



How MAD//Fest became a hybrid event trailblazer

Discover how MAD//Fest brought their iconic in-person event to the virtual and hybrid stage.

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The MAD//Fest Story: Virtual, in-person, and hybrid event success

You're about to read the story of MAD//Fest, a “marketing, advertising, and disruption festival,” which ranks as the largest marketing festival in the UK. Created by Dan Brain and Ian Houghton, MAD//Fest began with a simple yet powerful goal: to challenge the status quo of events and bring the global marketing community together.

The two co-founders launched MAD//Fest to bring excitement, innovation, and a bit of edginess to the traditional in-person event format. Boring conference centers and expo halls? Forget it. Brain and Houghton wanted their in-person to feel more like a celebration than just another in-person event on marketers' to-do lists. Through their immersive events and epic brand experience, MAD//Fest became a true events trailblazer, fostering a dynamic community of marketers.

When COVID-19 hit in 2020, MAD//Fest expertly reimaged their iconic in-person event as a five-day virtual experience featuring over 700 speakers. In 2021, Dan and Ian took their event program to the hybrid stage, seamlessly bringing together a UK in-person audience and a virtual audience from around the world.

Implementing a hybrid events program has emerged as a key strategy for event pros, **highlighting the components of virtual and in-person events that planners, attendees, and sponsors love the most.**

In this case study, you'll learn how the MAD//Fest team have uniquely positioned themselves as trailblazers of all three event formats: virtual, in-person, and hybrid, all while providing immersive attendee experiences and driving sponsor ROI.



About MAD//Fest: Marketing, advertising, disruption festival

[MAD//Fest](#) is where marketers from around the world come together to share ideas, introduce new innovations, and network with fellow industry influencers. The festival has captured the attention of a global attendee base, but its origin story isn't exactly typical. It was founded by Brain and Houghton over a couple of pints and a couple of questions:

- What if we created an event that packs a punch with no-nonsense, relevant content?
- What if we created a space that transforms the traditional concept of an event into an immersive experience that generates excitement, fosters connection, and drives ROI?

Dan and Ian were tired of in-person events that lacked energy, inspiration, and creativity. They knew they needed to launch an event of epic proportions to bring marketers together for an unforgettable and meaningful experience.

"We really felt that having worked in the industry for a long time, we'd seen the good, the bad, and the ugly of live events. A lot of people were saying to us in the marketing and advertising sector that the crop of events at that time wasn't really delivering in terms of value, in terms of experience, in terms of vibrancy. They had become a little bit staid... **So, Ian and I did the only sensible thing. We quit our jobs, we raised some money and in five and half months, and we delivered MAD//Fest London,**" Brain says.

“...Ian and I did the only sensible thing. We quit our jobs, we raised some money and in five and half months, and we delivered MAD//Fest London.”



Dan Brain,
Co-founder MAD//Fest

MAD//Fest's 2018 in-person event was their first step in disrupting the traditional in-person format by transforming The Truman Brewery in London into a pop-up town and the ultimate marketing event destination.





Transforming the in-person event status quo with **MAD//Fest London**

Picture this: you walk into an event space that's nearly twice the size of a football field. In front of you, there's a massive indoor garden with vendor booths doubling as pub tables. Around the venue, mini lounges gather attendees to network and enjoy food and drinks. To top it all off, cheers are erupting from attendees and exhibitors who are crowded around foosball tables as they partake in some friendly competition and ample networking opportunities. You might be thinking, "This sounds more like a party than an in-person conference or tradeshow."

That's exactly what MAD//Fest set out to do.

In under six months, Dan and Ian launched their first-ever event where attendees engaged in a two-day experience that exuded excitement, innovation, and connection.

“[Attendees] came to the show because of the amazing speakers, but they walked into the show and it felt like in their real life, like they were going to do something fun on the weekend and it just happened to be surrounded by business people as opposed to their friends. That made a big difference in terms of people’s emotional reaction to the event and how they enjoyed that space and how they relaxed.”



Ian Houghton,
Co-founder MAD//Fest



Dan and Ian are determined to take a human approach to hosting events. They truly put themselves in their audience's shoes and crafted an experience that provided tons of great content and fun.

“We think by treating [attendees and partners] like humans and creating a fun environment for them to be in, they will have better conversations, enjoy themselves, and do better business together,” Houghton says.



