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and virtual**



## Encore aims to address planner pain points as our industry recovers.

BY MICHAEL PINCHERA

**T**he complicated business event environment continues for most everyone right now, as uncertainty persists due to virus variants. However, whether you're planning for an in-person, virtual or hybrid event, Encore is focused on helping you plan and deliver meetings more easily, no matter the complexity of your event, with creative, production and technology experts on hand. As your trusted event partner, Encore is focused on saving you time and stress while executing a successful event.

### Pandemic innovation

The idea that necessity is the mother of invention surely struck many meeting and event professionals as an undeniable truism over the past 20 months. On the business front, some have opted for a more direct descriptor: pivot.

"Obviously, the pandemic forced a lot of innovation in an incredibly short time," says Darius Vaskelis, Chief Digital Officer at Encore. "Whereas before, I believe some people treated digital technology as a gimmick or a hobby, it suddenly became the underpinning of how meetings and events are executed, particularly in places that were locked down. That innovation allowed us to very rapidly make a lot of changes to our platforms just to keep up with the market—and I think the same thing happened with everyone."

Vaskelis says the focus is on using digital technologies to make events



more engaging, so they work better, achieve goals and are more cost effective to deliver. He notes that Encore quickly modified one of its pre-pandemic offerings to help clients move forward in the in-person-turned-virtual market shift.

The engagement platform itself is called Chime Live,<sup>SM</sup> but as business shifted to virtual, Encore developed a new solution with video production services to act as an important audience engagement tool for remote participants.

"We took Chime Live, our in-room pre-pandemic engagement platform, and we turned it into a complete virtual and hybrid event platform during the pandemic," he says. "And because its heritage was born in the room, it's still an extremely effective in-room tool and can be used regardless of whether the meeting is executed in the room or somewhere else, allowing people to shift as the demand for in-person and virtual shifts. It's an interesting problem that people are trying to solve not knowing what SARS-CoV-2 variants are going to come, not knowing what direction things are going to head."

"Pre-pandemic, Chime Live was primarily in-room and not typically delivered over the Internet—we would wheel in servers and our own networks," Vaskelis says. "Today, it's usually delivered over the Internet as a cloud-based solution. There was a lot of very rapid innovation done during the time of COVID. Having things that were born in the room, like Chime Live, are helpful now as in-person meetings resume in the same way that virtual event technologies emerged during the pandemic when people could not meet in-person."

### Engagement in times of uncertainty

With the event industry experiencing a

remarkable amount of uncertainty, Vaskelis says, "Organizations are trying to determine whether to hold a meeting next quarter and how much of that meeting will be in-person, virtual or some mix of both. In this environment, it's a challenge for meeting planners to decide what kind of engagement tools and techniques to use that will mitigate risks and deliver the desired outcomes."

To further complicate matters, Liz Whittaker, VP of Creative Services for Encore, notes that in early 2020, everyone had to quickly get up to speed on technology matters but also how to feel comfortable and confident with delivering content and experiencing "face-to-face meetings that weren't physically in-person."

"One of the things that came out of that was the value of content and making sure that it is compelling," Whittaker says. "Realistically, when you're looking at the virtual meeting space, you're targeting someone who has been sitting in the same chair, staring at the same screen...so how do you make your meeting feel special or different? When that person is even having Zoom calls with family members, how can you make sure your content is going to be compelling enough to capture the attention of someone doing the exact same thing they do no matter what kind of call is happening?"

And just as quickly as industry pros and event participants had to hone their tech and remote social skills to become accustomed to virtual meetings, many are now in an in-between space driven by the uncertainty that Vaskelis mentioned.

"At the same time, we're seeing technologies that were born as virtual event technologies trying to understand what role they play in an in-person world," he says.

"It's also evident that platforms that were designed to drive in-room engagement—through polling and attendee networking tools—continue to be looked at as something very important."

