Next-Generation Events
Cisco's Experience and Best Practices

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October 2010

Cisco Internet Business Solutions Group (IBSG)

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Executive Summary

With the pressures of globalization, increased competition, and the continually accelerating information explosion, the need for employees, customers, and partners to come together, exchange knowledge, gain fresh perspectives, build networks, and nurture relationships has never been greater. These activities represent a significant investment, with annual spending exceeding $200 billion for large meetings and events. The economic downturn, however, has greatly curtailed travel and created a "new normal" of reduced event budgets. Independent of the downturn, traditional in-person events face challenges in delivering their intended business impact, including a lack of scheduling flexibility, a one-size-fits-all approach to diverse attendee interests, and a one-shot, single-point-in-time orientation that doesn't meet organizer or attendee needs for ongoing interactions.

Next-Generation Events address these challenges by applying technology-enabled innovations tailored to deliver specific business outcomes. Remote collaboration capabilities expand the reach of in-person events and enable both hybrid and entirely virtual events. A virtual event platform extends the event in time, creating opportunities for sharing content and soliciting feedback before, during, and after the event, while social networking enables participants to build relationships without necessarily meeting in person. While these innovations don't eliminate the need for in-person meetings, they provide a much broader set of options than was available previously.

Cisco has been a pioneer in creating highly successful events through technology enablers such as live video (via Cisco IPTV and Cisco TelePresence[TM]), live text chat Q&A, replays via videos on demand (VoDs), and social networking and content management via virtual event platforms. Selected examples of recent Cisco Next-Generation Events are shown below (and five in-depth case studies are available at Cisco.com).[1,2,3,4,5]

Figure 1. Cisco Next-Generation Events Conducted During 2009

	Strategic Leadership Offsite (SLO)	Cisco Live	Global Sales Experience (GSX)
Date	May 2009	June 2009	Sept. 2009
Format	Virtual	Hybrid (in person and virtual)	Virtual
Audience	Cisco leadership (directors, VPs, and above)	Cisco customers and partners	Cisco sales employees
Duration, days	3	5	4
Number of attendees: - In person - Virtual - **Total**	0 2,954 **2,954**	9,058 5,000 **14,058**	0 17,306 **17,306**

Based on Cisco's experience with Next-Generation Events, these new capabilities not only reduce costs and increase attendance, but also enrich the attendee experience and greatly increase the event's impact. Demonstrated benefits Cisco achieved in 2009 from Next-Generation Events include:

- *Substantial cost savings:* Costs decreased from $65 million to $9 million for our sales meeting (GSX), and from $7 million to $4 million for our Strategic Leadership Offsite (SLO) meeting.
- *Increased productivity:* Time savings from reduced employee travel were worth $19 million for GSX and $2 million for SLO.
- *Improved communication:* Cisco sales meeting participants rated the virtual presentation sessions as highly or higher than previous in-person events.
- *Greatly expanded reach:* Virtual new-product launches attracted audiences three to five times the size of traditional launches, while reducing costs by 80 percent or more.
- *Enhanced flexibility and choice:* Attendees were able to consume content when and where it was convenient, avoiding schedule conflicts and providing a wider range of content (breakout sessions increased from 37 previously to 54 at GSX).
- *Real-time feedback:* Event organizers and speakers received real-time feedback that allowed immediate adjustments to improve the attendee experience.
- *Reduced environmental impact:* Carbon emissions avoided by meeting virtually totaled 34,000 tons for GSX.

While Cisco has received tremendous benefits from Next-Generation Events, we are still in the early stages of the learning curve and are continuing to refine our approach. Though early in this journey, we believe our experiences may be valuable to others and have profiled our key lessons learned in the areas of process, people, and technology best practices. We have also developed a Next-Generation Events Framework to help assess where to start, which capabilities to employ, and how planning and execution can be enhanced to support these new approaches.