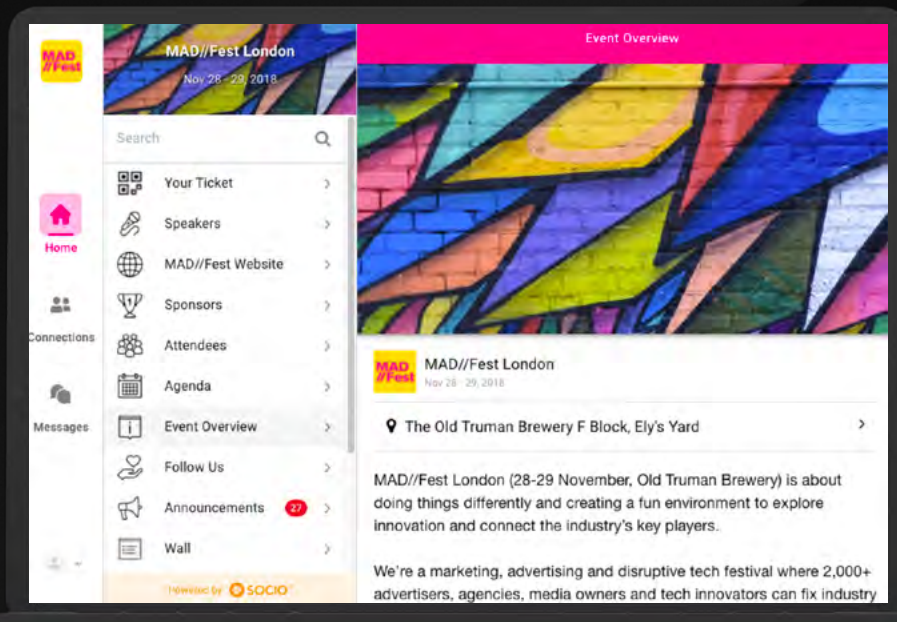
Up for the challenge: The art of “wow-ing” marketers

Dan and Ian know better than anyone that marketing to marketers in any industry can be a major challenge. After all, marketers are typically the ones who think up creative and compelling ways to get people interested in event content.

But the MAD//Fest co-founders saw this challenge as an exciting opportunity. They were up for the task of impressing an audience of marketers with quick thought and a bit of charm. When a royal baby announcement hit the press in the months leading up to MAD//Fest, Dan and Ian didn't waste any time putting a MAD//Fest twist on the nation's most talked about story of the day. Brain drew from the royal press release to quickly draft MAD//Fest's own announcement and spread the word about their upcoming marketing festival.

Later in 2021, when a news story broke that a group of people had been snowed in at a pub with an Oasis tribute band, Brain drafted yet another clever marketing email to the MAD//Fest community that drew comparisons between the pub-goers' incredible experience and MAD//Fest attendee experiences.

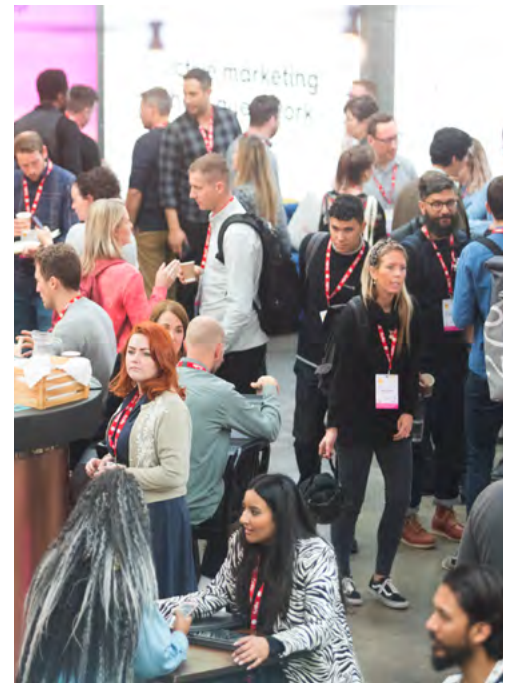
“A lot of the [event] emails you get, they kind of look the same. They sound the same. They've got some good speakers, and some are trying to sell you a ticket. We thought, how can we do something that is completely mind-blowing? If you can be creative and do something distinctive to disrupt a crowded market, it's incredibly doable and people really love it,” Brain says.

