

YOUR GUIDE TO:



**SOCIAL MEDIA and
VIRTUAL EVENTS**

By Dennis Shiao



Chapter 1: Twitter

Promote Your Virtual Event on Twitter

With a rapidly growing and highly engaged user base, Twitter can be a great vehicle for driving registrations and attendance to your next virtual event. Here's a step-by-step guide on how to get that done:

1. *Find your target audience on Twitter* – first, of course, you need to define the target audience of your virtual event. Once you do, go seek them out on Twitter – you don't need to engage with them on Twitter just yet, but you can start following them – and identify the “places” where they tend to congregate (e.g. read their tweets, click through on links they're sharing, read their blogs, attend chats they participate in, etc.). You may find that by following folks, they'll follow you back – and, may engage with you on their own. Next, leverage Twitter's search capabilities – search on key terms associated with your virtual event and observe who's tweeting about them. Sign up for a service like [tweetbeep](#) and you'll receive daily email alerts with all tweets about your selected terms. Start following the folks who seem to know what they're talking about, as your virtual event may be of interest to them.
2. *Identify Twitter users whom your target audience follows* – if you handled Step #1 well, then you've half-way completed this step already. By researching topics (and users) on Twitter, you'll begin to build an *authority map* – those with more authority on topics tend to have more followers. Identify users whom your target audience is following – then, determine which users they're following (and so on). You're now starting to build potential *promoters* who can help in the outreach efforts of your virtual event.
3. *Leverage prominent or active tweeters in your own company* – is your CEO or VP Marketing an active tweeter? If so, then reach out to their multitude of followers to promote the virtual event. On your corporate web site, use a service such as [TweepML](#) to share a list of your company's Twitter users – giving web site visitors a single-click option to start following every member of that list!
4. *Identify other prominent / relevant Twitter users* – find prominent industry bloggers and start reading their blogs. Engage with them by leaving comments on their blogs or send them @replies via Twitter. Making these folks aware of your virtual event is a good thing (e.g. perhaps they'll attend) – having them promote the event on your behalf is even better.
5. *Build your Twitter following* - if you'll be using a corporate branded Twitter account to focus your marketing efforts, use the aforementioned steps to start building your list of followers. For me, quality always trumps quantity with Twitter followers – I'd rather have the right people follow my corporate branded account than have 200 “non relevant” folks follow me (in the hopes that I'll follow them back). **Especially** with a corporate Twitter account – make every tweet count. Potential followers will often review your last 5 or last 10 tweets – if you tweet too often about breakfast or the weather, then you will **NOT** be followed.
6. *Start promoting by adding value* – first, you never want to over-promote your virtual event. Doing so will only turn users off from your corporate branded Twitter account. Each time you promote the

virtual event, you want to add value. So again, make every tweet (promotion) account and give users something useful each time. Similarly, ask your fellow promoters to start spreading the word – and suggest phrases or facts they should be using in their tweets. Use a link shortener such as bit.ly and track the number of clicks you generate – this way, you can start to determine what’s working and what’s not working.

7. *Define (and use) your virtual event’s hash tag* – make sure all tweets (e.g. from you, your colleagues and your fellow promoters) utilize the hash tag that you’ve created for your virtual event. Ask your event’s exhibitors to pitch in as well – have them tweet about their presence at the event. Once you’ve seeded the discussion with your event’s hash tag, you may see the interaction and commentary spread – if a few prominent tweeters jump in (e.g. >100,000 followers) and their tweets are then re-tweeted by other prominent tweeters, then awareness of your virtual event can spread beyond even your wildest dreams.
8. *Leverage other (relevant) hash tags* – the hash tag can be a wildly effective means for promoting content to *indirect followers* – I may only have a few hundred followers, but if I post something insightful with the #eventprofs hash tag, I may have my message seen by the 50,000 (*this number used merely as an example*) users who monitor that hash tag. Make sure the hash tag is relevant to your virtual event – assuming it is, including that hash tag along with your *event’s tag*. Be careful not to over-promote to the related hash tags, as constant promotion of your virtual event will surely turn off the followers of that hash tag - you’ll even receive backlash from them]
9. *Think outside the box* – instead of continually pointing users to the registration page for your virtual event, try to mix things up – link to other areas, such as: short video of the keynote speaker; text quote from a prominent presenter; a testimonial (quote) from a pre-registered attendee; a twitpic (image) of the event’s show floor or auditorium; a page that lists titles or companies who have already registered. Of course, on all of these pages, place a link to your event’s registration page.
10. *Have fun* – Twitter can be an effective business tool – but remember, it’s also fun!

