



The Future of **Virtual Events**

What's inside:

- Why virtual events struggled
- What event marketers care about
- A look at hybrid events



Welcome to the Future

It's been a crazy time for events (understatement of the year). Marketers depend on in-person events to build awareness, generate demand, and ultimately, grow their customer base. In fact, [35 percent](#) of US-based B2B marketing decision-makers rank events among their top four tactics for generating demand. It's no wonder that, before COVID-19, events marketing consistently topped the charts for program spending. Forrester research revealed that B2B marketers allocated nearly [15 percent](#) of their budgets towards events in 2019—and 55 percent of marketers were intending to spend more in 2020. But with a global pandemic sweeping the world, this tried-and-true channel was off the table.

In spite of the chaos and upheaval, marketers have done an admirable job making the best of the circumstances by flipping events to virtual and investing more in digital channels. Now on the other side, we wanted to hear their reflections on the past year and their predictions for what's ahead. How were virtual events in the past year? What qualities do marketers consider to be most important when evaluating virtual events software? As the COVID-19 vaccine continues to be distributed, how are they thinking about events for the rest of the year? Where do virtual events fit into the marketing mix after things return to “normal”?

We've summarized their responses and highlighted direct quotes below (which we've anonymized) as illustrations of their thought process.



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Who we spoke to

To conduct this research, we spoke to a range of personas — CMOs and VPs, event and field marketers, demand gen marketers, consultants, and even investment bankers. We interviewed eight people at seven companies. Our interviewees' experiences range from hosting their own events, to sponsoring events, to simply participating in events. However, what they all share is a desire to create memorable experiences for their customers.

It may be interesting to note that the title “experience marketer” is beginning to grow more common. We interviewed two marketers at an HR benefits company (one demand gen, one events) who identified themselves as being “on the experience team.”

Let's delve into their responses.

Where event marketers get their news

Perhaps unsurprisingly, event marketers primarily learn by observing others. They frequently attend other marketers' events to scope out what other teams are trying and collect their own ideas and inspiration. Trusted connections in their network are also a key source of intel. Some also mentioned participating in Slack groups or getting content from LinkedIn.

Virtual events have struggled to match in-person

One of our standard interview questions was to ask about a virtual event they had recently attended that they really liked. This was probably the question interviewees struggled with most. They came up with answers like, ‘people are trying their best’ or ‘this company did a good job pivoting’—but hardly anyone could name a virtual event they legitimately enjoyed attending.

Much of this, attendees and producers blamed on the technology—sputtering connections, clunky transitions, and systems that just weren't built for an engaging human experience.



**Director, Field Marketing
& Events | Business
travel software company**

"It's hard, I haven't found one that I was like, 'Wow, this is so well done and over the top.' I think everyone's done an incredible job shifting and making it the best they possibly could, but I'm not sure there's been one that has stuck out to me as like, 'Wow, I can't wait to go back to that virtual event.'"

**Inbound Marketing
Sr. Manager | HR benefits
software company**

"I think most of the time, we're metrics and data-focused. *How many people are in the room?* Are we getting the leads? And that's the type of perspective we approach events with. But I will say overall and I'll be candid and I won't sugarcoat anything—virtual events, we're doing as much as we can to make them engaging, enjoyable, and unique, but they're not the same as an in-person event and they never will be ... I think basically what I'm saying is that I've never sat down at [a virtual] event and been like, 'Holy crap, this is the experience I had wished for and wanted.'"

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**CEO & Founder |
Marketing consultancy**

"I've been thinking about why people go to events at all. And it's the combination of company interest and personal interest. The thing is, I was a VP at Oracle working in different roles for a long time. And when people were sent to OpenWorld, very often it was a way for their bosses and their companies to reward them. 'Okay, you'll go stay at a nice hotel. You'll meet some people. You'll have some nice food'—all of that kind of stuff. And depending on people's roles, there might be folks that didn't get out that much. And so it was a way that companies could reward them, and it had a personal interest as well as a company interest. And so far, nobody's added that to virtual. It just feels like another obligation to attend another virtual meeting."

"I've been thinking about why people go to events at all. And it's a combination of company interest and personal interest ... Often [an event] was a way for their bosses and their companies to reward them."

**Managing Director |
Investment bank**

"I would say we actually don't participate in a lot of online events. We get invited to them and they can be interesting. I'm not against online events. But I don't think they actually turn into revenue or business very often."

