Tips for Effective Webinars (Jan 10)
By Maria H. Andersen
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Giving an effective webinar requires some presentation redesign and technology skills that you don't necessarily need in a face-to-face presentation. A great speaker in a face-to-face environment can easily crash and burn in a webinar setting if he or she isn't prepared for the unique challenges and needs of that environment.

Here are some tips to help you pull off a webinar that will get you asked for an encore!

Before the Webinar

**Recording and distribution.** Before you design your presentation, you need to know whether the presentation is going to be recorded, and if it is, where it will be distributed. For example, when I give a webinar that's not being recorded, I feel more at ease showing "live" shots of my personal information (like an email inbox or a Facebook page). When the webinar is recorded for general web distribution, I want to make sure that I don't accidentally release private information for general public consumption; so I take screenshots of these types of pages instead, making sure there are no privacy issues with the pages I capture.

You should always think about issues like copyright, but you should be even more careful if your webinar will be distributed to large audiences on the web.

**Presentation design.** This should go without saying, but the rest of these tips only matter if you start with good presentation materials in the first place.

Just to give you some kind of time investment benchmark, it takes me between 10 and 20 hours to build a decent slide deck to accompany a new presentation. That doesn't include researching the content or writing the accompanying paper—it's just time spent designing the presentation!

You may even consider using an alternative to slides, like an online mind map, or threading live demonstrations between a few good slides.

**Engage often.** Plan to ask the audience a question every 6 to 10 minutes. This is not the time to ask, "Are there any questions?" Rarely does that question engage the audience in face-to-face presentations, and it doesn't work in online presentations either.

Ask very direct questions that every participant can respond to and that are meaningful to whatever topic you're covering in your talk. Make it clear that you expect every participant (or site) to respond.

For example, suppose I have just demonstrated the latest and greatest web tool. I could ask participants to "Give me an example of how you could use this in your professional life." Give participants sufficient time to respond, summarize, or discuss one or two responses, and then move on.
When I give an in-person presentation, I can read the attendees' faces to gauge their level of engagement and interest. Online, these frequent "engagement" questions give you a chance to do the same thing.

Another quick way to ask questions is to poll the audience using multiple choice or true/false questions. Almost every webinar platform has some type of feature for polls. Often, I use a poll questions to lead in to a new topic and let the responses shape the level of detail for the next 10 minutes of the presentation. Again, it's vital that the polls be integrated with the webinar topic, rather than a series random questions that sidetrack the attendees.

**Animation.** Animations in slide programs (for example, transitions between slides, dissolve in, fly out) can be problematic in some webinar platforms. Animations that work in one program may not work in others.

The safest way to design a set of slides for webinar use is to remove the animations and use extra slides to simulate the animations. For example, if you want an image to "appear" on a slide, create the slide without the image, and then make an exact duplicate that includes the image. A word of caution: You may find that your slide deck has a large file size after you make these changes, and some webinar programs will limit the size of file uploads. If your presentation file is larger than the upload limit, simply split the file into two files (parts 1 and 2) and load the presentation that way.

**Hyperlinks.** Even if hyperlinks are "clickable" in your normal presentation materials, they may not be clickable inside the webinar platform. If you want participants to actually follow a link, you need to be prepared to place the link in the text chat window. Even if your slide links are clickable inside the platform, you may still want to place them in the chat window.

While you can type the links one by one, you'll find it is much easier if you can just copy and paste the link from a text file. If the web address is long, consider using a URL-shortener, like TinyURL or Bit.ly. If you're going to include a lot of links, consider packaging them in an online mind map.
map, a simple web page, a multi-URL site like ZumLink, at the end of the webinar.

I encourage presenters to send participants on short visits to outside websites. It engages the participants nicely; but give them clear instructions about what to do there and when to come back, or you may be speaking to an empty room for the rest of your presentation.

**Videos clips.** If possible, I'd avoid using video during the presentation. You only have a short period of time with your audience and I have yet to see a webinar where the video-share worked properly in a live event. Are you willing to sacrifice 5 minutes of presentation time if that's what it takes to get the video working?

Consider alternate ways of sharing that content. Would a series of 10 images yield the same effect? If you must share use the video, consider sending participants to a site where the video is hosted instead of integrating it into the webinar directly.

**Trial run.** There is no way for me to overemphasize the importance of a trial run.

Every webinar platform is slightly different. Some can handle it if the presenter has dual monitors, and some can't. In some platforms, all the poll questions have to be entered manually prior to the live session (cut and pasted in from a document file). In others, you can just put the poll questions on your presentation slides and the polling functionality can be set up on the fly. A headset might sound crystal clear in one system, but Darth Vader-like in another. The only way to know how any of your components will work for sure is to do a trial run.

Whomever is hosting the webinar should be more than happy to test the system as a participant while you present your materials. Use the same webinar connection, computer, webcam, and headset as you will on the day of the live event. Do *not* use a stand-alone microphone, as this will cause an echo effect when you are interacting with participants.

If your computer has dual screens, test them to make sure that there are no issues in the webinar when you share your desktop. Some platforms will ask you to choose which monitor to project, while other systems will force you to use the primary monitor.