Leverage Twitter Lists

What’s a very simple yet effective way to integrate the new Twitter Lists feature into your event? Here’s what you can do:

1. Define your event hash tag (a “must do” for any event!)
2. Create a Twitter List for your event
3. If your company or event already has a Twitter ID (“brand”), connect it to that ID (e.g. `twitter.com/<your-brand>/<your-event-list>`)
4. On your registration page, ask registrants to supply their Twitter ID
5. Manually or automatically populate your Twitter List directly from registration!

As part of the [Twitter API](#), there are methods in place to interact with Twitter Lists (look in the documentation for List Methods, List Members Methods, List Subscribers Methods). As such, you could automate this process by having your registration page utilize the Twitter List API to auto-populate your list directly from registration.

In addition, you could use the Twitter API to inform registrants which of their Twitter friends or followers are (a) also registered and (b) already a member of the Twitter List. Here are benefits of leveraging a Twitter List for your event:

Registrants promote the event on your behalf

It's the crowdsourcing method for generating awareness – allow the participants to spread the word on their own. After all, the combined reach of your registrants is far greater than your own. By referencing your Twitter list on your registration page, users who supply their Twitter ID will likely go straight from registration completion to the Twitter list to (a) confirm that they're now a member of the list and (b) skim through the pre-existing messages.

The concept is similar to a pre-event bulletin board or forum – the beauty of using Twitter, however, is that unlike a forum (which needs a critical mass of initial postings before it really takes off), a Twitter list is “pre-seeded” from the natural activity of the list members’ tweets. You can be sure that as users register for your event, they’ll first tweet that they “just registered” – and then, continue to tweet about the event (especially as the event date draws near). You’ll want to encourage all registrants to include your event hash tag when they tweet.

Facilitates pre-event networking among registrants

Whether physical or virtual, a key reason people attend events is the networking aspect – being able to meet, connect and interact with others, to discuss common business challenges – and to extend their social graphs. Too often, however, one arrives at an event with no idea whom else is attending. A Twitter List changes the game – you’ll not only know the identity of folks who are attending, but you’ll feel like you know them very well.

Consider friends or family members that you follow on Twitter or Facebook – do you find that you come to learn and understand them more via status updates than interacting with them day-to-day (or over the years)? It's remarkable how social network connections can generate a more complete picture of an individual. With pre-registrants to an event, you may find that you're really getting to know individuals, based on their intra-day status updates and industry thoughts.

This will lead to events whereby attendees will have pre-arranged meet-ups and appointments (with other attendees) in advance, making their event experience more rewarding. Perhaps someone will build an integration from Twitter List pages to LinkedIn, so that event registrants can also extend their LinkedIn connections directly from the event's Twitter List.

Allows exhibitors to get to know registrants/attendees

This will need to be managed/handled properly, as registrants surely wouldn't welcome unsolicited pitches from exhibitors before they've even attended the event – but, imagine the potential for exhibitors. You get to know the users who are attending the event. Perhaps you create booth content or special offers that are tailored to what you've learned about your upcoming booth visitors. Did they talk about pricing challenges in your market? Well, how about an event-exclusive price break on your product, which you announce at the event?

If users commented about technical challenges using your product, bring the right specialists into your booth so that you directly address this pre-event feedback. Lastly, exhibitors can seed some “must meet” lists based on the registrants who are tweeting within the list – build a profile of interesting users and ask your booth reps to be on alert if those individuals visit your booth.

Can you believe it? Something as simple as a Twitter List can go a long way to making everyone happy: registrants/attendees, exhibitors and ... YOU.

Related links

1. [10 Ways You Can Use Twitter Lists](#) (Mashable)
2. [Five Essential Twitter Lists For Every Event](#) (CrowdVine)

Provide End User Support (via Twitter!)



End user support for virtual events has traditionally been provided via a small number of channels: email and telephone support (which is especially useful for users having issues entering the virtual event) and “in-show support”, which is typically provided in a “help booth” within the virtual event. With growing use of social media, however, attendees are leveraging their social network tools to request (and receive) user support.

