6CONNEX

eBook

How to Evaluate and Choose Sales Kickoff Platform

HOW TO EVALUATE AND CHOOSE A VIRTUAL EVENT & ENVIRONMENT PLATFORM

With a half dozen virtual event and environment software platforms on the market, how do you know which platform is the right one to go with? In the absence of third-party virtual event platform reviews, this article will help you do your own homework and choose a provider wisely—considering more than just price and what's in their brochure.

Imagine choosing a hotel as a venue for hosting an on-site tradeshow or conference. You wouldn't think of selecting a hotel without a site visit to observe firsthand how easy it is for attendees to get to the hotel, the quality of the hotel infrastructure, the level of staffing dedicated to helping you and your guests, amenities, and more. The same—if not greater—attention to detail is required when selecting a virtual event platform provider.

There are around a half dozen virtual event and environment vendors on the market. The vast majority are new, small start-ups with very limited investment in technology and staff. Since the service is fully hosted by the vendors, provided as "software as a service" (SaaS), the following criteria will help you dig into the behind-the-scenes details that can make a big impact on functionality and user experience. It's easy to compare price, but you really want to make sure that the business is viable and reputable, the technology is reliable, flexible, and easy to use, and there is sufficient staff available to help you after the sale and ensure there are no technical issues when your event goes live.

We'll delve into how to investigate eight specific categories when choosing a virtual event platform:

1. Service
2. Device and Browser Compatibility
3. Innovation
4. Configurability and Branding
5. Security and Privacy
6. Performance, Scale, and Reliability
7. Reporting and Analytics
8. Webinar and Content Agnosticism

1. SERVICE

As with all service contracts, your relationship with a hosted vendor should be ongoing. You should expect much more than mere access to technological tools. You need a vendor who is fully engaged throughout the life of your relationship to help with defining your business problems, training, implementation, problem solving, and other tasks that are vital to the success of your virtual program. Avoid vendors that push "self-service" on you from the start. While it is important that the platform you chose allow you to manage it yourself, support throughout and after launch is critical to the success of any virtual event program.

IMPLEMENTATION Chose a vendor that will work with you to implement and onboard your program. Virtual event platforms are complex and feature rich; partnering with your vendor will not only save you time in setup but also ensure you're making best use of all the features the platform has to offer. Find out whether a vendor offers training, and if so, whether it's included in your package or available for an additional fee.

PROGRAM CONSULTING Most vendors have launched thousands of virtual events and have broad experience in what works and what does not work well. Choose a vendor that will objectively assess the program you're considering, align your business strategies and goals, and build a comprehensive roadmap to help take your virtual event to the next level. Again, find out whether this service is included with your virtual environment or event package and if not, what additional costs are involved.

CUSTOMIZATION Modern virtual event providers will elevate your brand and engage your audience with professionally designed templates or a 100% configurable virtual environment experience. They should provide in-house creative services teams that can design and develop visually attractive virtual designs that reflect your brand and image.

SUPPORT
- Self Support—Find out if the vendor offers extensive help documentation and an automated self-help engine that allows you to easily resolve issues. Because SaaS solutions evolve very quickly, it's important that all help documentation kept up to date with latest changes and bugs.
- Customer Support – Discover whether the vendor offers live support. If so, look into how and when you can access that support, the expected response and resolution times, and the systems for processing support requests. As with the other aspects of service, it's important to understand whether support is included or available at an additional cost.

2. DEVICE AND BROWSER COMPATIBILITY

HTML5 The 6Connex platform is built using HTML5. As a result, attendees will not have to rely on Adobe Flash Player to join your event. While Flash has played an important role in enhancing the functionality of the web, HTML5 is making the plugin obsolete. Many users experience problems with Flash on their browsers, and it's completely unavailable to mobile users. In fact, Adobe has announced that by the end of 2020, it will no longer support the plugin. Because our virtual environments are built using current coding best practices, your attendees will be able to join easily—without additional plugins and from any connected device they choose.

CROSS-PLATFORM COMPATIBILITY One of the touted benefits of virtual tradeshows is that they're fully functional in the diverse technology environments that might exist for your attendees and sponsors. Various traveling attendees might have a Microsoft XP with Firefox browser or a Mac with Chrome browser. You want a virtual tradeshow platform that is fully functional across operating systems and on all major web browsers.

To understand a vendor's compatibility with various devices and browsers, ask,
- Is the end-user experience 100% HTML5, or are there Flash-based elements?
- Will attendees need to download an app in order to attend a webcast on a mobile device?
- What specific browsers and devices are actively supported?

3. INNOVATION

INTEGRATIONS Avoid any vendor with limited integration capabilities as well as those who require expensive and time-consuming custom coding to achieve those connections. Ideally, you'll want a hosted solution that uses open, standards-based APIs to link to your on-site systems. This will make integrations simple, fast, and cost effective.

UPGRADES As discussed above, one of the main benefits of a hosted solution is that it gives you ongoing access to innovation and new features rather than having to integrate new versions of the software on premises. Make sure that your virtual tradeshow platform vendor regularly upgrades the product and that you'll have free access to those upgrades.