Figure 2.   How Next-Generation Events Differ from Traditional Events

From Traditional Events . . .	. . . To Next Generation Events
Incur cost, lost productivity, and environmental impact of travel	Reduce costs, lost productivity, and environmental impact from travel
One physical location	Multiple physical locations possible
Must attend in person, limiting participation	Can attend remotely, greatly expanding audience
Must attend in real-time	Can view on delayed basis
One-size fits all agenda	Individually tailored agendas
Experience is limited to event itself	Experience extends before and after event
Audience feedback given after event	Real-time feedback given during event
Personal networking is random process	Interest driven networking via social tools
Awareness generation via traditional marketing	Awareness generation amplified via social media

Source: Cisco IBSG, 2010

Introduction: Need for a New Approach

In a world of increasing complexity and competition, many organizations recognize that improving collaboration among their employees, as well as with customers, partners, and other industry leaders, is essential to achieving improved business performance.

One important opportunity for collaboration is large-scale meetings and events. Internal events are key to ensuring effective communication, creating organizational alignment, and enhancing motivation. External events are critical for positioning the company with key stakeholders and helping grow the business. Employee participation in industry events keeps the company in touch with the market and ultimately drives innovation.

Despite these benefits, many organizations question whether events deliver impact commensurate with their costs. Challenges associated with traditional events include:

- High costs:
    - Cost of the event itself (venue, speakers, attendee fees, etc.)
    - Travel costs for participants
    - Lost productive time from travel
- Audience reach:
    - Difficulty in attracting attendees (host perspective)
    - Difficulty in sending all the employees that could benefit (attendee perspective)
- Flexibility:
    - All-or-nothing structure of most events ("attend or don't attend" rather than having opportunity to choose only relevant segments)
    - Scheduling conflicts that prevent attendance at simultaneous breakout sessions
    - Difficulty in getting copies of presentations and other collateral
- Business impact:
    - Ineffective communication to large audiences with varied needs and preferences
    - Difficulty in gauging audience engagement and making real-time adjustments
    - "One-shot" structure of event, rather than ongoing, sustained interaction
    - Random and ineffective nature of the networking process

New Approach: The Next-Generation Event

Many of the challenges associated with in-person events can be overcome by augmenting a traditional event with a wide range of technology-enabled enhancements to create a Next-Generation Event. A Next-Generation Event is an event where options for participation are expanded in both space and time, enabling the attendee to choose to attend in person or remotely, live or on a delayed basis, and for the entire program or just selected sessions. Expanding the options for attendee participation can help the event organizer attract a wider audience, engage that audience more effectively, and lower costs for both the host and the attendees.

While in some cases it may be desirable to conduct the entire event remotely, a hybrid of in-person elements and remote elements often proves optimal. Many permutations are possible, but typical "in-person" elements might include:

- **Main Venue:** This is where the host and most presenters are located. The in-person audience can range from very large, as at a convention site, to small, as with a broadcast studio audience.
- **Regional Hub:** These sites have medium to large audiences and potentially some presenters.
- **Small Group Site:** These are local sites where participants gather to view the event together, but are not presenting.

In addition, individuals may participate in the event from their PC, either live or via video on demand (VoD) replays.