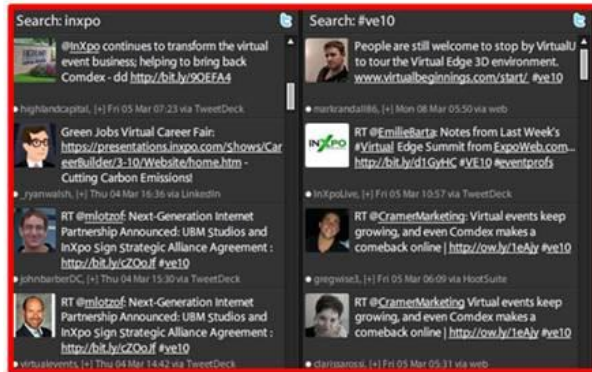
From my observations, Twitter is the most widely used social network for virtual event support requests (today) – however, I wouldn’t be surprised to see increased “calls for help” via Facebook and LinkedIn. This posting provides tips and best practices on providing virtual event end user support via Twitter.

Create/Establish a Twitter Account

Users can’t find you on Twitter if you’re not there, which means that if you don’t already have a presence on Twitter, you’ll need to create one. I recommend a Twitter ID that incorporates your company name – or, the product, platform or service that you provide (if that’s different from your

company name). In addition, be transparent about the contributors (employees) who tweet on behalf of your company and brand.

Create A Real-Time Dashboard (of tweets)



Configure your Twitter client (e.g. [TweetDeck](#), [Seismic](#), etc.) with the relevant search terms and hash tags related to your virtual event. At minimum, you'll want to monitor the following:

1. @Replies sent to your Twitter account (in TweetDeck, the column is labeled "Mentions")
2. A search on the hash tag for your virtual event
3. A search on your company name – or, the name of your platform, product or service
4. A search on the virtual event's name or title

If it helps you stay more focused, delete columns that are unrelated to the virtual event – the result will be a single app that consolidates all "chatter" related to your event. I recommend that you monitor for new tweets **every 15 minutes** while the event is live.

Allocate Proper Staffing & Get Started Early

In the same manner that you allocate support staff to booths, email inboxes and telephones, be sure to allocate staff to "Twitter support". You want to get up and running early – I recommend monitoring Twitter at least one full hour before the official opening of your virtual event. Virtual event producers typically allow exhibitors into the environment prior to attendees – so during the "early period", be on the look-out for tweets from exhibitors who may need assistance finding their way into their virtual booths.

Have at least one person who is "primary" for Twitter support throughout the event day. And, know that Twitter users expect quick turnaround to their tweets. Trend setters such as [@comcastcares](#) have provided highly responsive and immediate customer care on Twitter, which has raised the bar for everyone else. Users on Twitter have come to expect similar care and responsiveness.

If you do not respond within 15-20 minutes of users' original tweet, they may issue a subsequent tweet, letting the "world" (e.g. their followers + users who are following the event's hash tag) know that they've received no response from the event provider. So be sure to provide prompt service – if your

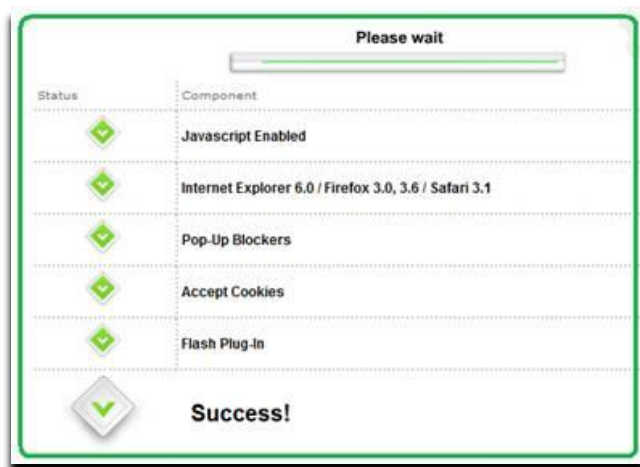
customer care is prompt and effective, you'll be rewarded. Users are just as quick to say "thanks" (on Twitter) and acknowledge the great service you provide.

Following Up With A User

I prefer to handle support issues via 1-on-1 care. Before you contact the user, review their Twitter profile – as background to your upcoming dialog, it's good to know the user's company, title and number of Twitter followers. I like to know if the user has an audience of 100 on Twitter – or, an audience of 100,000. In addition, read the user's last 10-15 tweets, to get to know his/her interests, hot buttons, etc.

Now you're ready to make contact. I prefer to connect directly – a direct message on Twitter (if the user is following you), a direct email (if you have his/her email address) or a private chat within the virtual event (if the user is logged in at the time). If none of these channels are available to you, send the user a public message on Twitter and provide your direct contact info (e.g. your email address).

