



# THE BIG RETHINK

How to recalibrate your event and trade show strategies in this new era.

A roadmap to increasing brand relevancy with your key audiences.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

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## CAPTIVATING AT-HOME AUDIENCES TODAY



Using virtual experiences to create meaningful connections

## EVENT EXPERIENCES IN THE NEW ERA



Preparing for the safe and scaled return of in-person experiences

## HYBRID EXPERIENCES, REDEFINED



Transforming your face-to-face marketing strategy into an experience-driven portfolio

# THE BIG RETHINK

While the pandemic has required us to press “pause” on live events as we knew them, it hasn’t stopped the industry’s drive to find a way to carry on. From virtual events that get smarter and more effective with every execution, to innovative outdoor events that meet social distancing guidelines *and* achieve marketing objectives, event marketers right now are doing what they do best in difficult times: **rethinking**, **reinventing**, and **reimagining** what live experiences are and can be.

Indeed, we are in the era of the “Big Rethink” as event organizations use the roadblocks of the moment as an opportunity to reevaluate their portfolios, their budgets, their ways of being and doing, and even the strategic value of their events. Many have come to the conclusion that they’re not in the event business—they’re in the business of creating brand experiences that drive business forward.

# RETHINKING REINVENTING REIMAGINING



To help you navigate *your* “Big Rethink,” the experts at Derse—a leading face-to-face marketing agency—have come together to create this insights-packed guide to creating trade show and event strategies to meet your immediate needs, while also fine-tuning your overall portfolio and perspective for the future. Because, while the impact of the pandemic may be temporary for live events, attendee expectations have changed forever.

# CAPTIVATING AT-HOME AUDIENCES TODAY

To make meaningful connections, you have to get to ‘the why’

Although “Zoom Fatigue” is a recent phenomenon, earning and keeping the attention spans of audiences—whether online or in real life—has always been the holy grail of event marketers.



## THE FATIGUE IS REAL:

According to an article by Tech Republic, in a study of 4,600 employees, when asked "How engaged are you in most work meetings?"

27%



REPORTED THEY ARE  
"TRYING TO PAY ATTENTION,  
BUT OFTEN ZONING OUT."

Virtual events have provided many event organizations with additional reach to new audiences and greater accessibility to larger decision making teams; therefore, building momentum that will continue through 2021 and beyond.

But it's important to keep in mind that “reach isn't the same as impact,” says Pete Riddell, Executive Creative Director at Derse. The biggest challenges remain—and will remain—in 2021 as marketers struggle against screen fatigue and continue to search for content that resonates and engagement tactics that connect.

“There is an opportunity with each one of these challenges,” adds Riddell. “But it requires a different kind of mindset in how you craft that experience, how you craft that content, and how you optimize it for the audience you're trying to engage.”



The Event Marketer 2021 Experiential Marketing Forecast report reveals that virtual events are expected to receive the largest spending percentage, representing 41% of the 2021 budget.

One way to attack these challenges head on is to evolve your 2021 thinking (or, *rethinking*) from a reactionary approach (**doing something**) to a proactive approach (**doing something meaningful**). In the wake of the pandemic, event marketers rushed to do *something*—quickly transforming live events into virtual ones as industry events and conferences rapidly moved online. Now, says Riddell, “there's a realization that we still have a fundamental need to meaningfully and resonantly engage our audiences in light of the other demands on their time and attention.”

REACTIVE

**DOING SOMETHING**

PROACTIVE

**DOING SOMETHING MEANINGFUL**

Paramount to a strong and meaningful engagement strategy is an informed answer to the questions of “why” and “why now?”

- Why are *you* activating your own event, or (virtually) participating in an industry event in the first place?
- Why is an event (or a webinar or virtual experience) the right answer to the business need?
- And ... what do you have to share that your audience needs, and that your organization is uniquely equipped to deliver? “And it’s quite possible your audience may not even be aware of what they need from you,” says Riddell.
- And why now? With virtual industry conferences, the answer may not be the obvious one for companies that are used to exhibiting at in-person trade shows. “We’re noticing a trend within our client base of evaluating the engagement opportunity *during* an industry conference vs. activating their own virtual event *before* or *after* the industry conference, when they may be more likely to secure the attention of their customers,” says Riddell.