Figure 3.   Range of Options for Participating in Next-Generation Events
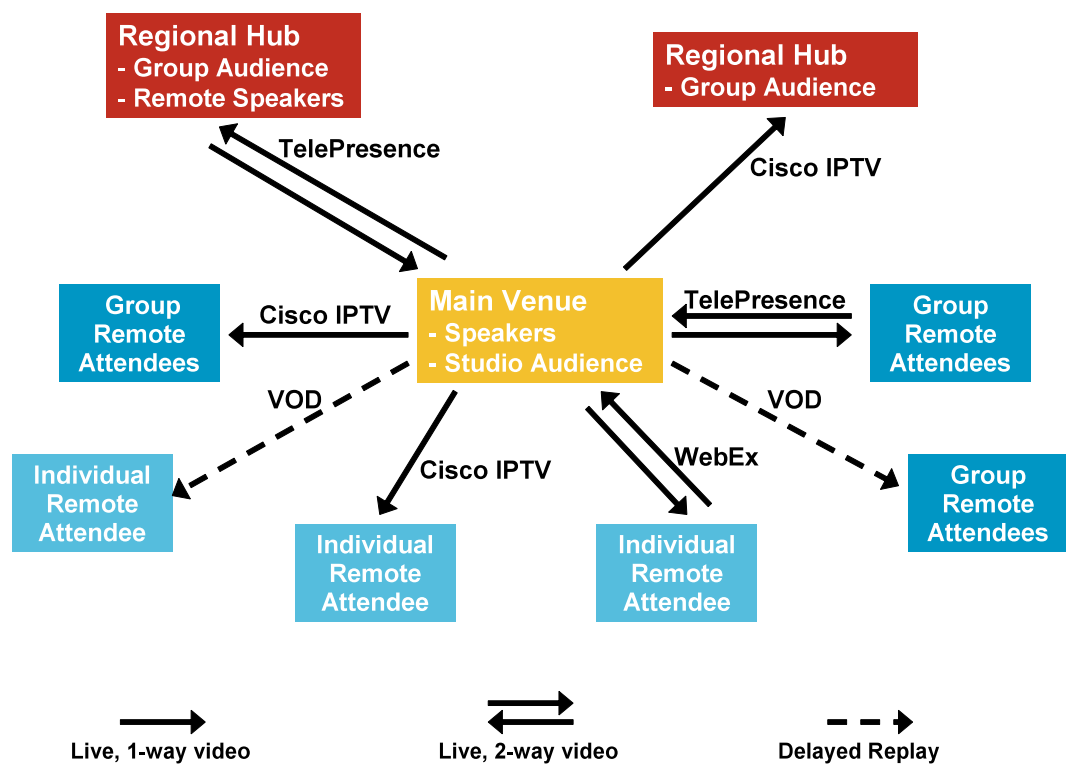
Source: Cisco IBSG, 2010

Some of the key technology-enabled capabilities of a Next-Generation Event include:

- Broadcasting event video (e.g., via Cisco IPTV or WebEx LiveStream) to large groups of participants located either at physical event locales or remotely
- Making these broadcasts available for later downloads as VoDs (e.g., via Cisco Show and Share)
- Connecting participants from different physical event locales with each other via immersive, high-definition video (e.g., Cisco TelePresence)
- Enabling sharing of information and interactions between presenters and remote attendees before, during, and after the event (e.g., via Cisco WebEx[TM])

- Creating a platform that supports event registration, pre-event previews, attendee social networking, real-time feedback, a document repository, and ongoing interactions and extends beyond the life of the physical event (e.g., 6Connex, INXPO)
- Providing mechanisms for participants to interact and provide real-time feedback with the host via audio or video (e.g., via WebEx, Cisco IPTV) and to network with each other (e.g., WebEx Connect)

These capabilities enable a wide range of interactions. Audience members at sites linked by Cisco TelePresence can actively participate directly in the event, such as during question-and-answer sessions. Audience members not linked by TelePresence can provide real-time feedback via text chat. Online communities enable ongoing dialogue between host and attendees before, during, and after the event, and facilitate interactions among attendees that foster networking and relationship building.

In summary, while a traditional in-person event limits attendee choices to going or not going, a Next-Generation Event expands the choices to a broad spectrum of options for when, where, and how to participate. For the event organizer, this translates into expanded participation, increased effectiveness, and reduced costs.

Next-Generation Event Framework

Cisco has been an active early adopter of Next-Generation Events. We recognized they had the potential for great benefit, and also could serve as case studies to demonstrate the capabilities of collaboration solutions. More important, our experience validates that these concepts apply across a wide range of meeting types.