ROADMAP Find out what is on the vendor's roadmap. This will not only give you an idea of what is coming but also a sense of the vendor's level of commitment to innovation. Ask for the following information:

- What do their 3, 6, and 12-month roadmaps include?
- Do they allow custom feedback to determine new features, and is there charge associated with submitting this feedback?
- What are some of the key upgrades delivered in the last three months?

4. CONFIGURABILITY AND BRANDING

Modern virtual event platforms are highly configurable to meet specific program requirements. They offer the ability not only to add any type of virtual space but also to configure the name and image to navigate throughout the program. Permission-based entitlement is also necessary if you plan to run a program that will offer access to different rooms and spaces by user level. Any modern provider will offer the ability to enable or restrict access to rooms as well as pieces of content via email or domain.

Leading online event platforms allow you to brand the solution according your corporate guidelines and program look and feel. Good platforms will have a variety of templates that can be easily configured to reflect the look and feel of your brand, department, and solution. Non-IT employees should be able to easily make these configurations with point-and-click tools so content owners and booth administrators can mold the solution according to their branding and virtual conference requirements.

When considering a vendor, find out
- Whether fully configurable events are available
- What elements are fixed and non-configurable
- Whether access can be configured by room and content
- What standard event templates can be customized and branded at no additional cost
- What options exist to create a custom room template and the costs associated with those
- Whether they can share examples of events that relate to your industry or solution

5. SECURITY AND PRIVACY

Because you'll be dealing with personal information of attendees, you'll want to choose a virtual conference solution that has proper security in place and is able to comply with state, federal, and international security and privacy laws.

- Network and infrastructure security
- Application security
- Firewalls
- Intrusion detection
- On-site physical security
- 24×7 security monitoring
- Third-party certifications for security practices

Choose a vendor that

- Provides privacy policy with both domestic and international protection
- Will never share or sell your contact data
- Ensures your data cannot be retrieved by anyone other than authorized representatives of your company
- Gives you full access to your information, for viewing or transfer, at any time

6. PERFORMANCE, SCALE, AND RELIABILITY

Using a virtual conference vendor means relinquishing control over the service and environment. So, make sure you choose a vendor that has invested in technology and staff to ensure fast response and 99.9% up time with no delays in navigation, video streaming, or other functionality.

While platforms hosted on homegrown data centers worked well in 2015, modern platforms have moved to the cloud to offer better scale, reliability, and security. If your event is running 24/7/365, you want continuous monitoring rather than only having your event fully monitored during normal business hours in your provider's location and perhaps limited monitoring during their night shift.

Be sure to find out
- What cloud provider the platform uses
- If not cloud based,
    - Where the data centers located
    - Whether dedicated 24/7 support is available
    - Whether international attendees will have access to fast local servers or be accessing a server thousands of miles away
- How many attendees the service can scale to support without having to schedule more capacity
- Whether there a cost to add more live attendees
- Whether there is a limit or cost to the amount or size of content that can be hosted on the platform
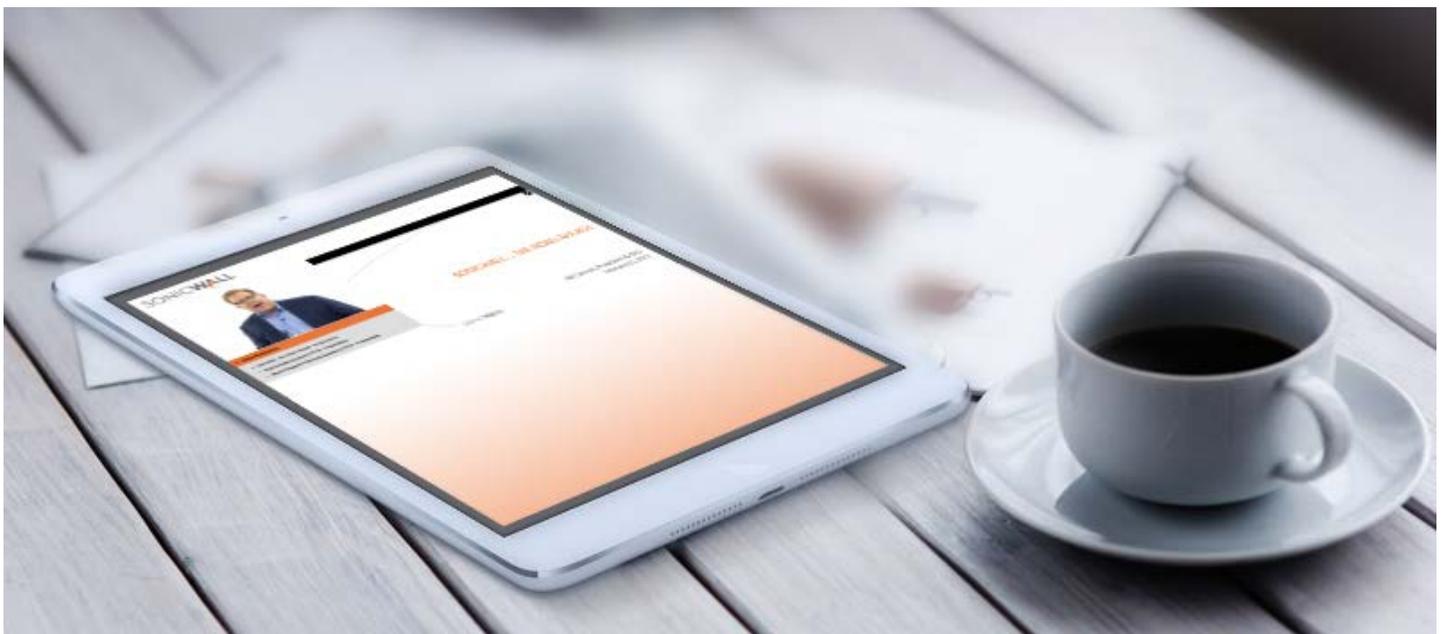
7. REPORTING AND ANALYTICS