Once you answer “why?” and “why now?” ... that’s when the actual work begins.

***Ask yourself:***

What is the ideal interaction with our target audience(s)?

Where and how can we deliver maximum value to them? Or, as Riddell puts it, “How can you make your audiences choose you over Netflix?”

“Begin with the end in mind,” says Riddell.

“What are the top of mind needs of your audience? What are the rocks that are in their shoe? And what ‘magic gifts’ do you have to uniquely address their needs? Then identify the action(s) you wish to encourage or motivate as a result of the experience.”

With the audience needs and your desired outcomes defined, you have the executional guardrails with which to roadmap your experience and build a virtual activation based on what the audience needs to know, feel and do. You will also have the recipe for meaningful metrics.

## HOW CAN YOU MAKE YOUR AUDIENCES CHOOSE YOU OVER **NETFLIX?**

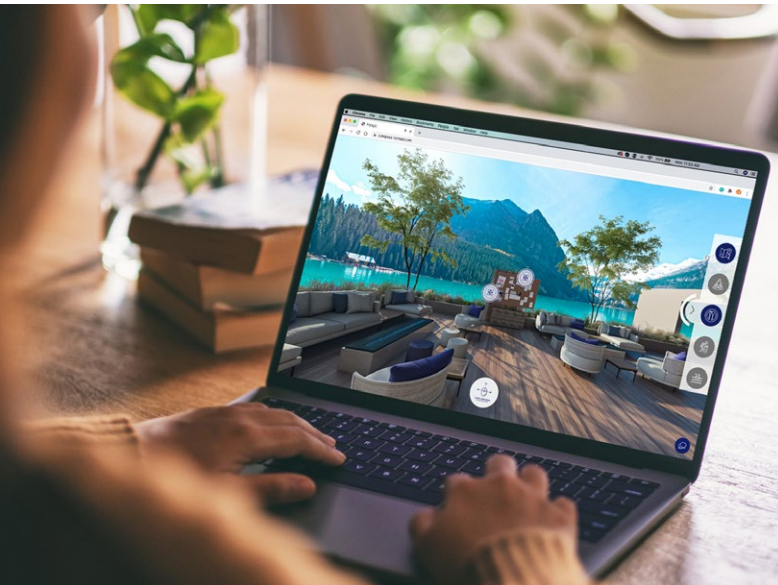


B2B event marketers say audience engagement is the largest challenge when it comes to virtual events. The next biggest challenge is **interaction**.

Source: [Markletic](#)



These are critical yet often overlooked insights Derse works closely with its clients to unearth as part of its engagement-mapping process. “Every one of our clients is hungry for the data that can be harvested from virtual events and activations,” says Riddell. “It all begins with helping our clients identify what constitutes a ‘win’ with regard to virtual engagement, and then establishing consistent benchmarks across your virtual event portfolio.”



### **25%** of people join virtual events for educational purposes.

The next biggest reason for joining virtual events is networking. Twenty-five percent of marketers consider the opportunities generated by virtual events as a success factor.

Source: [Markletic](#)

From a practical perspective, the Big Rethink is also requiring event teams to reassess how they're aligned with other groups within their organization and, in some cases, breaking down some of the silos that may have existed pre-pandemic. Many are quickly developing new skillsets and relationships with their digital marketing, IT, analytics, and sales leadership. Ultimately, one of the silver linings of the pandemic may be stronger collaborations between event departments and the rest of their company's ecosystem.

“At a micro level, we're really seeing a ‘wisdom of crowds’ moment with our collaborations with clients,” says Riddell. “There is no single entity or department, including us as a strategic partner, that can know absolutely everything there is to know about activating virtually. So, the richness of any solution is derived from the diversity of perspectives locking arms to attack it.”

