

Interactive Corporate Event Webcasting

Shawn Shadfar
Founder & CEO – omNovia Technologies

About the Author: Shawn Shadfar is the founder and Chief Executive Officer of omNovia Technologies, a software company providing state-of-the-art webinar and live event webcasting technology and services with worldwide clients. He is an industry expert and has authored numerous papers on the business application of web conferencing solutions. Prior to omNovia, Mr. Shadfar co-founded the Information Security group at Schlumberger. He holds a Master of Science in Computer Science from Supelec – Paris and a Master of Science in Electrical Engineering from Georgia Tech – Atlanta.

Introduction

Over the last decade corporate events and gatherings have been heavily impacted by company budget restrictions. Many organizations have significantly reduced the frequency of their internal and external events and have replaced some with online webinars or other distance learning systems with questionable results. While there will always be physical gatherings, the corporate event industry is undergoing fundamental transformation, which will undoubtedly impact tomorrow's corporate environment.

Webcasting events, meaning virtually sharing the live experience and not only video streaming, is going to play a major role in the upcoming years. The notion of *event* will evolve to simultaneously include physical and virtual similar to the way the term *marketing* has come to indicate offline and online marketing activities.

This paper intends to shed light on requirements for an effective and well structured corporate event webcasting and present, in detail, current technical solutions as well as best practices with a focus on increasing ROE (Return On Events). The purpose of this paper is to help executives and managers design and implement a new corporate event strategy meeting tomorrow's business needs.

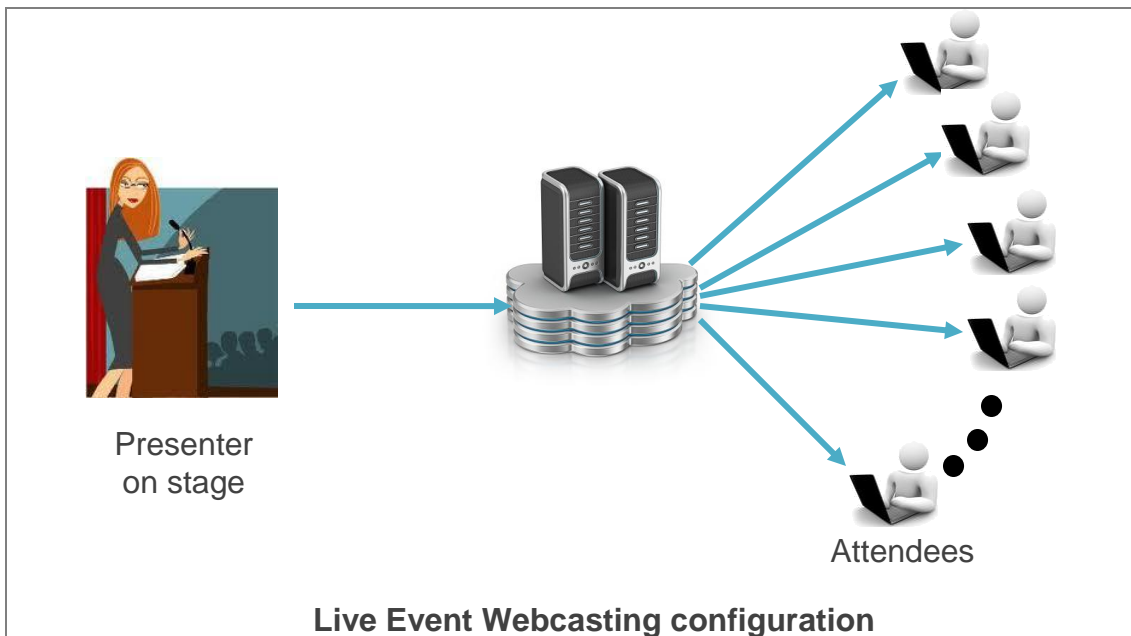
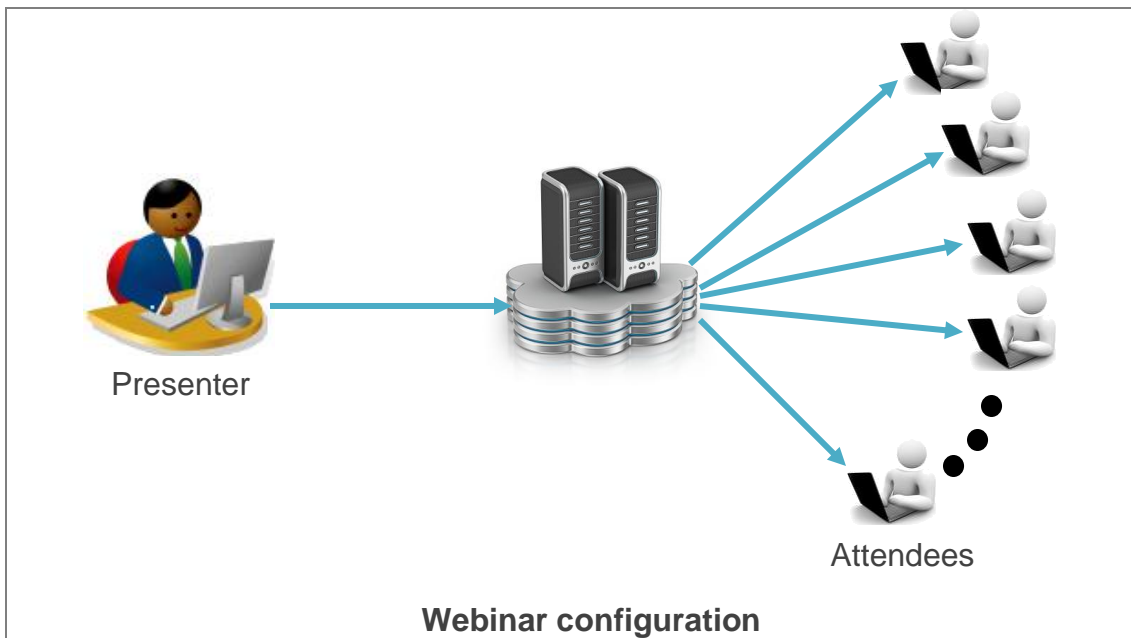
Definition of Live Event Webcasting

