

Meta Virtual Expo in the B2B Retail: Opportunities and Added Value

INDUSTRY

Retail

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Summary

The World's First 3D WebGL-Based Virtual Expo aims to reduce the distance between exhibitors and visitors. People all over the world prefer to use a secure connecting method, such as virtual exhibitions, to meet their sourcing needs and connect with global manufacturers via digital platforms. This service aims to provide a virtually accessible fair with real-world experience with a wide range of business facilities like Instant Chatting, Audio Call & Video Call. Digital Brochures, Meeting schedules and so on.

Societal Change

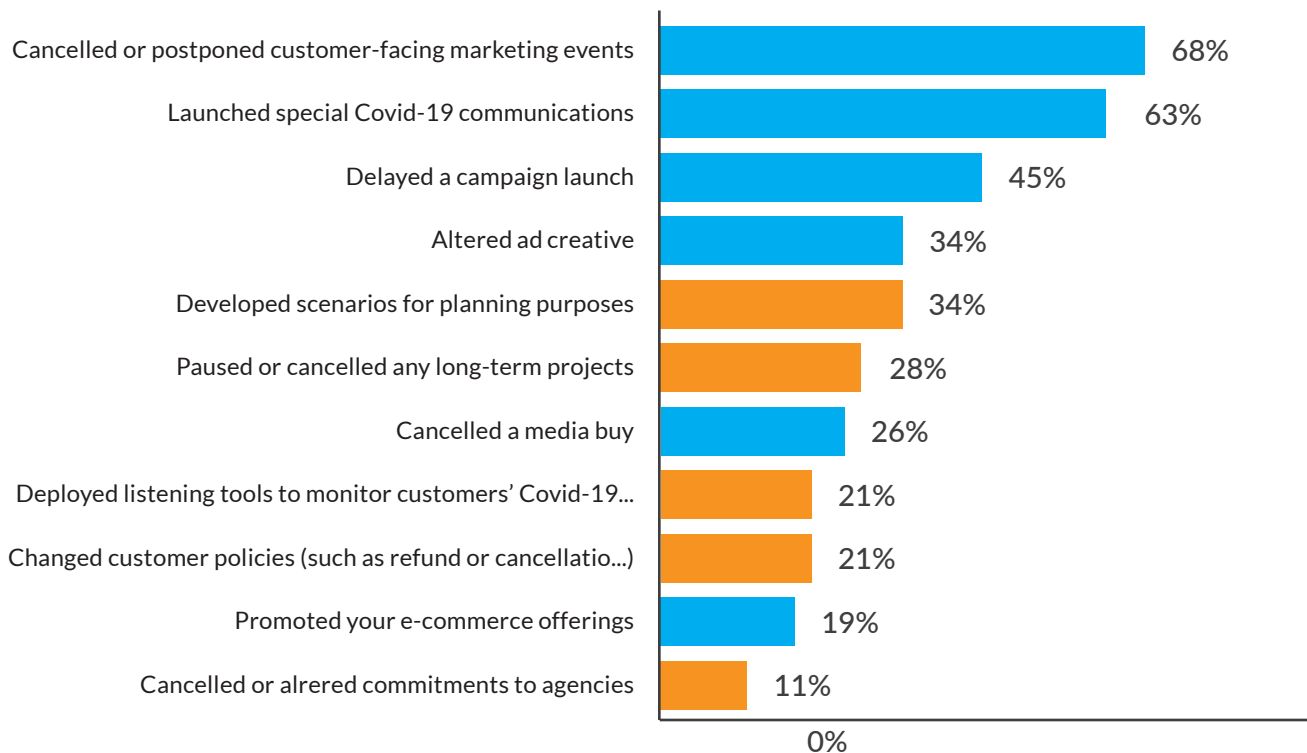
Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the societal change caused by digitalization and new technologies has accelerated at an unprecedented rate. All sectors, both public and private, are affected. Lockdowns have thrown retail, food and beverage, and tourism into a tailspin, threatening many livelihoods. To prevent insolvency, the food and beverage business is providing delivery services, the retail sector is seeking to remain available online, and the travel industry is hoping for rebooking rather than cancellations.

B2B organizations across the globe faced a stunning level of uncertainty regarding anything that included physical human interaction due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many businesses are encountering significant hurdles as a result of the Covid-19 epidemic. The demise of physical trade exhibitions has left a major void for B2B firms trying to extend their operations internationally, since these were a great venue to meet new business partners. Companies, however, cannot wait for physical trade displays to return; they must fill the void left by the epidemic.

According to recent Gartner research, 68% of Chief Marketing Officers (CMOs) cancelled or postponed customer-facing marketing events in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. [\[3\]](#) With so many marketers looking for ways to replace the brand awareness and lead volume that these events typically provide, it's no surprise that many are turning to B2B virtual exhibitions. However, the transition from in-person to virtual experiences isn't always straightforward — each medium has its own set of advantages and disadvantages to consider.

What if any actions, has your marketing department taken in response to the COVID-19 Pandemic?



Source: Gather For Marketers Research Connections Poll; March 19, 2020 (N=348 Marketers)

Figure: Impact of COVID-19 on exhibition [\[1\]](#)

With Covid-19 restrictions lifted and millions of vaccines now available nationwide, marketers are eager to resume normal operations. This return to normalcy, however, is somewhat paradoxical, because, despite the industry's growing restlessness behind its screens, work-related travel isn't high on to-do lists.

As a result, virtual exhibitions will remain an industry mainstay for the majority of 2021. However, as more organizations recognize the value of virtual exhibitions and host their own, the field is becoming oversaturated. As event organizers struggle to increase and retain attendance in a crowded market, marketers are taking a step back and focusing on providing more intimate experiences that rely less on mass appeal and more on reaching a target audience with relevant, high-quality content.

Change in the B2B Retail Industry

With the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, live events around the world have been cancelled, leaving many marketers wondering how they will generate the same quality leads they did at live trade shows. However, even in the absence of face-to-face interaction, companies can find meaningful ways to engage with their customers via virtual exhibitions.

Many B2B marketers have heard of virtual exhibitions or have participated in one themselves. A B2B (business to business) marketplace is a digital platform that allows businesses to connect with other businesses and conduct business in one location. While they may not provide the same level of engagement as a live trade show, they do provide an opportunity to grow business and generate new sales leads.

The internet is now brimming with virtual exhibition platforms that provide engaging and interactive solutions. Virtual exhibitions are being used by businesses and organizations all over the world to grow their operations and connect with global delegates. A comprehensive virtual exhibition platform can be used to organize virtual meetings, virtual conferences, virtual trade shows, virtual events, and so on.