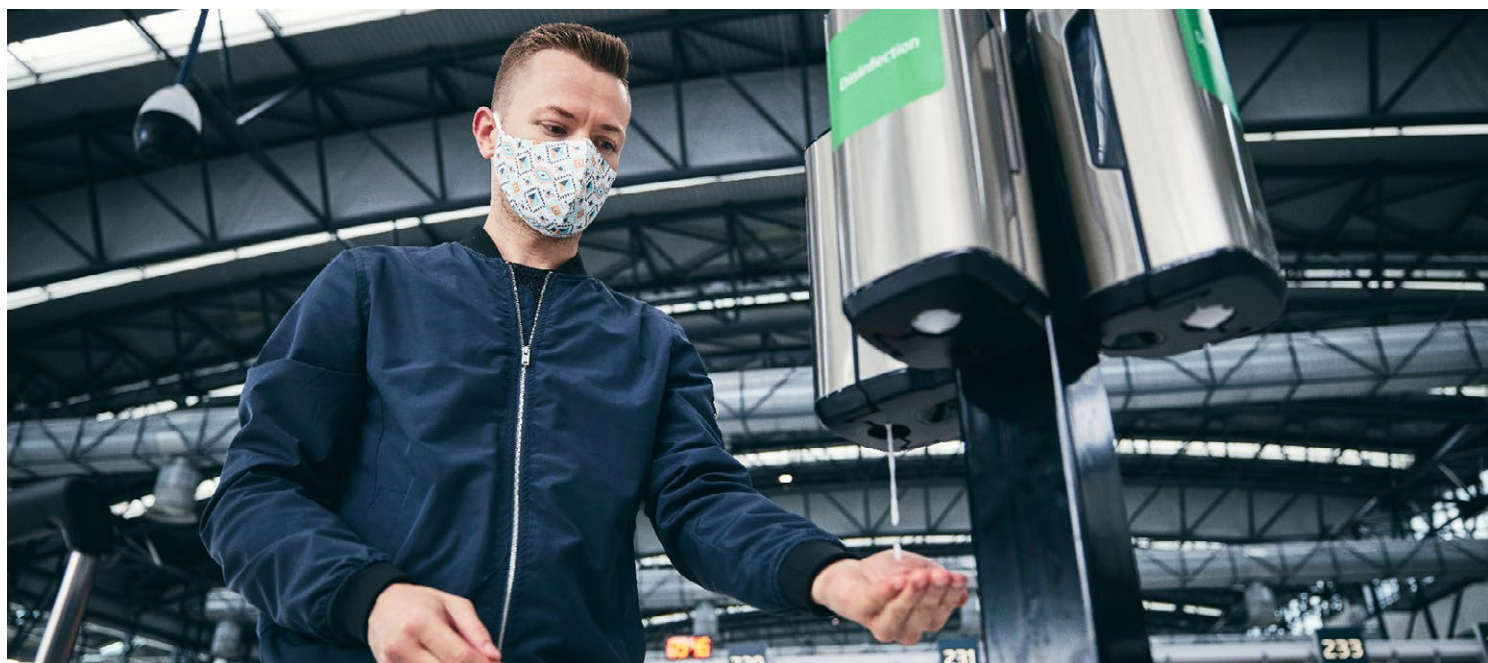


# EVENT EXPERIENCES IN THE NEW ERA

## Preparing for the safe return of in-person experiences

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Trade show and event marketers should approach the eventual live comeback of the industry through the perspective of the attendee's needs and comfort levels. Indeed, in 2021 and beyond, comfort—before content—may be king. “Start by asking yourself, what do I need to do to make sure my audience is comfortable engaging with us—engaging with our space, engaging with our people, engaging with our stories and our content?” says Riddell. That will be an evergreen lens to guide experiential marketers through the continuum of vaccine distribution and the responsible loosening of protocols that will govern large gatherings through 2021.