It's important to personalize your brand, letting users know that there are "real people" behind your corporate Twitter account – and, providing them with a direct means for getting in touch.



1-on-1 Triage

To prepare you for a "triage session" with your end user, I like to have the following information available via URLs that I can provide to the user:

1. Technical requirements for accessing/attending the virtual event
2. Automated system check that allows a user to test their system
3. Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) related to the virtual event
4. A "contact us" page related to end user support (e.g. providing an email address, phone number, etc.)

In addition, be sure to have higher level "support experts" available in case you need to delegate a sophisticated system issue. The experts should be available within the virtual event – or, be available "on call" to jump in as needed.

Post-Resolution

Once you've resolved a user's issue, follow them on Twitter – this allows them to send you direct messages. And, it allows you to be quickly apprised of any subsequent issues they may come across. Later on in the day, check if the user is logged in to the virtual event – if so, send a private chat request and politely ask how the event is going. It's always good for users to know that you're actively supporting the event and genuinely interested in their satisfaction.

On Twitter, respond to each and every end user "tweet" – mention that the issue is resolved and invite the user to contact you back as needed. Be careful, however, not to include the event's hash tag on all of these follow-up tweets. As the virtual event platform, you do not want to have a significant presence in the hash tag's tweetstream. Rather, only include the hash tag if your tweet relates to system-wide updates (applicable to all or most users).

The occasional update (with the hash tag) shows users that you're listening – and replying to every single tweet shows your followers that you are responsive to each issue that arises.

The Entire Team Contributes

If your virtual event support staff is comprised of active Twitter users, encourage them to tweet about the event – have them highlight interesting sessions, pass along comments from enthusiastic attendees or simply state that they're having a great time. This helps promote the event itself – and, highlights the depth of the team behind the event support. Take it a step further and create a Twitter List of your staff – allowing interested users to follow your employees tweets via a list.

Conclusion

The world is going social, which means that user support and customer service need to be "socially listening" (and responding). Get ahead of the curve – be sure to support your next virtual event on Twitter.



Chapter 2: Facebook

With 400 million active users worldwide (and counting), Facebook is enormous – in fact, Facebook recently surpassed Google as the #1 web site in the U.S. (as measured by visits).

While recent announcements have stirred up privacy concerns and caused some users to delete their accounts, Facebook continues to generate millions of new sign-ups per day. All of us know friends, family and colleagues who use the site on a daily (or hourly) basis.

Let's consider avenues for virtual event planners to tap into the power that Facebook can provide.



Integration 0.1: Share on Facebook

More than half of my Facebook friends (54%) are work-related acquaintances – current colleagues, current business partners, former colleagues and former business partners. The balance (46%) are friends and family. I'm by no means the "average" Facebook user. I believe the typical user tends towards a 65%/35% split between **family/friends** and work – and, uses Facebook for a family and friend focus rather than work.

That being said, it's clear to me that Facebook users "friend" their work contacts – and I believe that over time, a growing percentage of your Facebook friends will be work-related contacts, as our personal and work lives blend and mix online.

What does this mean for virtual events? With a B2B focus (today), this means that a "viable" audience exists (on Facebook) for you to share the virtual events that you're attending. Virtual event platforms

should make it easy to “share the event” on Facebook, in the same way that users share a web site’s movie review, restaurant listing or product listing.

To make virtual event sharing effective, the “shared items” should include:

1. A simple and easy to understand title (Facebook grabs the “page title” from the virtual event page you’re sharing)
2. A suitably sized image (on Facebook, the “sharer” can choose among the images listed on the shared page)
3. A hyperlink for interested users

If done right, 20 attendees might share your virtual event with their 200 Facebook friends – and **you’ve just allowed your audience to promote your event (on your behalf) to 4,000 potential attendees** (who otherwise would not have known about your event).

Integration 1.0: Live Stream Box

CBSsports.com used it for live streaming of NCAA March Madness – so did CNN.com for the live stream of President Obama’s inauguration. As the name implies, Facebook’s Live Stream Box is useful for the “streaming” of “live” events or occasions. The stream box provides an “Everyone Watching” tab – to submit a comment to that tab, users must authenticate to Facebook. Even if you don’t have a Facebook account, you’ll still be able to view the running commentary from “Everyone Watching”.

Comments posted to the “Everyone Watching” tab (in the virtual event) also appear on the submitting user’s Facebook Wall. Thus, participation in a Live Stream Box helps promote the virtual event – users’ comments appear in the News Feed of their Facebook friends, which generates awareness of the virtual event.

