

Hybrid and virtual events set to grow post pandemic

By [Tanya Davis](#), issued by [East Coast Radio](#)

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To event or not to event? That is the question organisers are faced with as the world moves towards a post-pandemic recovery.



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The events industry was hit hard by the Covid-19 pandemic, with [Pollstar](#) estimating that \$30bn was lost globally in 2020.

While the sector fared better in the second half of the year, no amount of pivoting and innovation was able to recoup the losses experienced during the early stages of the pandemic.

The Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown regulations adversely affected all the subsectors of the events industry in South Africa. But what does the future of events look like?

In 2020, we witnessed a seismic shift of the entire industry to the virtual space, albeit forcefully. This trend will continue for the most part of 2021 with digital remaining a major component of the event strategy.

Future events won't necessarily always only be online, as the need for human connection is too intrinsic to us, but online events will become increasingly relevant in the coming years to reduce travel and the cost of physical events.

A survey conducted with East Coast Radio listeners gives valuable insight about how consumers feel about attending physical and virtual events and what type of events they have an appetite for. **(Source: East Coast Radio Events Survey - May 2021)**

East Coast Radio has staged some of KwaZulu-Natal's biggest events over the years, including the family-friendly Big Walk and popular Durban Day concert.

The station was forced to adjust some of its annual events in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Women's Business Breakfast went virtual for the first time in 2020. The webinar, which was headlined by Bonang

Matheba, Leanne Manas, and Vusi Thembekwayo, was an overwhelming success with 500 attendees.

Bigger focus on hybrid and virtual events

Prior to the Covid-19 lockdown, 383,000 of the East Coast Radio audience watched, read about, listened to, browsed or paid to attend a theatre/musical production, live music concert, art exhibition or cultural event.

The coming year will see a bigger focus on hybrid and virtual events.

The survey shows that 27% of listeners only opt in for virtual events, whilst 34% say they are interested in attending both virtual and non-virtual events. A further 19% say they will attend non-virtual events that follow Covid-19 health safety protocols.

Music and comedy are the main choices of virtual events that listeners are interested in attending. A third would attend a virtual family walk and 20% a virtual business breakfast.

Physical gatherings and real-life events are still the main attractions for the listeners of East Coast Radio, with more than half of the survey respondents saying they would like to attend a Saturday market and a comedy show. Almost 50% are keen on attending a live music event or family fun walk.

This is not surprising, as family is very important to East Coast Radio listeners and more than 700,000 listeners say they enjoy family meals together on weekends.

Audience engagement and interaction

Audience engagement is the largest challenge when it comes to virtual events. The next biggest challenge is interaction and on average 66% of marketers use polling and videos to keep people engaged.

With larger events, they have gamification strategies to improve audience engagement.

63% of people say that the ideal time for a virtual round table discussion is between 60 and 90 minutes and 45% of event organisers opt for shorter, multi-day events to combat virtual event fatigue. In the East Coast Radio survey, 80% of respondents opted for an event length of up to two hours.

Almost 60% say they are more likely to attend an event that they've attended before.

Looking ahead, the virtual event technology sector will likely see an increase in growth and investments.

Virtual events have made it so much easier to track attendee actions and behaviour, creating both an opportunity to attract sponsors and raising questions on attendee privacy.

But consumers are getting increasingly wary of sharing their data.

The responsibility is in your hands to be transparent as a brand and to ensure you only collect data as required.

We live in a world where reality is no longer just what we see in front of us. We no longer have to rely on our senses to govern our experience of things, as technology allows us to create sensations that mimic the real thing so well, that we often aren't able to tell the difference.

Virtual reality, extended reality, augmented reality, mixed reality, behind-the-scenes tours, live commenting, ARwall, and Lightform are just some of the terms associated with the exciting world of virtual, live, and hybrid event spaces.

It's clear from the survey, and trends worldwide, that the future of events will be overwhelmingly hybrid.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tanya Davis is marketing manager at East Coast Radio. Before that, she served as the station's brand and communications manager. Davis holds a Diploma in Public Relations from Varsity College and a Bachelor of Technology Honours Degree in Public Relations Management from Durban University of Technology.

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