With the current interactive tools available, live event webcasting should not be simply restricted to streaming video of a live event on a website. Video streaming is a modern simulation of TV broadcasting, which although much more cost-effective, does not bring more to the table. While it shows what is happening at a remote location, it leaves out interactivity, the essential ingredient of a physical event.

Webcasting a corporate event must be able to share the live experience while preserving its human interactivity.

Difference with Webinars

While webinars also constitute an effective method for corporate communication, we distinguish live event webcasting from webinars in that webinars do not have any physical meeting components. During a webinar, the presenter or presenters sit in front of their computers and directly address their online audience. In the case of live event webcasting, we assume the presenters are speaking in front of a live audience, while the presentation also is shared with online participants. Live event webcasting is sometimes referred to as *simulcasting* or *hybrid event*.



Examples of Corporate Event Webcasts

There are a number of cases where effective webcasting can help increase your corporate events' audience and exposure. A few examples are:

- Training such as HR training sessions while taking place on a site can be shared in real-time with other office locations instead of holding physical events in different sites or having employees travel. Note, once more, we are not talking about webinars here. The trainer is actually presenting in front of a group of employees in a conference room or auditorium.
- Executive Presentations during which the CEO or another executive delivers a state of the union type speech.
- Product launches or other marketing presentations that may be for internal or external communication purposes.
- Share holder presentations again for internal and external addressees.
- A small team meeting requiring a Q&A session

The fact is, any size gathering whether large or small, could often benefit from more exposure and real-time feedback.

Please note one-on-one video-conferencing with internal or external participants is not within the scope of this paper since it cannot be regarded as an actual event. An event usually involves one or more presenters and moderators addressing a group of people and creates as such, a more asymmetrical topology.

Advantages of Live Event Webcasting

Webcasting a corporate event presents a number of advantages:

- Increase exposure
Setting up an event, as small as it may be, always requires preparation and effective project management skills that take time and resources. Why, then, limit the audience to only those who can be physically present?
- Increase revenue
In the case of paid events, you may also charge online attendees and increase the income from the event.
- Create a Recording
Some of today's webcasting solutions allow you to record an event and make it available to those who missed the live presentation. We will discuss this in more details in the "Record and Replay" section that discusses an interactive replay of the event instead of a video replay only.

Challenges with Webcasting

Besides technical challenges, there are two main problems with the concept of webcasting a live corporate event.

- 1) Webcasting may not be as effective as “in person”.

Experiencing an event remotely, especially when webcasting is reduced to streaming a video, may not be as valuable as seeing the actual presentation in person.

