

Planning a Successful Web Seminar

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A New Way to Meet

For some time now, the Web has been the preferred place to deliver content. For better or worse, it is simply the default method of communicating. So when it became possible to send live images and sound over the Internet, and have others see them in real time, Web conferences became the new rage. Since the late 1990's, we've seen a proliferation of technologies for communicating in real time over the Web.

With the recent rise in gas prices, however, and the related interest in environmentally sound business practices, the ability to communicate to others without physically gathering them together has taken on a new urgency. Add to that the development of tools that actually deliver rich presentation possibilities, and the Web seminar seems like a great choice for many applications.

This paper will discuss some of the major issues involved with holding a Web-based seminar and getting the most out of it. Specifically, we will address the following topics:

- What are the advantages of holding a seminar over the Web?
- Which kinds of content are well-suited to Web-based communication?
- How should a Web seminar be marketed and the audience managed?

The Advantages of Web-Based Seminars

Why Stage a Web Seminar at All?

To begin with, let's face the obvious: there is no substitute for being face-to-face with other people. No conference call, email dialogue, or Web seminar can provide the kind of immediate, personal feedback that a physical meeting can provide. To expect a Web seminar to be exactly like a face-to-face meeting is unrealistic and counterproductive. There are, however, very good reasons why a Web seminar can be the best way to communicate in a given situation.

Increased Visibility

For instance, if your goal is simply to increase your exposure to clients or potential clients, then a Web seminar can be a very unusual and effective way to achieve this. In a Web seminar situation you can not only deliver your message, but also give that message a human face. If you want your clients to know that you are staffed with seasoned professionals, you can say it in print (and you should), but you can also let them see these professionals and hear them speak authoritatively in their own voices. This is an entirely different kind of exposure, in that it makes you and your people literally visible. A Web seminar is one way to demonstrate your expertise and do it in a very emotionally powerful way.

Perceived Technological Savvy

Related to this, staging a Web-based seminar can speak powerfully about your level of technological savvy—simply by virtue of it happening. This is not to say that one should hold Web-based seminars just because it's possible; for some businesses, the ability to stage such events has no bearing at all upon their ability to conduct their real affairs. If, however, your business does need to convey a sense of being technologically current, then a Web-based event can help deliver that impression. If there is already a good reason to hold the seminar—that is, if you actually have valuable information to relate to your client base—then doing it via a Web-based seminar can certainly also speak to your company's fluency in current communication technologies.

Direct Feedback

While a face-to-face meeting provides greater opportunity for immediate, subtle layers of feedback, a Web-based seminar can provide a level of feedback beyond printed or other pre-recorded formats. Phone calls, emails, or online chat windows can be set up to allow viewers to ask questions about or comment upon the presenter's content in real time. Of course, these questions and comments can then be responded to immediately. Compare this to static ways of delivering content, and the advantages are obvious: The viewer receives more information faster, can respond immediately, and receives the message that you're interested in receiving that feedback as quickly as possible.

Of course, the feedback may not be coming from clients. An employee education seminar can also be an excellent choice for Web communications. If your organization is spread out among regional offices, or if you make use of individual contractors across the country, the Web can certainly be a great way to get information to them quickly, and get their feedback immediately. Decisions can be made without waiting for responses to trickle in.

Lowered Communication Costs

If the need exists to talk to a group of people, share visual information with them, and gather feedback—in other words, if you need to hold a seminar of some kind—then the decision to do so over the Web will almost always offer a lower cost alternative to a physical event. Consider the costs of renting space, transporting people, printing materials, and housing and feeding your attendees, and the cost savings is pretty clear.

A great by-product of this cost savings is that a company can actually afford to do more education and marketing than they might otherwise be able to do. Handled wisely, Web-based seminars can not only save money but also increase productivity and profitability.

Ecological Soundness

What a Web-based seminar eliminates, most obviously, is travel. That means fewer gallons of gas burned on highways, fewer miles flown, and less damage done to an already compromised environment. No business today can afford to be uninterested in these issues. If the situation calls for the kind of content that a Web-based seminar supports, it's not just a good idea to consider the alternative, it's a responsibility we all should take on. And if that isn't enough, there is the ever-present flip side of doing the right thing: You can tell people you're doing it. Good for the earth, good for business.

A Last Word on Advantages

No method of communication is right for all purposes. Web-based seminars are great for certain kinds of content, and certain levels of interpersonal communication. They are not suited to every need. If you save money by not having your people travel, but lose the close, eye-to-eye contact that your subject requires, then you haven't chosen your communication vehicle wisely; a physical meeting would have been a better choice. If you get immediate feedback via phone line but deliver materials that really should be studied closely, quietly, and for an extended length of time, then again, the Web seminar is the wrong choice: that content should probably be delivered in print form. Choose a Web seminar when it makes sense to do so. Otherwise, choose another communication channel. The result is what's most important—not the method of delivery.

