

# Going VIRTUAL

Online trade shows can offer the same benefits as their conventional counterparts.

*By Kenya McCullum*

After the September 11th terrorist attacks, John M. Peckham III, Executive Director of Cyberconventions.com, thought about the fear of flying that many people experienced and created a solution for those in the real estate industry who did not want to travel to trade shows: a cyber convention that would replicate a hard floor event, but would allow attendees to participate through the convenience of their own computers. The result was the National Real Estate Online Convention and Exposition, which was first held in early 2002. The event was well-received – about 20,000 attendees participated in the five-day event, a turn out that surprised even organizer Peckham. Since that time, he has continued to manage this event, as well as assist other organizations with their own online conventions. These events can either be independent conventions or supplements that are added on to a traditional event.

But does organizing an online event lose something in the translation of the convention experience? Not at all, according to Peckham. When he surveyed his event's attendees to find out why they went to hard floor conventions, he found that they gave four

primary explanations – to listen to speakers, to visit exhibitor booths, to network, and to have fun.

Peckham said that an online convention can easily incorporate all of these elements – giving attendees the same dynamic experiences they are accustomed to having at traditional conventions.

## **THE BENEFITS OF ONLINE CONVENTIONS**

Trade show managers can reap several benefits from online conventions – whether they are stand alone or add-on events. For stand alone events, a company or organization can expand its reach to more attendees than a hard floor convention would attract – sometimes ten to twenty times more – which is especially beneficial for international organizations. Attendees from all over the world can participate in these events at their convenience and the information and networking opportunities they seek are just a click away.

For an add-on event, a show organizer can attract attendees that were not able to travel to the hard floor event, while increasing the value for those that did. According to Peckham, this is a good supplement to the main event and in no way competes with it.

"When we add on a virtual show, it does not diminish from the attendance at the hard floor event, but it extends the hard floor event for a week to several months," he said. "The advantage is that the producers can share their information with the people that did not fly in for the main convention."

### IS THE WEB RIGHT FOR YOUR SHOW?

When Sharon Williams, Founder of the Online International Virtual Assistants Convention ([www.oivac.com](http://www.oivac.com)), decided that she wanted to organize an online convention for virtual assistants, she first inquired about whether colleagues in her industry had an interest in participating in such an event. Virtual assistants, who provide administrative support to clients on a freelance basis, are already Internet based so Williams felt that an online convention for the industry was the natural extension of the field. She was right and the convention for virtual assistants began in 2005.

Williams suggests that event managers interested in organizing an online convention begin the same way she did – by surveying the audience to find out if this type of event makes sense for them. A trade show organizer should determine things like what times attendees may want to log on to an event and what kind of seminars they would like access to. The answers to these questions will provide the blueprint for your online event.

"You can make your convention as exciting, educational, and informative as a brick and mortar event without a lot of overhead – not only internally for your organization, but also for your potential attendee," Williams said.

Once a trade show organizer decides that an online convention will appeal to the target audience, it is a good idea to start small – especially if attendees are not accustomed to online professional development. Offering one or two preliminary seminars will give

attendees a chance to become acclimated to the online setting and give show organizers the feedback they need about the content that will be presented at the main show.

For exhibitors, the benefits of purchasing a virtual booth at an online convention are the amount of prospects that they have access to. Peckham says that exhibitors at his online real estate convention regularly walk away with up to four times the number of leads that they would have collected at a hard floor convention. This is because of the tracking used during the event, which lets exhibitors know every time someone comes to the booth and sends them the interested attendees' contact information.

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### VIRTUALLY REALISTIC

Attendees – represented by avatars – can congregate in the online convention's exhibitor hall and if they want to network with someone they know, they can wander off together into a meeting room to chat. They also can peruse the information that an exhibitor is presenting and talk to staff manning the booth. Attendees can participate in seminars and communicate with presenters in real time – and avatars can even raise their hands to ask a question during a presentation. In fact, the feel of an online convention is so realistic that there are even elevators that go up and down in the exhibitor hall and toilets in the bathrooms that actually flush. 