The answer to this legitimate problem lies in the level of the interactivity of the webcast. In the next section, we will discuss in detail the merits of interactive webcasts, which takes the online presentation to the next level by making it significantly more engaging and hence more successful. With excellent implementation, the online experience presents some advantages over the “in-person” scenario by proving to be more interactive. Polls and surveys are easier to run in the virtual room. Also, individuals feel more comfortable submitting questions online instead of an intimidating live environment. Not to mention, that every attendee has a front row seat!

- 2) Webcasting may discourage people from attending the physical event.

Another commonly raised issue especially by marketing event organizers is the possibility of “losing live attendance” if prospects knew it was also being webcast. Studies however show that when webcasting is used with best practices applied, it can lead to a greater number of both physical and virtual attendees.

We will examine some of these best practices in the following sections. It is however worth further analyzing this issue at this time. If the goal is to increase the number of physical attendance, event organizers can broadcast only parts of the event, for instance a few presentations such as the keynote speech and hence create an incentive for more people to be physically present at the event. Online viewers however would get a “taste” for the event and decide to physically attend it the next time. They might also share their experience with others online creating more “buzz” or publicity for the combined physical and virtual event. In the next section, we learn about a new event strategy, which will consider more than the sheer number of physical attendees as success criteria.

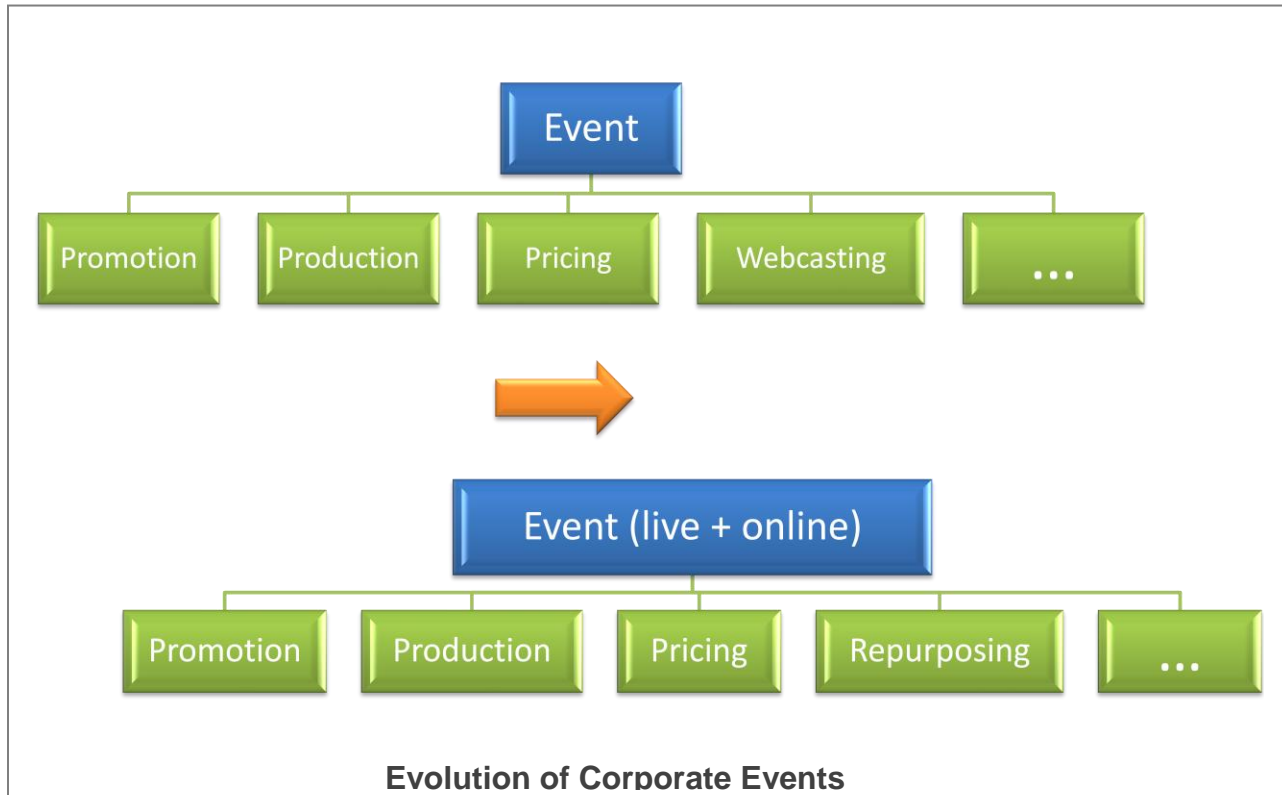
New Corporate Event Strategy

Over the last fifteen years, the word “marketing” has considerably evolved. It is now naturally associated with offline and online marketing and in any marketer’s mind, a marketing project will automatically include offline and online tasks.

