



How to Build an Effective Webinar Program for Online Learning

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As your organization considers creating Web-based educational programming, keep in mind: **your identity and brand are not just online, they're *on the line*.**

In the current economy, webinars and other forms of sharing content in real time provide dynamic methods and cost effective ways to bring value to our communities. In contrast to other online educational tools, Web seminars and webcasts provide opportunities to interrelate with content experts in an interesting and collaborative way. Organizations provide a natural setting to bring together geographically dispersed members, stakeholders and partners into a dynamic learning environment.

The challenge is in recognizing that successful Webinars take substantial planning and an understanding of the unique interactive relationship between the faculty, hosts and attendees. While many e-technologies such as pre-recorded Webcasts and Podcasts are primarily coordinated by IT departments, the creation of Webinar-based learning programs requires a multi-layered, five-step approach usually built by non-IT people. This includes understanding program objectives and creating presentations that make your session a unique learning experience. Most of us have been exposed to both programs that are well planned and delivered, and those that fall short. So what makes a program successful? Following these guidelines will help you build an excellent template for doing just that.

I. Program Development

Before you begin, consider the answers to the following questions to determine the validity and objectives of your program:

- Is the content “newsworthy?”
- Can the content be accessed in an alternative way?
- A Webinar provides the forum for colleagues to exchange ideas—will your content work in this format?
- Is the program relevant enough for attendees to invest time and money in learning, while at their workplace?
- Do you have faculty that can carry the weight of the program on their shoulders?
- Would participants tune in just to hear from these individuals?

Once justification for moving forward and objectives are confirmed, it is time to begin partner/vendor selection and branding. It's important to understand your organization's in-house capabilities and select an external partner that appropriately supplements your efforts. Your choice of partner services or solutions might include:

- Self-service conferencing e-tools
- An online event management company that provides tools, support services, training, facilitation and post event-programs
- A multimedia provider that offers Webinars and other e-presentation options

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The less experience you have with interactive media and online programming, and the less time you have to manage details, the more you should consider a full-service provider. Building a team that can handle content creation, program management, promotion, enrollment and payment, testing, certification or graduation, and all the help desk issues a new program launch will generate should be your initial goal. Team members may consist of both internal and external resources, with more time-consuming technical items being outsourced so that your internal experts can focus on content and faculty.

Ok. You have a team in place. . Now is the time to consider how to give your efforts the identity or “look” to be applied to event promotion pieces, e-registration system, event login screen, meeting window, handouts, continuing-education certificates and post-event surveys. Many organizations give their Webinar(s) a unique name or logo to help create expectations for excellence. Be sure to give this part of your project enough time to properly meet the requirements of your organization’s unique brand.

II. Faculty Selection

Once the ‘what’ pieces are determined, it’s time to select a host and faculty. **Be aware the most significant mistake organizations make is not realizing the differences of presenting online versus in-person.** E-presentations require hosts and faculty to carry programs with the vigor of their voices and skills at using interesting visual elements. Obviously, humor and spontaneity with the audience aren’t easily integrated into a program. First time e-presenters must understand and make the necessary adjustments.

Faculty need to become familiar with this unique medium, and should be practicing their delivery and getting comfortable speaking into their computer or microphone. They should format their sessions to maximize the value of the available online tools, and practice using them. Your presenters’ commitment to this effort will go a long way to the Webinar’s success.

Many e-conferences have a host or moderator and a presenter or multiple presenters. Since, in most cases, these people are in disparate locations, it’s critical to script the interaction. If you find your subject expert is not a dynamic presenter, consider putting more responsibility on the host by using an interview format. Practice sessions help tremendously in developing a natural delivery.

III. Session Structure

It’s time to build your program. You have attendees at their places of work, with all the typical distractions. How do you keep them engaged? Can you replicate the nuances and advantages of an onsite meeting? The answer is yes! However, it takes careful planning and cooperation from all involved.

