# PIVOT FAST: Building Virtual  Immersive Events

## Article for Publishing

Current times demand that we keep distanced while continuing to conduct normal business operations. As we shift into a period of a new normal our global community needs to navigate what that means for us as individuals as well as what that means for our individual organizations specific to what we are trying to achieve. This could be anything from transitioning our internal business practices for meetings and collaboration as well as interactions and initiatives external to our organization.

In an effort to help organizations navigate the new distancing practices, Brightline Interactive, in partnership with the VR/AR Association and Resource Department, recently held the first of a series of discussions called "Pivot Fast". The goal is to help organizations better understand the landscape of digital and virtual platforms and to help them develop informed and actionable short and long-term strategies in their transition to digital and virtual platforms. The first episode of the "Pivot Fast" series featured global and experts in virtual technologies to include thought leaders from HP, HTC, Microsoft and Unity Technologies. This discussion was led by Tyler Gates, host of the VR/AR Association's "Everything VR & AR" podcast and Donny Neufuss, a seasoned expert in live event streaming and VP of Commercial and Brand Partnerships at Brightline Interactive. The discussion kicked off with an in-depth review of the landscape of digital meeting and events platforms, describing the best uses of the technologies, followed by an industry expert panel with featured guest speakers.

## Why PIVOT PAST?

Why pivot fast? Because we have to. Most of us are challenged at some level due to the current and residual conditions of social distancing. It's important for us to consider the lasting effects of the time that we're in now. Even when we do have the ability to gather again, how long will it take for things to get back to 'normal'? Furthermore, how long will it take for people to get comfortable with being in large crowds? Will people get used to the ease and efficiencies of accessing information and connecting with people from the comfort of their computers or other connective devices? Regardless of the extent and intensity of the short and longer term outcomes, we should all be aware of and prepare for the fact that things will insurmountably change.

## Where Are We Right Now?

It's important to be able to understand where you are now to know where to go. Do you have a campaign that culminates around a physical launch of a movie with activations in different geographical locations or are you involved with sporting events that require a physical presence of players and attendees? Thinking about your event goals, what is it that you were really trying

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to achieve? Understanding the core of what you have been doing and why, you'll be able to better understand what options or combination of options, will work for you.

## On Demand vs. Live Content

Before considering different platforms, you should ask yourself a few questions:
- Do you need your content to be delivered live or will attendees appreciate accessing content on-demand?
- How many attendees do I expect to have? Will we have attendees all at once or is there an opportunity to break up content?
- Do you plan on passive information intake or do you want your audience to engage with each other or the speaker? Does this engagement need to be in real-time?

Virtualizing events on demand is a very powerful tool and the platform you choose highly depends on the use case. While we do have certain limitations with non-physical engagements, we also have the luxury of delivering content in a variety of ways. *On-demand* gives us the ability to time shift and play what we want, when we want, allowing us the freedom and flexibility to access content that is specifically appropriate to you, on our own schedules. Some would argue that accessing content in this way allows the event to capture more of their audience since the audience is in control of their time. There are very few things these days that demand us to watch live content. In fact, most content is actually delivered on-demand now.

Certainly, there are benefits to live programming as well. You can compare live content to "must see TV". What content is important to get to the audience in real time? For example, we need to deliver critical information to healthcare professionals to communicate the constantly changing circumstances, logistics and access to equipment. Other examples of critical real-time information is watching sporting events for up-to-the minute scoring and having a popular keynote speaker attract attendees for live messaging and potential interactions. Then there are examples where on-demand content may be more appropriate such as content for niche audiences, education sessions, breakout rooms, ect. In some cases and for larger events, you may conclude that a combination of both delivery mechanisms are needed.

Our suggestion is if you don't *have* to go live, then don't! There is a potential large budget shift that comes with delivering content on-demand vs. live. On-demand content allows for easier logistical planning and in a lot of cases, lower costs to produce your event. One obvious reason is that speakers and key participants can record their presentations and talks in advance of the event at a time that is most convenient for their schedules. When deciding on-demand or live content, think through your event goals and assess what makes the most sense for your audience.

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## Virtual Event Platforms

### Learning Management System

Learning Management Systems (LMS) are commonly used with on-demand content to deliver information to an audience that needs to learn the information. That learned information needs to then be verified and sometimes scored. This could range from engagement on Youtube live video all the way to granular assessment of content for training purposes.

### Virtual Conferences and Meeting Platforms

Virtual conferences and meeting platforms refer to any tools used to bring people together to deliver content. This ranges from Zoom, where the purpose is to gather a small group for collaborative purposes, or a Youtube Live event or other webcasting tool where the goal is to deliver a one-to-many experience for larger audiences.

