healthcare, and other activities.

NORDSTROM LEVERAGED A LIVESTREAM SHOPPING EVENT TO HELP BOOST DIGITAL SALES

Nordstrom held a livestream shopping event on its website demonstrating how to style and wear different designer pieces while also enabling consumers to participate in a live chat, per [Retail Dive](#).

Why it's worth watching: Livestream shopping events are gaining momentum in the US since they allow retailers to engage with customers in a unique way and to reach consumers wherever they are via digital channels—which is proving to be especially useful during the pandemic, as many consumers are still avoiding in-store shopping.

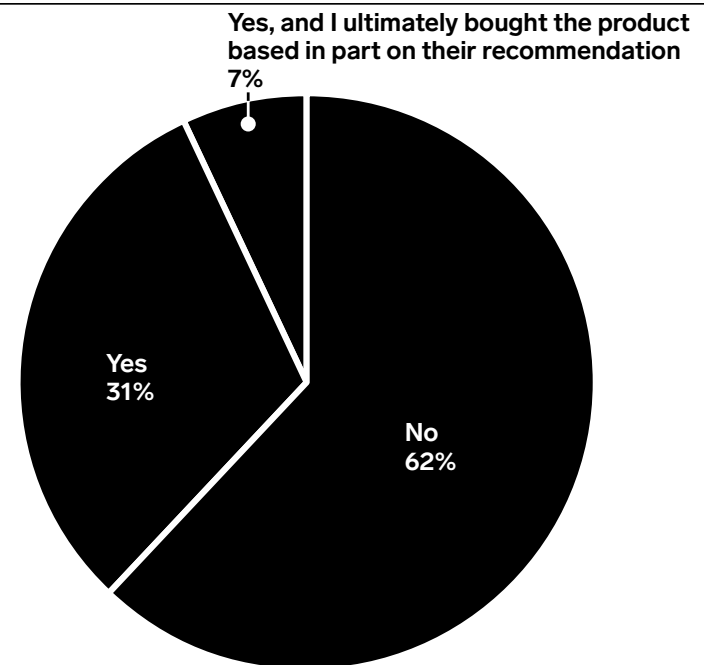
Other firms are also taking part in livestream shopping events: Walmart hosted another event on **TikTok** after a successful pilot. Meanwhile, **QVC** expanded beyond television commerce to launch a livestream shopping channel on **YouTube**.

The big takeaway: Nordstrom's use of livestream shopping events may help grow its digital sales volume—which represented more than **50%** of its overall volume in Q4 2020—by allowing it to further tap into a growing market: US-based live video viewers are expected to reach 155.8 million in 2021, per our forecasts.

Want to hear more about livestreaming shopping event trends? [Listen to the Behind the Numbers podcast episode.](#)

US Adults Who Have Watched a Livestream of Someone Talking About a Product that They Might Want to Buy, April 2021

% of respondents



Note: n=2,024 ages 18+

Source: The Harris Poll, "Covid-19 Wave 60," April 19, 2021

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BALANCE THE NEEDS OF PERSONAL AND PROTOCOL AS LIVE EVENTS REOPEN

As a hybrid approach to corporate events becomes more common and the issue of safety continues to be a key focal point, companies are navigating questions around who will attend and protocols to follow. We asked what our panelists missed the most about in-person events and how they plan to approach them as things reopen.

■ Inmar Intelligence's Robin Small

It is with resounding agreement that anyone at Inmar Intelligence, including the executive leadership team, would say that they miss the live interaction and networking with prospects and clients.

Many important discussions and connections are made in person, whether it be on the show floor or elsewhere. The one-on-one live meetings and collaboration are so important at all levels to foster strong relationships and move business forward. While we tried to foster networking and collaboration with prospects and clients virtually, nothing can make up for live face-to-face interactions.

As soon as events go live—and if those events are on our trade show calendar—we plan to attend. We are working closely with our trade show environment company to create booths and spaces that are safe and effective. Prior to each show, our event manager meets with the attendees to review strategy and goals for both virtual and live events. For live events, the event manager will also discuss our booth space and factors that have gone into the plan to make it safe. We expect each live attendee to follow our booth safety guidelines.

■ CrowdStreet's Brent Hieggelke

We have not yet started planning in-person events ourselves, but we are considering them for Q4. We will watch how other industry events are doing in September and then roll some out as test events in the fall.

The networking opportunities by far are hardest to replicate online. People will enjoy getting together despite the efficiencies of virtual events.

■ Boston Magazine's Emily Knight

Nothing compares to greeting and meeting people with a smile and making organic connections.

We'll start to gather in-person beginning in Q4 with just two events this year. Others will remain virtual. We'll follow the state's and city's guidelines for proper physical requirements and adapt our marketing to be more targeted and niched based on content matter.

■ Catalina's Chelsea Rowe

We are still working through our approach for live events. What we missed the most was face-to-face interaction. Virtual events have proved to be successful for content, thought leadership, presentations, etc. However, the virtual environment cannot duplicate the personal connection and relationship building that takes place at events. Whether that be at the booth, at a one-on-one meeting, or at a networking event, having the opportunity to connect in person is unmatched.

“Nothing compares to greeting and meeting people with a smile and making organic connections.”
—Emily Knight, Boston Magazine

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Contributors and Production

Danielle Drolet	Senior Producer, Content Studio
Dana Hill	Director of Production
Jennifer King	Producer, Content Studio
Stephanie Meyer	Product Specialist
Kristen Riebesell	Senior Director, Media Solutions and Strategy