When viewed through the “comfort is king” lens, there may be opportunities for event and trade show marketers who fall between virtual and in-person versions of industry conferences.

“We’re encouraging our clients to meet their customers where they are, physically and emotionally,” says Riddell, meaning that, for industry or customer segments who may be slow to return to the travel inherent in national trade shows, activating regionally via pop-up or road show type experiences may be considerations for the event marketer’s playbook.

**WE’RE ENCOURAGING OUR  
CLIENTS TO MEET THEIR  
CUSTOMERS WHERE THEY  
ARE, **PHYSICALLY AND  
EMOTIONALLY****



How you prioritize your audiences will also influence how ‘best’ to activate your brand, whether at trade shows or regional micro-events. Are you primarily targeting your **existing customers**, or aiming to **reach new prospects**? That will influence whether your in-person approach is aimed more at **intimacy** or **attraction**, says Riddell.

If **customer intimacy**, it’s time to bring out the white gloves... and not just for hygienic reasons.

“There will be a tremendous opportunity to make your existing customers feel special by giving them prioritized access to your experience and demonstrating that you have gone out of your way on their behalf,” says Riddell.

“Desirability can be triggered by exclusivity. Preparing elevated, hosted experiences can make your customers feel privileged for the access you are giving them ... whether that’s access to executives, subject matter experts, special content, or even other customers.”

# 80%

of consumers are more likely to make a purchase from a brand that provides personalized experiences.

Source: [Epsilon](#)

If **attraction of new prospects** is the goal, then different on-site activation strategies and tactics will be called for – all of which will center on commanding attention from afar.

For attracting prospects at trade shows, Derse encourages its clients to think BIG, as in big gestures. “Even before the pandemic, we were achieving great results for clients leveraging LED as architecture,” says Riddell, which consists of using large LED walls to not only define spaces, but as dynamic canvases to dramatize clients’ stories and messaging. Couple that with methodologies such as interactive flooring, and you have an experience that not only rewards individual users, but audiences from afar... safely and impactfully.



After you consider who you are trying to engage, and how best to make them comfortable to engage ... Riddell's encouragement is simple.

## “Be extraordinary.”

### *Meaning?*

“Protocols are likely to influence the initial rules of audience engagement,” says Riddell. “Initially there will be guidelines on where, how, and how many attendees may engage with you and your in-person brand experience. That has the potential to yield experiences that feel more like transactions, rather than interactions. While that may be appropriate in some situations, we are encouraging our clients to still strive to deliver an extraordinary customer experience so your audiences remember more than your ‘reassurance protocols.’”

**55%** of Event Marketers surveyed said Health & Hygiene will be among their top five investment areas in 2021, second only to investments in Technology and Event Platforms.

Source: [Event Marketer](#)

He reminds that extraordinary simply means, ‘beyond the ordinary.’ And defining what extraordinary looks like for you and your audiences is where the fun begins.

“What do you want your audiences to remember from their experience, from their time with you, however long that may be?” says Riddell, who encourages brands to design for memorability.

“I call it the ‘to-go container.’ What do you want audiences to, *mentally and emotionally*, take away from their experience with you?”

It's not surprising then, that he uses another food analogy for how to accomplish that.

“So, there is actually a timeless—even pandemic-proof—recipe for creating memorable experiences,” says Riddell.

“Memorable experiences have peak moments, at the beginning, middle, and end. And, as in any recipe, the key is in the seasoning, meaning, how brands season those moments with what makes their company, culture, solutions, and people different and special.”