Cisco IBSG has developed a simple framework to categorize different types of events to aid in planning the adoption of these new capabilities. The framework uses two dimensions:

- **Audience type:** The audience is segmented into three groups with distinct characteristics. While some events may include multiple segments, our focus is on the primary audience needed to accomplish the business objectives for the event.
  - *Employees:* An organization has more knowledge about and control over internal audiences than external audiences. It is easy to communicate with employees, and attendance can be strongly encouraged or made mandatory. These events are private and provide a low-risk environment for trying new approaches.
  - *Partners and influencers:* Organizations have a moderate understanding of and influence over strategic partners (e.g., channel partners, suppliers). They likely have an ongoing relationship with key influencers, such as analysts and the press.
  - *Customers and the public:* Customers are the most demanding audience and the most difficult to identify and recruit. Much effort is needed to craft the value proposition for each target segment and ensure that it is well communicated. These events are often public, creating pressure for flawless execution.
- **Complexity of event:** This dimension is rated along a scale of low, medium, and high. Key factors that drive increasing complexity include:
  - *Longer event duration:* A three-day conference has much greater complexity than a one-hour seminar.
  - *Wider geographical span:* Global events introduce challenges with time differences and languages.

- *Increasing heterogeneity of audience:* Increasing diversity of the audience (e.g., in knowledge, interests, motivation) requires tailoring of breakout sessions to meet the needs of different segments of participants.

- *Size:* Increasing the size of the remote audience impacts the technology enablers selected, the amount of planning required, and the degree of monitoring and management needed during the event.

- *Broader business objectives:* Complexity increases when the primary objective extends beyond communication of information to recognition and motivation (e.g., for a salesforce) or persuading and selling (e.g., for analysts and customers).

Figure 4. Cisco's Experience Conducting Next-Generation Events

Cisco Strategic Event Management Framework

Complexity	Employees	Partners & Influencers	Customers
High	Sales Meeting (GSX)	Partner Summit	User Conference (Cisco Live)
Medium	Senior Leadership Offsite (SLO)	Analyst Meeting (C-scape)	Product Launches
Low	Company Meeting	Supplier Business Reviews	Marketing Seminars

Audience

Source: Cisco IBSG, 2010

As shown in the framework above, Cisco's experience spans many types of Next-Generation Events, including five in-depth case studies:

- Cisco's Company Meeting,[1] a quarterly meeting for all employees
- Cisco's Strategic Leadership Offsite (SLO),[2] an annual event for senior executives
- Cisco's Global Sales Experience (GSX),[3] the annual meeting for our salesforce
- Cisco Marketing Product Launches,[4] periodic events for customers and partners
- Cisco Live,[5] an annual event for customers and partners

Lessons Learned from Next-Generation Events

Cisco has been innovating with Next-Generation Events for many years. We have successfully conducted hundreds of events for diverse audiences using a wide range of technology-enabled capabilities. While the road wasn't always smooth and we still have much to learn as this format continues to evolve, we'd like to share our lessons learned to help others implement Next-Generation Events smoothly.

One of the most important keys to success is to avoid treating each event as a one-off, and instead build core capabilities so that learning is captured and shared across different

events, functions, and geographies. The goal should be to build the processes, personnel, and technology platform that can deliver reliable, repeatable, scalable, and high-quality experiences that lead to consistent attainment of each event's business objectives.

