FROM START TO FINISH:

PREPARING & PRESENTING COMPELLING WEBINARS

You most certainly have had the unfortunate opportunity to sit through a boring, unorganized webinar in which the speaker droned on seemingly aimlessly. The power and promise of virtual presenting is the ability to engage and educate people far and wide. But in order to realize this promise, presenters need to plan, prepare, and practice in the right way to take advantage of webinars.

Here are 9 simple steps that will help you plan and present compelling, valuable webinars that your audience will follow with rapt attention.

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PHASE I: PREPARING
"GET YOUR A.C.T.S. TOGETHER"

1. AUDIENCE FIRST

Every successful webinar must begin not with the topic to be covered, but *for whom* the topic is being covered. Many speakers make the mistake of assuming that giving a presentation is about them as speakers. When you prepare a webinar from your perspective, no doubt you will deliver critical bits of information, but likely you will fail to pull your audience into the content. Some call this self-focused approach "the curse of knowledge." Simply put, you often know too much about what you present.

A better, more thorough approach to your presentation is to begin by focusing on the audience. Effective webinar presenters never ask themselves, "What do I want to say?" Instead, they ask, "What does my audience need to hear or learn?" These two questions might sound similar, but they are very different. By embracing an audience-focused approach, you not only engage your audience more–since you're giving them what they need–but you will present content that scaffolds their knowledge, helping them understand your message in a way that sets them up to truly appreciate and understand your message.

The audience-centric approach does require some extra work. You have to truly know your audience. Ask yourself the following three questions to help you better determine your audience's needs:

- What past experience(s) has my audience had with my topic?
- What attitudes and emotions will my audience likely have toward my topic?
- What areas of resistance will my audience likely have toward my topic?

The answers to these questions help you to develop and deliver a webinar that fulfills the needs of your audience, while making your message more compelling and memorable.

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COMMUNICATION SOLUTIONS

2. CONTEXT IS KEY

Beyond understanding your audience's needs, you must also consider the context in which your webinar is taking place. Context entails many external factors that influence your presentation and thus the audience's reception of it. The two most important of these contextual influences are timing and expectations.

Your audience's involvement and their retention of your material is directly impacted by the length of your presentation and the time of day when you deliver it. Prior to drafting your presentation, determine the minimal amount of time it will take to convey your information. Concision is key since longer presentations challenge your audience's attention, especially in webinars, where your audience's physical distance invites mental wandering. While it is impossible to provide an all-encompassing guideline for webinar length, research suggests that presentations that proceed for 10-12 minutes without some kind of variation lose value quickly. Variation can include asking questions, switching presenters, taking a poll, etc.

Timing also plays a role with regard to when in the day your audience is participating in your webinar. You must consider the time zone of your participants. Just because you are energized early in the morning while delivering your webinar does not mean your participants in far away time zones will share or appreciate your coffee-infused enthusiasm. Be mindful of what is likely happening in the lives of your audience members when you are presenting. For example, are they in need of lunch? Is their day drawing to an end? Or, are they listening even earlier in the morning?

The other critical contextual variable to consider are the expectations your audience brings to your webinar. Chances are that your audience has participated in a presentation similar to yours either in type, topic, or both. Perhaps your audience has not heard your pitch for your company's offering, but they certainly have heard pitches before. Thus, they have expectations for what an effective webinar like yours should entail. You must consider their expectations, and whether deviating from them will help you more effectively gain – and keep – their attention. While you probably should stick to your core message, you can deviate in structure. For example, audiences expect some type of agenda information at the beginning of a webinar that most often appears as a bulleted list of items to be addressed. You could conform to this expectation to keep them grounded, or try deviating slightly to grab attention by providing a visual map of your webinar's content.

Additionally, how your content fits into your audience's understanding of the bigger picture is key. While you see your webinar as a discrete presentation covering your specific content, your audience experiences it as part of a larger whole. So while you have worked long and hard to deliver engaging, memorable content for your assigned sixty minutes, your audience participates in your webinar as part of the flow of their day, or a mere blip in their ongoing knowledge of the topic. By reflecting on your audience's expectations for how your particular presentation connects to and comports with the other communication activities they have had or will have, you can better help them synthesize your material. The best thing you can do is link what you are presenting to your audience's other experiences. Something as simple as commenting on how "Bob's earlier presentation suggested…" can help your audience.

3. TECHNOLOGY SHOULD WORK FOR YOU

You need to be both familiar and comfortable with the technology you are using to deliver your webinar. Part of your audience's evaluation of your credibility and competence comes from your skillful use of the technology that transmits your message. If you fumble and stumble with the technology, you will be seen in a less positive light.

To avoid mishaps, test the technology ahead of time so you can better understand the features available to you and the nuances and procedures required for success. Additionally, make sure your supporting infrastructure (e.g., phone lines, internet connections, etc.) and those who manage it are available and ready.