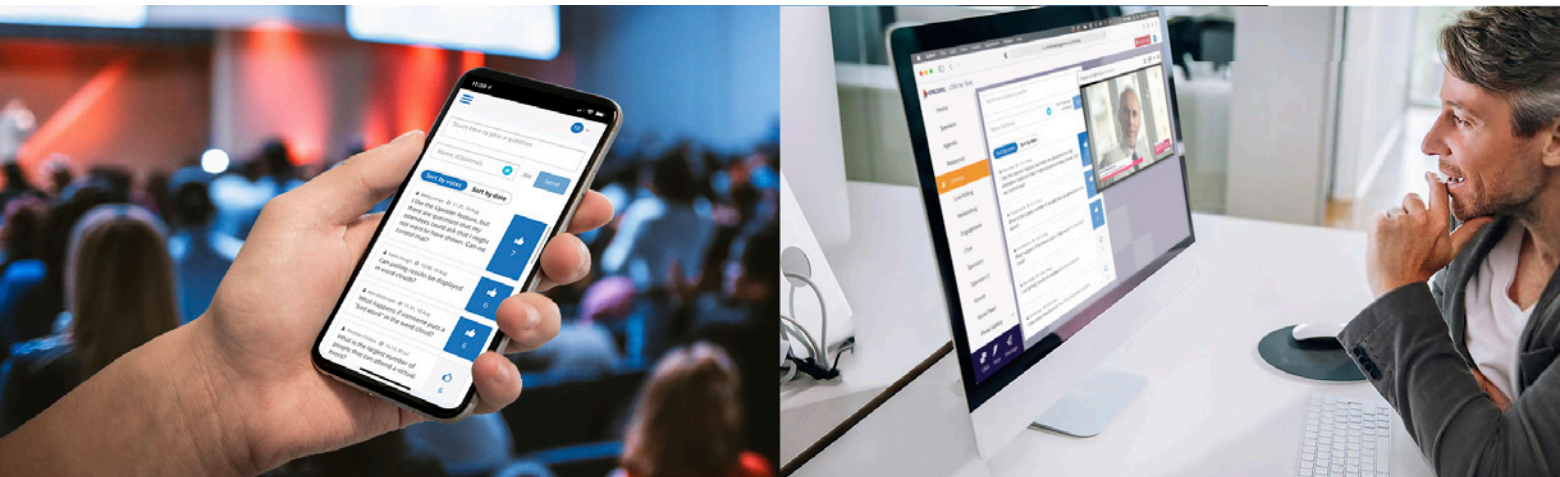
Solutions such as Chime Live, which work for in-person, virtual and hybrid meetings, have enabled Encore to manage clients' events in our complex times by offering options suitable to the fluid business landscape.

### Blending virtual and in-person

"What we're being asked to do—and I think this is probably the most interesting problem that we're solving—is offer planners engagement platforms so they can plan the meeting, plan how they'll engage people, work through it and be able to support whichever way that pendulum swings (virtual, in-person or somewhere in the middle) and still use the engagement technologies," Vaskelis says.

There's the push to get back to in-person meetings, combined with justifiable concern for the safety of all involved, all the while needing to proceed without knowing if and how the situation will change. Will capacity limits or travel restrictions be lifted? Will new restrictions be introduced in response to SARS-CoV-2 variants? There's a lot that's out of the control of planners that they somehow need to plan around. Vaskelis says the solutions offered by Encore—the same or strikingly similar, whether for in-person or virtual—address significant portions of those pain points.

"It's almost a form of insurance without it being a full-loss scenario," he says. "It's effectively, 'Can I get started, plan a meeting, plan how I'll engage people and do it in a way that's equitable for a remote attendee or an in-person attendee and



continue planning the meeting without knowing how much of either one will take place?”

His team also endeavors to bridge the worlds of in-person and remote attendees. One example he notes is the effort to reduce video latency. For instance, during a hybrid event, you may ask a polling question, but due to the delay in getting that live question out to remote attendees and receiving their responses, you'll have to inject an artificial pause—“Come back in a few minutes and we'll show you the results of the poll”—that slows the momentum of the moment.

“That's sort of an artificial distraction in the middle of the event,” Vaskelis says. “If you have a true low-latency video solution, one that can handle maybe 10 seconds of delay in the process, that'll help an in-room audience be in sync with a remote audience so you can answer the poll questions effectively in real time, or so close to real time that it doesn't matter.”

### Dedicated to your success

The fact that Encore was “born in the room, born as an event provider” rather than solely a tech provider, Vaskelis says, enables

the organization to work with clients in a uniquely robust manner.

“An event's success criteria aren't usually, ‘Does the software have feature x, y and z?’” Vaskelis says. “The success criteria are usually something tied to the event—did you raise the money you wanted to raise or get the desired market awareness? Our business strategy is not strictly about providing the software or the service that supports it. Our business is more comprehensive than that, with a network of over 2,100 venue partners and a global workforce of event professionals, technicians and producers to put on these events. When you put these elements together to support and reinforce each other, I think that works for our customers more than any of these specific technologies.”

The creative content delivery side of things—and more in-depth strategizing with clients—most interests Whittaker.

“What's really interesting is that there's this momentum right now behind content and how the delivery of that content can impact the way an audience receives your message,” she says. “For example, we helped a customer dramatically change the tone of their meeting by creating a comic

book theme, complete with characters, a story arc and the pop art illustrations and animations that really brought the theme to life. The value of content like that was really proven out over the last year and customers want to carry that back to in-person meetings.”

“That's a trend I think we're going to see continuing; and Encore is well-positioned to partner with customers to provide that deeper level of services and production solutions, including custom content development. And it's all with one goal in mind: deliver meaningful experiences that drive attendee engagement on platforms and in person.”

Whittaker says one of the greatest pain points for planners will be having to redefine and rethink their meetings.

“It's about future normal,” she says. “I think that's what we're all striving to define. And when we think about that future normal, the end-to-end offering of a company like Encore is different than everyone else in the marketplace. When you're looking to reinvent, having a partner who can help you with all of the pieces and parts makes it easier to bring that future normal to fruition.”

