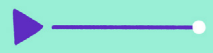# splash

A Guide to Agile Event Programs that Can Survive Anything

Why Agile Event Marketing Thrives through Change & Crisis

I n a world of fast-shifting business priorities and unpredictable change, companies must be able to pivot their strategies fast.

When an executive team decides to change product offerings or market focus, revising the positioning, messaging, and go-to-market plan is unavoidable. When a manufacturer is unable to fulfill a priority order, companies must identify a new way to meet customer demand. When a company's biggest customer leaves without notice, leaders must figure out how to fill that revenue gap with new sales.

And while life would be much easier if we had advance notice for the events that force change, it doesn't always work that way. Things out of our control happen every day. New competitor strategies, ever-evolving consumer trends, and even global health crises throw curveballs. That's why agility in business is so important.

Event marketing is no exception. Today, event programs must move quickly and be adaptable, all while ensuring a high-quality attendee experience and ultimately, event success. When unexpected forces of change arise, agile event programs are designed not only to survive, but to thrive.

In this guide, we'll explore what agile event marketing is, why it's necessary for every business, and how you can create and scale agile event marketing programs now.

What is Agile Event Marketing?

It's official: The new era of event marketing is here, which means the old way of doing event marketing is out. The most innovative businesses are building strategies for agile event marketing with a focus on scaling events that are fast, flexible, and hyper-effective at driving meaningful connections.

This begs the question: What does it mean to be agile in event marketing?

Agile event marketing is an approach where teams deliver a greater number of high-value events that are measurable, easily adaptable, and highly customizable. But here's the difference: These high-value events aren't your large, tentpole events that require huge investments far in advance.

Agile event programs are often small, local, in-person events with guests handpicked by sales or customer service teams. And although nothing truly replaces the power of an in-person event, agile event programs must be flexible enough to meet their attendees' needs. That's why some companies may decide a hybrid approach — blending in-person and virtual event options — works best for their agile event programs.
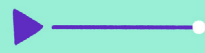
It might sound counterintuitive, but companies can actually grow their in-person events using a hybrid approach. For example, Dreamforce — one of Salesforce's annual conferences — has experienced increased in-person attendance rates year after year, even after adding live-streaming sessions. Coachella, the music and arts festival that hosts 250,000 people, sold out in three days before it started live-streaming in 2011. The following year, it sold out in three hours.

While live-streaming certainly isn't the only reason these events have grown, it shows that blending in-person and virtual event options can work. Giving your audience the option to attend virtually can help improve visibility and gain attendees who either haven't heard of your event before or just can't make it. A virtual event option can also help drive growth in other ways. It's a way for potential sponsors to evaluate partnerships with you and for prospects to see what they could expect as a customer.

This hybrid approach also lets event marketers pivot between local, in-person events and virtual-only events should the need arise. When you have the foundation and requirements built for both kinds of events, you can more easily and quickly adapt without having to start from scratch.

Regardless of what your agile event programs look like though, there's one more common denominator among all the successful programs we've seen. They've not only created agile event programs, but they've scaled those programs as well — without compromising brand integrity or losing valuable data.

The Benefits of Agile Event Marketing

Since agile event programs are more easily and quickly scaled than large events, this is where more and more companies are investing their event budgets. They are fast to market, execute, and measure, and easy to change when unpredictable things happen and business needs shift.

Because agile event programs are flexible, fast, and easily repeatable, marketing teams already running these kinds of events are able to host more events than ever before — without requiring more resources or time. Take Expedia Group for example.

Agile Event Programs Easily Scale

The marketing team at Expedia Group used to be all too familiar with how many hours go into perfecting event marketing programs. They were spending more than 100 hours on each event, experiencing brand integrity and data visibility issues, and missing out on events with huge ROI potential — all the things that really help scale agile event programs.
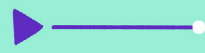
Expedia Group's marketing team did two important things to start reinventing their approach to agile event marketing. They invested in an event marketing platform that could support agile event programs, and they enabled their global partner teams to create their own local events (without sacrificing brand integrity or data management). Today, they knock agile event marketing out of the park by hosting thousands of small, local events around the world while saving 60 hours of work for each event.

But agile event programs aren't only about how many events you can run. They're also about better managing your event budget and resources, reducing your risk and footprint, and creating more meaningful connections in an intimate environment.

Agile Event Programs Boost ROI

Whether you host, sponsor, or activate at large, tentpole events, a few things remain consistent: You have to consider thousands of attendees, work or compete with dozens of other participants, and potentially spend millions of dollars. What's more, you must commit this inflexible spend — which is often a huge portion of your budget — months (or years) before the event even happens.

Smaller, local events require much less investment. Immediately, you're eliminating the dollars spent contracting a large venue and sending an entire team to the event location — not to mention the cost of time dedicated to planning a large event. And at the end of the day, when you spend less money on an event, you increase your event ROI.

Agile Event Programs Reduce Your Risk

Things outside our control happen all the time — event marketers know this better than anyone. From a budget cut to a natural disaster to a global pandemic, extenuating circumstances force event marketers to think quickly and master back-up plans. Small, local events are much lower risk than large events, which is another reason why they are growing in popularity.