# HYBRID EXPERIENCES, REDEFINED

How to transform your face-to-face marketing strategy into an experience-driven portfolio that will thrive post-pandemic

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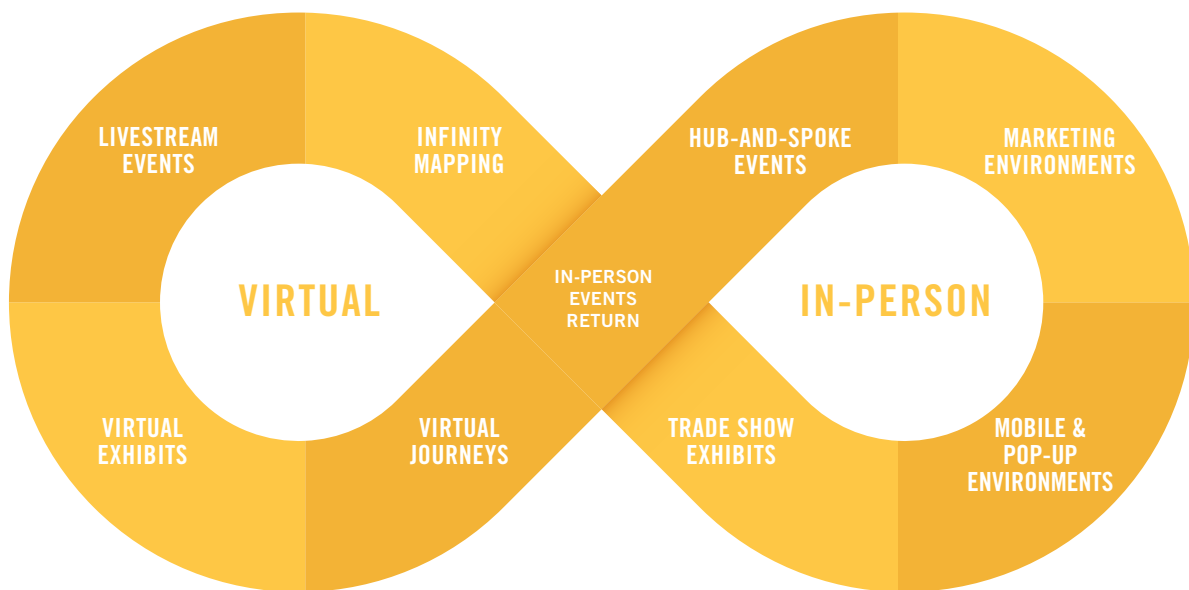
Captivating at-home audiences today while planning for the safe return of in-person experiences are links in a longer chain that culminates in how virtual and in-person experiences can be integrated into a hybrid strategy, which is the next frontier for event marketers. According to Event Marketer's 2021 Experiential Marketing Forecast report, 70% of brands plan to offer hybrid experiences in 2021. "Offering hybrid experiences that combine in-person and virtual elements is by far the primary new event model and approach planned for 2021, followed by providing participants with at-home experiences/kits, and running regional events," the study revealed.

# 70%

of brands plan to offer  
hybrid experiences in 2021

While the recipe for every brand will be different, Derse is encouraging its customers to think of virtual and in-person experiences not in silos, but in terms of an infinity loop—an ongoing dialogue with customers taking place across different moments and places—to deliver relevant connections that fuel the customer journey forward.

**The Derse Infinity Loop is a playbook of approaches they use with clients to roadmap how to capture at-home audiences, plan for the safe return of in-person events, and model a hybrid approach moving forward.** Derse works with each client on what types of activations to put into play to best optimize their audience engagement. Each client recipe is different.



**A lot of event marketers are talking about hybrid events as a mix of in-person and virtual, but the true hybrid mindset is more of an approach or a philosophy that should thread its way through your entire portfolio.** “There's going to be more of a customer experience-centric, playbook approach in 2021 that incorporates in-person, virtual, and online to stay as relevant as possible to the

audiences who you're looking to serve,” says Riddell. “And it's just going to consistently feed on itself.”

For example, don't think of your virtual activations as only for audiences not attending your in-person event. Similarly, don't think of your in-person activations as only for audiences who are not engaging with your virtual or online content.