Exhibitors may initially perceive hosting a virtual trade fair on a virtual exhibition platform as a daunting task. The benefits of virtual exhibitions are numerous and far outweigh the benefits of in-person trade fair events. The benefits provided by the event format encouraged exhibitors to transform their in-person events into visually rich virtual environments.

Meta Virtual Expo has changed the retail market's future. Previously, the Covid-19's restrictions compelled businesses to conduct their operations online. The shift was widely accepted and is still in effect. If the retail industry wants to maximize leads and sales, the virtual exhibition must be implemented. It specifically provides customers with a one-of-a-kind experience and assists merchants in making their products and services appealing to an international market.

Surprisingly, a virtual presence would be extremely beneficial for retail organizations seeking to enter the global market. The platform enables businesses to host an exclusive sales event by leveraging exclusive features, technology, and tools. A virtual exhibition environment, like a physical showroom, market, or shop, allows customers to view multiple available products and make informed purchasing decisions. They can also interact with merchants in real-time, request demos, and inquire about services. Customers, for example, move around the exhibition booths, inspect the displayed items, and engage in a one-to-one discussion about the product.

Challenges

In the past, business events such as exhibitions and trade fairs played an important role in business development and marketing activities; they allow exhibitors to showcase their products to potential buyers, generate leads, drive sales, and grow their business.

However, for all of its benefits, it had a few drawbacks, the most significant of which were its limited reach and poor ROI (leads generated). Given the investment in logistics, procurement, bookings, set-up costs, and management, the number of people attending these events was disappointing. This was primarily due to the events industry's lack of digitization. However, with the advent of virtual exhibitions, the needle has shifted.

Moreover, the primary challenge that exhibitors and sponsors face today is figuring out how to get the same opportunities for brand awareness and lead generation during virtual exhibitions without a conference floor or physical stalls.

To meet social distancing requirements, event professionals have been replacing physical event budgets with virtual ones, but the purpose of these virtual exhibitions remains the same as physical ones – customer relations, education, and retention, with the goal of generating a pipeline of leads.

Motivation

Virtual exhibitions are interactive environments that either replicate offline stores or are new digital showrooms designed to allow customers to shop in an offline-like environment. The virtual exhibition's aesthetics can be inspired by the existing physical showroom or by an entirely new concept.

The notion that you must be physically present at an exhibition is simply false today. The internet allows you to do it all from the comfort of your own home or even while traveling.

Virtual exhibitions are exhibitions or expos that take place virtually over the internet, regardless of where you are in the world or what device you use.

Indeed, virtual exhibitions have grown in popularity to the point where they are now the preferred mode of hosting exhibitions, owing to their global reach and high ROI.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a scope for B2B Virtual Exhibition to grow. The Healthcare World in a report said the US saw a 30% increase in traffic on B2B sites. The rise was mainly in life science and pharma industries as the demand for these products increased dramatically for corona virus-related research.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, global buyers have canceled orders of around \$3.08 billion in around 1,150 factories in Bangladesh.

The pandemic has benefited the virtual event platform market. With the help of virtual exhibition via Meta Virtual Expo platform, the COVID-19 pandemic has enabled the transformation of traditional events into virtual events.

"Almost 89% of event organizers have claimed that even when in-person meetings resume post-pandemic, virtual or hybrid events will remain a critical part of their event strategy," according to Aventri, an event management software company. Despite the pressure and competition for attention, virtual and hybrid events are here to stay. [\[4\]](#)

"In 2020, the number of organizations planning a virtual event doubled." [\[2\]](#)

A comprehensive virtual exhibition via Meta Virtual Expo platform tracks every footprint from the beginning to the end of the event.

? How many people attended the virtual event exhibition?

? How did they get around during the event?

? How did they interact with virtual booths?

? What did they interact with?

? What did they enjoy, share, and download?

Every detail is recorded by a comprehensive virtual trade show platform. It aids in the creation of a detailed analytics report that aids in the measurement of performance metrics. In short, valuable data tracking assists in determining the hotspots with the highest engagement and identifying impediments to work on for the next event.

World's First 3D WebGL Virtual Expo

WebGL is based on OpenGL ES 2.0, which is a stripped-down version of OpenGL with fewer features. [5] It also uses a JavaScript engine, which is slower than native code. WebGL isn't universally supported or standardized across browsers. There's also the issue that WebGL applications use a JavaScript engine rather than a fully developed desktop application. Even though Chrome's V8 engine has made significant progress in improving JavaScript speed, it will still be slower than a native program.

For these issues with WebGL technology, a virtual expo was never developed for this platform. We took some decisions to make the application serve all its functionalities within the limitations. Hence, we planned accordingly and created World's first WebGL-based Virtual Expo.

Platforms

Meta Virtual Expo was originally developed for the WebGL platform for Supported Web Browsers. Over time it was also ported for Desktop (Windows, macOS) and Mobile applications (Android, iOS).

Key Features of Meta Virtual Expo

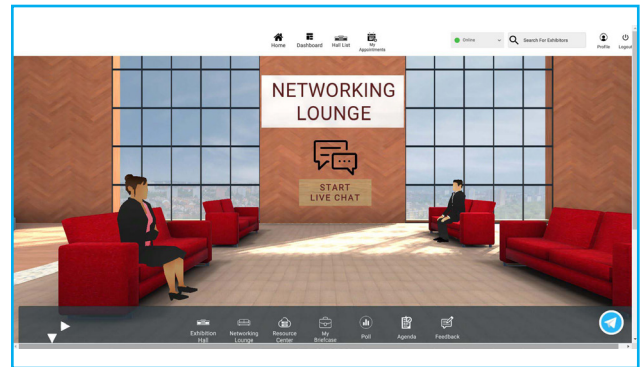
One-of-a-kind Online B2B Networking and Sourcing Platform where buyers can virtually meet, discuss, compare, and connect with local and international service providers for their sourcing needs via live chat, online call, or video call. [6]

1. **Fully customized 3D architectures for exhibition**
2. **Data can be configured from a cloud server back-end**
3. **Personalized accounts for individual users**
4. **Easy navigation through the 3D world**
5. **Corporate network building via instant chatting, audio call & video call between exhibitors and visitors**
6. **Wide range of business activities - collect business documents, can contact company representatives, schedule meetings, sales info & social links**
7. **Admin reports with attendee trends, webinar engagement numbers, booth visits, content download frequency**
8. **Watch Promotional videos directly on YouTube**
9. **Easily accessible event information**
10. **Multiple exhibition halls**
11. **Manage appointments**
12. **Arrange polls**
13. **Get feedback from visitors**