Process Recommendations

- Always start with a clear definition of the business objectives for the event.
- Recognize that planning is even more involved than for a traditional in-person event, and needs a strong link to IT.
- Rather than replicating the in-person format, consider new options that going virtual creates, such as shifting to shorter time per day for more days; rotating the host site among different physical locations; using innovative graphics, video, or virtual environments; or creating tiers of access with different pricing.
- Create a sense of occasion and immediacy, so that attendees choose to participate in real time, rather than (maybe) watching a VoD replay later.
- Shorten the duration of individual sessions to create a more intense experience over a shorter time period to increase dedication to the event (versus regular work).
- Design presentations that are lively and compelling (e.g., not an endless series of PowerPoint slides) to prevent participants from succumbing to the temptations of multi-tasking and tuning out.
- For those business objectives that may be difficult to achieve virtually, provide additional elements to supplement the virtual elements.
- Include in-person social elements (e.g., at local or regional level) to strengthen the "human network."
- Relative to a fully in-person event, design more opportunities for interaction with the audience to increase engagement (e.g., continuous Q&A via chat, online polling).
- Carefully assess which sessions should be done live versus prerecorded.
- Limit prerecorded video to no more than 15 minutes per occasion.
- Balance the emphasis on games based on the event audience (games are just a tool to encourage engagement and collaboration, not an end in themselves).
- Establish a command center/war room during the event, including capabilities to solicit real-time feedback and to act on it.

People and Organizational Recommendations

- Involve event executive sponsors in developing new strategies to take advantage of Next-Generation Event capabilities, possibly broadening the business objectives.
- Research the needs and preferences of the audience, along with their comfort level and ability to use virtual capabilities.
- Encourage people to visit the virtual event environment and become familiar with its functionality prior to the event (requiring completion of simple homework assignments in the virtual environment helps improve preparedness).
- Set expectations with the audience that a Next-Generation Event will be different, and explain the advantages it offers over a purely physical event.
- Encourage attendees to interact with each other before, during, and after the event via the virtual event platform (proactively recruit leaders to seed the discussions).

- Coach speakers to modify their traditional approach (e.g., shortening presentations, looking directly into the camera, incorporating polling and other interactive elements).
- Include contests requiring participants to work with others (in person, if possible), such as developing a short video related to the event theme.
- Recommend that participants create "buddy groups" to increase sense of community and make it easier to find friends in the virtual environment.
- Assign responsibility to a single point of contact at each physical venue to handle communications and issue resolution.

Technology Recommendations
- Create a comprehensive strategy, architecture, and roadmap to develop capabilities to support an increasing range of event formats over time (start simple, then expand).
- Partner where needed to bring in solutions and support capabilities that are new to the organization.
- Use pre-event registration data to help in capacity planning.
- Test the virtual environment well in advance of the event to identify and remedy any issues and mitigate risk.
- Continue to test as the event approaches; while many of these technologies are well established and reliable, it's best to err on the side of testing too much rather than too little.
- During the event, monitor the experience of remote participants in real time to detect any issues quickly.
- Establish event-specific technical support capabilities and a quick response team to address issues that arise during the event.

Getting Started with Next-Generation Events

The good news is that it's easy to get started with Next-Generation Events. Based on Cisco's experiences across dozens of events, we have developed our Next-Generation Events Framework to illustrate where to start and how to progress.

While the technology options have greatly expanded, in many ways the job of the event planner in this new world is not significantly different. Planning an event still begins with clarifying the business objectives of the organizer, and then assembling the resources to accomplish these objectives. What does change is the need to learn about new technology-enabled capabilities, to establish new relationships with technology providers, and to partner more closely with the internal IT organization. We have found that significantly more planning time is required for Next-Generation Events than for traditional events. Event planners have long relied on outside help from event marketing companies such as George P. Johnson and Maritz to produce traditional in-person events, and these providers are developing new capabilities to support Next-Generation Events as well. Cisco and our partners can provide many of the technology enablers.

Organizations seeking to adopt Next-Generation Events face a wide array of choices. While many companies are not starting from scratch, and have begun to use web conferencing for internal and customer events, few have done so on a large scale or for extended-duration events. And, fewer still have embraced the full range of technology enablers that can greatly boost the event's reach, richness, and effectiveness.

