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**Back to the Future**

Insights Report

January 2022



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# Back to the Future

An insights-led exploration into how the future of work is disrupting communications design, event experiences and attendee expectations in 2022.

## What does the future hold for B2B event and communications programmes?

COVID-19 has changed the way we work and do business. Widespread home working, powered by a variety of digital tools, has shown that we can accomplish most tasks remotely without loss of productivity or quality.

We are living, breathing and working in a hybrid world. Everyday interactions between multiple audiences and across multiple mediums has been adopted as common practice. As millions navigate and adjust to a more fluid employee experience, event formats and routes to engagement are evolving in tandem.

Business leaders in 2022 are redesigning their approach to events and communications activities to avoid alienating the audiences they most want to reach.

### Rewrite the rulebook.

This Brand Playbook report unanimously reflects a wide-spread challenge in nurturing talent and culture, doing business and building networks online. As we enter 2022, brands are ready to take more risks, experiment with new models, and analyse and adapt event programmes. All this whilst flexing between formats — live, virtual and hybrid — to build communities and do business.

This report identifies a dominant link between the future of hybrid work and the switch to hybrid event and communications planning. It demonstrates the need for time and resources to be reinvested in interaction-driven initiatives to meet new audience needs. It will deconstruct four major disruptors to B2B events and internal communications, and equip you with the insights to make proactive decisions across your event strategy and audience engagement this year.



Report data has been shared by 53 global brands, with responders in 23 different global cities.

# Connection and Inclusion

For those of us in desk jobs, our lockdown work-from-home experience disproved the traditional theory that we needed to be in the office in order to be 'at work'. Now, evolved employee expectations and preferences are challenging the traditional 9-5 workday. Businesses recognise that a flexible approach offers a better balance of employee wellbeing and retention, business productivity and customer service.

# 92%

**of Brand Playbook respondents prefer flexible, hybrid working formats.**

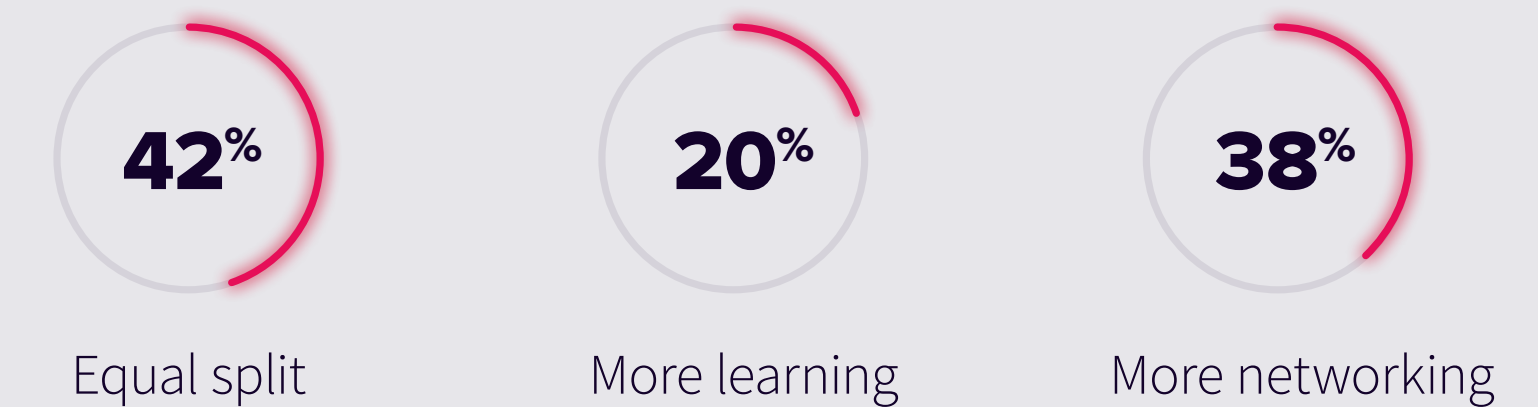
In contrast, there is an overwhelming sense of disconnection across B2B relationships, internal teams and global businesses. While flexible working is proving good for wellbeing and productivity, the new model is exposing massive gaps in workforce culture and engagement.

