



The Upswing of Virtual Trade Shows and Learning Centers: Using Virtual Tools to Increase Productivity and Revenue

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Virtual trade shows and conferences cost a fraction of what it costs to host, sponsor, or attend a physical trade show or training summit. Obviously, these cost savings benefit all industries, but the technology, publishing, and life sciences industries have begun to use virtual trade shows and learning centers to address industry-specific issues and requirements that affect employees within these fields.

Even as HR department budgets continue to be reduced, the pressure to provide talent development remains undiminished. Industry trade shows and training summits keep employees knowledgeable of current developments and keep them connected to the larger industry landscape. These shows also help companies maintain a high-visibility corporate presence. Even with these benefits, some organizations have opted to reduce or eliminate support of these large events due to the costs involved. The industries mentioned above, however, are discovering the many new benefits beyond saving money that come from virtual solutions and are leading in their adoption.

What is a Virtual Show?

A result of evolving webcasting technologies, a virtual show is a flexible communications solution – a virtual venue, so to speak, for events such as trade shows, job fairs, conferences and training summits. Simply put, a virtual

show brings the benefits of physical events right to the desktop. In addition to cost savings, benefits include greater convenience and flexibility.

What Is a Virtual Learning Center?

A virtual learning center is a virtual solution designed for training, professional development and continuing education. Highly interactive, a virtual learning center leverages the 3-D capabilities of virtual event technology and is a completely customizable environment designed to meet attendees' training and learning needs.

Due to a number of factors to be explored in this article, employees, customers and other professionals are using the Web more than ever before as a source of information. As a result, virtual learning technologies are seen as viable, cost-effective alternatives for satisfying training and education requirements.

Ease-of-use is key to a successful implementation; so most virtual learning centers are accessible from any computer, with no software download required. Once "inside," attendees experience a virtual training session, with e-learning courses, that simulates an in-person seminar. Typically included are a:

- Resource center or library where users can collect and save training materials, including PDFs, webcasts, videos and slide presentations for a custom learning experience;
- Product/technology showcase where training staff can provide in-depth review of new concepts and answer participant questions;
- Lecture hall/auditorium, where trainees can hear lectures and view presentations, as well as a schedule of webcast presentations by title, topics/tracks or time;
- Communications center where participants can leave messages for others and have interactive chat sessions to facilitate collaborative learning; and,
- Classroom/exhibit hall for interacting with subject matter experts or instructors and downloading related documents, such as course outlines.



With a virtual learning center's sophisticated registration and reporting capabilities, organizations can enroll trainees and then track and analyze participation and usage. Professional development return on investment (ROI) is further enhanced by the ability to leverage existing content, such as webcasts, product documentation and other training materials.

Virtual learning center applications include continuing education, employee training, professional development, corporate learning, external and internal panel discussions, sales training, new hire orientation and technical certification courses.

Industries Taking the Lead in Going Virtual

More industries are open to using virtual tools for simple webcasting functions, but the technology, publishing, and life sciences industries are leading in the development of virtual trade shows, learning centers and conferences to address industry-specific needs.

Technology

For employees in the technology industry, knowing the latest products is essential to business and career development. Technology trade shows, like those hosted by companies such as Cisco and Intel, play a major role in demonstrating and debuting new products to customers, partners and employees. At these events, people learn what is on the market, how to use what is available and what is to come. Trade shows are essential for sharing information, as well as networking with new customers and partners.

Virtual trade shows still allow these companies to share product information. They also allow them to provide white paper downloads efficiently, share links to archived presentations about new products, and revisit archived product demos.

Unique to the technical community is the importance of partners – the systems integrators, independent software vendors (ISVs) and value-added resellers (VARs) who together develop and market related services and solutions. Critical to the success of such an ecosystem is effective, timely networking and information-sharing. A virtual expo can feature new products but, more importantly, can also facilitate direct communication between partners and corporate product managers, channel managers and financing teams.

Because of these capabilities, virtual trade shows and conferences have impacted the technology industry by enabling companies to share product information while still saving time and money.

Publishing

Publishing companies are leveraging digital technology, including virtual shows and learning centers, to deliver timely and relevant editorial and educational content to the readership of their traditional print publications such as magazines and technical/professional journals and to the

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attendees of the industry trade shows they sponsor. Publishers often host industry-specific conferences where companies get together to present the latest industry news and to network.

