“VIRTUAL.” It’s the event world’s new “must-have” capability. Organizers are eager to slap that label on more of what they’ve always done – and even more of what they hope to do down the road. Piling into webinars, online trade shows, teleconferences, chat rooms and the like, they’ve used technology to bring a powerful new dimension to the physical, location-tethered event.

A game-changer, to be sure. But event organizers may be missing the bigger picture of this budding revolution in engagement and collaboration. If you’re merely dabbling in virtual “events,” failing to put them into the broader context of a new overarching virtual mentality and approach to your market, you may just be spinning your virtual wheels.

To get some forward momentum, start thinking about a virtual transfusion of sorts, one that travels to all corners of your organization and your product – an all-encompassing “persistent virtual environment,” or PVE. With a PVE, resources, contacts, collaboration and knowledge are reliably available and easily accessible in more virtual forms, giving users more opportunities to connect and engage when, how and where they want.

A PVE framework can be a prescription for broad success with all stakeholders. The audience you’re trying to attract, the marketers trying to sell that audience and the organizer as the facilitator can all benefit.

To take but one example: lead generation. By its very definition, virtual is a stand-in for live. Whether it’s “better” in all cases can be debated. But when it comes to the slog of prospecting, at least, virtual has a lot to offer. Whether it’s generating more leads through its reach, locating more qualified prospects with data capture, or lowering prospecting costs through efficiency, a PVE can be a lead-generation machine, delivering unique solutions for a chronically challenging task.

Today, the more that can be accomplished remotely, seamlessly and transparently, the better. Exploit virtual’s distinct capabilities more fully, and you can be in a position to exponentially boost the value of the services, information and insight you bring to the table as an organizer.
VIRTUAL EVENTS MUSHROOM

Virtual events have exploded onto the scene in recent years, opening new avenues for engagement. First as add-ons to live events, and then evolving into more stand-alone offerings, they’ve allowed organizers to reposition themselves in a time of upheaval in how people communicate, share and interact. When people want to communicate more economically and efficiently, those metrics are a little less friendly applied to “the way it’s always been done”: from live events and face-to-face meetings, to e-mail and phone conversations.

InterCall, a provider of platforms enabling virtual events and virtual marketing models, conducted research in 2011 that points to organizers’ growing awareness of the value of virtual engagement.

It polled 550 marketers and found 42 percent planning to decrease spending in the year ahead on conferences and tradeshows. Even more – 60 percent – said they’d spend more on virtual events in the coming year. And close to half foresaw a majority of their events having a virtual component within two to five years.

For many organizers, though, the lure of getting into the virtual event space obscures some of the challenges involved in making them truly work. As new vehicles, they can chew up time and money in the ramp-up phase, requiring strong project management, technological savvy and an informed, clear-eyed view of what needs to be accomplished – and what can.

Yet nothing seems to be stopping the march toward more virtual offerings. There’s a seemingly insatiable appetite for all things virtual, and those hurdles don’t look to be slowing the pace. But the PVE approach may offer a better roadmap that can allow organizers to steer clear of some of the bumpy spots. By developing a virtual umbrella of sorts, and better linking virtual and live events as part of a new approach that puts a higher value on virtual, organizers can move ahead with more confidence.

PERSISTENTLY VIRTUAL

With a PVE “365-engagement” stance, organizations see virtual as an all-encompassing way to seed demand and craft an image. Marketing minds captivated by virtual’s qualities champion a PVE as a way to better leverage all that can be offered to the marketplace in the form of information, education and insight that ties back to the product or service. Taken to the events realm, a PVE maps a possible transformation of how event organizers design their offerings, relate to their communities and even define their core business models.

A PVE constitutes the framework for a new sort of physically detached community unconstrained by distance, time or participant expertise or status. It can span tightly focused events, content, news, training, dialogue and collaboration, in real-time or archived, interactive and on-demand formats. Think of a virtual gathering spot where organizers reap the full benefits of a culture emphasizing openness, communication, engagement and thought leadership, a full slate of resources intelligently crafted and thematically presented.