# 70%

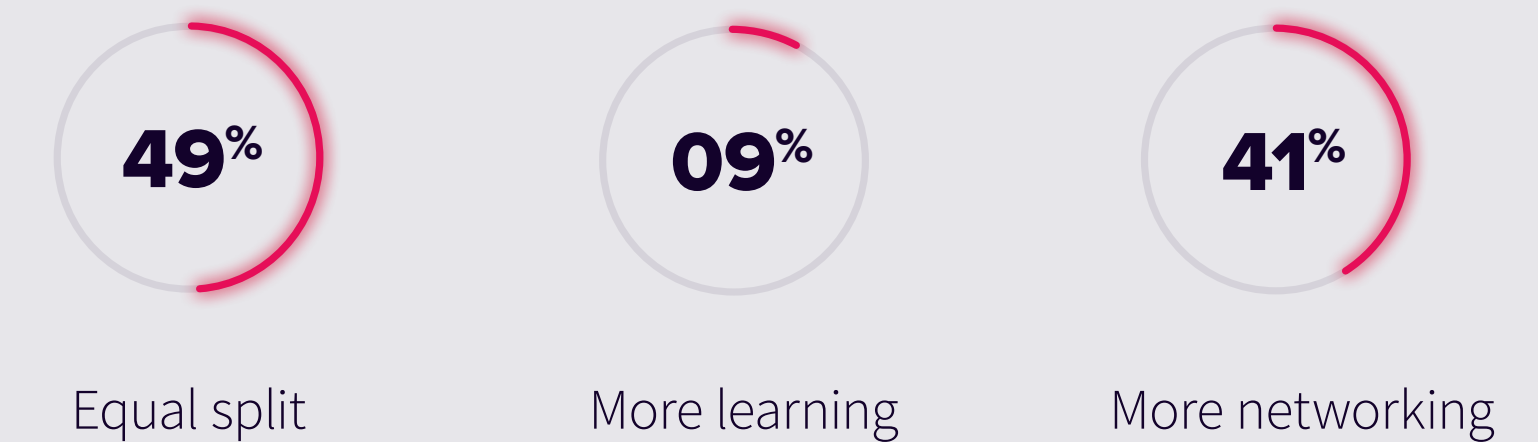
**of Brand Playbook respondents identified ‘team culture’ as the biggest challenge to employee engagement in the next 12 months.**

Comms professionals are investing in event formats that prioritise building connection over learning to try to plug the gap. Similarly, internal communications programmes are shifting to forum-driven formats that open the conversation, rather than present the information.

Pre-pandemic, what proportion of your events were spent learning vs. networking?



What do you expect the learning vs. networking balance to look like in the post-pandemic era?



# 94%

**of Brand Playbook respondents are ready to try new event formats in 2022, with 74% of senior leaders “very willing” to experiment with emerging event and engagement tactics across their communications programmes.**

Excitingly, brands are ready to experiment with emerging formats to meet event audiences on their own engagement terms.



**Virtual was exciting for everyone in the beginning but we soon found that Zoom fatigue was real. We shortened sessions, content was ‘digitised’, we focused on measuring engagement and listening to feedback — changing our ways accordingly.**  
*—Mid-level events manager, financial and professional services*

## Reconnecting.

Shorter, more powerful content will allow for more time spent on networking and collaboration.

The next phase of events will see blended communications channels open up new avenues for interactivity, all anchored by quality production and slick content. Hybrid and digital content will prioritise audience accessibility, champion authentic stories and invite discussion. Messaging will see subtle reframing to present key information through a ‘point of view’ narrative. Accessible content design will be key across languages, learning styles and on-demand formats.



**The on-demand ‘Netflix model’ presents a strong case for accessible content but if the stories weren’t fundamentally engaging and representative, we would switch off. We are making content that is optimised for on-demand viewing and underpinned by human storytelling.**

*—Jo Radford, Head of Moving Image, Cheerful Twentyfirst*



# Shifting Needs of a Multi-Generational Workforce

Corporate communications planners were asked the top three reasons they use events as a marketing channel.