However, some publishers have adopted a “hybrid” solution. These are conferences and training events which extend the audience reach of traditional physical in-person events with a complementary virtual component.

By offering a virtual trade show in conjunction with a physical show, the sponsors get more exposure, making the money they invest in the show go further in terms of networking and business development. With virtual trade shows, publishers can help their sponsors reach more people, which make their events more valuable within their respective industries.

When a traditional training event is offered with a virtual learning center alternative, the virtual content can be recorded and posted online for future viewing by new hires. Because content is available on-demand after the training event, convenience and flexibility are enhanced even further.

Life Sciences

Life sciences organizations face unique communication and professional development challenges given the complexity of the industry and the importance of regulatory compliance, certification, testing and assessment.

Understandably, the life sciences industry has begun to use virtual conferences to share research and information about the latest medical breakthroughs and devices. A virtual learning center, for example, can help companies deliver critical information about new innovations and research to broad medical audiences in a highly secure and timely manner.

Because of the international nature of this industry, virtual conferences allow for better dissemination of information and training to community members located throughout the world. With virtual conferences, participants from across the globe can attend an event they would have missed normally. Additionally, the ability to archive research presentations and medical device demos allows professionals in this industry to stay current with less effort and time.

A virtual learning center can be a powerful tool for the quick dissemination internally of industry and company news

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and information, functioning as a news resource for sharing highlights from in-person meetings with non-attendees.

In an innovative approach to medical education, the life sciences industry is using virtual learning centers for training procedures as well. A virtual learning center designed for cardiologists, for example, can include a virtual heart and vascular center with virtual imaging.

Converging Trends and Increasing Value

Early on, there was some concern among virtual learning center developers that participants would resist continuing education and learning opportunities that did not offer face-to-face contact with trainers and peers. However, virtual solutions are being widely embraced by participants, most of whom appreciate the added convenience and flexibility of desktop training and the ability to access content anytime, anywhere.

Trainees also appreciate having direct access to high-level experts; it is easier for a senior-level executive to participate in a virtual learning event. In addition, as with the adoption of many other virtual communication tools, human resources professionals are finding that today's "digital generation" actually prefers meeting and learning virtually.

Virtual events are growing rapidly in popularity, largely because a "perfect storm" has been created where several key business trends are now converging:

- An increasingly mobile workforce, requiring "on-the-go" communications and training alternatives;
- The need to reduce costs and employee travel and increase efficiency;
- Increased virtualization, with technology advances making realistic user experiences possible;
- The green movement and the implications of reducing energy use; and,
- A greater organizational focus on accountability, measurability and ROI.

As shown, a virtual conference is an ideal solution in a tough economy. Organizations need to reduce travel and hosting or attending physical events, even as the need to

communicate increases. A virtual event is also a greener alternative as it is virtually carbon-free. At a time when employees, customers, and regulators are stressing the need to improve an organization's carbon footprint, using virtual solutions is evidence of a commitment to green business practices.

In training applications, equally important is that a virtual learning center can be more effective, as content can be presented in an interactive environment that participants often find more engaging. The interactivity of virtual events also makes it easier to connect presenters with participants. Of great benefit to both employees and employers are the productivity and efficiency benefits that can be derived without the cost and inconvenience commonly associated with traditional training efforts.

Conclusion

Due to shifting environmental and economic factors, organizations of all sizes are increasingly turning to virtual solutions to meet their communication needs. A primary application for virtual solutions such as virtual shows and conferences is training and continuing education.

Given the affordability, flexibility and customizability of virtual trade shows, learning centers and conferences, organizations and their employees increasingly see the added benefits of hosting, sponsoring, and attending these events to address their specific business needs. For example, many virtual conferences are held to offer cutting-edge industry information for advancing attendee career development. However, on a broad level, this is a productivity issue – saving time and talent resources so people can do the jobs they were hired to do more effectively.

Trade shows and conferences, in general, offer career, performance and talent development benefits. Human resources executives who are seeing the wider reach they gain from using virtual conferences and learning centers are contributing further to their organizations' exposure within their industries. This equates to increased competitive visibility and a stronger market presence, which aids in recruiting top talent.

About the Author



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