

THE YEAR AUTOMOTIVE EVENTS WENT DIGITAL

Did the automotive industry take advantage of everything digital had to offer?



REALTIME

FOREWORD

We don't need to provide a recap on what 2020 brought us all. The year began with the usual sense of optimism as we looked towards what it had to offer, only for the rug to be pulled from beneath us and much of the world heading into some form of lockdown. Here we are, a year later, and the situation remains uncertain.

But the future looks brighter than it did this time last year. Vaccines are being rolled out in various countries and many are hopeful we'll be able to go back to the way it used to be (as much as possible). And that's not a far-out possibility; here in the UK, the government has laid out their multi-phase plan to return to normality. If all goes according to plan, it could happen by the end of June.

Last year, the events industry took a massive hit. It is a significant contributor to the global economy. As per the report published by Allied Market Research, the global events

industry was valued at \$1,135.4 billion in 2019, with corporate events & the seminar segment holding the highest market share.

That was before the pandemic. With a sudden lockdown, every physical event was thrown up into the air. Like many other industries, there was no consensus on how to handle this unfamiliar situation. Eventually, with the writing on the wall, the events industry had to make a choice: cancel outright or move to digital events. The automotive industry was no different.

But with digital events being the only alternative, did the automotive industry take advantage of everything they had to offer? And did those that took up the challenge succeed in providing a worthwhile experience? And what will happen in 2021 and beyond for motor shows?

Let's find out.



WHAT HAPPENED?

2020 began like any other year, with many of the staples of the automotive calendar in place.

By the end of March, many of them had to cancel or postpone their event. The immediate response was one full of questions. There was almost a sense of panic: what was the protocol in a situation such as this? The lockdown came mere days before some events were due to throw open their doors...

THE COMMERCIAL VEHICLE SHOW

One of the first UK shows to cancel in mid-March. There was no digital alternative.

GENEVA INTERNATIONAL MOTOR SHOW

The show was cancelled only days prior to opening.

PARIS MOTOR SHOW

In a statement, they said: "Nothing will be like before, and this crisis must teach us to be agile, creative and more innovative than ever."

NEW YORK MOTOR SHOW

The show was postponed and eventually cancelled.

However, as the year (& the pandemic) continued, an alternative to cancelling became more plausible than it's ever been. They could go completely digital.



WHAT DID THEY DO?

Automechanika Birmingham was one of the first to offer something to fill the gap. After a fantastic 2019 show, which broke its own record with 12,000 attendees, the show was always planning to skip 2020. But they still made a mark on the year. In June, they announced they were hosting a series of free-to-attend webinars.

Automechanika is held in association with SMMT, who were also quick to offer digital alternatives. In a review of 2020, they reported that 10,877 people attended 98 SMMT events. This included roundtables, market briefings, press conferences, and networking sessions.

The Goodwood Festival of Speed started with high hopes. But being such a widely attended public event, they were going to have to think differently. In October, they hosted an alternative, a three-day digital event that had a team of 180 television crew members and 49 cameras. The event was broadcast for free on their website and social media channels. The people who go to Goodwood for the vintage

cars were treated to a host of valuable classic cars driven in Revival-style historic racing events.

The cancellation of the Geneva International Motor Show was a blow to many exhibitors hoping to use it as a platform for their marketing. Volkswagen was one such exhibitor who had planned two press days and a press conference. But they quickly adjusted and turned it into a webcast. In just a matter of hours, they turned an on-stage event into a digital format, with adjusted trailers and a studio talk show.

Elsewhere in the world, the show could go on. With the coronavirus starting in China, they were in a better position to phase in physical events. The Beijing Motor Show was pushed from April to 26th September. Due to travel restrictions, there weren't too many international attendees, but exhibitors such as BMW, Maserati, and Rolls-Royce still put on a good show.



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

It seems very few automotive events made the jump to a digital platform. Many were left with too little time, a matter of weeks - if not days - to make the decision to cancel altogether.

It begs the question; would these events have even translated to a digital space? According to the Center for Exhibition Industry Research, 92% of attendees are there to discover new products. Without that face-to-face, hands-on experience, is a digital alternative the same? Can they network as effectively? Some events just might not see it as worth it.

Lev Cribb, Managing Director of Webinar Experts, suggests that physical events with digital elements will become popular: a hybrid approach to event management.

“Physical events offer an opportunity to meet, network, talk and make new connections. On the downside, physical events can be costly, hard to reach (geographically) and limited by the availability and suitability of physical event venues and transport networks.

We’ve run more webinars and virtual events than ever before in history, and organisers have seen an increase in reach, engagement, and audience data insights. These are amazing benefits that we all want to retain.”

Rebecca Saletta, Head of Automotive/Mobility at the Department of International Trade, agrees, capturing the essence of what is missing from virtual events: “As humans, we naturally gravitate towards people. We are made to connect with others.”



That's the gap that these virtual events needed to bridge. "These digital events can still be creative and unique, and I think they're not going to go away," Saletta notes, "but I do think there's added value in meeting people face to face."

Perhaps, she admits, the pandemic forced the industry to think differently, to up their virtual offering and to think about orientating guests as well as wowing them with great virtual assets. "We did have things in place to launch virtual events, but Covid definitely accelerated it. We were less afraid of it, which suggests that perhaps we were already headed that way."