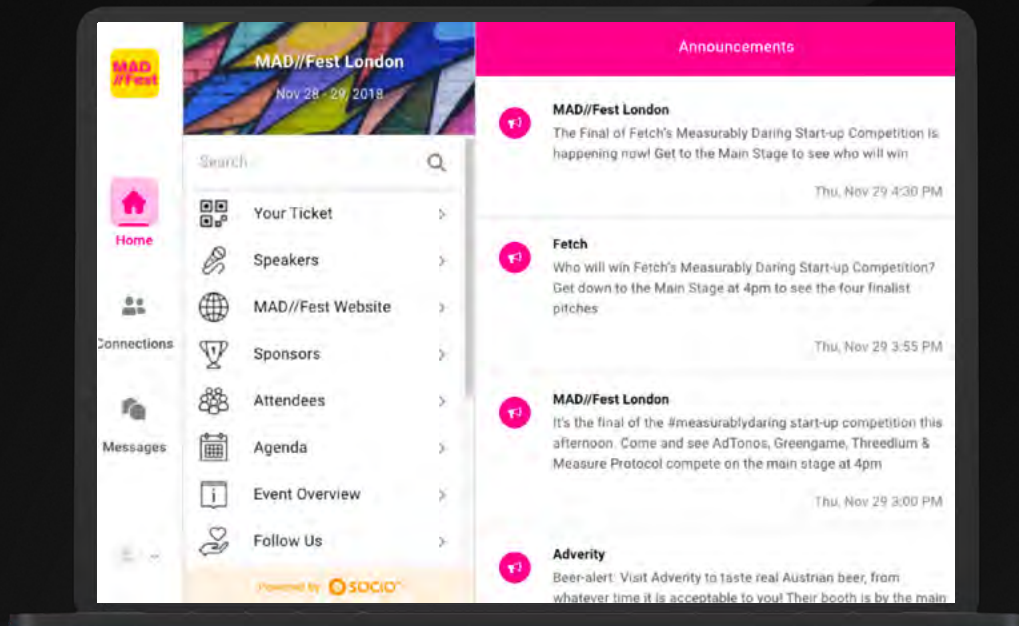


Bringing the MAD//Fest brand to life through Socio's branded event app

The MAD//Fest brand reflects the festival's dynamic event experience. Hot pink and bright yellow are the brand's signature colors, bringing life and excitement to every interaction they have with their attendees.

For MAD//Fest's 2018 and 2019 in-person events, they leveraged [Socio's Branded Mobile Event App](#). The app was built with key features that enabled attendees to easily navigate the event space and level up their networking opportunities, including a festival map, event game, social Wall, and agenda.





“Everyone is searching for differentiation at the moment because lots of apps and virtual events look the same but working with [Socio] has really helped us customize and make the MAD//Fest app different from everything else that’s out there.”



Dan Brain,
Co-founder MAD//Fest

MAD//Fest’s first-ever event went on to win several UK Conference Awards including Best New Launch and Best Networking Event.

On winning Best Networking Event at the UK Conference Awards: “Obviously, networking is such a big deal at MAD//Fest – we really try to encourage people to form those relationships. Aside from giving people great content and lots of nice food and drink, technology has a really important role to play in that, and that’s where Socio comes in. Using the app and the digital platform that Socio provides to make MAD//Fest a richer networking experience has been really important,” Brain says.

Entering the world of virtual events:

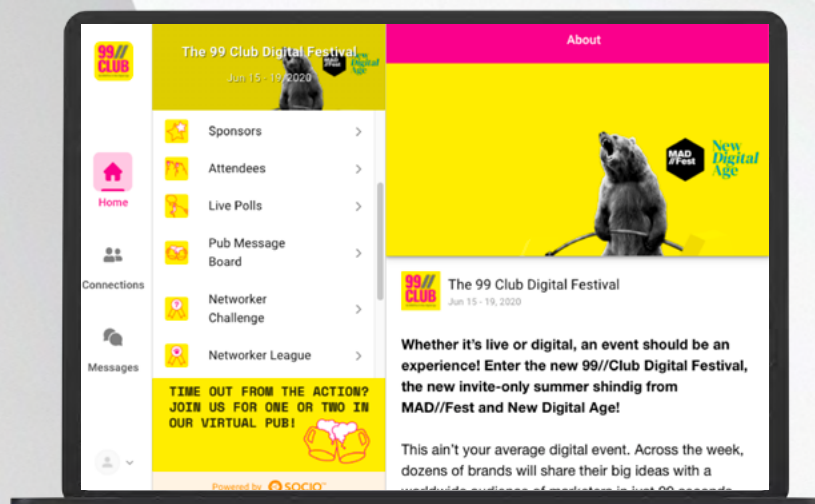
How to fit 23,000 attendees into a virtual pub

