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AGENTS OF HYBRID

FIVE LESSONS LEARNED FROM HOSTING A HYBRID EVENT

There's a monumental shift happening in communication as digital and "real life" experiences become more and more intertwined.

Hailing a cab. Buying groceries. Talking to a doctor. An important meeting with your boss. A few years ago, all of these would have been exclusively "in person" situations. Now they can easily be done virtually, or through a blend of virtual technology and human interaction.

So many of our communal experiences are going hybrid via a mixture of online connection and face-to-face interaction, including events. Binary distinctions that attempt to fully separate "live" and "in person" experiences aren't just old thinking, they're at odds with what today's audiences expect. Hosting an impactful hybrid event requires a delicate balance of strategy, technology, and production. But once you achieve the right equilibrium, the results can be amazing.

The following are five key lessons we've learned hosting events that merged live broadcast with online technology—mixing in person and at home attendees through consistent content, mutual engagement, and personal interaction. These are the guideposts that have helped us create experiences that resonate with participants all over the world. We're still learning all the rules, but we're very excited with the initial results. We hope they help you the way they've helped us.

—THE CRAMER HYBRID EXPERIENCE TEAM

Hybrid Is A Spectrum

"HYBRID" IS A BROAD TERM, COVERING ANY EXPERIENCE THAT MIXES IDEAS, MODELS, AND TECHNOLOGY.

There's no set rules or expectations on what hybrid looks like—at least not yet—but some examples of how to distribute content to both audiences include:

- Hosting a live and virtual event concurrently, with similar but unique experiences for both audiences. (For ideas on models to do this check out the article: "4 Ways to Produce a Hybrid Event.")

- A delayed experience where content is offered live first, and then on-demand.

- A broadcast experience where a small audience attends a live production in person that is broadcast to a much larger at home audience.

- Remote viewing pods, where smaller audiences come together in different locations for in person viewing, breakouts and networking, while presenters and speakers are broadcast in from a centralized location.

Every hybrid option has its own benefits and challenges. Picking the best fit for you will depend largely on your attendees' needs and expectations.

To start the hybrid decision making process, consider a whiteboarding exercise detailing your target audience personas and what matters to them. Narrowing in on your target audiences' most immediate needs can help determine the right hybrid model for your event.

LET'S BE CLEAR: PRODUCTION MATTERS IN EVERY EVENT.

But this is especially true when communicating to a large virtual audience because they're much more likely to be distracted or disengaged than an in-person crowd.

Keeping their attention requires pristine audio and visual feeds, interesting staging and camera angles, immersive and integrative technology, top-notch programming, and more.

There's a time and a place for single shot, back-of-the-room webcasts that beam your GS (general session) content to an at home audience. Your hybrid event isn't one of them.

Beyond the GS, taking extra care to monitor the production value of every session in your agenda makes a big difference. We learned this first-hand during the hybrid breakout sessions we hosted during Agents of Hybrid. Some of the breakouts we staged worked well in person, but lacked the proper camera angles and a balance of speaker to screen content to engage digital viewers, while sessions like "**How to improve audience engagement**" breakout offered more engaging and seamless virtual experience for the online audience and produced better metrics.

If you're asking an audience to invest its time in your programming, you need to invest in top notch production that will hold their attention and keep them engaged throughout your show.   It's only fair.

