Engaging Participants Without Leaving the Office: Planning and Conducting Effective Webinars

Abstract

The University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture Cooperative Extension Service has been developing and refining webinar delivery practices since 2012. On the basis of a review of existing literature and our own experiences, we have established methods for necessary planning, organization of content and people, and effective delivery of high-quality webinars. We have distilled those methods into a collection of best practices. By using those best practices, which we identify in this article, Extension educators can deliver virtual learning experiences that are engaging and enjoyable for all parties involved.

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Introduction

Experience has shown that in the changing era of digital communication, there is a need to use available technology and resources to enhance Extension educational efforts. One such resource is the webinar. A webinar is a seminar or presentation that takes place live over the Internet, allowing participants in different locations to see and hear presenters and interact with the presenters to ask questions, add to the discussion, and/or provide feedback (Pluth, 2010). Webinars are effective as educational tools in Extension because they allow the Extension professional to use a virtual setting to bring together and engage audience members across a large geographic area (Johnson & Shumaker, 2016). Given Extension's limiting funding realities, it is increasingly important for Extension to use tools that extend educational opportunities for audiences in the most efficient ways possible (Gharis, Bardon, Hubbard, Taylor, & Gonzalez-Jeuck, 2014).

The University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service has found the use of webinars as teaching tools to be a successful technological resource endeavor and has been developing and refining webinar delivery practices since 2012. On the basis of a review of existing literature and research and our own practical trial-and-error experiences, we present best practices for planning and conducting effective webinars.

Planning a Webinar

Implement the following best practices when considering and planning webinars.

- Decide whether the webinar format is appropriate for the educational effort being planned. Ask these

questions: Can content be presented through a webinar as effectively as or more effectively than through other delivery methods? Does the target audience have access to the technology and the skills necessary to participate in a webinar? Is a webinar more cost effective, in time and/or dollars, than other delivery options?

- Determine whether you have the technological capacity to conduct a webinar. Conducting a webinar requires specific hardware and software. Hardware and facilities can range from a full studio–type setting to a smartphone in the middle of a cornfield. Minimally, webinar presenters need a camera, a microphone and, most important, a good Internet connection. The best practice is to have a hard-wired Ethernet Internet connection, the second best option is a strong wireless connection, and the least desirable connection is a cell signal through a phone or mobile device. If the webinar will be presented from a field or remote location and no wired connection is possible, a mobile hotspot should be used.

- Consider the availability and ease of use of the selected webinar platform for the proposed host, presenter(s), and participants. In Arkansas Extension, we have used Zoom effectively as our webinar platform, but other options exist. Regardless of which platform is chosen, an understanding of the capabilities of the platform is essential.

- Determine whether you have appropriate human resources available to carry out the webinar effectively. You will need a webinar host and a technical support person in addition to the presenter(s). This setup will allow presenters to focus on their presentations and not worry about "behind-the-scenes" activities. Depending on the expected number of participants and the communication options available (e.g., chat, Q&A, polls), you may need additional team members to monitor/manage those options.

- Presenter effectiveness is a critical aspect of a successful webinar, so be strategic when recruiting talent. Recruit presenters who are experts in their fields, have good camera presence, and are willing to commit preparation and practice time beyond that normally required for a face-to-face session.

- Encourage presenters to incorporate engagement with the audience into their presentations. Engagement with participants before, during, and after a webinar is key for a positive participant experience. It is important that presenters incorporate participant engagement opportunities *throughout* the webinar, with an engagement activity occurring about every 4 min (Pluth, 2010). Example engagement options include handouts, an activity, polling questions, feedback in the Q&A or chat box, video clips, or animated dialogue between presenters.

- Conduct at least one prewebinar practice session. Practice allows presenters and other members of the webinar team to experience what the live webinar will be like and how the hardware and software will function. Additionally, practice sessions provide opportunities to work out any rough edges of a presentation. For example, if presenters are using PowerPoint slides, practice sessions provide opportunities for the webinar developer to suggest modifications to the presentation, such as conveying messages through more images and less text to keep learners engaged and avoid "death by PowerPoint."

- Ensure that participants are aware of the date and time of the webinar, and preenroll participants when possible. Marketing a webinar is much like marketing a face-to-face session. Word of mouth, social media, email, e-newsletters, fliers, and website posts are all effective tools for marketing webinars. Many webinar platforms allow participants to enroll for the webinar ahead of time. Once enrolled, these individuals can be sent automatic email reminders to ensure that they remember the day and time of the webinar.

Conducting a Webinar

Use the following best practices to deliver effective webinars.

- Start and end the webinar on time. Participants need to know that they will be able to participate in the entire webinar within the time frame that was advertised.

- Implement a backup plan in the event of a technology glitch. There is no way to account and plan for all possibilities, but try to take precautions for unforeseen issues. For example, have an alternate Internet connection available, have backup equipment available, or use equipment with battery backup capability.

- Use evaluation to make improvements. Evaluation is necessary for determining a webinar's effectiveness and for gaining feedback to apply to future webinars. Many evaluation techniques used with face-to-face educational activities can be modified for use with webinars. Webinar evaluations receive the highest response rate if the evaluation is conducted at some point during the webinar or online immediately following the webinar.

Conclusion

Incorporating these recommendations when planning and conducting a webinar can seem daunting, but they can make the difference between an effective, positive experience or a poor experience for both participants and presenters. If participants have a positive experience, they are more likely to want to participate in other presentations delivered through webinars. The use of webinars also saves time, travel costs, and other resources for both presenters and participants. Increasing the use of webinars as an educational delivery method can be a win-win situation.

References

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