Preparing for a Web Seminar

Once you've decided that a Web seminar is the way to go, it's vital that you plan the event as carefully as you would any other meeting. If your content is not customized to the medium you've chosen, it stands a very good chance of being ineffective...or worse. You've invited people to take time out of their day to listen to you speak—being unintelligible will not create good will.

Of course this is no different than any other method of communicating. One of the most ubiquitous tools for presenting information is the dreaded Power Point presentation, and who hasn't sat through one of those praying for a fire alarm or electrical outage? It isn't the fault of the medium, it's the lack of careful planning and smart customization of information. Even Power Point can be enlightening and entertaining if it's done right.

Think About Your Audience

As you plan your seminar content, think about your attendees' experience. They are going to be watching on a monitor, most likely sitting at their desk. Unless there have been arrangements for a group of attendees to view the seminar in a separate room, there will likely be others nearby who are working. This means that the volume will not be turned up loud. Their phone may ring. Distractions will be numerous.

What this all means is that even more than in a physical meeting situation, the information you present must be simple, clear, and uncluttered. What is said should be supported by the visuals whenever possible. Points should be made with as few words as possible and, when practical, should be scripted in advance. The idea is to condense ideas into digestible chunks that can be displayed and spoken clearly.

When planning your Web seminar, remember that the ability of your audience to view your seminar depends on many factors: the speed with which you upload the information onto the Web, the speed with which they are able to download the information onto

their computer, and the traffic patterns on their networks at the time of the seminar. This is not like sitting in the same room and speaking to them; they are not going to hear or see your presentation in “real time.” Be careful therefore to pace your presentation, and try not to cover too much information in too short a time. You will want time to speak clearly and a little more slowly. If you would present a certain amount of information in a seminar “in person,” reduce that content for your Web seminar.

If a concept is very complex, break it down into smaller chunks. This isn’t a question of dumbing down your presentation, it’s a matter of taking the medium into account. While a Web-based seminar can feel spontaneous, it isn’t as loose as a live presentation; you can’t sense the mood in the room and repeat what may have been lost. For the most part, you are going to forge ahead and present your material in a linear fashion, so you owe it to your audience to give them every opportunity to obtain the information the first time.

Finally, remember that attention spans are notoriously short in front of a computer screen. There is no convention room for the attendees to glance around from time to time while they listen. Boredom can set in quickly. Vary the content in your seminar as much as you can. Rather than changing slides in a Power Point presentation for an hour, plan to introduce other kinds of media on occasion. Plan for a moderator who can break up the seminar into parts, and give the audience another voice to hear.

Arrange for the Right Technology

There are a lot of options for staging Web-based seminars. The technology you set up to deliver your content should suit your needs, which means, obviously, that you need to think about what kinds of content you’ll want to deliver before making all the arrangements.

Do you want to display Power Point presentations triggered by the presenter? Do you want to see live video, so that the viewer can see the presenter? Are there other forms

of media—video, graphics, programs displayed and run on a laptop computer—that you want to use during your seminar? Each of these options will probably require that specific technologies be brought into play, so make sure that you think through these issues well in advance.

The question of interactivity also comes into play here. How much feedback do you plan from your attendees, and how will that be handled? If you want instant, two-way communication between presenters and viewers, then you may need to have dedicated phone lines set up to handle that. Email can be used, which would require that a dedicated computer, and a dedicated email account, be arranged for and staffed at the seminar. Real-time chat room interaction is a possibility, and that also requires a certain level of planning to set up.

At the heart of all of this pre-planning is the basic hardware and software configuration that actually delivers your content to the audience via the Web. Knowing what kind of stresses on bandwidth will be placed on the system will help ensure that you arrange for Internet streaming services that can handle the load. Be sure to thoroughly research your organization's IT infrastructure before plowing ahead with a Web seminar. It may need to be updated, and you may well need to augment your facilities with specialized services from Web stream providers. It can be a complex system to establish at first, and knowing what will be demanded is the key to getting the right technology in place.

Prepare Materials for The Web

The bottom line when creating content for a Web seminar is legibility. Making content attractive is essential; branding your organization is key. But the most important factor is creating visuals that “read” well over the Internet.

You must remember that unlike a Web site, your Web seminar will be delivered as a streaming video signal. Text that, on a Web site, is clean and easy to read can be absolutely unreadable in the context of a Web seminar (besides which, a Web site sits still

until you are finished reading it; your seminar will forge ahead at its own pace). Size your text much larger than normal, and use bold typefaces whenever possible. Keep contrast between background and type strong. Don't ask your audience to read text that is on a slant or runs vertically. Be straightforward.

Illustrations should be prepared with simplicity and boldness in mind. A graph is fine, but it cannot be too complex or its details too fine. It is better to prepare multiple graphs than to try and show too much on one graph.