To measure the ROI of your program, it's important not to overlook reporting and analytics when choosing a provider. You'll want to capture key demographics at registration and develop a picture of your audience over time. The right analytics can give you insight into user behavior and content preferences and help you to capture quality leads.

Modern reporting and analytics provide real-time data with real-time access via a secure program dashboard. They will generate program reports in 5–10 seconds, not 5–10 minutes. They will provide high-level show analysis in real time as well as detailed user behavior data.

Choose the vendor that provides
- A login to a real-time dashboard for any and all reports
- The ability to create custom reports by program
- Documentation and definitions of what they track and how they track it

8. WEBINAR AND WEBCAST AGNOSTIC

When you run an online event, your webinars and content will be among the main reasons people will show up. It's important to ensure the vendor you chose does not force you to use their webcast platform.

You'll want a vendor that can integrate with any webinar provider because this will not only ensure that you are using the right platform for your program, but it can also save you a lot of money. A typical webinar won't cut it if you want to have collaborative video breakouts. Any modern platform should integrate with solutions like Zoom and BlueJeans. Use a webcast for your keynote presentations and a more collaborative online presentation tool for your breakouts. If you already have access to a webinar, webcast, or collaboration platform, choose a vendor that allows you to integrate with those platforms.

Choose a vendor that provides
- Options for different types of online presentations
- Low- or no-cost options to integrate with platforms you already have access to

Organizations face a daunting task when selecting a platform provider they can trust with their virtual program. By looking beyond a product feature and price comparison and considering the factors discussed above, you'll be much better equipped to make an informed choice that serves all of your virtual event and environment needs.
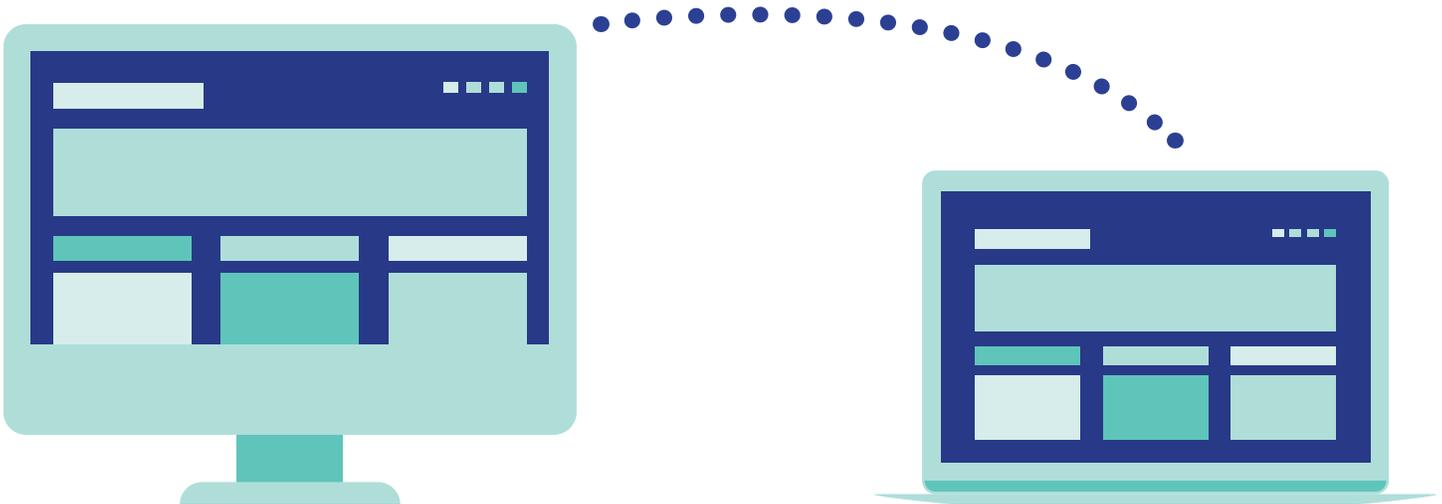
For more information on the 6Connex Virtual Event & Environment software platform, go to www.6connex.com.