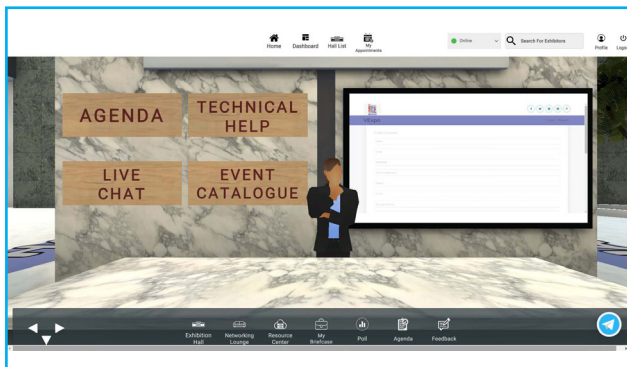
Sneak Peek of Meta Virtual Expo



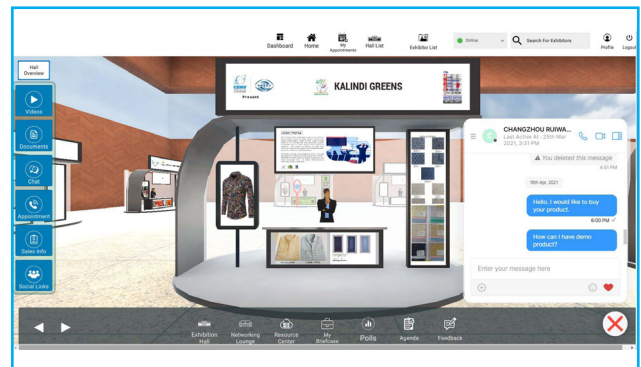
Entrance of Meta Virtual Expo



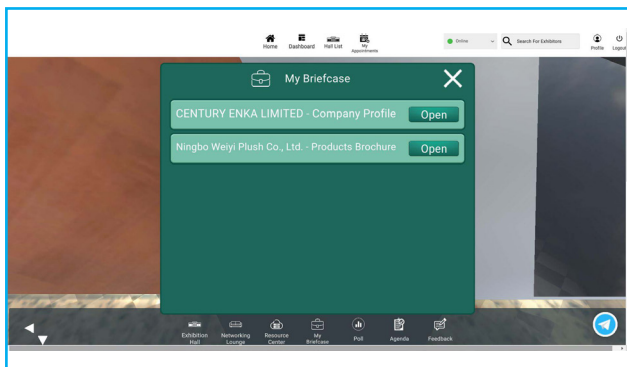
Networking Lounge



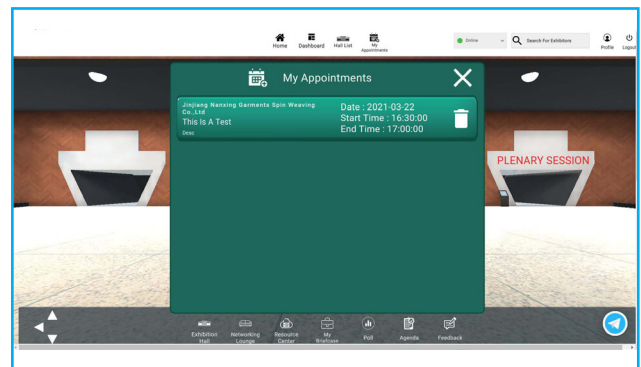
Reception



Virtual Stall of Meta Virtual Expo



Personalized Briefcase for Documents



Appointment Scheduler

Figure: Screenshots of Meta Virtual Expo

Requirements for the Meta Virtual Expo in the B2B Retail Sector

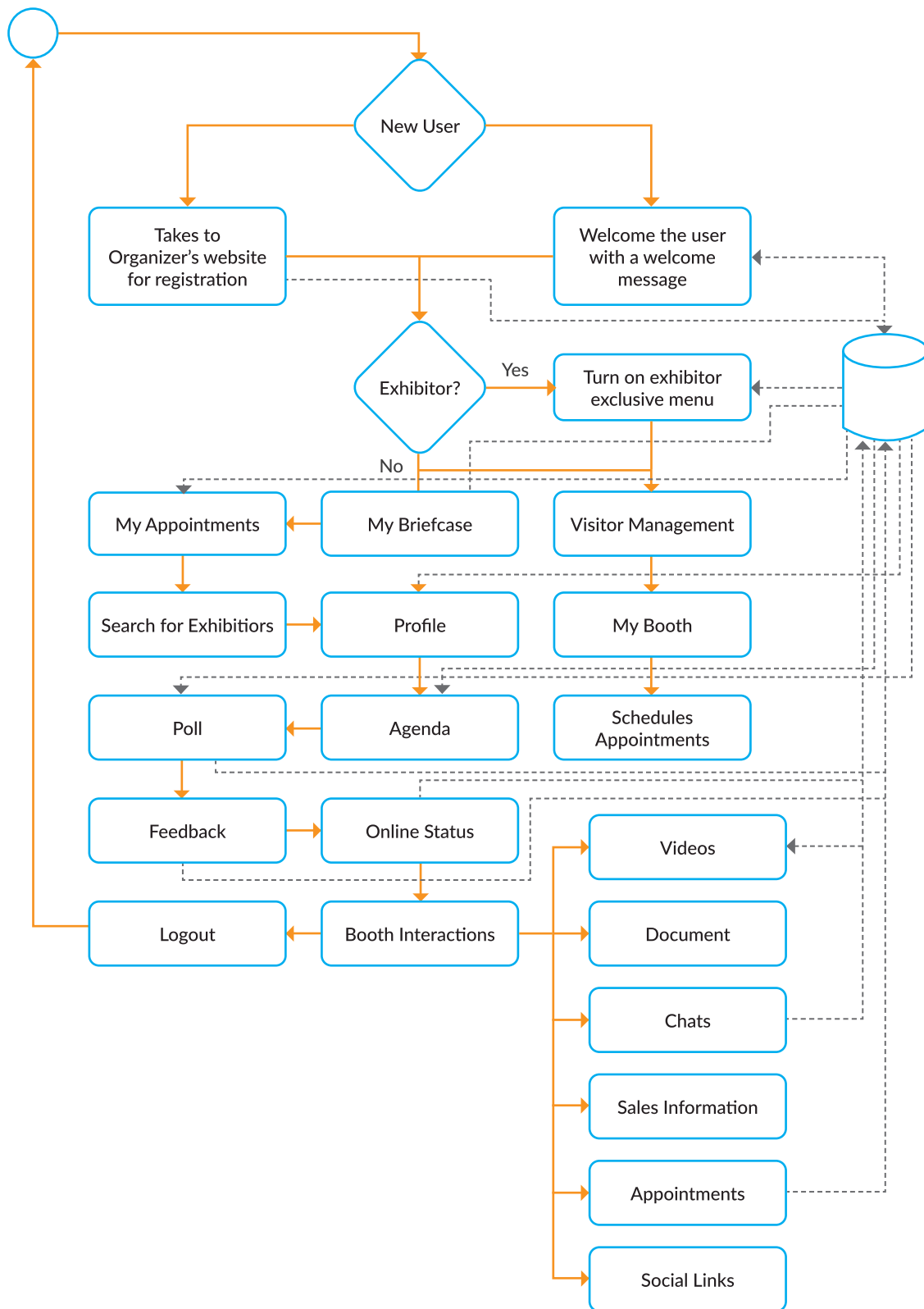


Figure: System Design

The requirements for the virtual expo should be defined with as much precision as possible to consider the aspects described above. The following diagram shows an example and excerpt of how the requirements can be visualized in practice via a “system design”.

