

Create Engaging Marketing Webinars with Audience Polling

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Webinars and other virtual online events are becoming more than just a rage. Webinars were once a nice informational tool; today they're an integral thread in the training fabric. Webinars are becoming more and more relied on by both training suppliers and training providers as a way to reach widespread audiences.

But there is one major area, generally speaking, where buyers and suppliers have different measures for success. On the training buyer side, a webinar is frequently used for virtual classrooms, most typically reserved for employees and partners, those with a financial (or direct mandate) to listen and learn. Certainly not an easy mission, but a level of engagement is built in.

Not so for the supplier side. Webinars for suppliers are primarily vehicles for lead generation, with a touch of branding and exposure mixed in. Whether launching new products, positioning thought leadership or dazzling potential clients, suppliers need webinars to speak to a more discerning audience. In short, when lead generation is the goal versus staff development, audience engagement takes on a deeper meaning.

All webinar platforms today offer a certain level of interactivity with the audience. Sometimes it's the ability to give audience members a virtual microphone, or more simply (and less dangerously, though that's a topic for another column) collecting audience opinions through polls and other response indicators.

While it ultimately doesn't matter what interactivity tool is used to engage the audience by any means necessary, don't be afraid to start simply. Static polls (choose one or more of the following responses...) may seem the lowest common denominator in terms of engagement, but when used properly, they make a program sing.

Case in point: On Oct. 23, Training Industry, Inc. produced a webinar titled "Sales Coaching for Better Sales Results," sponsored by Richardson, www.richardson.com, and featuring founder Linda Richardson as the lead presenter. Over the course of one hour, Linda presented eight poll questions to the audience, drawing immediate responses from attendees. The attentiveness feature on the Citrix GoToWebinar platform didn't drop significantly during the program ... in fact, with Linda's masterful use of the polling capabilities, the minds of audience members didn't have time to wander.

Linda taught two big lessons that day, beyond what the sales professionals learned. First, she structured her polls carefully, using the first to set the stage for the audience, but withholding that information from public view so as not to influence the rest of her presentation. Only after her class did that first poll get shared, giving audience members a chance to reflect on their initial answers, and where they felt they were just an hour later.

Second, Linda integrated her polls expertly into the program. The program was set up, in large part, like a coaching session, and the audience interacted throughout to predict correct comments from the coach. Ask any educator: Learning by doing is a great way to reinforce concepts.

I'd urge you to access the Oct. 23 Sales Coaching webinar recording, available through www.trainingindustry.com. You'll feel the sense of involvement that permeated the entire webinar, and weeks later is still building through email discussions and archived attendance.

So what does that little case study teach us? Does adding polling automatically make a webinar a winner? Unfortunately no: Like any program a webinar is best when it's thoroughly managed, wisely produced and professionally planned, and adding a simple touch point simply isn't enough. Here are a few suggestions to up the engagement through audience polling:

- **Walk in the audience member's shoes.** Step outside the message you're delivering, and ask yourself with a fresh eye how to make it more involving. If this was your first exposure to the topic, what would capture your attention?
- **Make the polls matter.** Recognize that basic questions like "Have you tried XYZ" are going to get basic interest. If the polls are integrated into the program, and the answers integral to the program, the attention level automatically goes up a notch.
- **Challenge the audience.** You don't have to make your webinar a quiz show necessarily, but giving audience members a sense of challenge, a sense of right or wrong increases participation. Everybody wants that "Jeopardy"-winner feeling. (Here's another tip: Be sure to explain why other answers weren't correct ... that's a learning opportunity itself.)
- **Ask now, share later.** It may seem simple, but when appropriate to the structure of the webinar, withholding information from polls until further in the program can add a bit of interest and expectation.
- **Involve the audience from the start.** Outline the planned interactivity and stress their importance to the process. When they see their role in the flow of the program, the spirit of participation supports the outpouring of information. (Another thought here: whenever a speaker and the materials are up to the challenge, it's great to let the responses dictate the webinar's directions. But that does take a skilled speaker and careful planning.)

No doubt your company is either already using or seriously considering webinars as a low-cost solution for reaching wide audiences. Once you start thinking about the power of polling, you'll find it easy to transform your presentations into a two-way flow of information. You'll also realize another benefit: You'll not only engage potential clients, but thanks to the reporting tools available with today's webinars, you'll be that much ahead in terms of understanding knowledge levels and basic interests.

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