After the huge successes of their 2018 and 2019 events, Dan and Ian were eager to build upon their event structure in 2020. **But in March 2020, the outbreak of COVID-19 shocked event organizers around the world**, giving them no choice but to close the doors to their in-person event and pivot to a virtual format. The MAD//Fest team didn't have time to waste. The only way forward was virtual, so Dan and Ian jumped right in and began brainstorming what their iconic marketing festival would look like as a completely virtual event.

A few months earlier, when the pandemic hit in March 2020, [Socio](#) had shifted its product focus to meet the needs of virtual and hybrid events, leading the charge in a new era of events. "We went back to the roots that we had for MAD//Fest. We thought, 'We need to do something virtual. Who are we going to speak to?"

Alright, we will speak to Socio, our partner since the beginning – let's do something virtual with them. We know we've got a platform that works, that our people like,'" Houghton says. The beauty of virtual events is that event organizers can launch them at anytime from anywhere. Instead of packing all of their speakers and content into a one or two-day event, Dan and Ian decided to take a different – or as they would put it – "completely mad" approach.

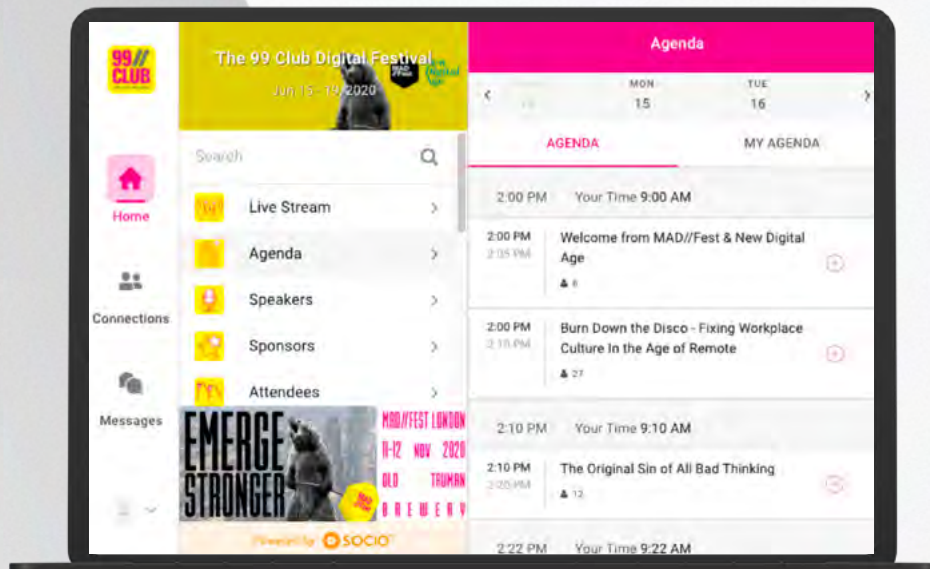
In June 2020, MAD//Fest was back with the 99 Club Virtual Event, powered by Socio's [virtual event platform](#), but this time, it returned as a five-day virtual event with a global audience of **23,000 attendees** and over **700 speakers** who each had **99 seconds to speak**. When each speaker's time was up, a horn went off and the next speaker began.