If you plan to incorporate video, make sure it's been encoded for Web streaming, and is as compressed as possible while retaining sufficient quality. Anything you can do to decrease the size of the signal being sent out will help your attendees to receive and view the signal smoothly on their end.

Write Out the Game Plan

You have so far evaluated your audience and their specific viewing conditions, planned your content with variety and clarity in mind, and produced that content to maximize its effectiveness over the Web. What do you do next with all of this planning?

You are, essentially, broadcasting a live performance. Once you've collected all of the content to be broadcast, it's necessary to produce a rundown of what will happen during the seminar—a step-by-step, minute-by-minute listing of each event, each source of information and, to as great an extent as possible, each word that will be said. This will be your road map once the seminar begins. Knowing exactly what comes next and who will be responsible for what is vital to ensuring that on their end, the viewers see nothing but a seamless, professional-looking presentation.

Gathering and Managing an Audience

Unless your audience is in-house, you'll need to market this new communications tool and arrange for an audience. If you have never held a Web seminar before, your client base won't know that it's something you offer. And once you have prepared the ground, the logistics of registering the attendees and getting them to the show on time are vital. As with all things, it's best to plan ahead.

Getting the Word Out

To market your seminar, use the same logic that guides all of your marketing decisions. You want to target the most qualified, most potentially interested parties. The topic of the seminar should guide you in selecting prospective attendees. Who, among your client base, would be most interested in this particular subject? Who would be most likely to take the time to watch the seminar? Who would it benefit the most?

Take a multivalent approach to announcing the seminar. Use print, email, whatever channels you normally use. Make it clear that this is not just a gimmick you're trying out, but a vital new part of your company's approach to education and communication. Explain why you're offering the Web seminar, and what benefits it offers to attendees. Don't make the mistake of thinking that because it's new and exciting to you, people will flock to attend. Like any marketing effort, you need to make it clear to the audience what it will do for them. Otherwise, they won't take the time.

Ultimately, email campaigns are a great way to announce a Web seminar for logistic reasons. It may not be (and probably should not be) the only method you employ, but it is a great last step. The reason is that in an email announcement, you can provide a direct link to a registration site where attendees can sign up for the seminar. If you plan to take registrations over the phone or by mail, of course, this isn't such a concern. Whatever method of registering attendees you use, however, do make certain that you gather email addresses.

A note on email campaigns: always make certain that the list you use in your campaign has been carefully prepared. The days of buying bulk lists is long gone; your list needs to be composed of people who have voluntarily given you their email addresses and at least implied that they want to receive emails from you specifically. For more information on this subject, see our white paper here:

http://www.imaginevisualmarketing.com/resources/reports/articles_whitepapers/email_marketing.html

Inviting your Attendees

As we mentioned above, email is an ideal vehicle for sending out invitations to Web seminars. Take the time to design a good, solid-looking email campaign. Utilize a vendor to handle this for you; there are fine services available that take a lot of the stress and labor off your shoulders.

The first email announcement should go out two weeks before the event. Explain the content and benefits of the seminar, and of course give the date and time. If you have an online registration service set up through your Web provider, include a link to that site. Let them know that more information will be emailed to them when they register.

Remember to let your potential viewers know what provisions are being made for interaction. It may help encourage them to attend if they know that they'll have a chance to ask questions.

A second invitation should go out a week before the event. This can be exactly the same email that was used the first time, to exactly the same list. You may want to customize it slightly to indicate that it is a second invitation, to avoid confusion, but that's the only extra effort required.

The day before the event, you will want to send access information to your registered attendees. This will be an email announcement that reminds them of the seminar along with a link to access the seminar, and if required, a user name and password to log in.

Also, if you plan to take questions during the seminar, tell them at this point what the details of that interaction are: the email address to send questions to, or the phone number to call into, whatever your plan is. It's not a good idea to send this email too far in advance, for obvious reasons; we all know how easy it is to misplace an email or simply forget it.

If you are requiring that your attendees enter a user name and password to view the seminar, you will automatically be collecting information on who actually attends. If you aren't, then it's a good idea to ask them to send an email when they "arrive" at the time of the seminar. A dedicated mailbox set up in advance can easily collect these emails. You'll want to know who actually attends so you can gauge the effectiveness of your campaign, and also so you can communicate with your attendees after the event.

In Conclusion

The technologies that are available for providing rich content over the Internet expand at an astounding rate. Web-based seminars have evolved in just a few years from dry re-enactments of live presentations to dynamic and interactive meetings with true value in their own right. Knowing how to plan for their use is what makes the difference between failure and success.

If you realize that every mode of communication has certain limitations, and certain unique advantages, than you can design and execute your messages with these in mind and make the most of the technology. This is what distinguishes an organization that communicates well from one who doesn't—in any medium.

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