The easy to be understanding navigation is very important for Meta Virtual Expo. Several factors were considered while creating and designing the levels, including ease of access, Separate Lobby for interactions, Networking, and others. After intensive brainstorming, we created a waypoint system that fulfills all the traversing options we needed. Here is a flowchart of the navigation system we created for the expo.

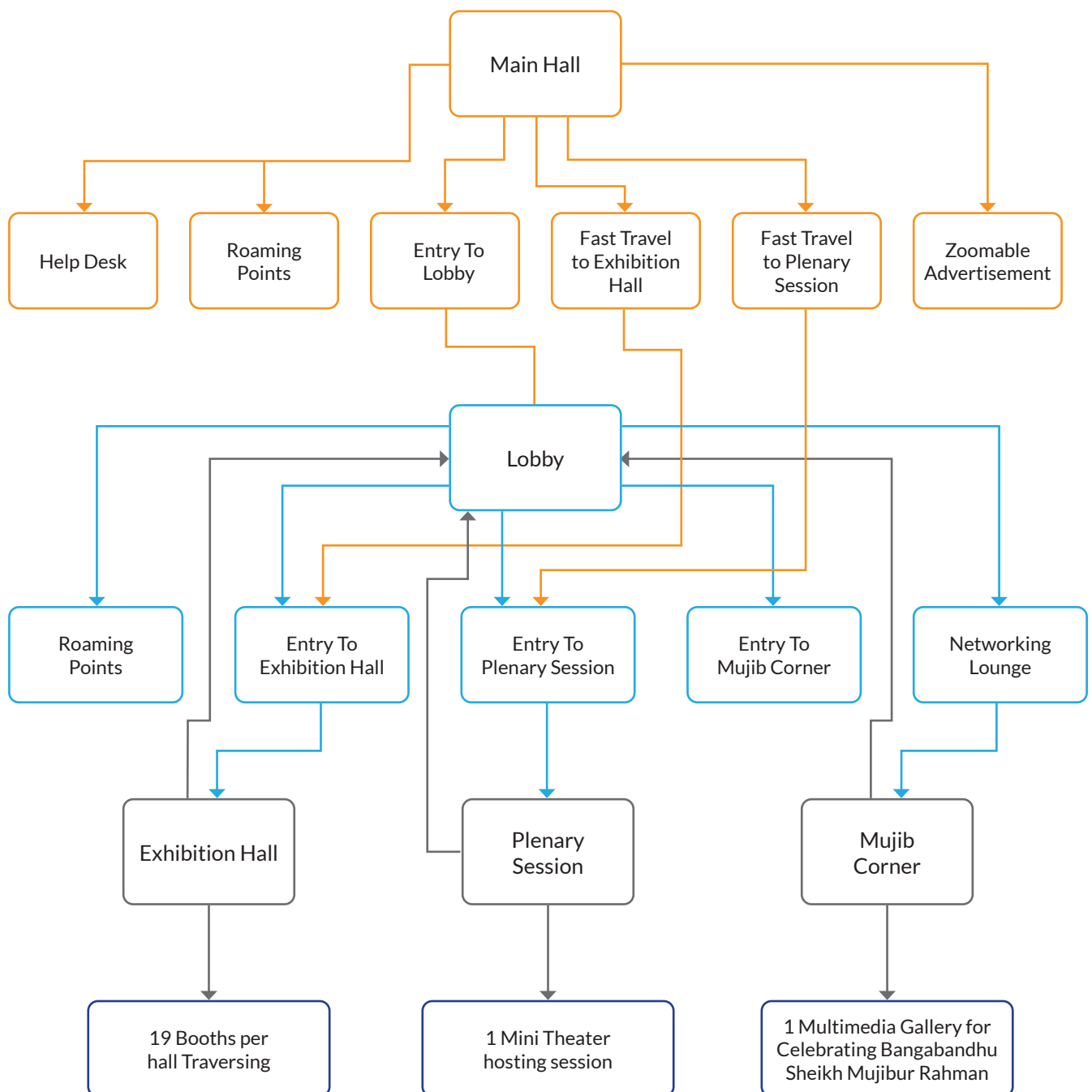


Figure: System Design

Things kept in mind while developing

Meta Virtual Expo was targeted toward a demographic of 30 – 60 years businessmen. Most of them are not familiar with the gamified experience. Also, Content should be easily available to access for the users, so that they don't get lost in complicated interactions. Based on these requirements, we decided to focus on these issues while developing

Only Mouse/One Hand-based Navigation

Users must be able to navigate through the 3D World using only one hand. Therefore, the navigation must be done by mouse for desktops and single-finger gestures for mobile devices.

Graphical Limitations of WebGL

As discussed in a previous section, we had to create all the 3D Models and rendering considering the limitations WebGL possesses.

Load Time

As this is an application targeted at businessmen, time is important. So, we had to optimize wherever we can to minimize the load time.

Universal Access Menu System

Users must be able to use any functionality of the application from any area of the 3D World.

A Unified Cross-Platform Communication System

To make the most out of the expo, we decided to implement a chat system where users can chat or have an audio/video call with other participants.

YouTube Integration

To make the plenary sessions and video transmission easy, we decided to integrate YouTube video playback into our system.

System Idle Time Utilization

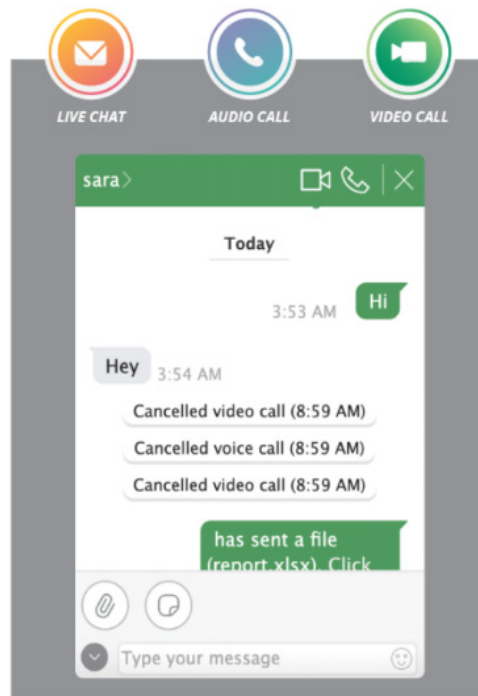
To minimize loading time and also for dealing with unexpected network interruption we decided to utilize user idle times to load data that can be needed.