Facebook members have the added benefit of a “Friends” tab, which allows users to view their Facebook News Feed, right there from the stream box. In a virtual event, the Live Stream Box can be placed in the Auditorium (where live sessions are broadcast), the Lounge (where visitors drop by to engage with one another) or Exhibitor Booths (where booth visitors can engage with the Exhibitor – and, one another).

Integration 2.0: Facebook Open Graph



“Share on Facebook” goes in one direction (the sharer -> her friends); “Live Stream Box” combines multi-directional interaction with a corresponding one-way share. Facebook’s Open Graph API, announced in April 2010 at Facebook’s F8 Developer Conference, takes things to the next level.

Now, users can go beyond sharing “the event” and be much more granular in what they “like” (recommend/share) in a virtual event. I may “like” a session, a virtual booth, a document, or even another user. And with the Open Graph, I need not share each and every “like”, posting it to my Facebook Wall. Instead, the “likes” can be aggregated (e.g. by the virtual event platform).

Now, when I login to the virtual event, I may choose to view the activities (and likes) of Facebook friends who opted in to the sharing service. When I’m making a purchasing decision on a complex product or service, I can poll my Facebook friends to see who’s in the same boat. If a former colleague attended a virtual trade show in the morning, I may login during the afternoon to view the sessions and exhibitor booths that she “liked”.

Taken at a more granular level, I may choose to see the specific product collateral that she “liked” in the virtual event, or seek out the exhibitor representative that she chatted with and “liked”. By leaning on those whom I trust, my journey through a virtual trade show just got more productive.

Conclusion

Facebook and its 400+ million users cannot be ignored. There will be more and more business decisions guided (and made) on Facebook – it can be a great place to “share” your virtual event, both the event as a whole and individual elements within it.



Chapter 3: LinkedIn

With over 65 million registered users worldwide, [LinkedIn](#) has become an essential destination where business professionals connect and network. Make it easy for attendees to connect and engage with their LinkedIn network and virtual event planners have much to gain.

The good news is that LinkedIn provides several convenient integration points – there are LinkedIn Events, LinkedIn Widgets and a full-blown Application Programming Interface (API). Let's consider a few possibilities.



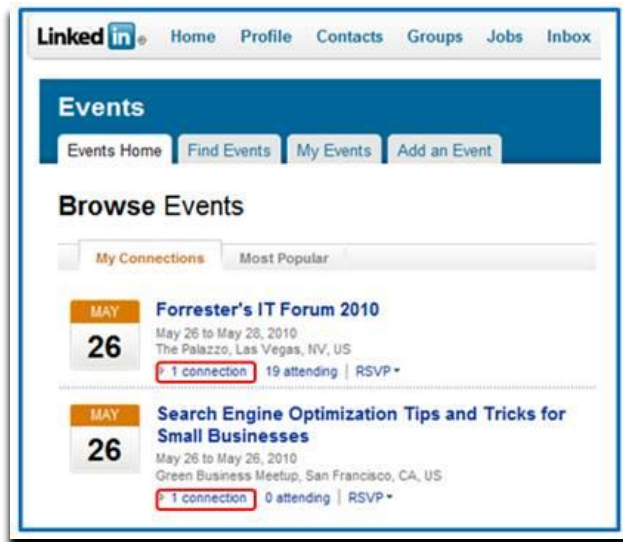
LinkedIn Events

To promote your event, create a LinkedIn Event – it's easy to “Add an Event” once logged in to LinkedIn. Complete a few input fields and within 5 minutes, your event record is created. There is a check box for “This is a virtual event” – you'll obviously want to select that. Once created, your event will appear at <http://events.linkedin.com> and be searchable by all LinkedIn members.

Your next step is to generate awareness of your event to LinkedIn members. On your LinkedIn Event creation confirmation page, you'll have the option of sharing the Event with selected LinkedIn contacts – and/or advertising the event with LinkedIn's [DirectAds advertising system](#). In addition to these options, consider promoting the event to relevant LinkedIn Groups, including those that your company has created – or is active on.

As LinkedIn members find your LinkedIn Event, you'll begin to generate registrations – members can also denote whether they're “Attending”, “Interested” or “Not Attending”. If they're “Attending”, they can further define their role at the event (e.g. “Attending”, “Presenting” or “Exhibiting”).

Note that a member can denote that they're "Attending" your virtual event (on LinkedIn), but will still need to complete your event's registration page, typically hosted on your site or your vendor's site and separate from LinkedIn.