Figure 5. Recommended Sequence for Adopting Next-Generation Events

Cisco Strategic Event Management Framework
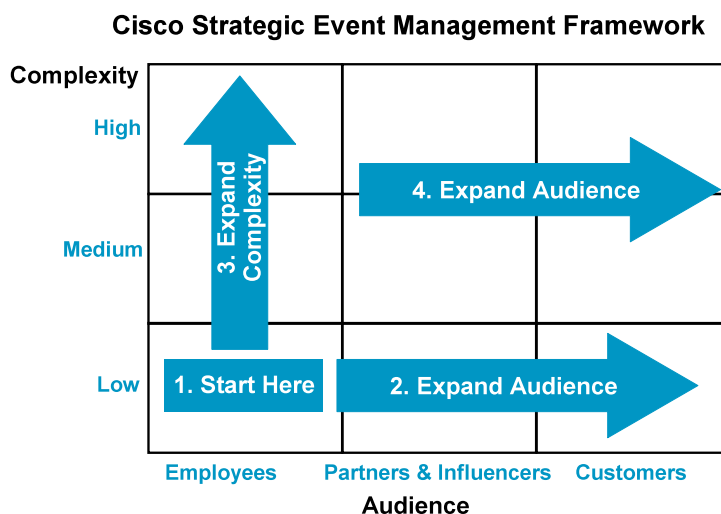
Source: Cisco IBSG, 2010

We recommend a four-step approach:

1. Begin with employee meetings of modest scope, where the primary objective is communication. This provides a low-risk environment to fine-tune the process, people, and technology elements required to execute Next-Generation Events. By getting some early wins, it makes it easier to build momentum for broader adoption.

2. Keeping the event complexity low, expand the audience to partners and customers. This might include events that are smaller in scope, focused primarily around communication of information, and aimed at existing (rather than new) partners and customers.

3. Build additional capabilities for larger, more complex events with more challenging business objectives by turning again to employee audiences. Initially, this might focus on gradually expanding the scale of the meeting (e.g., participants, locations, duration, time zones). Eventually, it should encompass more ambitious business objectives beyond communication of information (e.g., recognition and motivation).

4. Extend these new capabilities for more complex events to the more demanding partner and customer audiences.

Throughout this progression, focusing on building new process, people, and technology capabilities will help make these events scalable and repeatable. Getting some early wins helps reassure executive sponsors of the value of Next-Generation Events and builds momentum. Organizations can also benefit from Cisco's experience by following many of the "Lessons Learned" covered earlier. More information about how Cisco technology can enhance the event experience can be found at www.cisco.com/go/collaboration4events.[6]

It's also important to remember that no event is an island. That is, it's important to integrate an organization's event strategy with its overall communications strategy for both internal and external audiences. Next-Generation Events represent just one portion of the overall communication program's portfolio, and the impact from events can be enhanced by other elements. For example, social media can greatly facilitate building "buzz" within the target audience around topics of interest, independent of specific events, and then stimulate higher

attendance for external events. For employees, using multiple channels (e.g., CEO's video blog, employee blogs, wikis, communities, and enterprise social networks) to communicate with and help build connections among employees can significantly improve alignment and morale.

Conclusion

Next-Generation Events offer tremendous opportunities to improve the business impact of meetings and events while simultaneously reducing their costs significantly. Cisco's experiences have proven that Next-Generation Events can expand the audience, deliver a more tailored event experience, maintain or improve communications effectiveness, reduce environmental impact, boost productivity, and save millions of dollars.

Benefits from Next-Generation Events accrue to both the event organizer and the event participants. It's easy to get started by focusing on internal meetings, and then building capabilities by gradually expanding the audience and event complexity. Ultimately, we believe that most events—even those with complex objectives, large scale, and demanding audiences—will benefit from shifting to either a fully virtual format or a hybrid approach that combines physical in-person elements with virtual event capabilities.

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Acknowledgements

The author would like to recognize the contributions of Cisco's LaSandra Brill, Lisa Dixon, Vera Fisher, Jovi Gayac, Regina Gordon, Melissa Mines, Mike Mitchell, Petra Neiger, Abby Smith, Angie Smith, Dannette Veale, and Doug Webster, without whom this chronicling of Cisco's experiences with Next-Generation Events would not have been possible.

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