

## Adding Virtual Events To Face-to-Face Meetings

ASI Corp. this year added virtual events to its meetings program as a complement to the six computer-product presentation and educational road shows it holds in North America annually. The Web-based meetings enabled the company to reach more customers and new audiences, garner new exhibitors and have greater access to return on investment data for exhibitors and attendees, while keeping marketing costs at bay.

The Fremont, Calif.-based computer component distributor held its first virtual event in May with 730 attendees, 330 more than the average of one of its physical events. With the success of the first virtual show, ASI plans to put on another one in October. "Even if you figure that we are doing six shows a year, which is typically the max that we can do, we are hitting six cities, and the maximum that we might reach is 1,800 to 2,000 cus-

tomers by traveling to those cities," said ASI vice president of marketing Kent Tibbils, who added that



**ASI's Kent Tibbils**

ASI has about 6,000 customers in the United States. "We needed to figure out how to bring the value of the vendors' products and services to our entire customer base."

One of the biggest additional areas of customer reach was Canada, where the live shows are held about once every three years. Many of ASI's Canadian customers were unable to attend past live events because of their distance from the company's branch offices in Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver.

ASI's virtual event, which uses a platform from San Francisco-based Webcasting supplier ON24, is half the cost of one of the company's physical shows, which are held in hotel or convention center space.

The use of new technology is not an effort to dis-

card the physical events.

“We weren’t really looking to replace what we are doing today with the live show because we still think there is a lot of value in the networking that takes place face-to-face between customer and vendor,” according to Tibbils. “The ability for them to look at and put their hands on it is still important to us and something we wanted to continue to do. It wasn’t, Let’s stop doing the road shows and change to virtual. It was, How can we combine these two things to bring greater value?”

As ASI rolled out its virtual event product to potential attendees and exhibitors, the company used several communication channels. Within e-mail blasts, Web site advertising, sales presentations and trade publication advertising, ASI included statistics on comparable virtual event metrics, such as the amount of time people spend attending and the average number of exhibitors.

Tibbils also tailored communications to customers from cities that already had attend-

ed live events earlier in the year to include information about new exhibitors and education sessions they missed.

The virtual platform also gives the marketing team better statistics and more meaningful attendee feedback, such as the products they purchased after learning about them at the show, the events they attended and ques-

in the market so that they can use these products to really grow their business. That education piece is something that we see as a differentiator for our company. Being able to figure out mechanisms that deliver that from a vendor side all the way to our customers is something that we are focused on.”

On top of the six live and two virtual events,

ASI also holds two two- to three-day internal strategic planning meetings annually with executives from the company’s 12 U.S. and 11 international branches.

While a marketing staff of three, including Tibbils, oversees the meetings and events program, six people coordinate the physical events.

In preparation for the virtual show, Tibbils’ team worked with exhibitors to get their information uploaded correctly, hosted training sessions on controlling their booth and attendee interaction and provided guidance on booth development and labeling in the online environment. “You don’t want it to be like a Web site,” he said. ○

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—Ken Tibbils, ASI vice president of marketing

tions that they asked.

ASI also can replicate or provide new online exhibitor training sessions from such technology companies as Cisco Systems, Hitachi, Intel and Microsoft. Six to nine companies host education sessions at each show.

“We are not just a distributor,” Tibbils said. “We give them insight into what is happening