The culmination of these tools includes LMS, webinar and webcasting and should all be considered based on who the audience is, what the content is and what the purpose and goals are for your content distribution. These tools can be used to educate, communicate and assess and have significant alternatives to what we were able to achieve and measure with in-person events. We should now be thinking about virtual-first event and engagement strategies rather than focusing on replicating the live experience.

### Virtual and Augmented Reality

With virtual and augmented reality (VR & AR) we are able to deliver embodied cognition to the consumer, giving them the sentiment that they are physically involved and interacting within an environment. VR & AR has grown in utilization to create efficiencies across a multitude of industries. Specifically for events, VR & AR are being used to bring people around a common "dinner table". Examples could be for product releases, showing a movie, displaying 3D objects for a variety of purposes, etc. These immersive events can be networked for real time interactions or stand alone, "on-demand" experiences. VR & AR is also commonly used for collaborative meetings to deliver deeper and more meaningful connections and communications. During virtual meetings, attendees have the sensation of being in a room where you can see everyone's "bodies" and "faces" and feel as though they are in the room with others and can even hear them from varied distances and positioning in the virtual room. Features are constantly being innovated to enhance the virtual experience such as being able to import 3D objects and files, creating "face masks" of the attendee to overlay on the avatar, enabling avatar mouth to voice matching movement, being able to draw objects in a 3D capacity and shift individual perspectives of viewing those objects and much more that will continue to develop in the near future. Much like the trends with enterprise and the military, the events industry is also beginning to explore the use of VR & AR to conduct training both for their event

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producers as well as for delivering training content for attendees. There are a lot of studies and statistics that show that learning in immersive environments are very impactful and the next best thing to being there in person.

## Featured Guests

Our featured industry guests joined us for the second half of the conversation to go into more detail about what their organizations are doing to help the community in the effort to "Pivot Fast".

Amy Scarfone is the Principal Design Manager for Microsoft's new SharePoint "Spaces", a web-based tool for authoring and consuming mixed reality experiences both on traditional browsers or with a head-mounted display. Spaces provides an easy way for anyone to federate 2- and 3D content and tell meaningful stories. Currently, SharePoint's education and enterprise customers are using spaces to design and share experiences for scenarios like virtual galleries, tours, and training. Microsoft is broadly focused on optimizing their sharing and communication tools.

Joanna Popper, the Global Head of VR of Location Based Entertainment at HP, discussed many initiatives the company is focused on to grow the XR industry. She teased a new headset being produced in partnership with HP, Valve and Microsoft, introduced HP Z Central to remote into workspaces and HP's Refresh Software that helps make older computers remote-education ready. We also loved hearing that HP is utilizing their resources to produce 3D printed Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for our hospitals and healthcare workers.

Ron Martin, Creative and Technical Developer at Unity, announced the recent availability of free coding courses on their Unity Learn platform to fast track education for creating immersive technology experiences. Unity is also launching Create with Code Live geared for educators and aspiring developers.

Vinay Narayan mentioned HTC Vive's new event platform, "VIVE Events", virtual meeting service that will be both budget and climate-friendly, and will allow users with and without VR headsets to participate.

## Your Questions, Answered!

During this live discussion, many of the participants asked some great questions. We captured your questions and have compiled the best responses from our speakers.

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**How are you going from creation in Zoom to broadcasting on Youtube and Facebook? What tools are you using to go from Zoom to Youtube and Facebook live?**

> The platform we are using is a custom syndication solution we developed to allow us to distribute Zoom to as many live streaming platforms as we want. We are also using a dedicated enterprise encoder that we have customized. This encoder allows us to take several feeds of both audio and video and route them anyway we need. It is not a solution you can buy off the shelf. It's built specifically for this capability.

**How do you integrate live VR and AR in a one to many platform? (livestream/Youtube/GotToMeeting/adobe connect)**

> You can push VR through one-to-many platforms by doing a screen share. AR is a lot more difficult. That being said there are platforms that allow the distribution of VR and AR content over the web. These platforms are also device ubiquitous, which means the viewer can use their phone, desktop or head-mounted display to view the same content. The use case for the VR and AR content will dictate what platform and distribution method makes the most amount of sense.

**How do you view the future of colleges and universities with what's going on with covid-19 in regards to how immersive tech can help?**

> Colleges and universities are already creating more virtual and immersive platforms to teach students both on campus and remote. But what covid-19 will do is only expedite this adoption and capability for higher education. There is now unfortunately a clear use case as to why these technologies are important.

> The challenge is for many people in higher education who are not familiar with virtual and immersive content is their perception of the technology. Many people have a misconception of what immersive does. They haven't viewed it as a way to communicate a lot of information with higher levels of comprehension to remote students. But that is changing due to the lens we're now forced to look through due to this scenario we're living in.