LESSON 2

Production REALLY Matters In Hybrid

Ultimately, there are a lot of moving parts during a hybrid event. To ensure that nothing falls through the cracks, it's a great idea to have staff focused on specific aspects of the show. **Some of the jobs can straddle the digital and in-person divide, while others should be more siloed.** *For example, we've found that content teams can produce and monitor the program material for both audiences, while the production team works best when they're more focused on individual assignments. (Our default rule is to try and have one producer assigned to the virtual experience to manage technical issues in real-time, while a second producer runs the in person show.)*
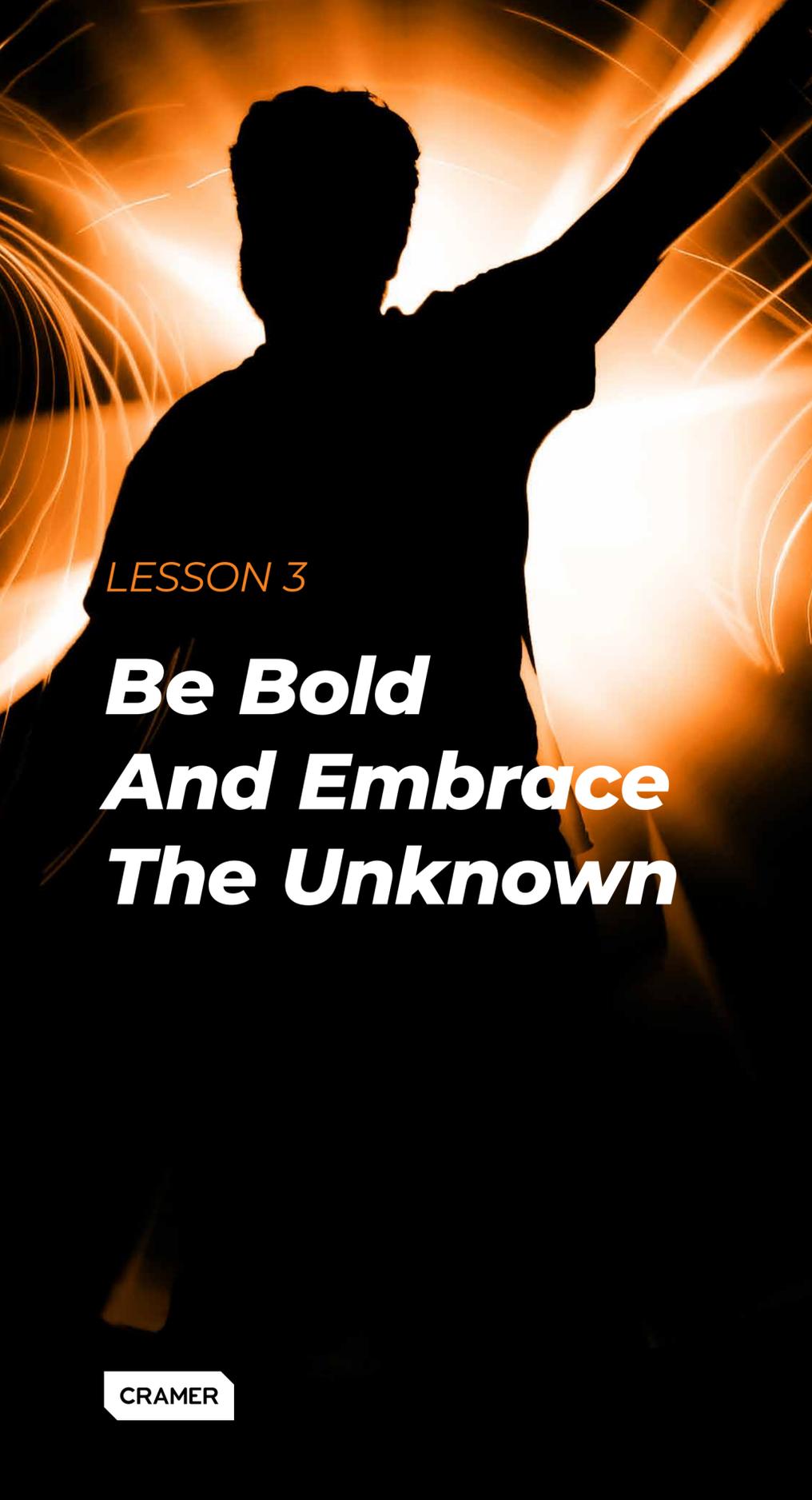
LESSON 3

Be Bold And Embrace The Unknown

AUDIENCE EXPECTATIONS FOR HYBRID EVENTS ARE STILL IN THEIR INFANCY. USE THAT AMBIGUITY TO YOUR ADVANTAGE!

If there was ever such a thing as the "perfect time" to step outside your comfort zone and try new things to surprise and delight various audiences, this is it.