Live or virtual, events, strictly defined, have clear value. But PVE backers say they’ll become increasingly insufficient and inadequate on their own. Today’s bulging digital communications tool kit opens the door to more interpretations of virtual interaction. Events, as they’ve traditionally been designed for the virtual space, may be just the tip of the iceberg of what’s possible with interactive communities. Organizers that take a more expansive view of what virtual can offer, and perhaps link up with partners skilled in marketing and virtual technology deployment, can start down the path of transforming their mission of building a community of shared interests.

LOOKING OUT TO THE PVE CONTINUUM

Cramer, a Norwood, Mass., creative marketing agency, has become a vocal advocate of event producers going deeper with virtual.

Steve Gogolak, the firm’s director of solutions, virtual and webcasting, is a big believer in the transformative power of a “persistently virtual” mindset for event organizers. Speaking at the Virtual Edge Summit in January, he emphasized the importance of merging the “tactical” approach needed to produce events with the deeper “strategy” of building an environment where interplay and engagement is ongoing. Putting virtual in an events context implies a beginning and an end. What’s really needed is something closer to “always-on” access for customers, vendors and other stakeholders in the community, to resources, ideas, each other.

“The way to look at it is if you were to turn your event into a museum or a show that never closed, instead of
a one-time occurrence, what would that mean for how you market it?” Gogolak says. “You’d have to do things to draw people back. You’d still need an event mentality with a moment-in-time sense of urgency, but at the same time you’d need to take a longer view that sees an event as just one destination in a campaign.”

Event producers would effectively be adopting more of an ongoing marketing mentality with a PVE approach. In viewing an event more as part of a continuum of engagement, and not in isolation, the event’s overall value to the organization and users can grow. Steadily transitioning more interconnected functions to the virtual arena, organizers reap savings in time and money needed to set up virtual events from scratch.

**BUILDING A PVE PLAYBOOK**

Shifting into PVE mode requires planning and vision, and a mindset that’s different than just creating a script to make virtual events somehow mirror live events. It also means commitments up-front to putting a premium on long-term engagement and meeting the needs of the most-valued elements of an audience. And rather than creating a PVE for its own sake, it must be designed with an end in mind.

The event component must be built around fostering interaction and collaboration. In PVE mode, they’re best organized around a central theme as opposed to being a “one-size-fits-all” smorgasbord. Virtual events can also attain greater value if they’re offered in highly focused formats that may follow a larger event, live or virtual. Plus, virtual exhibitors need to have a place at the table when the talk turns to creating a seamless end-to-end virtual experience for participants.

In setting up a PVE, producers also need a laser-like focus on content. Resources giving participants spanning customers, potential clients and even suppliers insightful and actionable information need to be front and center in the virtual mix. Bringing content sponsors early on into discussions of how to present and market it in line with the PVE’s broader tone, approach and goals for interaction can help assure continuity and relevance.

A PVE launch must also consider the aesthetics of the encounter and the visual and broader sensory environment. Getting visitors not just to come to the environment initially, but to stay longer and return regularly, requires a keen awareness of navigation tools and cues that can drive deeper engagement. The design can’t be static, but instead must be malleable, capable of being redesigned and repurposed as web interaction and digital communications platforms evolve.

Budgeting for a transition to a fuller, more capable PVE also is central to success. Traditional virtual events usually involve known and manageable outlays. A commitment to a PVE that’s ongoing and dynamic has more components and, at first, carries uncertainty. In building it out, creators commit to a more or less open-ended process. Depending on where the search leads, maintaining and enhancing the PVE presence can come with greater ongoing expenditures.