## DERSE RECOMMENDS THE FOLLOWING MENU OPTIONS:

### Virtual as ‘apéritif or digestif’ for in-person experiences.

Consider how to leverage a virtual activation to appetize audiences **PRIOR TO** an in-person engagement. Examples could include a virtual teaser or tour of what they might experience on-site. And/or, consider your virtual presence as a destination to encourage audiences to return to **AFTER** they engage with you on-site (or to engage on-site attendees who you may have missed).

### Virtual ‘access’ to in-person experiences.

A key to a quality virtual experience is to minimize online audiences feeling like they are missing out by not physically attending an experience. To maximize reach, consider imbuing your onsite experience with broadcast capabilities to livestream any signature moments, announcements, presentations, or performances. If appropriate, consider offering a VIP-level virtual experience for prioritized audiences where you reserve exclusive access to subject matter experts, executives, or live demonstrations.





With this menu in mind, Derse recommends developing assets (physical and digital) with maximum utility in mind.

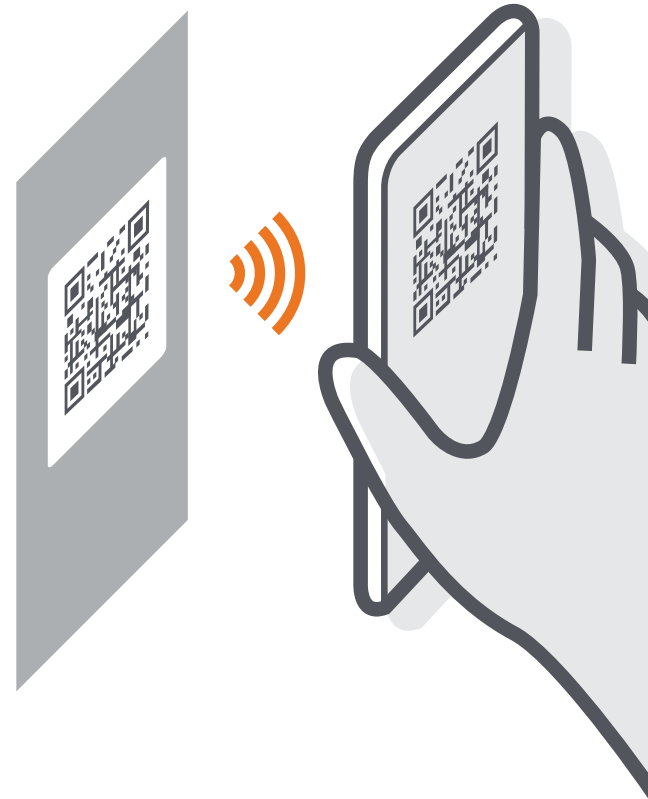
“We’ve created digital tools for clients that are not only serving as destinations for virtual events, but also as one-on-one sales tools our clients’ sales teams can use with customers. Not only that, but the digital content is developed so it can live on reps’ tablets when in-person sales calls return, and on interactive kiosks, when trade shows return.”



Similarly, multiple Derse clients are already using existing exhibit properties to stage and livestream virtual product demonstrations, which Riddell points out is a precursor to how live, in-person events can activate with a hybrid sensibility.

“Our philosophy is that hybrid will be good for both brands and customers as brands will be able to extend their reach to meet the needs of wider (virtual and in-person) audiences, allowing event marketers to maximize their investment in digital and physical assets.”

Moving forward, another way brands can meet audiences wherever they are is by investing in creating quality mobile-accessible web experiences that can be used to create impactful “microments” in a virtual experience, or to augment (pun regretted) an in-person event. From allowing audiences to use their mobile device as a remote control for safely engaging in the physical world... to serving as a platform for surprise and delight experiences (goodness knows people could use a few of those right now), mobile-accessible web experiences can help brands drive engagement by leveraging the one device audiences trust most—the one in their pocket.