**87%**

**of executives identified 'networking and new connections'.**

**68%**

**of senior leaders identified 'information sharing and learning'.**

**56%**

**of mid-level managers identified 'building community'.**

## Enter the era of shades of audience.

Over the past 18 months, workforces have developed new behaviours and a unique set of priorities from their employee experience. The same can be said for how they engage in events.

From our own experience, we can see young professionals need to be re-energised. They lack mentorship and social environments to grow their knowledge and networks. Working parents need to own their schedule, looking for a blend of routine and flexibility. Senior leaders need authentic peer-to-peer exchanges and opportunities to share openly as each navigates unprecedented change.

The pandemic was a catalyst for understanding that a single, linear event journey cannot successfully engage all guests. The applications and learnings from the last eighteen months show that a much deeper understanding of patterns, needs and audience groups is required to address questions around event format, content streams and live and on-demand programmes.

**Different audiences need different things from their event experience.** The event model has shifted to a campaign-led approach. Intrinsic audience understanding will inform tailored communications journeys that meet the needs of attendee groups at scale. Greater investment in audience profiling and data capture will drive programme design this year.

“

**We ran a global hybrid event in December 2021 that used targeted content streams, sessions and experiences within the event to address specific audience groups. The engagement response was incredible; our programme design allowed for ‘cross pollination’ moments across generations, disciplines and roles, without sacrificing on audience needs. We’re seeing clients invest in this understanding more and more.**

*—Beth Nicholas, Account Director, Cheerful Twentyfirst*

# Workforce Without Borders



# 79%

**of Brand Playbook respondents agree that the purpose of their office has changed in the last 12 months.**

Of those, the majority (62%) cite remodelling for collaborative meeting spaces and hybrid communications tools to stay connected to their remote colleagues.

The expected permanency of hybrid working has meant many businesses are reconsidering the purpose of their workspace. Some have closed offices or reduced their footprints. Many have redesigned spaces for team meetings rather than individual work. A growing number of brands, especially those from the information technology and media sectors, have moved to asynchronous working; enabling staff to choose their working hours and enabling businesses to recruit talent from all over the world.

“

**We had only dipped our toes into the tech available for remote working — now we are fully embracing it. As a global organisation with a remote workforce already in place we have been able to fully run with virtual ways of working and communicating.**

*—Senior marketing leader, professional membership body*

Leaders have invested in collaborative technologies but the shift to redesigning collaborative experiences is somewhat slower out of the gate. Workforces are calling for dedicated time to gather, share and collaborate in-person.

**58%**  
**of Brand Playbook  
respondents identified  
isolated working and  
reduced collaborative  
environments as the  
greatest downfall to  
remote working.**

## **If we meet less often in the office, should we meet more frequently at company events?**

The need to physically be ‘in office’ no longer exists, opening global opportunities for talent but introducing new barriers to culture, development and doing business. With international teams expected to grow and remote working expected to remain in some form, face-to-face ‘water cooler’ moments are happening less often. Office spaces have become a place to occasionally meet rather than a place to regularly work. Disparity in access, opportunity and collaboration between onsite vs. offsite teams will need careful management to spark innovation and protect culture.

There is a pressing need for businesses to upscale event and communications programmes to fill the gap. This does not mean a complete overhaul of traditional programmes. It does, however, place a greater importance on the impact, frequency and strategy behind internal meetings, annual offsite events, conferences and incentives, cross-region collaboration hubs and the value of industry trade shows.

Event professionals are talking communications objectives first, format second. For example, learning and information retention objectives should lean into virtual and content-led formats: using versioning, language accessibility, chaptered content and strategic narrative to reinforce key messaging. Live events such as internal meetings, conferences and incentives, proprietary customer events or industry trade shows should be used to bring people together, and build relationships, loyalty and trust.

## You don't know what you've got until it's gone.



**Brands that historically look to tentpole industry events — like DMEXCO, Cannes Lions or CES — to generate engagement have felt first-hand the impact on business in the last 24 months. The future of trade shows will balance tactile and personalised show floor experiences with comms journeys that drive conversation and community. As an attendee, I want to know who I am visiting and why it is valuable before I get on the show floor.**

*—Jules Staveley, Brand Experience Director, Cheerful Twentyfirst*

With no traditional office, regular offsite events and dedicated incentive programmes will play a far greater role in talent retention and wider team culture. Internal programmes will shift to focus on relationship building, trust forming and shared thinking, moving away from isolated silos into shared processes to establish a foundation that supports intermittent remote work and improves collaborative outputs.



