

"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), 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.

Trade show managers
can reap several
benefits from online
conventions – whether
they are stand alone
or add-on events.

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. 