
You've come a long way, baby.

Webcasting is certainly not what it used to be: postage stamp video of horrific quality coupled with a boring PowerPoint presentation, viewed reluctantly by a disinterested audience member. Video quality has come a long way in the past few years thanks to the likes of YouTube, Vimeo, Brightcove, etc., but it's not just the quality of the visuals that have improved. We're thinking differently about what webcasting is and what it can be used for.

What is webcasting, anyway?

Webcasting is best defined by a virtual presentation experience including audio or video accompanied by some other visual medium (usually PowerPoint), but it doesn't stop there. Today we think about webcasting as an interactive experience that includes Q&A, allowing audience members to ask questions of the presenters in real-time, polling that allows the presenter to ask questions of the audience and chat that allows the audience members to talk directly amongst themselves.

Webcasting is not screen sharing, nor is it a virtual meeting tool. It is a one-to-many instrument to deliver presentations of many types that facilitate communication between participants.

Hey you, snoring in the back...

For some, webcasts have become synonymous with "snoozefest." The association can be dispelled because the boring part of webcasting is in the creation of the content, not in the technology or delivery. Creating compelling content can be challenging, but also incredibly worthwhile. First off, when creating your presentation ask yourself, "what does my target audience want to hear and see?" Once you've eliminated all of the content that isn't relevant, follow these tips to a better presentation:

1. Make sure your PowerPoint is visually interesting. Use images, charts and graphs to illustrate and support what you're saying and don't rely on bulleted text that you simply read back.
2. Keep it interactive by soliciting for questions often and querying the audience with polling topics relevant what you're talking about. This will keep the audience involved and help give them a voice, making them feel like part of the presentation, not just a viewer.
3. Pre-produce video content that helps support your message. This will help to break up the monotony of the "talking head" and make your program feel more like a TV show, which everyone is used to watching.
4. Use professional host talent. If your presentation is for a high-impact event, having professional talent can mean all the difference because their screen presence will welcome the audience into a comfortable state of mind. A nervous, inexperienced staffer can't accomplish this as easily.

Let's chat about that.

The options for interactivity have come a long way in the past few years and so have the ways in which we're utilizing them. Simple text Q&A has evolved into on-camera and/or over the phone Q&A, providing question-askers instant gratification. Polling, while not a new feature, is now getting more constant use. The biggest innovation now accompanying live broadcasts is user chat. There are several different ways to implement the feature, but here are a few suggestions:

- Chat can be a single, open playground that goes un-moderated and uncontrolled. While this is the wild-west of methods, it can be appropriate for audiences that are ready for that level of freedom.
- Most chat sessions right now need to be moderated at some level to ensure that there are no users with malicious or inappropriate intent. This usually requires one (or many) individual moderators present within the system who will actively "boot" users.

- The most effective way to conduct a chat session is to have active facilitators who are sparking discussion with preconceived questions and comments written to provoke thought and discussion. This often creates a sidebar discussion accompanying the live event that will have parallel topics being discussed by the users. Presenters on camera can then review highlights from within the chat room discussions that are fed to them via the facilitators, bringing the parallel discussions back together.

Hey, over here!

All too often the audience acquisition part of an online event takes a back seat in importance to the event itself. If you produce great content, will they come? Not if they don't know about it. Thinking beyond a text email is critical and more and more marketers are relying on segmented communication to increase response rates. When you're putting together a communications plan surrounding a webcast, you'll want to consider the plan as a whole rather than a collection of communications. Here are a few tips:

- Segment your audience into logical categories and write your copy to appeal specifically to each audience thereby increasing the chance that their interest is piqued.
- Segment your audience based on whether they have attended an event in the past or had registered, but missed the last event – this will help you lower your attrition rate by encouraging the existing audience to stay tuned in.
- Group your events into campaigns and promote to a series of related events rather than to one event at a time. You'll realize better ROI from each communication that you send and you'll get a better response because you have a broader range of content to appeal to your audience.

No matter how you plan to approach communication, don't, under any circumstances, forget about promoting your archives and on-demand events!

Oh shoot, I missed it!

The archives of your live events can, over time, be a greater source of viewers than the live events themselves despite the inherent lack of interactivity. As a result, make sure that you continue to drive traffic to them in your promotions as well as regularly check the statistics for popularity so you know what's hot and what's not.

When a user is viewing an archive, there are a few important considerations that you want to take into account:

- Ensure that they don't have to watch start to finish by offering relevant chapter marks so they can jump to a part of the presentation relevant to them.
- Have an exit survey available for them to fill out and make sure that you ask them to fill it out when you record the presentation. You'll see two to three times the response on surveys when you proactively ask for it to be completed rather than leave it up to the user to find the button.
- Polling isn't just for live presentations; you can still ask polling questions throughout the archive to keep the viewer engaged.

Handling Logistics

Webcast event logistics can be downright frightening. They involve a blend of IT infrastructure with production engineering that you just don't see in other types of events. This is where you want to make sure you have the proper vendor support because you just can't afford the time to figure it all out on your first try.

When you're choosing a venue for a webcast event, you should always inquire about three things:

- Will you be able to provide me with at least 3 static IP addresses?
- Will you be able to guarantee that my connection to the internet will not be compromised by other users on your system or by your firewall? Can my connection be outside of your firewall to ensure this?
- Will you be able to guarantee that I'll have at least 1.5Mbps of outbound bandwidth?

If those three conditions are met then you likely have a good venue with good IT support available.

Webcast Best Practices

By Steve Gogolak, Director of Media & Webcasting at Cramer

The next thing to think about is space. Despite the size of some ballrooms, at least 20% of the space will be used for equipment and crew...sometimes more. You'll need to consider the following before settling on a space:

- If you do not plan on installing supplemental production lighting, the room will need to have excellent ambient light. This can make or break the look of your video, so do not compromise here.
- If you do need supplemental lighting, consider that you'll need to cast light from three points: two from the front at 45 degree angles to the podium and one directly behind the podium.
- Make sure that the podium placement relative to the projection screen is the same orientation as the video and slide windows on your webcast player. It can be awkward when the presenter points to his right and the slides are to his left for the online audience.
- Camera angles matter, so make sure that you have a camera position dedicated that is directly in front of the podium. You should consider audience reaction cameras as well if you are covering an event with a live audience.
- Be careful of background color behind the presenter. Most pipe-and-drape companies will supply either black or blue fabric and blue is preferred over black.