**The connection between employee and employer needs re-navigating. We're consulting on how groups of individuals are motivated rather than a 'one off cash incentive' reward approach. When this option is replaced by group experience, we are seeing employee engagement levels dramatically increase. I expect offsites to prioritise building up softer skills and community within teams, with a much greater investment in social or wellness programmes through shared experience.**

*—Holly Mills, Head of Incentives, Eventful*

# Measuring Event Effectiveness





## What are the internal expectations around reporting of event ROI?

With expectations and demand for detailed insights to be higher post-pandemic, marketers face more scrutiny than ever to justify event spend and investment. Virtual events, often hosted on sophisticated technology platforms, gave us access to engagement data to justify that spend. Almost overnight, brands could tap into reporting that showed measurable audience insights, including comparable data into acquisition, conversion and ROI. Planners gained broader visibility on event journeys and began to intentionally design for data capture and to drive improvements for the attendee.



**Mixed [expectations]. We understand the importance of it [reporting] but don't have any real systems in place to track it properly.**

*—Mid-level events manager, professional services*



**More in-depth analysis backed up by new digital event platforms.**

*—Mid-level creative, media and broadcast*



**High [expectations] as there seems to be more requirement to measure productivity, particularly in a hybrid working environment.**

*—Senior project and event manager, private consultant*

Virtual events have set the new benchmark for measurement, and with 91% of Brand Playbook responders planning for a return to live in the next six months, corporates are reconsidering how to actually value and measure impact as face-to-face programmes return.

## Data driven decisions

This report learns that the majority (87%) of corporates are measuring the impact of their event programmes this year, mostly at a topline ROI level.

Anecdotal data — such as topline feedback surveys — will phase out as a substantial measure of success. Intentional measurement consultation and design will play a much bigger role in feeding a campaign cycle that can be adjusted, adapted and optimised event-on-event. Hybrid and live programmes will need to consider how to incorporate new metrics like time vs. engagement, frequency, adoption and retention to justify budgets behind brand experiences.



**While the pandemic has caused major business disruption, it's also been a positive chance to reflect. For internal communications and events professionals, that has meant reassessing traditional strategies and audience needs. We're helping our clients to go back to the critical questions of why, who, what, when, how and how well, and we're seeing huge success for those who apply the insights uncovered to redesign their brand experiences and measure ROI.**

*—Jane Baker, Strategy Director, Cheerful Twentyfirst*

# Closing statements

Events sit at the perfect crossroads to meet new needs and build new connections in a hybrid working world. Communicators are freshly armed with a tool kit of virtual learnings and content formats to experiment with as we reinvest, reinforce and redesign brand experience programmes this year.

With these insights, we have the opportunity to take forward best practice, audience-first design and completely rethink the traditional attendee experience for the better.

The rationale for clear and considered event strategy is business critical. Our key takeaways:

## **Connection and inclusion**

Flexible working styles and event programmes are good for wellbeing and productivity, but sacrifice culture and engagement. Shorter, more powerful event content will allow for more time spent on networking and collaboration.

## **Shifting needs of a multi-generational workforce**

Different audience groups have different needs from their working environment and these differences carry over to communications and events. Understand your audience and tailor bespoke comms and events to address the real time needs of each group.

## **Workforce without borders**

Offices have become a place to meet rather than a place to work. That workforce now includes an international talent pool. Review the purpose behind your communications activities and upscale your event programmes in considered formats to drive value for remote workforces.

## **Measuring event effectiveness**

Virtual events have set the new benchmark for measurement. Custom measurement programmes, led by strategy, will impact the ROI for your events and proofpoint future spend.



# Cheerful Twentyfirst

Cheerful Twentyfirst is a leading creative brand experience agency based in London and New York. Strategic communications is at the heart of what we do, using innovative thinking to engage audiences through game-changing content and experiences.

**Game changers since 1985.**



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