Load your slides and click through them, testing any add-on features, like animations, video clips, and links. Test the desktop sharing, and play with the various options: full-screen browse, allow participants to browse separately, and so on. Know how to change the poll format and how to activate and clear the polls. Learn how to turn the audio on and off, and how to lock the audio on for long periods of time. Take a screenshot of the interior of the platform so that you can annotate it later and use it to give participants directions at the beginning of the event. Learn how to turn the webcam feed on and off. See if there is any noticeable lag when the webcam feed is on when you are clicking through slides or sharing the desktop.

Throughout your tests, make sure to ask your stand-in participant if he is able to hear, see, or follow your slides and materials.

**Moderator duties.** Many logistics can be delegated to your moderator, but you need to make it clear what those duties will be.

First, make sure your moderator is comfortable troubleshooting technical difficulties, like participants who can't hear you. If the moderator can't handle technical problems, ask who will be doing it. Your moderator can also reset poll questions and set the proper polling format for the next question (number of multiple-choice options or true/false), which will save you from being distracted during the presentation. If the webinar will be recorded, your moderator should be responsible for starting and ending the recording. The presenter has enough to think about without forgetting to do that!
The Day of the Webinar

**Arrive early.** On the day of your webinar, *show up early!* How early? No less than 30 minutes early. This may seem extreme, but if there are any technical problems (for example, if you are unable to log in to the site on the day of the event), it may take you 10 minutes to track down someone who can fix the problem, 10 minutes to wait for him or her to solve the problem, and 10 minutes to calm yourself down again. If it happens, 30 minutes will not seem long enough!

As soon as you're logged in, place a note on the screen that says, "Loading files, temporarily unavailable," and go ahead and load all your files. In every platform I've used, users are unable to use the text and audio chat while files are loading, so just wait patiently until it's all done before asking, "Are you able to hear me okay?" Until the files are loaded, assume that no one can hear you clearly or respond to you.

**During the Webinar**

**Clear directions.** At the beginning of your presentation, provide a screenshot of the webinar platform and use this to point to the various features that you plan to use. Point out where the response buttons are for polls, or the selection box for yes/no or true/false questions. Explain how participants can give emoticon feedback: hand-raising, smiley faces, and so on.

Point out the text chat window and ask participants to introduce themselves there, which will break the ice on using the text chat window, too.

The most important direction you can give participants is how you want them to ask questions. The most common methods are raising their virtual hand, asking for the microphone, or typing the question in the chat box. If there are questions during the presentation, I ask participants to use the text chat. At the end of the presentation, I take audio questions.

Keep in mind that some of your participants may be at a site where several people are participating using a single connection. In your directions to participants, make sure to address how you would like these sites to participate.

**Desktop sharing.** If you are demonstrating skills in live desktop sharing, you need to watch out for lag. If there are a lot of participants, if your Internet connection slows, or if the webinar platform site slows down, you may experience a phenomenon where the video lags behind the audio. If you notice a lag, you can simply pause between statements: "So you see that when I click on this [pause, leave your mouse in
place, count to three silently], this window opens." How will you know if there's a lag? Ask occasionally if participants are seeing what you describe, and have them text you a response.

**Webcam sharing.** My advice is to use webcam sharing, but use it sparingly. It's nice for the audience to connect the image of you with the webinar content. On the other hand, streaming live video can suck the bandwidth away from the functionality of the platform and hurt the rest of the presentation.

As a rule of thumb, I always keep the webcam on prior to the start of the presentation and after the presentation is over. During the presentation, I leave it off, turning it on only for short periods of time when I ask the "engagement" questions. This connects me to the audience visually during the times when they are most likely to pay attention to my talking head—one would hope that for the rest of the presentation, they are more interested in the content!

**The echo.** Chances are, if you've ever attended or given a webinar, you know exactly what I'm about to say. One of your participants produces an echo-effect every time she or he speaks. Usually, echoes are caused by participants using speakers and a microphone instead of a headset. Their own voice comes back through the speakers and gets fed into the microphone in a kind of infinite sound loop. You know how radio announcers are always telling callers to "turn off their radios"? Inside a webinar, the "radio" is the computer speaker and the "phone" is the participant microphone, creating the same kind of feedback loop.

If a participant is causing an echo, use your moderator! Ask the moderator to turn off the person's audio access and explain the problem privately using the radio-analogy.

**After the Webinar**

When the live event is over, prepare a short email to send to the participants that

- thanks them for attending,
- reminds them about the main points (no more than three), and
- gives them another copy of the hyperlinks that you shared in your presentation.

Rather than including files in this email (a handout or a file with your slides), consider hosting the documents and slides directly on the Internet and linking to them rather than adding more bulk to your email. Send the email to the moderator (with a thank-you note) and ask them to forward your thanks (and resources) to participants. As your final act, remember to add the details of your presentation to your website and CV. Hopefully, you've just given a webinar to be proud of!

**About the Author:**

Maria H. Andersen is a professor at Muskegon Community College. She has given webinars on various topics for the University of Wisconsin Extension Office, MCCVLCC, the Instructional Technology Council, and for an MAA PREP course. She has also begun teaching classes on designing presentations for the digital age.

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