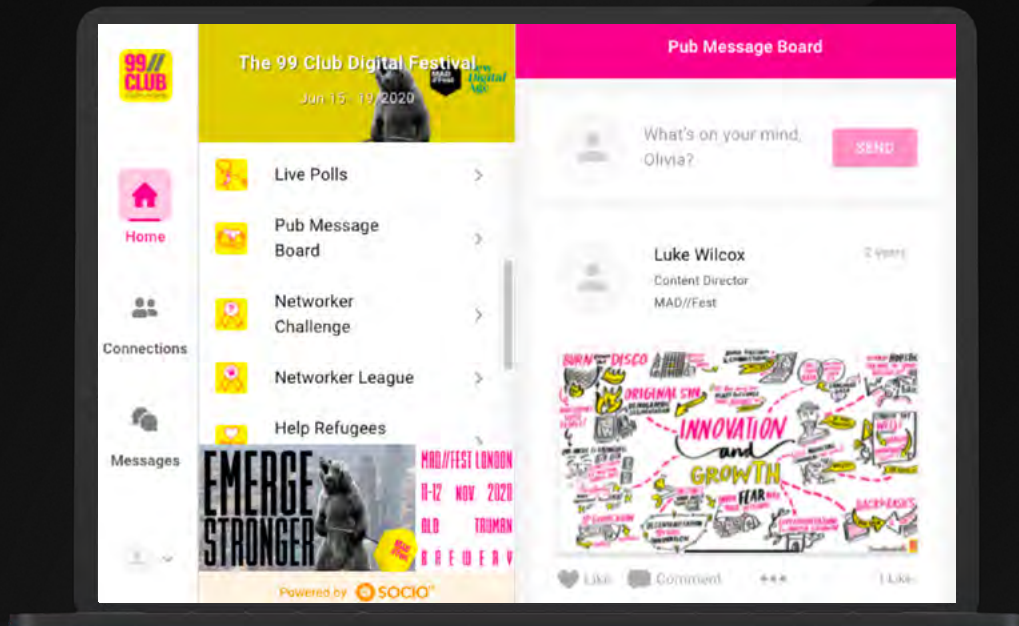


"It was like watching a radio show, but on your laptop, it was compelling...The format was really different. And the technology to make the format work and allow people to network makes a difference, too. You've got to get all of the aspects right," says Houghton.

Why choose such a drastic event format? If you ask Ian and Dan, after they tell you it's because they're completely "bonkers," their reasoning speaks to the strategic and creative marketers they are. "At that time, everybody was doing sort of long form content in the digital space... But people have got very short attention spans online. This was a good way of capturing people's attention and just providing something different than what all of our competitors were doing," says Brain.

Following the 99 Club Virtual Event's success, Ian and Dan knew the importance of maintaining engagement with their audience. They had successfully engaged their audience in a virtual format which meant one thing: virtual was here to stay. The 99 Club Virtual Event served as a catalyst for MAD//Fest's next two virtual events, MAD//Anywhere 2020 in November and MAD//Anywhere 2021 in March of 2021.



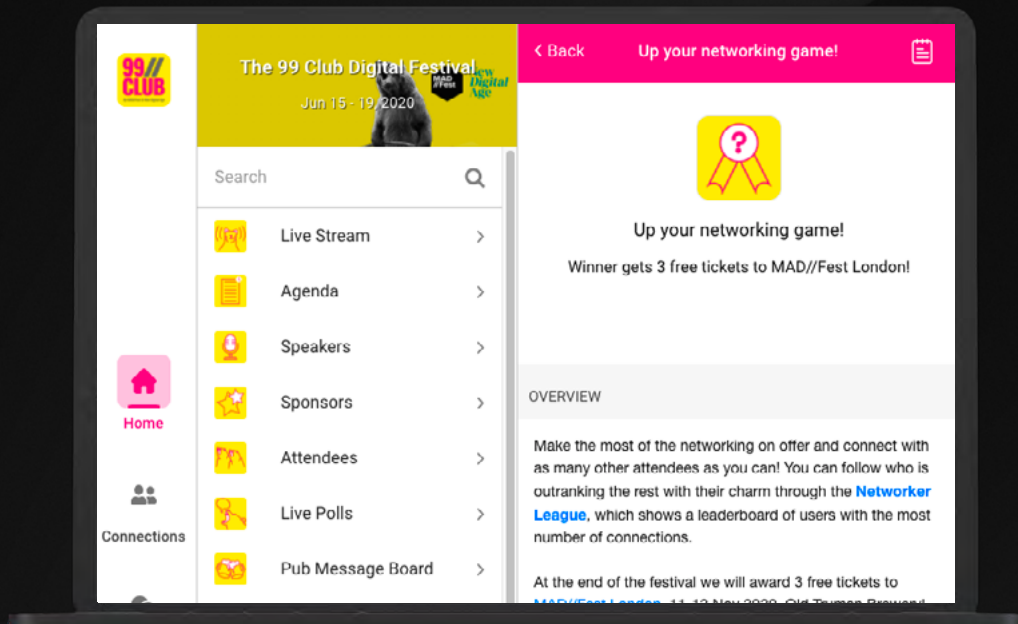


Engaging attendees with live polling, social networking, and more!