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**What is the best platform to have interactive panels for a few hundred people that can be recorded for later on demand use?**

There is no one size fits all platform for this question.  This all depends on:
- The environment you're rolling this out in (open vs. closed)
- Security required
- The end users participate
- The level of interactivity required
- The type and amount of data required to collect and measure
- The requirements for integration into other platforms such as CRM or Marketing platforms
- The quality requirements of audio and video

The best way to figure out what will work for you is to first work with your colleagues and stakeholders as far as what is important to you.  Define what success looks like. And once you know what that is, then start to look at the platforms that are available. See how many of the requirements they fulfill.

You might find that an off the shelf solution works for your needs.  Or you might find out that you need to perhaps take off the shelf product and add some customization to it to work for your needs.  The good news is that most of these platforms allow you to demo them for free.  In the case of what we use for our platform we took Zoom, YouTube Live, Facebook Live and then had to add some customization to it to meet our needs,

**What VR applications are you using for your meetings/hangouts?**

We have been using several platforms.  We're actually big fans of rumii.  It has been a great collaboration platform for our needs.  However, there are so many platforms out there.  If you simply search for "VR Collaboration" you will quickly see all of the options out there.

**Does Vive Sync require avatars? Is there a way to use AR or MR to communicate with actual people?**

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Vive Sync does require avatars but they are easy to create from your mobile device and the guide walks you through each step. Perfect for anyone who has never created or even heard of an avatar. More info below:

https://service.viveport.com/hc/en-us/sections/360001526471-Sync-XR-FAQ

For MR and AR capabilities, it's not currently there but there's many features in the works.  Forum.vive.com is a great place to share your feedback, ideas and engage with us and other XR community members.

You can find out more about Vive Sync from our recent virtual developer talks here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IA90a6ymLlc

**What is the future of Microsoft mixed reality? Will it be open for developers to build virtual worlds integrating their own apps and developments?**

Microsoft Mixed Reality is the umbrella term that represents the broad spectrum of the company's software, hardware, and cloud offerings in the VR/AR space. Each platform has its own affordances.

I can speak to SharePoint spaces and our roadmap. We are built on the SharePoint platform, which allows developers to build extensible "web parts" to integrate third-party apps. While spaces doesn't support third-party web parts right now, it's absolutely something we'll support in the future.

**Are there any security implications around access to content?**

Of course.  What we often tell people is your security is only as good as the ability to trust your end users.  In other words, there are a lot of tools and security integrations you can do with your content.  But as long as there is a screen someone can look at and audio they can hear, nothing is preventing them from recording it with screen software or their mobile phone.  That is why YouTube gets flooded with mobile phone videos around conferences like SXSW, CES or Comic-Con.  You can put as many barriers to entry as you want, but you need to be mindful of this reality.

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**How do we produce virtual events when all the performers and attendees are usually live?**

When thinking about virtual events you need to shift your way of thinking about the event itself. What we do in live events does not equate to what we do in virtual events. Most people think that because live events are "live" then virtual events also needs to be "live". But that just isn't true. The truth is doing everything live is more costly in a virtual environment and just not always practical depending on your budget and resources. But you can record content ahead of time and then present it as simulated live or on demand.

Generally, the next question we get is, "How do you create interaction amongst the attendees and speakers?" If you really think about it, where does most of the interaction happen at a live event? Generally speaking, you interact with attendees during meals, receptions and coffee breaks. Not during a session. Also, while there is Q&A with speakers towards the end of a session, people will also exchange information with the speaker and follow up after the conference. Case in point I'm responding to questions after we have done the webinar. So unless you absolutely need immediate interaction, there are still ways to facilitate conversations online around the content.

However, there is one truth about both live and virtual events. Content is everything! If the content isn't engaging, if the speaker isn't great or if the quality is bad, that is what turns off attendees both on site or virtually. This is where you need to start in both types of events. That is the golden rule of engaging an audience no matter what. And I can give a perfect example of this.

One of the most sought-after conferences in the world with one of the highest priced tickets gives all of its content away for free. This online video content is on demand with no interactive capabilities.

https://www.ted.com/talks?sort=popular

Here are some quick facts about TED:

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- It's estimated that TED talks on YouTube get 3 - 4 million views a day (Over 1.2 billion a year)
- TED Global tickets start at $5,000 and can go as high as $250,000 for a 5-year commitment to attend
- TED-ED has over 10 million subscribers and over 1.5 billion views as of September 2019
- You have to apply or be nominated just to go, which can take over a year before you get accepted

The point is not to make your conference like TED.  The point is to focus on your speakers and content first.  No amount of features or tools can compensate for bad content.