

# The Ultimate Guide to Annual Customer Conferences



# Hosting Annual Customer Conferences That Stand Out From The Crowd

Annual conferences are an amazing way to build deeper relationships with your customers, resulting in increased customer loyalty, valuable insight, enhanced customer success, and additional sales. Realizing these benefits, however, requires careful consideration of several important factors, such as your purpose, budget, and event format.

But the most critical factor to consider when planning a top-notch event is to ensure you have a customer-first mindset. Gone are the days of expecting to sell out a conference by booking a flashy destination resort or a highly-sought after band. Today's customers want to know what they will gain by attending your event. This guide presents a framework for planning annual customer conferences that stand out from the crowd and leave clients eager to confidently use your product or service.

## 1. Start by Considering Your Customer

As mentioned, putting your customers' needs first is vital when planning an annual customer conference. But to meet their needs, you must first understand your audiences. And yes, that is audiences, plural—there is almost always more than one. List out all of your target personas and study their challenges, needs, and motivations. You can also choose a subset based on specific attributes, such as the product they subscribe to, new customers versus established customers, or c-level executives versus director-level employees.

Data collected throughout the buyer or customer journeys will help you build complete customer profiles to segment your audiences. Segmentation allows you to cater to each group's desires to deliver a worthwhile event. This process will ultimately drive the rest of your decisions—how you market, content tracks, event format, and more.

## 2. Define Your Purpose

After you understand your audience, you are better equipped to define the event's focus. What are customers hoping to achieve—new skill sets, accreditations, personal development, or product knowledge? All of the above?

Secondly, consider the needs of your internal teams beyond marketing. Sales, customer success, product, and others are likely to have input that can be used to develop pieces of the event that best meet their goals. For example, your engineering team may want to elicit product feedback, while your executive leadership team would be eager to attend a VIP networking event with your biggest clients. Being included in the planning stages can incentivize internal teams to help you deliver a successful outcome.

After your customers and internal teams have been considered, determine your goals as a marketing team. Is your overall purpose to increase adoption of new products, build a case study library, or foster a brand-loving community? Think about how your event can support these objectives.

Next, try to marry the goals of your customers, your internal teams, and those of the marketing team to deliver an event that maximizes value for all parties. For example, you might have super users who want to go in-depth with expert-level product showcases. Offering a product demo hosted by a reputable client in your industry who is doing ground-breaking work and creating a case study out of this session would meet a shared goal between your more advanced users, customer success, and marketing.

## 3. Set Your Budget

Unless you're Salesforce and you can literally spend millions of dollars to host a week-long festival that takes over an entire city, you will have to make tough choices and prioritize based on your budget. If certain priorities don't make the cut for your annual customer event, you can consider planning a quarterly event or a webinar series instead.

When evaluating your budget, you'll also need to decide if you'll charge your customers a fee to attend. If your event involves an elaborate venue, meals, and big-name speakers, it could make sense to offset your costs with a registration fee. A fee can communicate that your event is valuable, and attendees will be less likely to no-show. On the other hand, if your event is relatively inexpensive, it can be seen as a gesture of goodwill to pay the entire cost.

## 4. Choose the Best Event Format

Today's marketers have a wealth of tools and technology at their fingertips to deliver both in-person, virtual, and hybrid events. Here are a few of the successful formats we've seen and the use cases that work best for each.

### Full-Scale Virtual Events

Full-scale virtual events typically include sessions on multiple stages and feature networking, round tables, experiential activations, sponsorships, and exhibitors. This format is ideal for dispersed, tech-savvy attendees with a flexible schedule so they can devote time to self-education.

### Single-Day Virtual Mini-Event

A single day of content delivered online may be an excellent fit for attendees with limited time and resources available to attend in person. This format is a fantastic option for businesses that want to connect with their audience without wearing out their welcome, so to speak.