Dynamically Generated Feedback Forms

Dynamic post requests should be created using field names for submitting

Agora-Messenger 23

Among all other platforms, the Agora SDK [\[7\]](#) provides a global messaging cloud service as well as real-time communication. For Unity, it enables the integration of in-game real-time communications to boost player engagement. [\[17\]](#)



The SDK includes the following features to enhance the gaming experience:

- **Cross-platform:** Available for macOS, Windows, Android, and iOS. It also has native SDK interoperability allowing you to connect to native and Web Agora apps.
- **Audio and video communication:** Sub-second extremely low latency audio and video communication inside your game.
- **Spatial sound effects:** Spatial sound effects add a sense of reality & depth to the sounds of your game.
- **Voice change:** Add more fun to your game by enabling voice changing through pitch, reverb, and equalizer.
- **Screen share:** Share the screen over the live stream.

Voice and Video Communication in Agora SDK

Agora utilizes the procedure outlined below for voice and video communication as below:

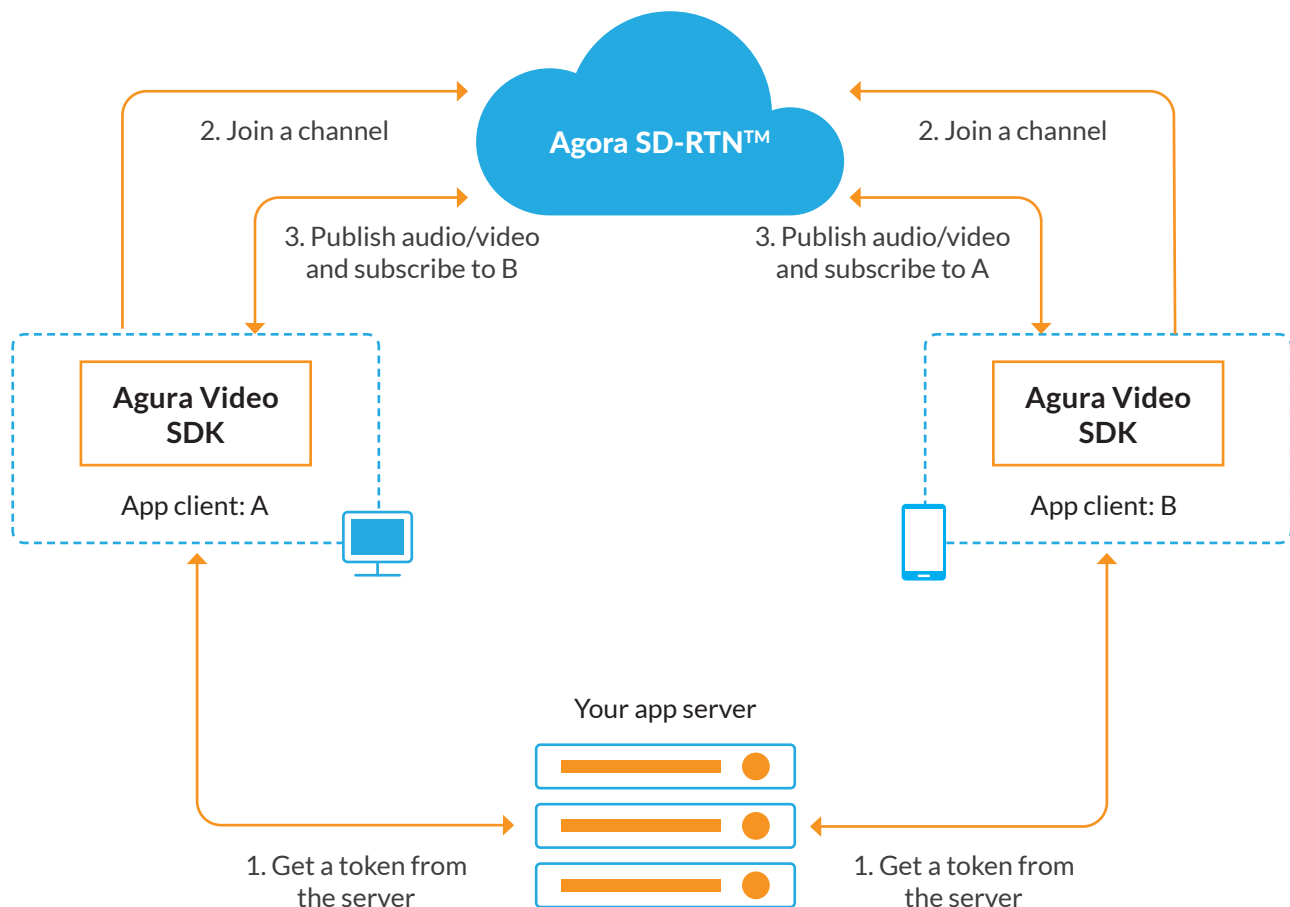


Figure: Flowchart of Video Communication between two users

Before establishing a connection to the remote user, agora implements an RTC token which is a credential that authenticates a user when your app client joins a channel. In a test or production environment, the app client retrieves tokens from a server in the security infrastructure. [\[8\]](#)

App clients that pass the same channel name to join and after joining a channel, the app client automatically publish and subscribes to audio and video in the channel.

When the app opens, it creates a RtcEngine instance, enables the video, joins a channel, and publishes the local video to the lower frame layout in the UI. When another user joins the channel, the app catches the join event and adds the remote video to the top frame layout in the UI.

The following figure shows the API call sequence of implementing Video Call.