Once a few members denote that they're "Attending" your virtual event, LinkedIn's sharing features kick in – as you see above, I can "Browse Events" and view all upcoming events that a LinkedIn connection (or connections) is attending. I can click on the LinkedIn Event record to view all attendees – and, I can view which of my connections plans to attend.

This could help in two ways – first, knowing that other like-minded professionals are attending may tip the scales in favor of my own registration and attendance. Second, I now know (in advance) that one or more of my connections plan to attend, so I'll be on the look-out for them within the virtual environment. Or, I may email them on the live event date to ask for their early impressions.

Here's a useful article: [Promote Your Event Using LinkedIn Events Application](#)

LinkedIn as Your Registration Page

 A screenshot of the LinkedIn registration form. It contains the following fields:

- First Name
- Last Name
- Title
- Company
- Phone
- E-Mail Address (with a note: "Your email address will also be your show Login ID")
- Password
- Confirm Password

 At the bottom, there are two buttons: "Register Now" and "Register on LinkedIn".

Registration page abandonment is a concern for all virtual event hosts – use a form that’s too long and potential registrants may give up and never return. LinkedIn has a [Profile API](#) that can be used to retrieve certain attributes from a LinkedIn member’s profile.

The first step for users, of course, is to authenticate to their LinkedIn account, granting the virtual event platform permission to access their LinkedIn profile. Once authenticated, the virtual events platform can use the Profile API to obtain some [profile attributes](#). This should cover 40-50% of a typical event’s registration questions.

By making it convenient for registrants, you’ll see a higher conversion rate and generate more registrations. You’ll need to balance that by collecting additional information (that exhibitors may need) once registrants login to the event (e.g. email address, which the Profile API does not provide, street address, zip code, qualifying questions, etc.).

LinkedIn Widgets

LinkedIn makes it easy for you to incorporate functionality by way of Javascript-based widgets – LinkedIn provides you with a few lines of Javascript and you embed the code on your web page (or virtual event page). There are three widgets currently available: Company Insider (see how many connections you have at a particular company), Profile (display a user’s LinkedIn profile) and Share on LinkedIn (share content with your LinkedIn Connections or Groups).



Your virtual event’s registration page is a logical place to embed the “Share on LinkedIn” widget – users registering for your event can share it with their LinkedIn network – or, with particular LinkedIn groups to which they belong. As shown above, members can share the page via status update (on LinkedIn), via a posting to a selected LinkedIn Group or by emailing selected connections.

The registration page is the one page where sharing makes sense – the rest of the event sits behind the registration page. Thus, sharing pages from within the event are less useful, since recipients would first need to complete the registration page prior to seeing the “shared content”.

Searching for LinkedIn Connections within the event

I occasionally attend a virtual event where I come across a former colleague in the Networking Lounge or in an exhibitor’s booth. If not for the random encounter, I would have never known s/he was attending the same event. The virtual event platform ought to provide me with the ability to search my LinkedIn Connections and then check to see if any of them are registered or online (right now!).

This would be useful for:

1. *Attendees* - have the opportunity to connect with a former colleague or business partner, right there in the virtual event. Additionally, be able to compare notes on exhibitors, sessions, etc. with folks you know.
2. *Exhibitors* - invite contacts (connections) to visit you in your virtual booth and get them caught up on your latest product offerings. Also, be alerted to existing customers and business partners who are attending – whom you may not have known were online in the environment.
3. *Show Hosts* – be alerted to business contacts who are attending your event – and be able to check in with them (or connect with them afterwards) to ask about the event experience.

Conclusion

Leveraging LinkedIn can bring many benefits to a virtual event planner – you can generate awareness and additional registrations via LinkedIn Events and the “Share on LinkedIn” widget; you can create an accelerated registration process for your users (and generate additional registrations along the way) and you can create enhanced engagement within the event by allowing attendees to discover their peers and business partners. Give some of these ideas a try and let me know how they worked out!



Bio

Dennis Shiao is an evangelist, strategist and practitioner of virtual events. Currently, Dennis serves as Director of Product Marketing at INXPO, the leading provider of privately branded virtual events and virtual business communities. At INXPO, Dennis is responsible for go-to-market strategy and execution, and for shaping product and platform evolution via the “voice of the customer”.

Dennis provides strategic consulting to clients on their virtual events and has managed virtual event campaigns for Cisco, HP, Oracle and Microsoft, among others. Dennis blogs about virtual events and virtual worlds at “It’s All Virtual” and is a frequent author and speaker.

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