The first step is to understand the dynamics that contribute to the best possible learning experience. Think about when you attend a key note address in a large auditorium, versus attending a small learning lab. What makes a keynote address successful are the dynamic elements in the room, multimedia effects, the sound system and of course the presenter. For the learning lab, the focus is on the opportunities for interaction, small group dynamics, and participation. Online presentations can follow a similar strategy.

If you have large number of attendees the opportunity for interaction is somewhat limited. You can invest in more technologically dynamic broadcasts with custom branding, Flash transitions, embedded video, broad based polling and complementary screen transitions. For a learning lab type of webinar, focus should be on creating interaction and an interesting program through individual participation, white board exercises, panel discussions, case studies-directed questions, and calling on people by name.

For either approach, the entire program should be planned down to the minute. Remember, the conveniences of communicating at an onsite meeting are gone. Backroom logistics, transition moments, introductions and closings have to be handled flawlessly.

IV. Technology Selection

Now that your session structure has been determined, you must select appropriate technologies. When considering Webinar tools, most event planners opt for familiar names (WebEx, Live Meeting) without regard to their organization's specific goals or requirements. Before selecting a technology, talk to your IT person, then research features offered by various online meeting tool providers.

Most Webinars have from 30 to several hundred participants. With these numbers, it's critical to select a solution that meets your session structure objectives.

If you are having several hundred participants, use technology that rises to the level of the popular content that is being offered. Less interactivity coupled with a smaller visual venue are offset and made more compelling by the use of dynamic video and graphics. New Webcast tools offer better rendering and customization than those of the past.

There are three leading Webinar user interfaces: Flash, Java, and proprietary meeting tools requiring downloads. With downloads, some participants won't have administrator rights and will be frustrated when unable to log on. Flash and Java do not require downloads.

Typical webinar tools include:

- Adobe PowerPoint slide viewing area with full annotation
- A robust Q&A function for announcements to attendees and communicating with hosts and presenters privately
- An instant polling function (display pre-created polls at will)
- The ability to record integrated Web audio for simplified program archiving
- A whiteboard to note key points and run interactive exercises

Emerging tools include:

- Embedded full motion video
- Dynamic rendering of polls (create polls on the fly)
- Complementary Flash transitions
- Interactive questions that track individual responses
- Custom layout
- Viewer screen designs that dynamically change depending on who the audience is
- Google Maps

For the audio component, the tried-and-true method remains fully-managed, dial-in telephone audio. Streaming audio is less expensive but not as reliable because its success is dependent on attendees having proper access and audio systems. Streaming audio is one-way, eliminating attendees' ability to voice questions or comments and relegating them to chat or text mode only.

V. Event Logistics

Organizations often underestimate Webinar coordination details, such as:

- Event marketing
- e-Registration
- e-Commerce for online payments/credits/collections
- Handouts and download mechanisms
- Communicating login Web/audio instructions
- Coaching and run-through with faculty/presenters

- Pre-event technology checks (sound, Internet, login, multimedia recording)
- Live-event management
- Dissemination/collection/evaluation of pre/post-event surveys
- Online assessments, tests, quizzes, surveys
- Attendance certificate generation
- Creation and posting archives

As many details as possible should be automated. For example, as soon as participants register, they should receive login and system testing instructions, be given a pre-event survey and have access to handouts. Reminders/updates should be automatically re-sent as event dates near. Post-event follow up emails along with certification acknowledgements or test results should be planned in advance and issued immediately upon session completion. There are many more questions that require forethought, pre-planning and preparation.

These criteria are the foundation of solid Webinar management, along with establishing a flow map of how each participant will be taken from initial promotion to post-event evaluation.

VI. Summary

Producing online programs is a high-profile, high-reward proposition. While the logistics of Webinar planning may seem daunting, creating well-received online educational programming is crucial for organizations looking to retain and recruit members. Do it well and your organization will be a primary information resource for your industry. The best part? You have a built-in audience: for most organizations, less than 20 percent leave their workplace for off-site learning opportunities. The roughly 80 percent remaining are prime targets for well planned, educational programming via Webinars.

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