It is similarly important to develop a veritable event strategy that takes into account the physical and virtual environment from the beginning instead of thinking of the webcast as

an afterthought. Thinking that way, an event organizer would plan the project with different logistics, pricing, timing, scope and different goals.

We see the concept of corporate events evolving to incorporate both online and offline components in an effective, structured and complementary manner. This will evidently require some corporate culture change.



Interactivity from physical and online attendees will enable real-time feedback, which in turn will allow event organizers to base the success criteria of their events not only on the number of attendees but also on more tangible results from actions taken by attendees during and following the event. Real-time polls or surveys are examples of such interactivity.

Sharing the Experience

As discussed above, live event webcasting must be able to truly share the live experience with the online audience and not simply broadcast a video stream. Sharing the experience means online attendees become participants and as such feel more engaged, which in turn leads to more effective events. When online attendees can ask questions, take polls, download “hand-outs” and take other actions, the webcast transforms into a dynamic event with significantly better results and tangibly higher Return On Event (ROE).

Our studies have shown a direct correlation between the level of interactivity and online participants’ satisfaction level. On average, over 70% of attendees in the sampled interactive webcasts said they would recommend future online events to their colleagues.

Beyond subjective 'satisfaction', it is important to set objective and measurable goals for your corporate events. Whether you hold an employee training or a product launch, a key component is to assess the outcome of your event. This is often achieved through tests, surveys or in some cases dollar amount (when attendees purchase a product or service).

