

## Trend Watch: *online collaboration & meetings upswing*

By: Richard Finstein, CEO, CommPartners

Why is everyone jumping on the online bandwagon for document sharing, meetings, seminars and distance learning?

It's convenient. It's profitable. It's the next step.

### The advantages...

Onsite, in-person conferences mean long hours of traveling and time away from family and work for most of the attendees. Members, donors, volunteers, board members...whoever attends your events will appreciate not having to leave home. Online events are viewable anywhere there's an Internet connection and a phone: in the office, from a boardroom, or even on the couch at home.

Even better...online events may be archived onto audio CDs and edited into podcasts, Associations, non-profit organizations and businesses who offer post-event recordings are finding a real new source of income. Some clients reap tens of thousands in CD/online download revenue each month—after events costs. Online events not only pay for themselves—and offer a high perceived-value of your services to members—they're moneymakers!

While online events do not replace the need for face-to-face connections, the technology creates new opportunities:

- Strained travel and event budgets are not as tapped.
- Participants unable to travel to live conferences and meetings can easily attend.
- You can offer members/clients access to the depth of expertise within your industry, via events featuring multiple national leaders.
- Online meetings can become part of your organization's continuing education and accreditation programs.
- The ability to share documents or review Web applications without having to fax/mail items first or endure online training using venues, such as NetMeeting, that have limited features.
- Time and timing:
  - Online meetings eliminate travel time—to the airport, getting to the hotel, making your way to the conference venue, negotiating through the maze of conference rooms and throngs of attendees, and then collecting your belongings to go back to the airport or drive home.
  - Web meetings also take much less time to plan, between one to six weeks (we recommend six weeks or more of planning when possible, to ensure higher participation).
  - Immediacy is a significant advantage of online meetings. If you're launching a new program or a development in Congress occurs, you can spontaneously decide to hold a meeting!

### Where did the trend come from?

Internet companies and ad/PR agencies, which are typically early adopters of new technologies, were the first to embrace the virtual meeting trend. Gradually, large businesses recognized the time and cost savings by collaborating online versus in person.

As costs have diminished through improved applications and competition, smaller companies, non-profits and associations have reaped the benefits from online collaboration through small scale Web conferencing and full-blown online events, educational series and certification programs.

### The shift toward meeting online

Not only have costs decreased, but, five years ago, there was a limited audience; people with dial-up Internet access and older computers could not attend full events. Today, almost everyone uses some form of broadband Web access; even home computers come replete with all the bells and whistles. Meaning, the majority of your stakeholders are ready and able to participate in money-saving, convenient online gatherings.

Megan, the head of our managed online events division, explains, "First and foremost it's an added value that organizations can give their members and clients, while generating revenue for the association. For users, it's so easy and convenient, plus it's not a big commitment time-wise." She also adds, "There are more and more sophisticated, affordable options for online events all the time. Once clients see how easy and interactive events can be—and, frankly, fun to use—it becomes a no-brainer."

### Can you do it?

The answer is...of course! Not only is online conferencing convenient, it's easy to set up and learn. Planning full-scale, online events, however, is similar to in-person events—both require careful preparation and detailed coordination.

For those who want to avoid the headaches of coordinating meetings, event management services are a viable alternative to paying several of your staffers to perform this complex, time-consuming process.

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