### Virtual Mini-Series

This format bucks the idea of an annual conference but allows you to interact with your audience regularly throughout the year—keeping your content and brand top-of-mind. This event style works for audiences who don't have time to dedicate to an all-day conference (such as executives) but prefer to watch 1-2 hour segments intermittently.

### "All-In" In-Person Event

In-person events work best for audiences who skew older and more traditional. The professionals are either in a small geographical area or are passionate about your topic and have the flexibility to travel and take time off. They also appreciate the opportunity to network. In-person events can also be a great way to generate revenue.

### Hybrid Event

Consider this format if you have a very large audience with multiple segments over a large geographical area. While some attendees can commute to the venue, others may be content watching from their office. Hybrid events also work well if you have a wide variety of event objectives.

## 5. Audience Engagement

Developing tactics to engage your audience is where you can let your creative juices flow. What fun and educational ways can you hold your audience's attention or encourage participation? When brainstorming creative themes, sessions, or entertainment, ask yourself how you can take inspiration from other companies outside of your category. And don't just go for a 10% improvement over what your competitor did. Aim for a 10x improvement!

Looking outside the box at wildly different sources of inspiration will help you generate 10x ideas. If you'd like to build a strong community, consider what other brands are doing to foster this. Take Jeep and their weekend Jamboree events, for example. The events include group off-roading trips through new and exciting terrain, plus exclusive gatherings at local restaurants. Think about what you could do to capture the same experience Jeep provides—one that incites a sense of adventure and belonging among Jeep owners.

Another way to stand out is through your speaker line-up. Sourcing user stories from impressive brands or by select verticals can help you draw in registrants and captivate your crowd. You could offer an exclusive VIP track with content from industry influencers or direct access to prominent names. Or perhaps a live contest with prizes and recognition will help energize the room. The possibilities are endless.

## 6. Event Marketing

Gimmicks like magicians, mixologists, or one-size-fits-all swag kits are out. With the ability to capture data throughout your customer's lifecycle, segmentation and personalization are easier now than ever—so make your data work for you!

For pre-show marketing, consider sending targeted emails with teaser content based on specific pain points or use cases. Or send curated gift bags based on the customer's interests or role within their company.

And for post-show communication, go beyond passing leads to sales. Keep the momentum going with highly-targeted follow-up emails based on customers' actions during the event, such as the sessions they attended or their answers to poll questions. You can also suggest content based on their learning objective. For example, you could text or email attendees on-demand videos of sessions they registered for but never actually attended.



Event marketing that meets the needs of your customer or shows that you understand their struggles will be infinitely more effective than sending out the same mass message to all your guests.

## 7. Event Technology

Having the right technology to support your event is also a significant consideration. When evaluating event platforms, determine the capabilities you will need. Will you use a customized event website? What about multiple event formats? Can you easily poll event attendees to collect data?

In general, it's recommended that an event platform have the ability to capture data, improve attendee experiences, and connect seamlessly with your other tools. For example, data capture could look like a platform with a mobile event app to record session attendance or booth check-ins by scanning a QR code. This same mobile app can also enhance attendee engagement with notifications and real-time updates for sessions that match their interests. The best event platforms and apps should also sync with the event website and automatically populate data in your CRM or marketing automation tool.

## It's a Wrap...

Since all your decisions will ultimately flow from your customers' needs and wants, taking the time to fully understand your audience is the foundation of a successful annual customer conference—one that stands out and keeps clients coming back year after year. Gleaning inspiration from other successful brands will help you develop unique engagement and marketing activities. At the same time, a solid event tech platform will allow you to capture the data needed to deliver personalized experiences across channels, now and in the future.

## About BigMarker

In 2010, BigMarker pioneered the webinar and virtual events space as one of the first live video platforms on the web. Today, we're a category leader helping thousands of companies accelerate demand generation and deliver targeted content experiences at scale. Regardless of your CRM, MAS, and business environment, BigMarker's unparalleled customization, expertise and partnership-approach help you achieve your unique demand generation goals.

Reach out to us at [sales@bigmarker.com](mailto:sales@bigmarker.com) to see the difference today.