

MARKETING

As wait for in-person events continues, how have marketers adapted?

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The 92nd Academy Awards were held in February 2020. Image credit: Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

By SARAH RAMIREZ

Nearly a year after COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic, in-person events have not returned in earnest continuing to pose challenges for luxury marketers who relied on these opportunities to engage with affluent consumers.

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While vaccination efforts have begun, with varying degrees of success, many governments still have lockdowns and other restrictions in place as more contagious virus variants take hold. As a result, there has been another wave of postponements and cancellations impacting events scheduled in the coming months.

"For the first time in a long time, brands and agencies can't rely on their playbooks," said Leo Nguyen, strategist at **Stink Studios**, New York. "Business is not as usual, and we can't approach it as if it was.

"Luxury brands, and really all brands alike, can no longer rely on cultural moments and physical experiences to cultivate an emotional connection with their audiences," he said.

Transforming events

Events impacted by the pandemic have ranged from awards ceremonies, music and film festivals, sports tournaments and worldwide fashion weeks.

Last year, events such as the Sundance Film Festival and Academy Awards took place before the onset of the pandemic. After March, however, most events were postponed, moved to digital platforms or took place with very limited attendance.

After in-person fashion weeks took place in early 2020, fashion weeks and collection presentations shifted to digital events in the summer and fall.



Alma Jodorowsky watches Chanel's socially-distanced spring/summer 2021 haute couture show. Image credit: Chanel

"Our events will be virtual for a while so luxury brands must figure out how to turn this challenge into a marketing advantage," said Mathieu Champigny, CEO of content agency [Industrial Color](#), New York. "And some luxury brands have had more success than others in doing this."

Mr. Champigny cited Chanel as a success story. The French fashion house livestreamed its spring/summer 2021 ready-to-wear show from Paris, but still utilized its relationships with celebrity ambassadors in a series of interviews with Margot Robbie, Kristen Stewart, Lily-Rose Depp and more regarding their impressions of the show ([see story](#)).

These changes to runway shows also changed how the media covered fashion weeks.

"We've learned over the last year that while transforming major events into pure content may change their dynamic, it doesn't diminish their interest," said Jessica Flood, managing director of NYT Events at the [New York Times](#), New York. "In fact, in many cases audiences have expanded both in size, geography and demographics."

In September, the New York Times debuted a month's worth of digital events called "On the Runway." This included Instagram Live conversations with leaders in the luxury space, such as LVMH's Antoine Arnault, Louis Vuitton's Virgil Abloh and Givenchy's Matthew Williams.

According to Ms. Flood, the [New York Times](#) also established exclusive streaming partnerships with organizations including Council of Fashion Designers of America and Fdration de la Haute Couture to stream the September shows in real-time. Luxury brand sponsors included Audemars Piguet, Armani, Dior and Valentino.

"The challenge for luxury brands has been to go beyond traditional content advertising and bring that live activation ethos of enhancing the audience experience to the digital realm," Ms. Flood said. "We wouldn't be surprised to see brands investing more in digital competencies and in particular more innovation around targeting valuable niche audiences with second screen' activations that enrich live content experiences."

Beyond fashion week, other exclusive events such as the Oscars have previously been opportunities for luxury brands to launch activations and engage with audiences ([see story](#)).

This year's Academy Awards ceremony has already been pushed back to Apr. 25, instead of the original date of Feb. 28. It remains to be seen what form the show will take on, as the situation around the pandemic changes rapidly.

"For luxury consumers the exclusivity' attached to these big events is as important in a virtual setting as it is in the real world," Mr. Champigny said. "The same people who want to be at the VIP parties after the in-person Academy Awards expect something exclusive at a virtual Academy Awards."

"The secret to making these exclusive events work is having the luxury-level content to promote them on social media and holding virtual events that are impeccably produced," he said. "Otherwise, you might as well be in a breakout room at your company holiday party."

Some of Industrial Color's clients have leveraged augmented and virtual reality to make digital or small-scale events feel more immersive. These strategies are similar to those improving the customer experience of virtual storefronts and similar offerings.

Brands will have more time to experiment with these technologies, as landmark events continue to be moved online, postponed or even canceled. In some cases, the fate of events depends on local health officials and COVID-19 restrictions.



Some art galleries hosted in-person events for LE PARI(S). Image credit: Artsy

One of the first festivals canceled last spring, SXSW is returning as a digital event next month.

Meanwhile, California's Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival, which was previously scheduled for April, has been canceled. It is unclear if there is a possibility for a fall edition of the event.

In France, the Cannes Film Festival has been moved from mid-May to July, while the Cannes Lions advertising market is still planned for late June.

Art Basel has postponed its June fair in Basel to September. Most recently, Art Basel's Miami edition was held as an online only event in December.

"In many ways, this [shift to digital] was always going to happen," Stink Studios' Mr. Nguyen said. "We're in a transitional period to a digital renaissance which gives us the opportunity to reimagine how we tell stories and immerse people into our brand world."

"Through an intentional UX experience and integration of emerging tech, we can create new and unique experiences," he said.

Reason for optimism

While large-scale live events are unlikely to return to as soon as brands and marketers had hoped, there is expected to be pent-up consumer demand once in-person experiences do resume.

"[This is an opportunity] to get ready for when normalcy does return and audiences are more passionate about live events than they've ever been before," the *Times*' Ms. Flood said. "The event marketing industry could be heading toward a renaissance and the most innovative first movers could have a major advantage."

It appears likely that more intimate events will remain popular in the first half of the year, such as the VIP dinners hosted by Italian automaker Lamborghini last summer ([see story](#)).

For events that are traditionally more consumer-facing, digital platforms will still be key.

In the fall, international horse racing event the Breeders' Cup unveiled a multi-faceted digital program, demonstrating how luxury brands may continue to virtually engage consumers as sporting events take place without live spectators ([see story](#)).

Meanwhile, global art platform Artsy was the exclusive partner for several online-only 2020 editions of art fairs, including Art Cologne, Cologne Fine Art & Design and LE PARI(S) ([see story](#)).

It is only a matter of time, however, before crowds return to in-person experiences.

"I think the idea that normalcy is out of reach may be a bit extreme," said Claude Zdanow, CEO of [Stadiumred Group](#), Los Angeles. "We are already seeing a big shift in many markets towards a return to normal along with socially-distant events occurring."

"Going forward luxury brands who are reliant on in-person experiences will start to see them come back, and I believe quicker than expected," he said. "They are just going to start smaller and be even more intimate but will likely scale as we get to summer and into the end of the year."

"I would expect many brands will be planning, if they have not already begun, on making big splashes in Q4 of 2021."

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