Dan and Ian understood that their virtual events simply couldn't be structured the same way as their first two in-person events. Instead, they decided to leverage Socio's engagement capabilities to drive engagement and promote connection.

MAD//Fest's three virtual events featured live polling with a Slido integration where attendees could answer poll questions in real-time. To elevate the engagement, Dan and Ian had one of their sponsors jump up on the virtual stage to comment on poll results as they were submitted.

"Especially with virtual events, you have to make them less linear. You've got to make them interactive and engaging and break up that content from time to time. So, whether it's poll questions or things that are just for fun, just giving people that sort of break from wall-to-wall sessions is really important. That's the way TV sort of works, and we sort of tried to take bits of inspiration from TV in the studio events," Brain says.



MAD//Fest also leveraged Socio's Wall feature as a Pub Message Board, where attendees shared about their event experiences by creating their own posts as well as liking and commenting on each other's posts.

To drive networking between attendees and exhibitors, MAD//Fest gamified the networking aspect of the event. They even leveraged Socio's [Live Display](#) tool to showcase the connections leaderboard which drove engagement and amplified which attendees were in the lead. To top everything off, the winner of the game received three free tickets to MAD//Fest's November 2020 event. As a result, over 3,700 attendee connections were made in the Socio Platform.

Following each virtual event, Dan and Ian were able to download their session recordings and upload them directly to the MAD//Fest YouTube channel to boost brand visibility and garner excitement for their future events.





Communicating sponsor value through the Socio platform

It's always important for event organizers to drive and prove ROI for their event sponsors. For MAD//Fest, securing top notch sponsors enables them to provide immersive, content rich event experiences for their virtual and in-person attendees.

Socio's data and analytics capabilities are a must-have for all MAD//Fest events. The Socio Platform has enabled MAD//Fest's sponsors to collect data on the attendees they connect with at their events. Following the event, MAD//Fest sponsors leverage the data they've collected through Socio to craft personalized outreach to attendees.

"Securing more sponsors is always a key target for me.... That's helped by the work we do with [Socio] with the ability that sponsors have to really get quite a clear understanding of their [ROI] before they even finish a show."



Ian Houghton,
Co-founder MAD//Fest



Jumping into virtual event MAD-ness with Socio's professional services

In 2020, as MAD//Fest navigated the somewhat unknown territory of virtual events, it was critical that they teamed up with vendors that would be true partners every step of the way.

MAD//Fest was one of the first-ever customers to leverage Socio's [Professional Services](#) for their June 2020 event. While Dan and Ian were in a planning frenzy in their UK headquarters, the Socio team was set up in Indianapolis, Indiana, ready to help launch MAD//Fest inaugural virtual event.

With over 700 speakers rotating every 99 seconds, Ian and Dan were excited and understandably nervous about the logistics of the event, but when it came time to launch the five-day event, they were pleasantly surprised with the results.

“Once it came round to that full five-day event, we have three people in that London office and Ryan from Socio over in Indianapolis helping us to get everything in order. And it worked,” Houghton says.

When it comes to launching their events, the MAD//Fest team says that while the MAD//Fest and Socio teams are separated by geography, the distance has never prevented the Socio team from providing excellent support and ensuring their events run smoothly. Following their first-ever virtual event, MAD//Fest's took home a UK Conference Award for Best New Event.



When virtual and in-person worlds collide: MAD//Fest goes hybrid

After Dan and Ian experienced firsthand how they could increase their attendee reach with a virtual event component, they knew that virtual had to be a part of their 2021 event strategy – but they couldn't forget the electric nature of their in-person UK event.

At the same time, the events industry was navigating the world of hybrid events and attempting to bring together the best components of in-person and virtual event experiences. Dan and Ian saw many examples of pseudo-hybrid events, where in-person events were simply streamed to virtual attendees without any true hybrid engagement. Dan and Ian decided that if they were going to go hybrid, they needed to do it the right way and craft a true hybrid experience that connected virtual and in-person attendees.

