Keys to a Winning Webinar

Planning and practice are keys to a standout Web conference.

BY MARY WINTER

Web cameras are standard equipment in most statehouses—more than 40 legislatures now live-broadcast at least one chamber’s floor proceedings on the Internet. A close cousin of the webcast—the webinar, or Web conference—has also become a part of our daily lives. Although both are powerful communication tools, webinars are also interactive—audiences can converse in real time with the webinar hosts.

There are many variations of webinars, but generally, one or more presenters give a talk, accompanied by PowerPoint slides, while audience members in scattered locations watch and listen on computers, tablets or smartphones.

The advantages of webinars over face-to-face seminars start with major cost and time savings—no venue is needed, and no one has to travel (both also good for the environment). Webinars potentially can reach millions of people, and most are archived so they can be viewed later, anytime, anywhere, or searched for specific content.

Creating a webinar doesn’t require a Ph.D., but creating a good one does require planning and practice. Few things are worse than a boring webinar. Below are a few pointers on how to create the opposite—an engaging session that leaves attendees wishing it hadn’t gone by so quickly.

What’s a Good Topic?
Topics generally present themselves. Sometimes they cover policy subjects—understanding the complexities of the budget, education finance or health care, for example. Foundations and nonprofits often create webinars to update members on a particular program’s progress or new government regulations. NCSL policy experts frequently host webinars that keep lawmakers and legislative staff abreast of topics ranging from drones to tele-health to state tax policies.

Is a Webinar the Right Medium?
Consider your audience, the subject and the time you’ll need to cover your topic. Your topic should be fairly narrow, such as “Hugging the Cactus: How to Deal With the Media” or “Private-Public Partnerships in School Breakfast Programs.” People have relatively short attention spans in a webinar setting, so if the topic can’t be covered in an hour—some experts say two—a webinar is probably not the best medium.

Who Does What?
The organizer or host, presenter(s) and assistants are the main players. The host is in charge. He or she picks the topic, finds the presenters, reviews the script and slides, and oversees marketing, registration and logistics. The host usually introduces the presenter and moderates questions. The presenter writes the script, prepares the slides and answers audience questions. Assistants generally help with equipment.

What Software Should I Use?
Software to run the webinar is available from a variety of vendors. Research what’s available and choose one you’re sure works with your computer and equipment. Study the training video or manual and practice using the software.

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How Should I Plan my Time?

Three to four months before webinar: Discuss possible topics, presenters, assistants and an organizer; set date for the webinar.

Two to three months before: Choose webinar software, location and logistics; finalize time, date, presenter, assistants and marketing team. When setting a time, consider all your attendees’ locations and different time zones.

One to two months before: Review presenters’ scripts and slides; conduct at least one dry run, testing all phones and equipment.

Two to three weeks before: Publicize the webinar. Write a short description, including title, presenters, date, time, where to log in and phone number. Post the information on your website, emails, online event calendars, listservs, newsletters, blogs, Twitter and Facebook.

How Much Will it Cost?

Cost depends on many things, including how many will attend your webinar—20 or 200? A do-it-yourself webinar can be cheap, while a totally outsourced, professional webinar can cost thousands. Ken Molay, a marketing expert who writes a webinar blog and created Webinar Success, says there are three primary expenses:

- Technology, including a Web conferencing platform, such as Google+ or GoToWebinar, and phone lines. These are musts.
- Services, such as Molay’s company, that will put the whole show together for you, for a price.
- Promotion, including press releases and email blasts.

Molay writes: “You can get some good, capable Web conferencing software on the less expensive side, learn how to use it yourself, manage everything in-house, and invite people already on your own list. Total cost, maybe $500.” If you’re a wealthy corporation, you might spend $15,000 to $30,000. Molay says a good mid-range is $2,000 to $4,000.

Sources: Entrepreneur.com, Mobileoffice.about.com, NCCL Legislative Staff Coordinating Committee, Wsuccess.com, Techsoup.org and WebinarsOnAir.com.

Webinar Wrongs

1. **TEXT-HEAVY SLIDES**
   Each slide should contain only one idea.

2. **NOT ENOUGH VISUALS**
   People never outgrow cartoons. A variety of simple illustrations, charts, graphs and photos keeps viewers engaged.

3. **POOR SET-UP**
   Don’t skimp when introducing the presenters. Attendees are more likely to engage if you’ve talked up your experts’ backgrounds and credentials.

4. **FLAT DELIVERY**
   Be enthusiastic. If the organizer and presenter aren’t enjoying themselves, the attendees certainly won’t.

5. **WEAK PHOTOS**
   Without a speaker to look at, the slides need to be top quality. The first three slides should set the stage with the webinar’s title; the presenter’s name, title and head shot; and finally, the main points to be covered.

6. **OVERCONFIDENCE**
   Don’t assume you can pull off a great webinar without practice. The more dry runs you can do in the days before the webinar, the better. Technical and audio issues can torpedo an otherwise great webinar.