**VP Marketing |
Cloud services provider**

"I tended to stay away because there were just so many. There was an influx of virtual events happening every single day for a period of time."

The advantages of virtual events

While marketers have been sorely missing in-person, digital events do have a number of advantages. Here are some of the themes that came up in our conversations and through secondary research:

Better attendee data

Many of the marketers we spoke with highlighted the rich analytics they can collect from virtual events. “The data you can get from virtual is unsurpassed in terms of registration, attendance, attention span, etc.,” said the Director of Partner Marketing at an ABM tech company. With traditional events, you might be aware of who attended, but in a virtual setting, you can see who attended, how long they stayed, whether they participated in chat, and so on—giving you a much deeper picture of their engagement.

Accessibility

By eliminating the need for travel and reducing the costs of hosting, virtual events are much more accessible for people, both geographically and financially. They’re also much easier to squeeze into a busy schedule. “People from around the world can join or re-watch on their own time,” says the Director of Field Marketing & Events at a business travel software company. “They easily pop in, if they have meetings all day, but they want to go to this one session.”

Fewer barriers to participation

In a recent *Harvard Business Review* [article](#), the organizers of the International Meeting on Advanced Spinal Techniques (IMAST) explained that in this year’s virtual conference, they noticed higher rates of engagement among younger surgeons and those with language barriers than in previous years. They hypothesized that the virtual chat and digital Q&A sessions were less intimidating for these groups than a traditional Q&A, where they would have to step up to a microphone and ask their question in front of hundreds of their peers.

Evergreen content

While many in-person conferences do livestream or record their sessions, this requires additional resources, such as camera operators. Smaller sessions or workshops may not be recorded due to resource constraints. But in a digital setting, it’s easy to record content from live events and endlessly repurpose it in the form of on-demand video, podcasts, and more.



What event marketers look for in a virtual events platform

UX and experience reign supreme

We asked interviewees what 3-5 characteristics they looked for in a virtual events platform and what their deal-breakers were.

Here's what they had to say:

A beautiful, easy-to-use UI

Inbound Marketing Sr. Manager | HR benefits software company — “UX/UI is a big one now because Zoom used to be just the gray box, a chat button maybe, and then you see the presenter and the slides. And now it's like, it should be beautifully designed and custom.”

Director, Field Marketing & Events | Business travel software company — “I mean, no one really used virtual event platforms, so they're these old products that no one's redone or really invested a lot of time or money into until recently. So I think there's going to be a lot more innovation in them, moving forward. One of the reasons we chose the platform we did was because the UX was a little more modern, easy to navigate, easy to use...So I think ease-of-use, something that didn't look like it was built in the nineties because that is a big one for us. Our brand is pretty modern, and so finding something that kind of fit with that was important to us.”



An enjoyable, interactive experience

CEO & Founder | Marketing consultancy — “If you can make something that people want to watch to show up for, then you've cracked something that nobody else has really cracked yet.”

Inbound Marketing Sr. Manager | HR benefits software company — “You should want to spend time there if you're staring at your computer for an hour or more. You should be able to have customized widgets that people can click on a bio and expand this resource and download the deck immediately. And it's how interactive can you make it? Poll, questions, Q&As, on-demand, live. Those options are critical.”

Reliability

Director, Field Marketing & Events | Business travel software company — “It has to be reliable and work. There's a lot of demos that I've been on and the platform has crashed on the demo. Gosh.”

What pushed marketers' buttons

We also followed up and asked users if anything annoyed them about the virtual events platforms they have experience with. Here's what they had to say:

Outdated UX

Director, Field Marketing & Events | Business travel software company — "I think that my biggest pet peeve is just hopping onto a demo and it looks like you've gone 10, 20 years back in time, looking at this event product and being like, 'Has anyone touched or updated this in 10 years? Probably not.'"

Virtual booths

Director, Field Marketing & Events | Business travel software company — "There's a few virtual events where people have tried to keep the expo or the virtual booths and that's already hard to do in-person, let alone virtually. And so having our sales teams sit in these booths, and people can click in, you see them click in, but no one responds to your chats. They don't have to, right? So I think trying to recreate the virtual booths, in my opinion, is a miss. You don't get that interaction and you don't get that face-to-face interaction or meeting."