In July 2021, MAD//Fest hosted 4,000 in-person attendees at the Truman Brewery space in the UK and another 4,000 tuned in virtually, culminating in a two-day event that saw attendees from over 38 countries network, engage, and experience the magic of MAD//Fest, no matter how they attended.

The MAD//Fest party was back – and better than ever. The Truman Brewery was bustling once again with attendees networking and enjoying local food and drink under branded umbrellas. Virtual and in-person speakers took the stage to share their industry insights and learnings. Most importantly, the energy, buzz, and connection of the event reached an entirely new virtual audience that was tuning in from around the world.



Results from MAD//Fest's Hybrid Event:

21.47k

connections
made

7.5

connections
per attendee

82%

renewal rate for
event sponsors

33

countries
represented



“[The Hybrid Event] really took production to another level. We had to cater to the needs of in-person attendees and virtual attendees. That’s where the Socio Platform enabled us to seamlessly join the conversation between in-person and online attendees, so people could meet remotely, they could tune into the content, they could interact with the content, and that was all through the Socio Platform.”



Dan Brain,
Co-founder MAD//Fest

Later in the year, Dan and Ian’s first-ever hybrid event went on to win the UK Conference Award’s Best Hybrid Event award. Eventex also named MAD//Fest as one of the top 80 event organizers in the UK and Ireland in 2021.

Leveling up hybrid attendee engagement with Socio

The event's global success is perfectly summed up through a story of an attendee who leveraged the virtual event to transform fellow attendees into future attendees for her upcoming webinar.

"An attendee from Uruguay obviously couldn't come to London for our event, so she jumped onto the Socio Web App. She connected with lots of people and off the back of her experience on the web app, she was able to organize her own webinar for 100 potential clients in the UK. That is amazing ROI for one of our delegates," Houghton says.

Successful hybrid events seamlessly bring virtual and in-person attendees together. MAD//Fest did just that by leveraging the Socio Platform to power an event experience where both virtual and in-person attendees felt engaged, connected, and informed. To achieve this, MAD//Fest enabled numerous features in the Socio Platform including:

• Selfie booth

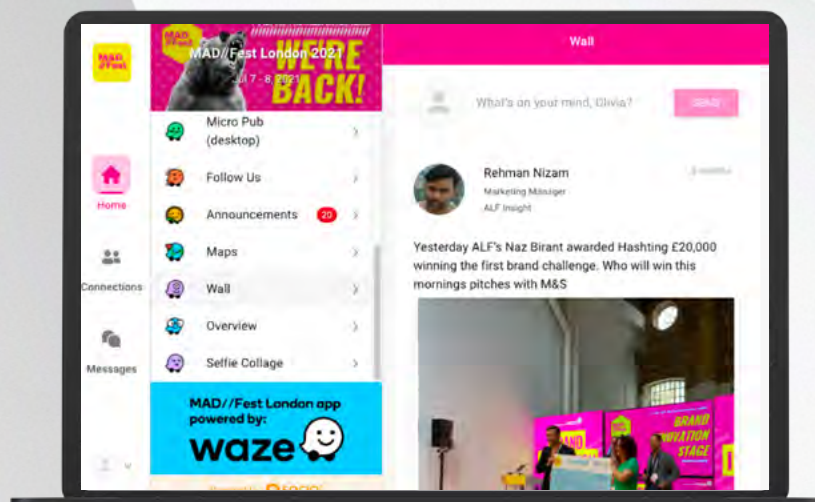
Attendees could easily snap a selfie of themselves from their phone or desktop, allowing everyone to put a face to a name.

• Social Wall

MAD//Fest's hybrid event attendees seamlessly interacted through Socio's Wall feature by posting pictures of their event experience and "liking" and commenting on each other's posts.

• Maps

Socio's Maps feature enabled in-person attendees to easily navigate the event space.





Creating a cohesive hybrid experience with Socio's RTMP player

To ensure both virtual and in-person attendees could experience the same sessions and keynote presentations, MAD//Fest leveraged Socio's RTMP Player, which was embedded directly in virtual attendees' agenda.

"It was important to us that the [virtual] delegates had exactly the same experience from a content perspective as the [in-person] delegates," Houghton says.