Among the possibilities the Derse team is most excited about is creating augmented-reality ‘portals’ that can be accessed by simply scanning a QR-code with a smart device’s camera. “You can give your audiences access to immersive environments and worlds via a simple scan from their phone,” says Riddell.

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Any opportunity to **eliminate or remove friction** from experiences is one event marketers should take in 2021, Riddell says.

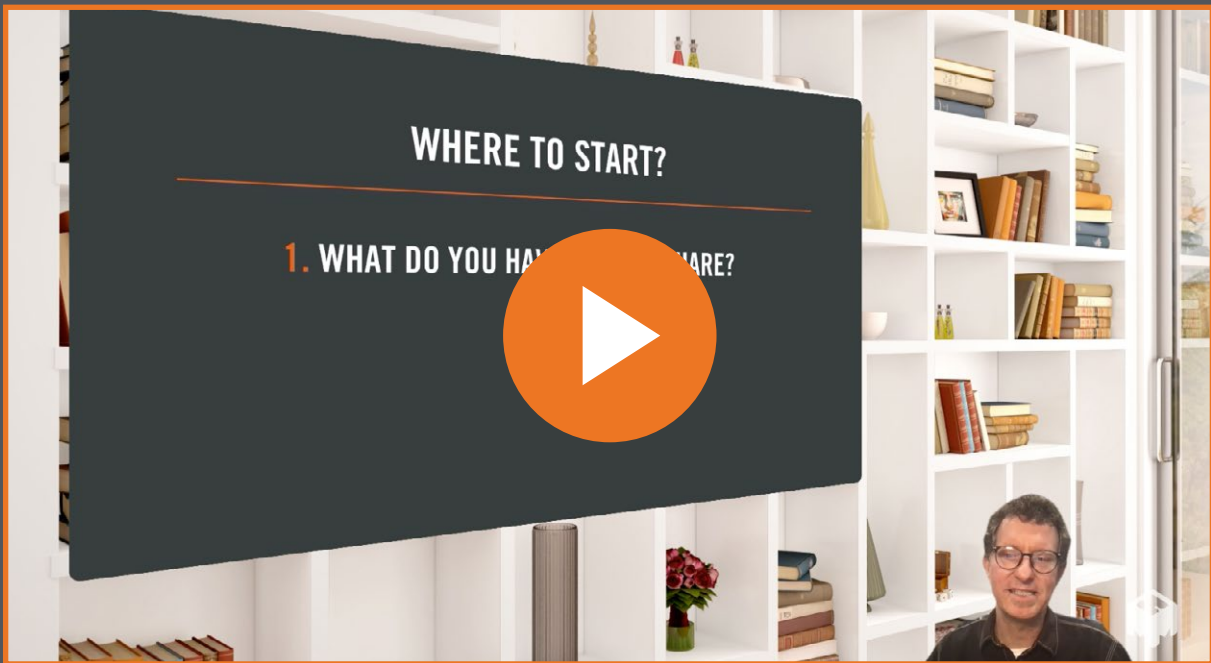
*“Moving forward we have a tremendous opportunity to activate hybrid strategies that ultimately deliver a more streamlined, satisfying, efficient, and integrated user experience.”*

Of course, all good rethinking processes also require a degree of flexibility, to move quickly into new areas and to take advantage of unique opportunities. In this constantly changing pandemic environment, event marketers will have to be nimble.

“Be mindful that the information that's available to you today, the insights and the expertise that you are drawing upon, are going to be radically different a month from now, two months from now,” says Riddell. “The constant refrain that we're saying is, ***‘The good news is, we're going to be wiser a week from now than we are right now.’***”

## NOW WHAT?

As you continue to rethink and recalibrate in this new era, it's no secret that hybrid is going to be a vital component in your engagement strategy. Watch our two minute video where Pete Riddell unpacks what a hybrid strategy means, key considerations, and what you should do to get started.



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## READY TO GET STARTED?

We are excited and ready to help you navigate your "Big Rethink."

[CONTACT DERSE](#)



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