Virtual Backgrounds

Managing Director | Investment bank — "The screen you can put up virtually behind people's heads tends not to work very well because somebody turns their head and it looks weird because part of their head disappears. I think it's better to have a nice picture behind you. And have front lighting and stuff like that. I think that's about as much as is really needed."

How marketers are thinking about the future of events

While some marketers are optimistic about hosting in-person and hybrid events in 2021, many are remaining cautious. Here's what they had to say:

In-person events? Not so soon.

Experiential Marketing Manager | HR benefits software company — “We've been talking with a lot of vendors who we typically partner with for webinars or virtual events and hearing them just share what they've heard from other companies and other sponsors of these events has been really helpful as well. All of our events that we would consider for 2021 are all virtual.”

There might be some small, safely distanced gatherings and small-scale hybrid events

All of our events that we would consider for 2021 are all virtual. Nothing we've heard of is in-person except for one in Europe.”

Marketo Consultant | Serving Fortune 500 companies — “If I'm completely honest, well I am an optimist, but I honestly don't

“You're able to reach so many more people if you do have that virtual component ... So I do think that [hybrid events] will be something that sticks.”

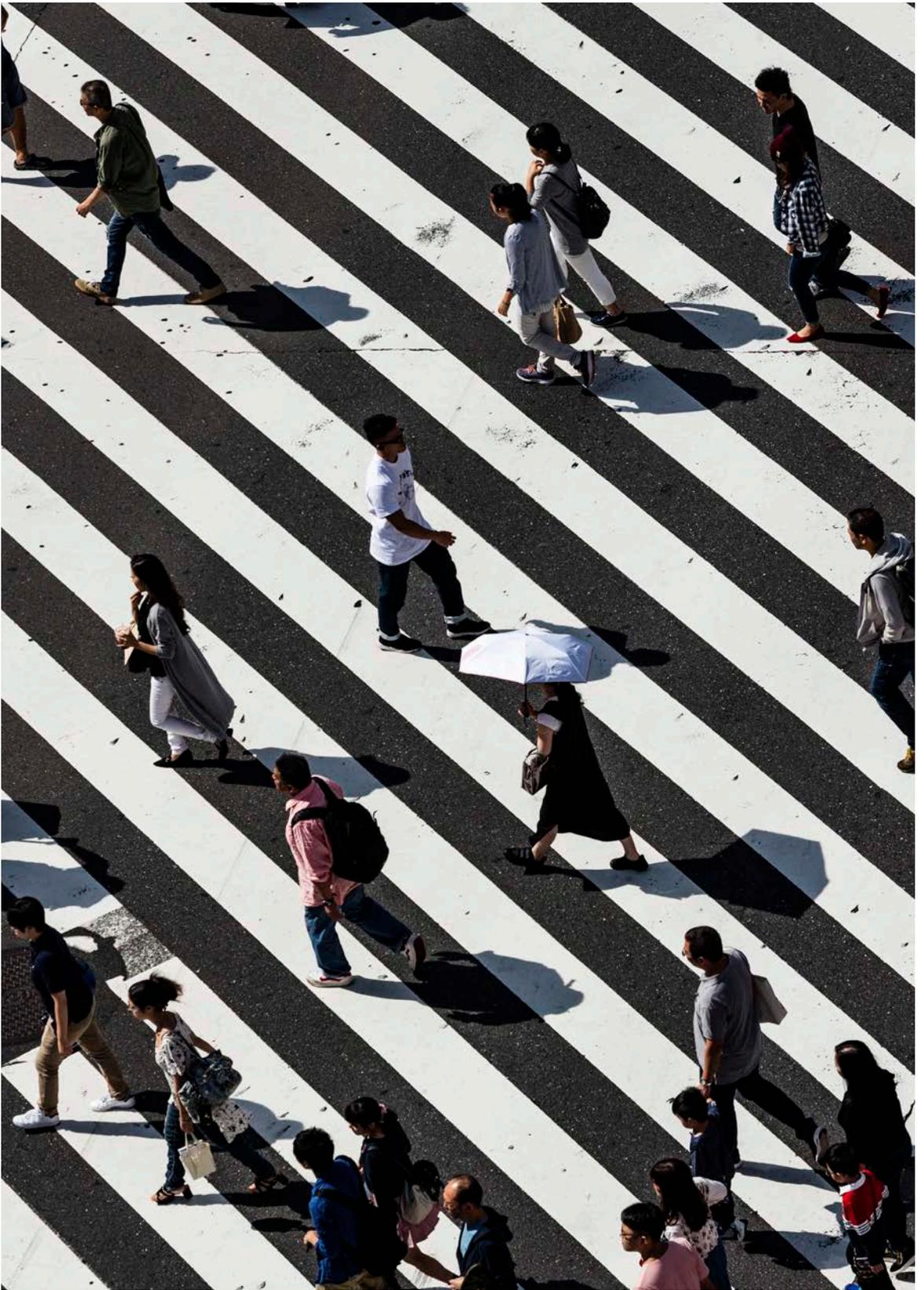
think events will be able to come back until December next year. So, maybe the most optimistic route, maybe somewhere around summer, there could be some events and probably still outside. But, if you are talking about normalcy or some regularity, not a one-off type of thing, I do not expect events to move back in-person until sometime the following year.”