According to Saletta, Commotion LA's digital show worked well. Its user interface was simple, tailored and easy to use, making sure that you didn't get lost in the hundreds of different digital elements it offered up. It built its experience of the event around the user – and that was where it stood out from the rest.

Ultimately, though, Saletta doesn't see an end to the physical motor show. "There's something powerful about a physical presence, especially with motor shows. That said, I think there's room to build that emotion beyond the physical space. Shows can start building the excitement and conversation virtually prior to a physical event and use technology to tailor the user experience of the show. It'll be interesting to see if we can nail that balance."



WHAT DOES 2021 HAVE IN STORE?

The difference between 2020 and 2021 is the optimism we can have this year.

Here in the UK, the government has laid out its roadmap for the rest of the year, with the plan to completely end restrictions by 21st June. So, we may be about to see events postpone until the back half of the year, with a sparse spring/summer calendar. But there was one staple event that embraced digital this year...

CES

The 2021 edition of CES was the largest digital tech event ever. There were almost 2,000 exhibitors, including 681 start-ups. There was a media storm covering the event, with over 13,000 outlets writing over 165,000 stories. People from around the world tuned in, with over three million people watching their keynote talks. To any sceptics, CES showed them just how successful a digital alternative can be.

GOODWOOD

The event is planning on bringing back the physical Festival of Speed in July, though they are also planning on making it an experience you can also enjoy from elsewhere. Details of how they plan on blending the events together are thin on the ground, but they seem dedicated to providing an alternative experience for those not comfortable in leaving their home just yet.

While digital events are always an option - and perhaps an inevitability in some way - the pandemic proved no better time to see how they compare to their in-person counterparts.

So, what are the benefits of going virtual?

- *By moving online, you create an opportunity that otherwise wouldn't have been there and open the event up to the rest of the world. You bring more people into the conversation.*
- *They can be more convenient; you don't have to worry about scheduling conflicts. The more you can see, the more you can learn.*
- *Instead of having one big motor show, you can host mini-events as and when you have something you feel is worth announcing.*
- *Digital events are easier to track and analyse, making it easier to tailor future events and improve the experience each time. It takes out the guesswork.*

But if it were this simple, wouldn't we cancel all in-person events and go strictly digital? People aren't about to say that, though. And that's because there are still good reasons to keep physical events.

Downsides of digital?

Feedback from CES shows us that there was a certain quality missing. Being able to access what you want, when you want was an obvious benefit, but there was a sense of discovery missing.

- *At a physical event, you can explore. CES had Eureka Park - a place where visitors could discover small exhibitors showing off their newest, most unique creations. Where is the opportunity to explore in the digital space?*
- *At motor shows, you have the chance to get up close and personal with a new vehicle. To get a feel of how it looks. To see if it appeals to you when it's right in front of you. At a digital event, without that tactile nature, how can you ever be sure?*
- *Do digital events put smaller companies at a disadvantage? Could a new car start-up ever compete with the likes of Mercedes-Benz, Ford, or even Tesla? It's a difficult situation and people might be less inclined to watch something that doesn't have the flash and pizzazz of other shows.*
- *And, of course, the lack of opportunity for in-person networking.*



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE FUTURE?

Is it goodbye to motor shows as we know them? We think, probably not.

We've seen how we can hold online events. In the same way we now know remote working is a viable option.

But you can't replace that human interaction.

The best path may be a blend of the two varieties. Cribb (Webinar Experts) suggest a 'Hybrid First' approach, whereby the physical and virtual aspects of the event are planned together so that they work to complement each other.

There is undeniable power in a physical presence, but there's also an opportunity to build beyond it using the digital element in tandem. You can work to grow the excitement and emotion before an event, triggering conversations to build more fruitful relationships. The opportunity is there to make something more tailored and concise; "As a new event format in its own right," argues Cribb, "thinking about how the virtual & physical portions of your event can integrate with each other will really help the flow and design of your Hybrid Event."

This could be exclusive online content that attracts your digital audience, Cribb suggests, or providing 'hands on' content or experiences

at your physical event (which can't be achieved online) to drive demand for the physical event. "Although your physical event will still live stream keynotes and presentations online, the allure of the mystery 'in person only' content is just so tempting!" he adds.

If there's a lesson to learn, it's this: go slow. Create a resource for people less keen to attend in person to help them to warm up to the idea of being back at a physical event. Offer a digital element or experience that the audience can engage with from their own home.

As the lockdown eases here in the UK, we're sure we'll eventually see a return to normality, but we believe digital events are here to stay. If people don't have to travel cross-country to attend, and are instead able to participate from the comfort of their own home, many of them will choose the digital edition.

It's been a difficult year, but there is light at the end of the tunnel. The combination of real human interaction with virtual assets that are straining every sinew to support and engage, will make for some stunning experiences.

We think this is the start of a new era for the event industry. And we can't wait to see what the future holds.

ABOUT REALTIME

Our immersive and lifelike car configurations place buyers in the driving seat.

Whether it's the dashboard illumination or the stitching on the seats, our attention to detail drives belief, influences decision making and brings consumers closer to their car.

With over 20 years experience of working with the world's leading car manufacturers, we understand automotive marketing and the vehicle design process.

Get in Touch with the Realtime Automotive team:
paul@realtimeuk.com



REALTIME