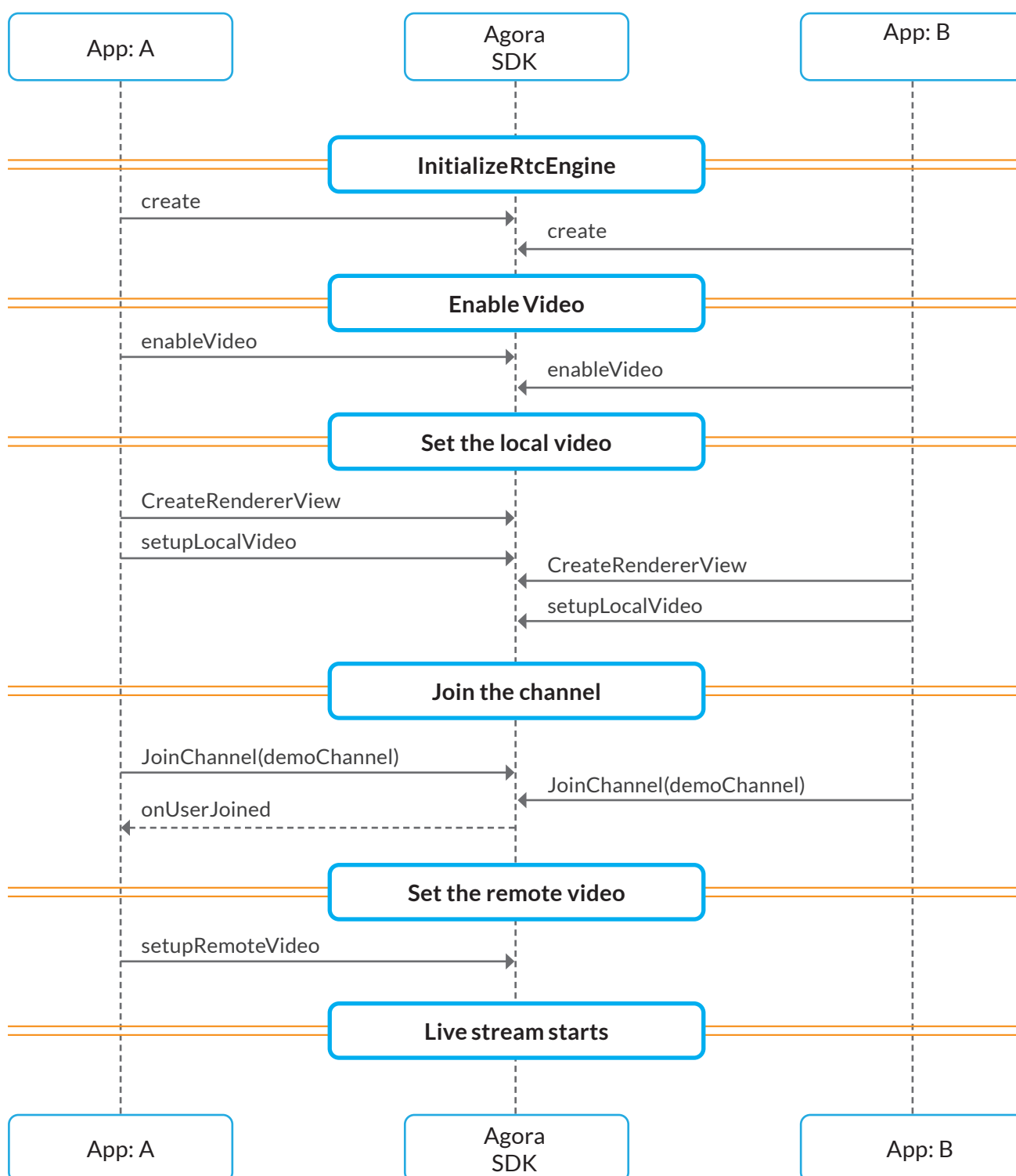


Figure: Flowchart of creating a video channel

In Agora RTM, there are two possible ways of developing the system. The first one is, we can put both users (sender and receiver) in a channel and thus they can communicate by chatting with each other. The channel will only allow two users on both sides.

Real-time Messaging in Agora SDK

The second one is a peer-to-peer messaging system. In this way, users can communicate with each other only by using their peer id.

For the real-time messaging system, agora basically uses a peer-to-peer communication system. The following figures will describe the procedure of sending and receiving messages in Agora RTM. [\[9\]](#)