Before you jump into your execution plan, question your assumptions of what is possible and what the event has to look like. Thoughtful and creative event planning can pay big dividends right now.

That's the key learning in this innovation class taught by Duncan Wardle, Former Head of Innovation and Creativity at The Walt Disney Company. To start, Duncan recommends you write out a list of your assumptions and rules for the event and then focus on one main challenger to those rules. For example, if you have a large virtual audience, the main rule is they won't be at the event venue, which means your main challenge is to figure out how you can give the virtual attendees more of a presence in the event.

A few thought starters on creative solutions to common challenges

- Experiment with technologies outside your industry that may have value in the virtual space. (AR and VR technology have come a long way in the past few years.)

- If you find technology that you're interested in, look for startups in the field to partner with. (There are many who are willing to offer technology or services at a discounted rate to promote or test their products.)

- If your in person audience is small, try experimenting with nontraditional venue spaces. It can create a more immersive and interesting experience for attendees, offer different broadcast possibilities, and potentially reduce venue costs.

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Audiences have no preconceived notion of what your events are supposed to be in a hybrid format. This is the disruption industries dream of—a blank slate where old standards don't apply, and innovation can flourish. Take advantage of it while it lasts.

NOTHING CAN MATCH THE ENERGY OF A LIVE SHOW AND THAT EXCITEMENT IS PALPABLE FOR EVERYONE—YOUR PERFORMERS AND SPEAKERS, THE IN-PERSON AUDIENCE, AND THOSE WATCHING REMOTELY.

In the past you may have been hesitant to embrace a real-time virtual show because it comes with so many variables. But with the right equipment, production team, engineering, and crew, it's no more difficult than your typical live in-person show, and we believe the rewards far outweigh the risk.

But to ensure the show runs smoothly you need to live by an old cliché. Never has "practice makes perfect" been more applicable than in the hybrid world.

A few preparation points to consider:

Make sure the talent has virtual speaker training.

Even if they're old pros at talking to live crowds, there are subtle differences in talking to a camera without an audience, or when connecting to a smaller audience than they're used to.

Do multiple tech checks on the platform.

No matter how well you think you know a platform, you need to do thorough tech checks at least a week before the live show. Run them with all presenters (both in-person and remote) and run them separately with the crews operating behind the scenes. Then, a day or two before the show, do a final dry rehearsal on the platform in real-time.

LESSON 4

Trust Live It's More Solid Than You Think

There is an irreplaceable authenticity that comes with streaming content live. **Practicing and pressure testing your platform are imperatives to keep things running well, but they can't guarantee perfection.** *At some point a speaker may stumble on their words. At least one remote participant will probably forget to unmute themselves before talking. Someone's live feed could get glitchy. And that's ok. These little mishaps bring a human and relatable aspect to your event. To soften the disruption, have your Emcee remind viewers throughout the show that they're watching this live and in real-time. It will make your audience more forgiving of little glitches and make them feel more connected to the show.*

There's no denying that hybrid events can be complicated. In many instances you are hosting two individual events simultaneously, which can mean twice the planning, and potentially, twice the investment.

Acknowledge The Complexity

To decide if hybrid is right for you, you must take the time to thoughtfully weigh its benefits against your available resources. Talk to internal and external stakeholders. Communicate with your traditional sponsors and explore if the move to hybrid could open you up to new partnerships. Poll your target audiences in email and social media to get a better understanding of their wants and expectations when it comes to events, especially after the events of the past 18 months.