Senior Director, Partner Marketing | ABM tech company — “I think the return to events will be very cautious, in line with people's appetite. I have absolutely zero desire to attend anything that has massive crowds. So maybe there'll be smaller dinners, smaller socially distanced workshops. But I think people are preparing for hybrid and they're still building a level of flexibility into their plans and to their budgets so that when the first company is brave enough to dip their toe back into the water, the rest of us can quickly follow suit.”

Hybrid all the way.

Despite this somewhat cautious approach, many marketers are also embracing hybrid events with enthusiasm. According to a survey we conducted with 75 B2B marketers, 60% are ready to start hosting hybrid events within the next six months.

Director, Field Marketing & Events | Business travel software company — “I think for all events, hybrid will likely be the way to go. We always streamed our keynotes at events before, but I think that they should be more available online for people who aren't able to travel. So I do think we'll definitely move to hybrid. We will go back to in-person if we're allowed, but I think hybrid shows and conferences moving forward will be the way to go.”



The future of virtual events in a post-vaccine world

Finally, we asked marketers for their predictions on the role of virtual events once the world returns to “normal.” Here are their thoughts:

Senior Director, Partner Marketing | ABM tech company — “I think virtual events have really placed a spotlight on the expense of in-person events. Also the return on investment. The data you can get from virtual is unsurpassed in terms of registration, attendance, attention span, etc.—all in a very cost-effective manner. I can hit New York, San Francisco, and London if I time it correctly. And my costs are at one-tenth.

And I've got all of the data to back it up. I think people are starved for in-person. So maybe those events will start to showcase better returns. Because right now it's hard to tease out, what's the difference between COVID impact versus in-person? Were you not able to buy our thing because you don't have the budget or because you didn't have four glasses of wine?”

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Director, Field Marketing & Events | Business travel software company — “If you're able to travel to the event, you will, because like I mentioned before, there's no replacement for the connections and the networking that you get being there in-person. However, you're able to reach so many more people if you do have that virtual component. So people from around the world can join or re-watch on their own time, easily pop in if they're unable to, like they have meetings all day, but they want to go to this one session. So I do think that [hybrid events] will be something that sticks.”

Final thoughts

Despite marketers' heroic efforts to make the best of virtual events, many are still struggling to match the energy of in-person experiences, due to limitations of the technology they're using, gaps in their own skill set, or the unavoidable realities—such as screen fatigue—of living through a deeply stressful time. While marketers are excited to return to in-person, they remain cautiously optimistic about when exactly that might be. They're largely in agreement that virtual events and small, safely distanced gatherings will be the way forward.

Even though our interviewees' experiences with virtual events this year were lackluster, there's still a lot to explore. A rushed transition to virtual in the face of a global crisis meant that many virtual events weren't as well thought through as they could have been. With the hard-won experiences of the past year behind them, marketers are now much better equipped to make 2021 a year of jaw-dropping virtual events. And given that the ROI is there—the marketers we spoke with agreed that the low-cost and unsurpassed reach of virtual events would make them an important channel in the years to come—we have every confidence that marketers will find a way to make it happen.