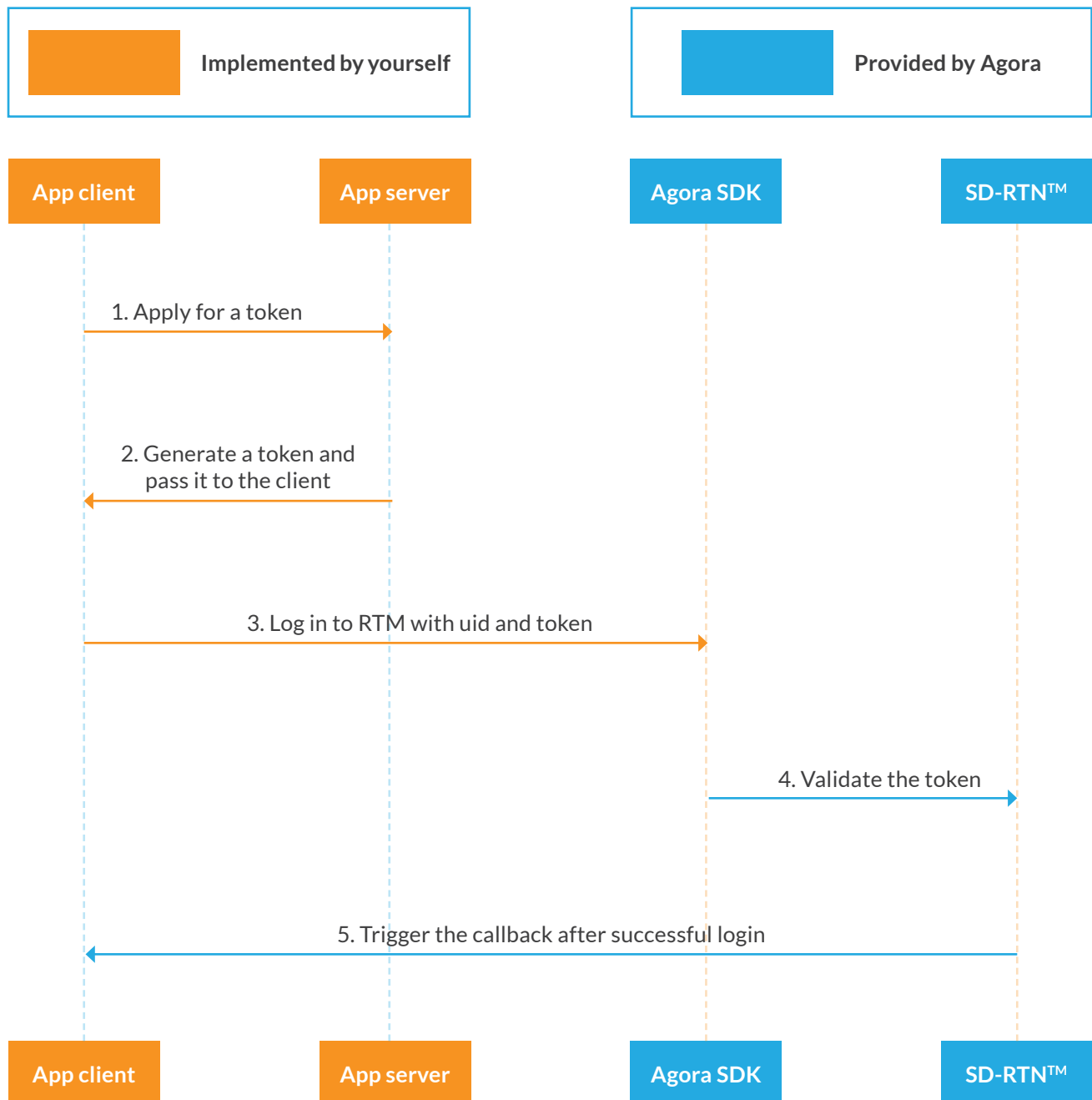


Figure: Flowchart of creating Agora Real-time Message (RTM) token system

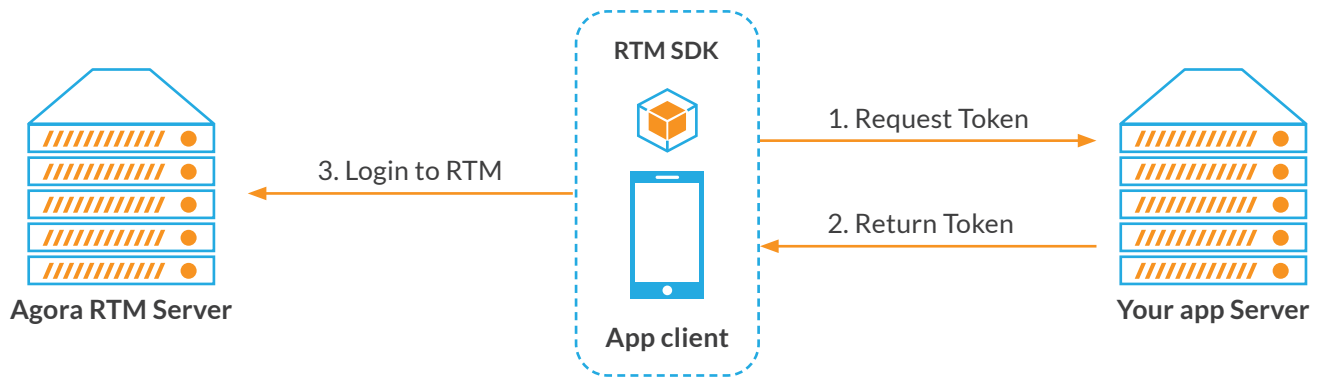


Figure: Flow diagram of token validation process

The login process includes:

- The app client requests a token from your app server.
- The app server returns the token to the app client.
- The app client logs in to RTM with the token.

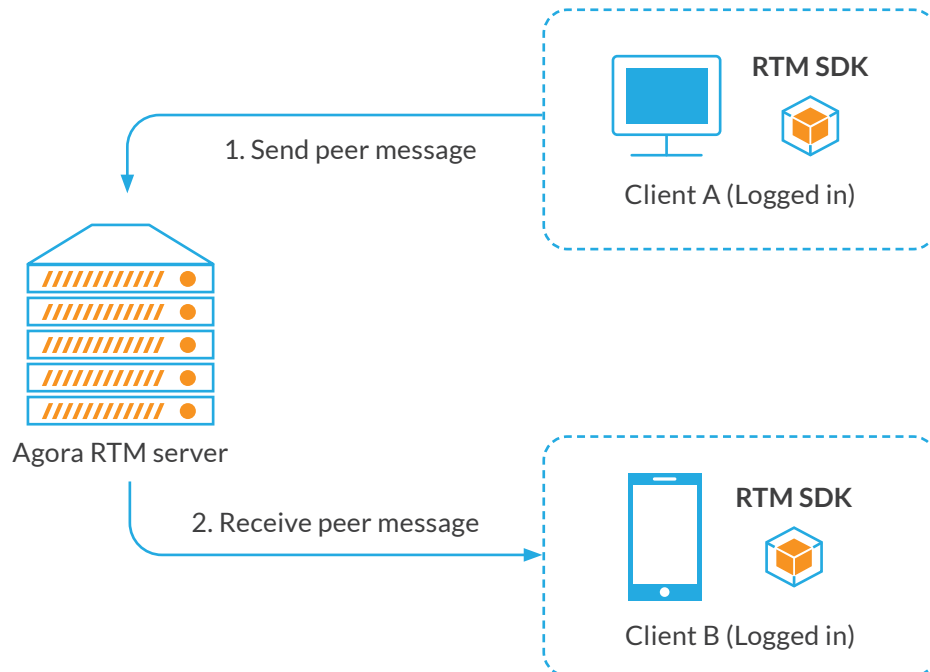


Figure: Flow diagram of Chat Communication between two users

The peer messaging process includes:

- Client A sends a peer message to the RTM server.
- The RTM server sends the message to client B. Client B receives the peer message.

For the RTM chat system, Agora needs an RTM token for authentication. A token is a dynamic key generated by App ID, App Certificate, user ID, token expiration timestamp, and other information. This token is available in the Agora development console. For scenarios requiring high security, such as the production environment, Agora recommends using an RTM token for authentication. For generating an RTM token for authentication, which needs to set up its own custom server. [\[10\]](#)

Benefits of Agora-Messenger 23 Plugin

In Meta Virtual Expo, a virtual trade fair that allows the creation of an easy channel of communication between exhibitors and visitors.

The Real-Time Engagement Platform is the only stabilizable way to develop a messaging system in unity. There are two other major competitors with agora here. As you can see, Agora has its own SDK for the unity engine while the other two solutions don't. Moreover, every user who creates an account in Agora gets 10,000 minutes every month. The other one such as Twilio has only provided the first-time trial number of minutes which is unspecified. Agora provides community support for building video chat integrated applications in unity. Overall if you want to develop a messaging system in unity, Agora is one of the most fruitful solutions of all. [\[11\]](#) [\[12\]](#) [\[13\]](#)

List of possible solution	Provides a direct SDK for Unity Engine	Has a free tier for testing for video chat, if yes then amount	Provides all essential tools for testing and implementing their services	Provides community support for building video chat integrated application in Unity	Pricing
Agora	✓	10,000 minutes every month	✓	✓	\$0.99 per/1000 minutes
Twilio	✗	First time trial credit number of minutes unspecified	✓	✗	\$4 -\$8 per/1000 minutes depending on features
CometChat	✗	Unlimited as long as you can limit the number of users up to only 25	✓	✗	\$49 -\$149 per month depending on different features

Figure: Difference Between [Agora](#), [Twilio](#), [CometChat](#)

Behind the Meta Virtual Expo: Robust Backend

In this application, there are nested relationships among entities and our data model is rigid. That's why a relational database was chosen. To optimize backend query, and data organization we have chosen MySQL relational database management system. We have categorized the APIs based on their main functionalities as described below:

Authentication:

This set of APIs deals registration and log in activities of all level of users such as Admin, Exhibitor, Visitor, Super Admin etc.