Navigating the complexity thoughtfully will set your team up for long-term success— with heavy emphasis on <u>long-term.</u>

Our industry is undergoing a transitional phase of rapid growth, but make no mistake, the blending on online and in person experiences isn't going anywhere. It will continue to evolve and gain popularity in the coming months and years. The learning and experimentation you do now could inform your planning for years to come, so spend all the time you need to do it right. Review old goals and decide if they still apply. Identify new success metrics. Monitor the events and communication industries to keep track of new trends or tricks that could help you achieve everything you want to. Don't be afraid to experiment with new ideas and technology, and don't be too hard on yourself if those experiments don't pan out the way you originally envisioned. (No one hits a homerun with every at bat, and if you're not trying new things you're never going to grow as an event professional.)
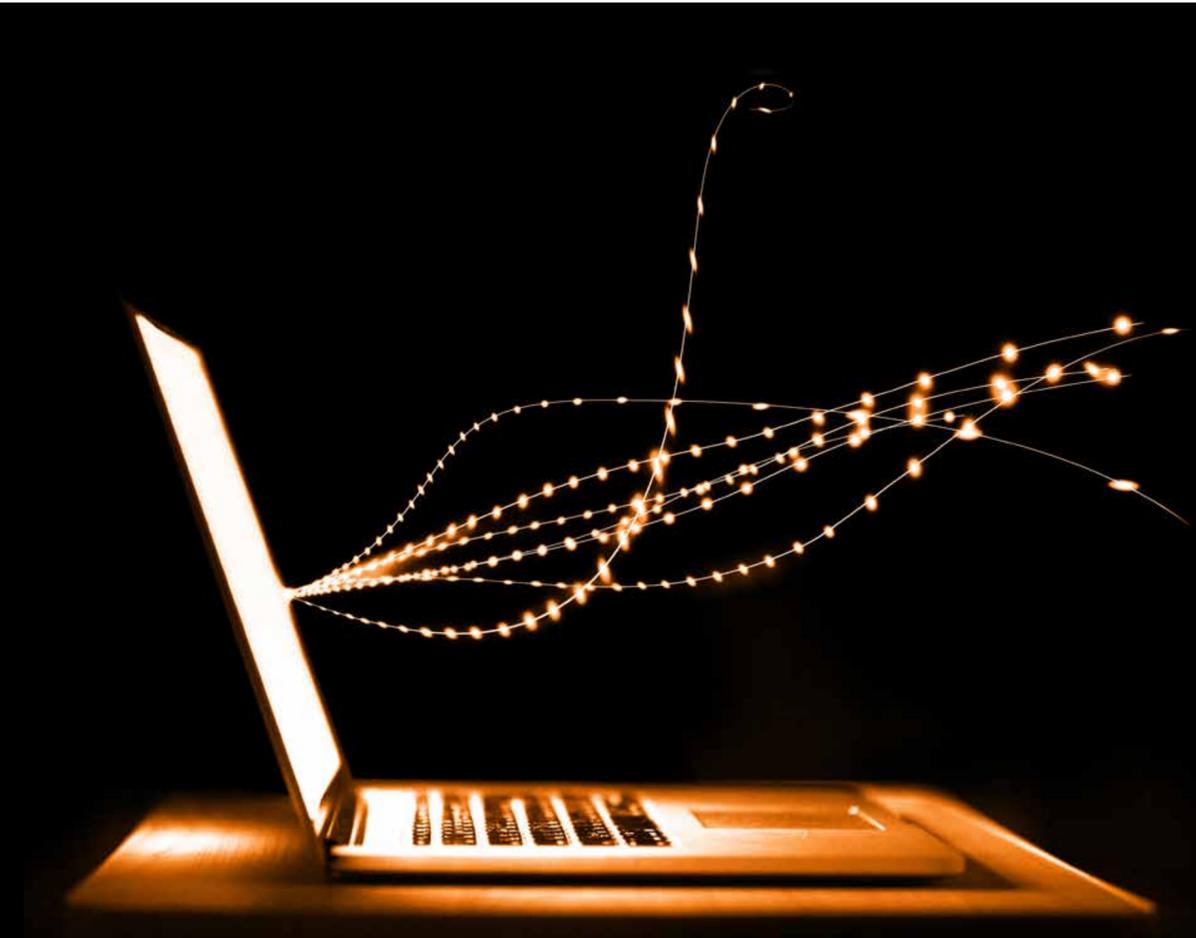
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It's an incredibly exciting time to work in the events industry, and the best possible time to embrace possibility and see where it takes you.

Relax, you've got this. And if needed, we're here to help.

Have a project in mind? Let's chat.

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