**PVE IN ACTION**

Virtual platform providers like InterCall, and marketing agencies specializing in virtual, like Cramer, have been getting more buy-in on their views of the power of the PVE model. Using their history of work with associations and companies producing live and virtual events, they’ve built PVEs that have delivered on the promise of vastly improving the virtual presence.

In touting the value of PVEs, both highlight the tangible benefits event producers can deliver to customers looking to harvest business from virtual meet-ups. That’s one key area where PVEs can shine, producing results potentially superior to traditional live events. With the ability to capture detailed information on user movements with an event or other component, a PVE can deliver a quality of lead information harder to replicate with the traditional model.

Correctly designed, they can shed more light on where participants go in the PVE, what resources they use and how much time they spend. With built-in analytics and tracking/reporting capabilities, PVEs yield critical information organizers can market to sponsors. InterCall’s Engagement Index, for example, produces data on attendee activity,
interest and demographics that can be used to prioritize and rank leads. The index also can be customized with different qualification criteria.

An always-on PVE, then, can serve to constantly generate new leads and, in turn, new business. For those that sponsor or utilize it, a PVE can effectively function as a dynamic extension of the brand. With its unique capabilities to foster engagement, sharing and rich, multi-faceted experiences spanning live and archived content, the PVE can eclipse what a static website offers.

Ultimately, a PVE is about the user’s experience. That’s how companies like InterCall and Cramer design the PVE, from the outside in, focusing on how it’s used and navigated.

An InterCall client, Healthcare Businesswomen’s Association (HBA), leveraged a comprehensive InterCall-designed virtual engagement platform to broaden its leadership development offerings and member participation. Eager to move in a different direction from organizations that focus on one-shot events, HBA worked with InterCall to develop two virtual tracks.

With Leadership Online, HBA offers ongoing multi-dimensional engagement opportunities. Online educational sessions, live chat, teleconferences, confidential coaching and reference materials target members’ varying needs. Those who can’t attend live meetings or those who want to dig deeper on their own time gained a resource built on a new flexible platform.

HBA’s Leadership in Practice, meanwhile, offers members a way to interact on a number of different levels like webcasts and text chats with professionals who present at the organization’s annual leadership conference.

Both programs have drawn far more and deeper participation than envisioned, prompting CEO Laura Cooke to speculate that HBA has “probably only scratched the surface” of what’s possible with a PVE.

Cramer, which has partnered with InterCall on quite a few virtual engagement projects, is expanding its PVE activities. The company is reaching out to the growing roster of companies eager to learn more about expanding virtual engagement and using it in new ways.

PTC, a software developer, recently worked with Cramer to fashion a virtual environment geared to supporting an important new product introduction. Although technically a virtual event, the structure Cramer built was more than a one-shot effort.

By creating message tracks tailored to different types of prospective users, keying on highly interactive product tours, the visitor’s virtual experience was differentiated, rather than one-size-fits-all. PTC’s marketing director, Stacy Clement, credited Cramer’s virtual platform with helping the company more clearly explain the product better to key audiences.

That also helped drive extensive media coverage. The virtual environment Cramer created from a single virtual event highlighting a product rollout continues to be an ongoing sales tool for the company.

Cramer helped another client, coffee brewing system-maker Keurig, Inc., develop a virtual training program for its distributor network. Dubbed Keurig University, the environment was fashioned to be more welcoming and engaging than standard web-enabled training. Designed to be regularly updated and capable of monitoring participant progress the virtual environment drew 250 distributors out of the gate, more than half of whom viewed every single piece of content in the environment. The average distributor spent more than two hours per visit immersed in the environment.

These early dispatches from the front lines of PVE’s deployment may augur well for virtual’s future in the broader events space. But organizations eager to see what virtual is truly capable of may well have to approach the wager window with not only more resources, but also more pluck. By borrowing some pages from the standard marketing playbook and making a new organizational commitment to virtual, event producers may be better positioned to build the type of themed, branded and thoughtfully built virtual platform needed to produce tangible results, not just a virtual afterthought.