Further reading

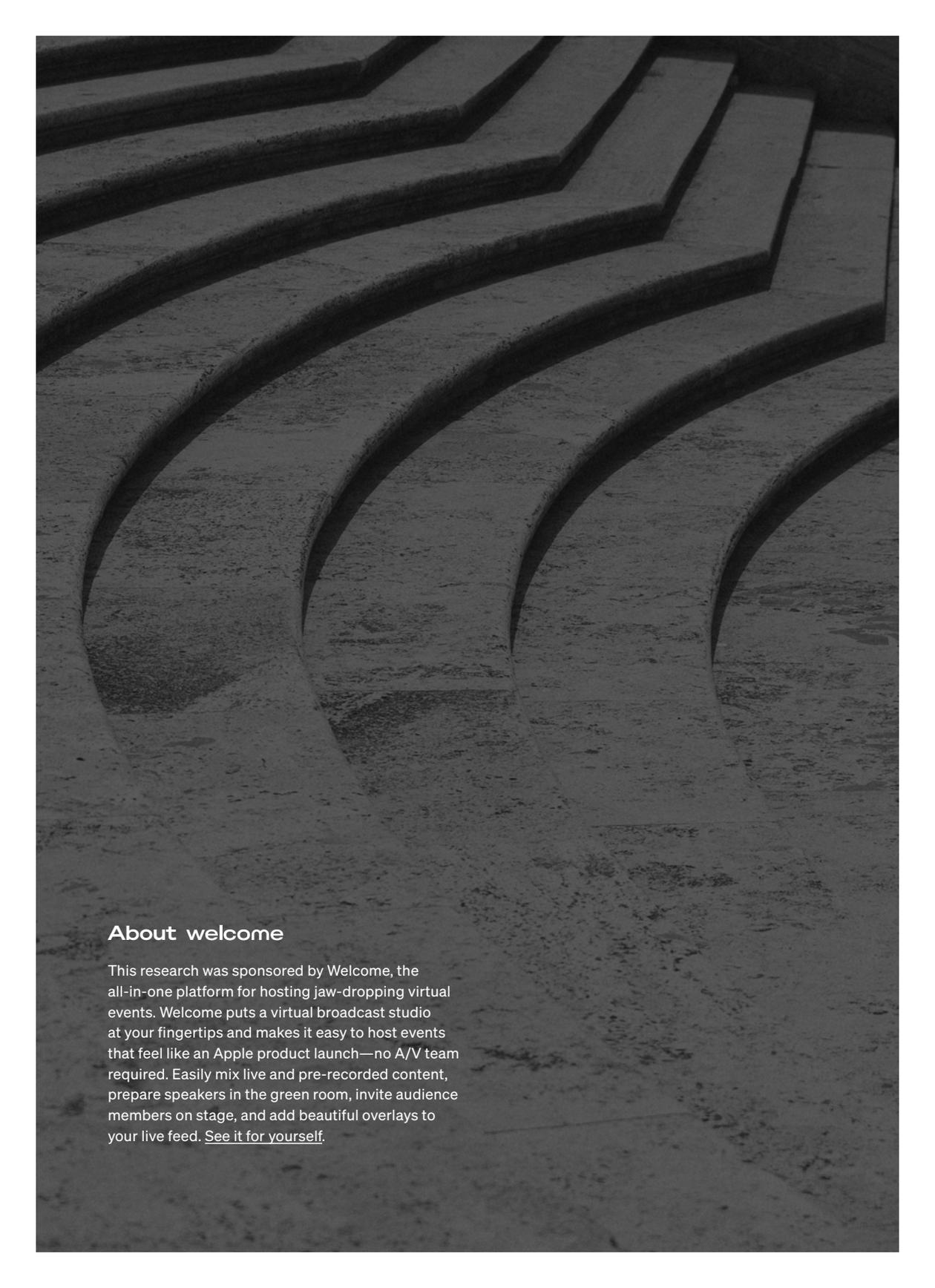
[Keeping Attendees Engaged Is the Biggest Challenge for Virtual Events \(EventMB\)](#)

[Virtual Event Momentum Will Move Strategy And Tech Forward Rapidly \(Forrester\)](#)

[Combat event fatigue with a virtual event marketing strategy \(TechTarget\)](#)

[Reimagining Medical Conferences for a Virtual Setting \(HBR\)](#)

[How to Network When There Are No Networking Events \(HBR\)](#)



About welcome

This research was sponsored by Welcome, the all-in-one platform for hosting jaw-dropping virtual events. Welcome puts a virtual broadcast studio at your fingertips and makes it easy to host events that feel like an Apple product launch—no A/V team required. Easily mix live and pre-recorded content, prepare speakers in the green room, invite audience members on stage, and add beautiful overlays to your live feed. [See it for yourself.](#)