Event:

New events can be created by the admins.

Main Lobby:

Admin can set main lobby images, videos, documents, agenda, event catalogue etc. via this API.

Exhibition & Conference Hall:

Admin can set unique properties like images, graphics and videos to the exhibition halls & conference halls. Admin has the privilege to decide the maximum attendee capacity of the halls by defining the size of the halls.

Exhibitor & Buyers:

Both exhibitors and buyers can update their profiles. They can also bookmark booth documents, images, videos etc. which links are saved in the cloud backend. Users can make appointments for a meeting based on the available slots on the online calendar. A wide range of business activities - collecting business documents, contacting company representatives, getting connected to social links and sales info is functioned via APIs.

Booth:

The exhibitor can choose his preferable booth appearance from various options. They can set the booth images, flyers, documents, and social media links from a cloud server backend. Exhibitors can play promotional videos in their booth directly from YouTube. Assigned representatives can communicate instantly with the visitors via the messaging tool previously described.

Plenary Session:

Admins can create the plenary sessions. They can set related images and videos to the plenary sessions.

Poll:

Admin can create a poll for the specific event. Exhibitors and buyers can submit their opinion in the poll.

Benefits of Meta Virtual Expo

A brand can use virtual exhibition technology to improve its online presence by promoting its products through high-resolution graphics and an interactive and user-friendly interface. Customers can navigate a virtual environment, click on a specific product to reveal its information, and view it, and communicate with a sales representative via the chat function.

Virtual exhibitions have gained popularity since the entire event industry and various businesses were forced to enter the digital space. Several businesses and corporations have used virtual events to expand their operations and connect with potential delegates all over the world. [\[16\]](#)

Better Brand Visibility

Virtual exhibitions provide brands with 360-degree visibility. They enable businesses to promote their goods and services to attendees from all over the world. In comparison to on-site trade fairs, virtual trade fairs have a longer lifespan. This means that the brand will be visible to the audience for a longer period of time. Furthermore, because the events are taking place online, audiences have access to the same on-demand, which unquestionably results in increased brand visibility and exposure.

Global Reach

Virtual exhibitions can help you reach potential customers in any part of the world. By removing the need for and expense of travel, lodging, meals, and venue, for example, the likelihood of participation and lead conversion increases. As a result, businesses can now showcase their offerings to a wide range of people and establish several new connections.

Cost-Effective

A virtual exhibition allows organizers and attendees to save money and time. Virtual events eliminate the costs of hiring a venue, hiring staff, providing food and drinks, building booth setups, lodging, and so on. With virtual trade fairs, you only need to invest in the right technology to provide immersive experiences to your audience. It aids in providing a scaled-up version of a real-life event experience to the audience.

Allows Real-time Interactions

Physical trade shows provide attendees with numerous opportunities for 1:1 or group discussions. Introverts, on the other hand, miss out on this opportunity. They also miss out on the opportunity to interact with sponsors at the sponsor booth. Virtual exhibitions enable all participants to communicate easily with exhibitors and other attendees. The virtual event platform's live chat and networking lounge features enable them to communicate with organizers, virtual booth delegates, and so on.

Meaningful Data Analytics

Virtual exhibitions assist in obtaining a comprehensive report from registration to execution. You'll be able to track the number of attendees who navigated or communicated with our virtual trade fair platform. What information did the attendees share? Which engagement features were the most popular among attendees and exhibitors? How many of the leads were converted? And a lot more. Virtual trade fairs aid in the collection of valuable data that allows you to track the progress of the virtual event.

SWOT Analysis

A SWOT analysis helps with the fundamental design of the Virtual Exhibition for the chosen use case. Applying the SWOT analysis to Virtual Exhibition in the B2B retail sector means that strengths and weaknesses directly pertain to the virtual exhibition itself or are considered as internal features (characteristics). Opportunities, possibilities, and threats are external effects that complicate or even prevent the realization of the virtual exhibition. Sample questions in the fields of the SWOT analysis for supporting a decision are listed here.

Strength	Weakness
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is unique about our virtual exhibition?• What are the advantages/benefits of the system?• What are the greatest benefits of the virtual exhibition and what will they be in the future?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What needs to be prevented during real-world implementation?• Is the Knowledge base of the system sufficient?• What improvements to the Virtual Exhibition system are necessary?• What are the disadvantages of the virtual exhibition?
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Which external changes bring opportunities?• What are the current trends in the retail sector?• What is lacking in the retail sector? Can the Virtual exhibition fill this gap?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What negative aspects currently exist in the retail sector?• Is political instability having an impact?• Is a change in consumer behavior expected?• What are the hurdles expected in the implementation of the system?• Are there standards, regulations, laws, or new ordinances which negatively influence the use of virtual exhibition?

Overall, it can be said that virtual exhibitions in the retail sector are highly adept at controlling, guiding, and supporting the B2B retail industry.



Client Profile

CEMS-Global USA is a multinational exhibition and convention organizer headquartered in New York with operations on four continents. CEMS-Global has been dedicated to organizing professional B2B trade shows for key business sectors in the trade and economy since its inception in 1992. [\[14\]](#)

CEMS-Global USA, as a company with a global presence and a wide-ranging proven track record, also provides high-value management & strategy consultancy services, putting its knowledge and vast global experience at the disposal of the Client, and assisting Trade/ Business Associations and Enterprises to improve work strategies, improve efficiency & performance, or enter new markets, using our proven system to achieve the goal. [\[15\]](#)

Conclusion and Outlook

Virtual exhibitions are clearly the retail market's future. Consumers' online shopping experiences have prompted businesses to invest in virtual reality and software. Who wouldn't want their company to be known all over the world? Retailers are increasingly moving their sales processes online to encourage international customers to make quick purchases.

Virtual exhibitions are equally beneficial for B2B and B2C segments; in the case of B2C segments, it includes industries such as jewelry, consumer goods, and clothing. Engineering products and IOT products are examples of B2B segments. The virtual exhibition has given business owners an entirely new way to take their company to the next level.

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