Driving attendee networking with Socio's Live Display

MAD//Fest gamified networking by using Socio's leaderboard feature to highlight users with the highest number of connections. In-person attendees could also view this on Socio's Live Display throughout the on-site venue. In total, over **22,000 connections** were made during the event.



Boosting partner engagement with Socio's sponsor capabilities

To boost sponsor ROI and ensure sponsors engagement across virtual and in-person attendees, each sponsor at MAD//Fest had a dedicated sponsor room through Socio's Video Rooms feature, which enables 1:1 and small group networking.

Socio's hybrid [sponsor features](#) allowed Ian and Dan to retain key sponsorships when some partners couldn't attend the in-person component of the hybrid event. One large-scale global sponsor was originally supposed to attend on-site but was unable to because of the company's travel restrictions. Fortunately, the brand trusted MAD//Fest and Socio's sponsorship capabilities, so they were able to maintain their original sponsorship package and update their assets to be compatible in the virtual platform.

It's also important that MAD//Fest can leverage Socio's customization features to promote their event partners. Waze, Google's navigation software, was unable to attend the in-person component of the 2021 festival, but MAD//Fest was able to customize the event and showcase Waze's branded icons in the Socio Platform.

“Sometimes it is the people no one can
imagine anything of who do the things no
one can imagine.”
— Alan Turing

#MADFESTLON

How MAD//Fest measures event success

Ian and Dan know how to execute a compelling event experience and analyze their event data to understand how they're proving ROI for MAD//Fest and their sponsors.

MAD//Fest measures ROI through:

- The number of attendees who register for future events
- The number of attendees who attend future events and bring colleagues
- The number of connections that virtual and in-person sponsors have made

“Ultimately, our ROI is measured for us. MAD//Fest doubles every year in revenue and is always a sell-out event to delegates. That's got to be because of what we're doing, but also because of the technology that we offer through Socio to make it a valuable event for everybody.”



Ian Houghton,
Co-founder MAD//Fest



The Future of MAD//Fest: Educating and inspiring marketers



A new adventure: MAD//Fest's marketing masterclasses

After tackling all three event formats: in-person, virtual, and hybrid, Ian and Dan are just getting started in their efforts to provide valuable content for marketers around the world.

In 2022, MAD//Fest will launch a marketing masterclass program on Socio's [Community Platform](#), which will provide marketing professionals working in any part of the industry with masterclass courses led by top marketing leaders around the globe.

"It's almost a way for a company to reward their up-and-coming stars, give them an opportunity to interact with some of the most senior people in the industry who they would never have a chance to speak to on a normal basis to learn from them... [It helps them become] a better marketer, a better advertising person, a better supplier to the industry, to genuinely understand what lies ahead for them in terms of where the industry is going, so that they are primed and in a much better position to move their career forward," Houghton says.



Where MAD//Fest events are going in 2022 (and beyond)

Even as the events industry is still navigating what events will look like in 2022 and beyond, MAD//Fest is moving full speed ahead with key learnings and insights from their repertoire of in-person, virtual, and hybrid events. For Dan and Ian, complacency isn't an option. They're excited about the future of MAD//Fest and how they can continuously surprise and engage their attendees.

"We never want things to be exactly the same. We want the show to constantly move forward and be different. We will change the way we do things. We'll move things around; we'll create new features in the show so that it has a slightly different feel every time people attend. There are a lot of event businesses at the moment that are dying a slow death because of COVID-19, but also because they haven't really changed what they've done for a very, very long time. We want to remain essential," Houghton says.

While it's tempting to expand MAD//Fest's in-person footprint around the world, Ian and Dan are conscious of the emerging COVID-19 variants and the risks globally held in-person events could pose to their attendees. MAD//Fest has always been committed to growing their presence in London, where the festival truly began.

"We feel that if we focus on having a global reach, our global audience will come to us when they can. We have to make London as strong as possible," Houghton says.



As for MAD//Fest's event format of choice-- hybrid isn't going anywhere. MAD//Fest will continue to host hybrid events to make their event experiences accessible to attendees around the world.

Dan and Ian are already gearing up for their 2022 event, "No Guts, No Glory: Take risks. Win hearts. Gain an edge," which, just like the MAD//Fest brand, is prepared to inspire, innovate, and challenge the status quo.

“No guts, no glory:
Take risks. Win hearts.
Gain an edge.”



MAD//Fest 2022