Imagine you had spent more than a year planning your company's annual conference. With a heavy time investment from nearly every department — development, design, marketing, sales, and more — you were finally feeling that things were coming together. More than 5,000 guests had registered, 100 sponsors had committed, and 200 staff members had finalized their travel arrangements. Now, it's four weeks before the event, and a virus has begun spreading globally, causing a pandemic. You make the difficult decision to cancel your event. Now what?

But imagine you were planning a handful of small, local events during that time instead. You may still decide to cancel the event, but much less travel, contractual agreements, and budget are on the line. And if you decide to move forward because it's such a small, controlled group of people, the same goes: Even if you see a slight dip in attendance, the consequences to your budget and ROI won't be as significant.

Agile Event Programs Support Green Efforts

Sustainability becomes more relevant each year, which means companies are investing in sustainability programs more than ever before. "Going green" isn't just a temporary campaign anymore — it's a permanent movement that's expected by your company's customers, prospects, employees, and stakeholders.

Today, the smartest business leaders aren't just looking at sustainability from a corporate level. They are also integrating these practices into departmental efforts, and we've seen this manifest in event marketing through a rise in sustainable events.

Agile event programs help companies minimize their carbon footprint by reducing production and shipping needs, staff and attendee travel, and even the single-use plastics used at most events. And since agile event programs are often small, local events, you can work with responsible vendors (like caterers that offer locally produced food and drinks).

Agile Event Programs Create Stronger Connections

One of the top reasons people attend events is to make connections with others who have similar jobs or interests. This poses a problem for attendees at large events, where it can be difficult to find those like-minded people (and more so for those who aren't comfortable in large crowds).

Meaningful connections are more easily created at small, local events. There's an enhanced comfort level that promotes engagement and conversations that ultimately bring people closer and build community.

If that's not enough: Smaller, more intimate groups of people also mean event marketers can offer more curated touchpoints and content. This leads to not only stronger interactions among attendees, but also higher ROI. When event marketers provide a more customized experience for attendees, they are more inclined to move through your sales funnel and become a customer.

So, should you invest in more of these local, agile event marketing programs? If your answer is yes to at least a couple of the following statements, we recommend moving forward.

1. In-person events are key to my pipeline development plan and winning customers.
2. I have at least 100 prospects or customers concentrated in at least five cities.
3. I believe my customers or prospects would find value in having a drink, meal, or conversation with like-minded people in their local area.
4. I may not have the budget to host large, tentpole events, but I can afford a meal and cocktails for 12-30 prospects or customers a couple of times a month.
5. I am resource-constrained. My web designer, marketing operations manager, and others don't have the bandwidth to help me launch events as fast as needed.
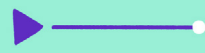
Building Agile Event Programs that Scale

At this point, you know the importance of agile event programs and have decided there's a place for them in your event strategy. There are a few steps you can take to create agile event programs — and ensure they scale.

Determine what event success means for you. Like every other decision you make for your event marketing strategy, you need to first define what event success means for your agile event programs. Does this mean enhanced brand awareness, increased sales pipeline, or improved customer loyalty?

The goals you have for your agile event programs will directly impact the types of events you choose to run, who you invite, and the content you present. Your goals will also help inform whether you should host in-person events, virtual events, or a hybrid of both.

Identify an event marketing platform that supports agile event marketing. Smart agile event programs are only as smart as the technology supporting them. Even when events run flawlessly with no pivots required, event marketers must still adjust their programs based on different event goals, formats, and audiences. This means you need a platform that will keep your event design on-brand, your data accurate, and your communications consistent, whether your events are in-person, online, or a hybrid. An event marketing platform that supports agile event programs can be the single differentiator between good events and extraordinarily successful events.

Keep your brand top-of-mind. After all of this, we know what you're thinking: *With all these local events, how will I ever keep up with event design assets?* When you are hosting more events, more people get involved and things can slip through the cracks, so it's no surprise this is one of event marketers' most common concerns.

But it is more easily mitigated than you would expect. With an event marketing platform that scales, you can develop marketing-approved, branded event templates that anyone in your organization can use for their agile event programs. Which leads us to...

Engage other internal teams. Agile event programs are great opportunities to empower other teams within your organization to help run events. Small, local events and virtual events are much more manageable for non-marketers, like sales and customer service reps, to build and run with minimal help from marketing.

The key to doing this successfully is ensuring those teams have controlled access to the marketing-approved, branded event templates. This way, your brand is presented properly across your event page, registration form, emails, and more. And if your event marketing platform has a built-in approval workflow, it makes enabling your internal teams even easier and more streamlined.
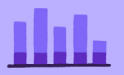
Make data integration a priority. Many event marketers focus on the more visible elements of an event, like promotion and production — but your event data strategy is equally important. Tapping into data about attendance, participation, and preferences can bring more customization and value to your guests, which can lead to higher-quality leads and understanding your event ROI. The best way to manage this event data: Integrate and share it across marketing technologies, so everyone has full visibility.

Continue innovating and improving your programs. Just like every other marketing or business activity, it's important to continue making your agile event programs better over time. Even though agile event marketing means marketers will always have to think on their feet and adjust as necessary, continued innovation means you'll remain ahead of the curve rather than reacting to every force of change thrown your way.

Discover an event marketing platform that scales to support your agile event programs, no matter what they look like.

Take the Splash product tour today.