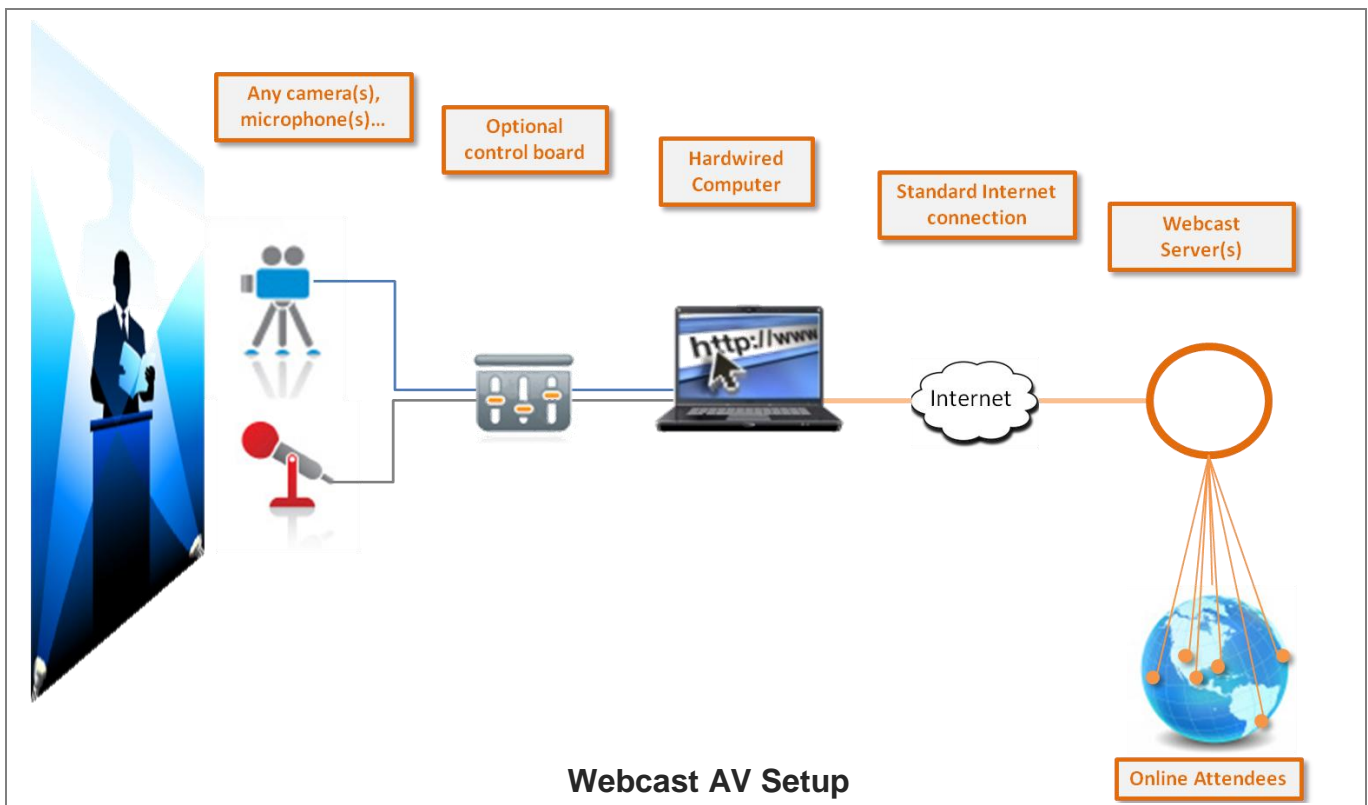
How Webcasting Works

There are two components involved in the operations of webcasting:

- Audio and Video transmission

As shown on the diagram below, the audio and video streams from the live event are simply fed to an online computer, which encodes the media in an Internet-friendly transmission codec and sends it to a server for distribution. Using some of the HD encoding techniques, the required bandwidth can be less than 1 Mbps meaning a regular T1 or professional cable Internet connection would suffice for the task. If an AV (Audio-Visual) crew is already involved to set up the room audio and large screen projection, the webcasting component would present a small investment since it uses the same standard audio and video inputs.

It is preferable to use a fully hosted webcast solution requiring no hardware components.



- A moderator would be in charge of leveraging interactive tools within the virtual room environment to bolster communication between the presenter(s), and the physical and online audience. As discussed above, interactive tools include polling and surveying, downloading presentation materials, asking questions via chat, audio or video, taking actions on a given website, feedback via social media such as twitter, etc.

You may also have a situation where two or more physical sites need to simultaneously webcast. This is often referred to as a “multi-site webcast”. A subcategory of multi-site webcasting is when a person is presenting remotely via video. This presents a more complex environment requiring seamless interactivity between multiple sites without running into problems such as audio echoing.

Selecting the Right Webcast Provider

With the advent of more complete and complex event webcasting, it is a bigger challenge to select the right vendor. Below are a few of the most important factors to consider when choosing your webcast solution provider.

Technology, Processes and People

Successful projects are always the outcome of a combination of advanced technology, sound processes and competent and dedicated people. In seeking a webcast solution provider, you should ensure those three conditions are met.

There are various tasks that need to be performed before, during and after the event. Well defined processes in the form of checklists and operated by experienced project managers communicating with your event producer and AV team will make an impactful difference. The webcast provider’s project manager should go beyond tasks management by also implementing industry best practices with the event producers.

In addition to the project manager, ensure you and your online attendees have access to live technical support before and during the webcast.

HD Audio and Video

A critical component of the webcast is the audio and video stream quality. Webcast providers often use 30-frame-per-second H.264 encoding, also used in HD television, to reduce bandwidth requirements while delivering high quality images. Previously comparable video quality could only be achieved via expensive and burdensome satellite transmission using “satellite trucks”.

Technically a video is considered of HD quality if the number of vertical rows of pixels reaches 720, known as 720P or 1080 rows in the case of 1080P HD. In webcasting over the Internet however, encoders try to preserve the same clarity and number of frames per second with smaller image size to further reduce bandwidth requirements.

The better webcast solutions simultaneously broadcast two streams at different bit-rates and offer an automated video quality adjustment mechanism for viewers. Such mechanisms seamlessly switch to a lower quality stream when bandwidth is limited.

Hosted vs. Hardware-Based Solution

Webcast technologies are available as:

- hosted solutions without requiring any specific hardware servers or device; and
- Hardware-based “black-box” solutions that need to be physically shipped to event location(s)

Today hosted solutions, leveraging regular laptops, can deliver the same or better video quality without the logistics head-aches that come with any hardware-related solution. Hosted solutions do not require any server software either making it easy to schedule webcasts on short-notice.

Interactive Tools

As stated above, interactive tools are essential to the success of your events. In addition to high quality audio and video, the platform needs to enable:

- MS PowerPoint shows
- Polling and surveys
- Document downloads
- Customizable chat
- Q&A Manager
- Twitter input and Twitter feed display
- Website browser (a mechanism to load a web page for attendees and have them take actions such as filling out forms)
- A comprehensive event registration system
- Customizable layout

Web Based Solution and Mobile Support

Ease of access and use is paramount in your selection process. The right webcasting platform is web and browser based so attendees do not have to download and install any new software.

You should select a solution that will also offer mobile users the same or very similar experience as on a PC or Mac computer. The solution should provide a mobile app enabling attendees to take advantage of the interactive tools such as casting their poll votes or asking questions via chat in addition to viewing the event in high quality video.

Branding

Projecting your corporate identity in a webcast is as important as having a nicely branded web site. To maintain a professional image, it is important your webcast provider can easily brand your virtual room not only with a logo but also with the perfect color scheme and layout. The same way you would want to greet your physical attendees in a nice hotel ballroom, you would want your online attendees to experience the same level of professionalism during your webcasts.

Record and Replay

Most webcast platforms allow you to record the broadcast in real-time and make it available for replay at a later time. Recording a webcast event is a good idea for multiple reasons as it enables you to make it available online for those who missed the live event and for archiving reasons. You should select a webcast system that also allows you to offer the replay with registration and full reporting so you can track all viewers.

In the ideal world however, the replay should do more than playing a video. As mentioned above, the interactivity of the webcast platform is a critical factor when it comes to the success of a webcast event. The ideal webcast replay would be one where interactivity is preserved even at replay time. Imagine viewers being able to take polls, fill out forms, type questions, etc as they are replaying a webcast. Although rare, this functionality is today offered by a few webcast providers.

Event Registration and Credit Card Processing

An Event Registration system is required to gather RSVPs from event attendees. An adequate event registration system would display branded registration forms, provide full reports and send automated email reminders.

When used as an external marketing or training broadcast, it is sometimes useful to have the ability to charge online attendees. Examples of such events are presentations given at a paid conference or product training sessions to resellers. The online registration system for a live event webcast needs to support online payment with full reporting capabilities.

Reporting and Marketing Automation Integration

A more advanced yet optional development would be integration between the webcast platform and your marketing automation or customer relationship management software. The integration, often through software APIs would allow your enterprise systems to get automatically updated when people attend your events and with details such as their answers to polls during the webcast.

Cost of Corporate Event Webcasting

Depending on the size of the event, the cost component will involve the webcasting service, project management, technical support, and optionally Audio Visual (AV) costs. The latter is

optional given that some corporate events already include the AV equipment and services, for instance for on-screen projection and video recording.

Without the AV costs, the actual webcast expenses are often reasonable and will not exceed a few thousand dollars per day. The webcasting service often depends on the number of online attendees and is charged either on a daily or hourly basis. Based on experience, when the projects are well designed and implemented using best practices, the advantages of webcasting easily compensate the daily costs.

Future Developments

Technology is not going to be the only future improvement when it comes to live event webcasting. A more important component is the culture change presented above, which will have event planners successfully include the virtual environment into their events from the beginning and hence create powerful events with a savvy balance of physical and online attendees.

Technology advances such as H.265 encoding and 3D streaming will provide higher quality video at lower bit-rate requiring less bandwidth. Easier interactive tools will also enable more communication between live and virtual presenters and attendees. One can easily predict an environment where physical and online attendees can mingle and talk to each other while waiting for the event to start thus benefiting from similar quality of networking as in physical events.

An often asked question involves the future of “virtual tradeshow”. Over the last decade, we have witnessed the rise and the relative fall of those virtual tradeshow technologies trying to actually simulate tradeshow with 3D graphics and animations. Such solutions would be similar to making airplanes with flapping wings or equivalent to creating online shopping sites with 3D simulation of a physical store. The “online” aspect introduces certain advantages such as speed that you would lose should you try to simulate the physical store. For instance, it is more time consuming to find a certain product if you have to navigate the 3D store like a maze. Leveraging technology only for the “cool” factor when it does not translate into any tangible advantage often leads to failed opportunities. Today’s solutions allow you to offer effective virtual events with an efficient registration system and a secure, branded and interactive virtual room without the need to look like a physical venue.

Conclusion

With some of today’s webcasting solutions, companies will be able to create impactful hybrid corporate events benefiting both organizers and attendees. The key is to transcend TV-like video broadcasting into a fully dynamic and interactive live event webcasting. When combined with industry best practices webcasting can bring significant cost-savings while bolstering internal and external corporate communication.