Next, practice the presentation in the presence of a remote audience and record it (if this feature is available to you). This will allow you to have a better understanding of your audience's experience of your presentation. You can learn important things from this dress rehearsal and recording review. One time during a practice run, I realized that the builds in my slides where delayed for my remote practice partner. So for my presentation, I initiated the build prior to speaking to it, so my viewers could see what I was addressing as I was addressing it.

Finally, create a support plan for your webinar participants so you needn't be bothered or distracted by any issues that arise. First, empower your participants by providing them access to tutorials and trials of your webinar tool. Ask them specifically to practice using the features (e.g., chat, question submission, etc.) you intend to employ during your webinar. Second, designate someone whose sole responsibility is to address any technical challenges that might arise. Your job during the webinar is to focus on your audience and the content you have provided for them. Further, be sure to provide your support person's information early and often so participants are aware of who to contact if they need guidance. As part of my overall webinar preview, I include my support person's contact information.

4. SPEAKING GOAL SETS YOUR ROUTE

Your speaking goal is your overarching reason for presenting. It is why you have been asked to share your thoughts and why your audience has chosen to listen. Your speaking goal will serve as your magnetic north and help ensure that you and your audience stay on track.

In one clear and concise sentence, your speaking goal should answer the following question:

"At the end of my presentation, I want my audience to think, feel, and do what?"

A complete speaking goal needs to address all three components. Too often presenters focus only on the "thinking" outcome of their talk. For example, an executive whom I coached had an important corporate webinar to present in which he was announcing a new Chief Operations Officer. Originally when asked, he said that his speaking goal was for his subordinates to "get to know the new COO." Upon further prodding, he came to realize his bigger goal was to get his company not only to meet the COO, but to embrace him and help make his transition into the company easier. This more complete speaking goal helped in the crafting of a webinar that better achieved all of those outcomes.

The best and clearest speaking goals are defined only after you have done your prior homework of determining your audience's needs and reflecting on the context.

5. PLAN TO ADD STRUCTURE

Beyond making sure that your speaking goal fulfills your audience's needs, you must also craft your webinar content so that it is easy for your audience to understand. I am not implying that you "dumb down" your content, but rather, you need to plan and structure your content so your audience can more easily follow you. Research shows that people retain structured information up to 40% more reliably and accurately than information that is presented in an unstructured manner.

THERE ARE MANY PRESENTATION STRUCTURES:

- Past-Present-Future — good for providing a history or stepping people through a process
- Comparison-Contrast — good for showing the relative advantages of your position
- Cause-Effect — good for helping people understand the underlying logic of your position
- Problem-Solution-Benefit — good for influencing people to support your ideas/plans
- What?-So What?-Now What? — good for explaining an idea and its relevance to your audience

Select the structure that most easily allows you to make your point or tell your story.

6. LEAD LIKE A TOUR GUIDE

Your job as a presenter is to lead your audience through your content. In this regard, presenters are like tour guides. And in this role, presenters must follow the tour guide imperative: "Never lose the members of your tour group!" All good tour guides set expectations for where they are taking their tour participants to make them feel comfortable and help prepare them to follow you. With webinars, you have two opportunities to set expectations:

(1) When sending out the invite to your webinar, you should not only include the date, time, topic and technical information (e.g., URL, access code, etc.), but you should also send out a blurb describing your speaking goal and the structure you intend to use to achieve it. You can even include questions you would like your audience to think about before listening to you.

(2) During the first few moments of your presentation, be sure to define what you intend to cover and how you will do so.

In addition to setting expectations early, you need to make sure your audience stays with you as you move from point to point. In other words, transitions are critical. Too often, presenters simply say "next" to move their audience along. This is a missed opportunity to tie your points together and keep your audience focused. Effective transitioning tools include:

- Internal summaries – Paraphrase your previous point before moving on
  Example: "Now that we have seen how our competitors do this…"
- Questions – Ask a question that signals what is coming next
  Example: "How can we achieve what our competitors do?"
- Agenda slide – Return to an agenda slide that indicates where you are in the presentation

Lead your audience throughout your presentation, and they are more likely to engage throughout your talk and remember it afterwards.

7. ENGAGE EARLY AND OFTEN

As a webinar presenter, you need to engage your audience and get them involved. If you fail to invite participation, inertia sets in and your audience will soon lapse into gazing out the window and checking e-mail. To avoid this situation, I strongly recommend using engagement tools to get your audience to participate. These techniques demand involvement from your audience. They make audience members sit forward in their chairs and be in the moment with you.

- Ask your audience to do something. You can have them physically act by asking them to respond to a poll, submit a question, or provide a chat comment. These actions require focus and involvement, which reduces passivity. Or, you can have them mentally do something by asking them to "imagine," "remember back," or "picture this." Since your audience is seeing something in their mind's eye, rather than just listening to you describe it, they become more engaged and your point becomes more vivid and lasting for them.
- Do a Think-Pair-Share exercise. Ask your audience to take a moment to think of an answer to a question you pose or to come up with a potential alternative. Next, encourage them to discuss their response with someone else via chat or a wiki. After this brief discussion, solicit their input. Think-Pair-Share is a powerful participation tool because it not only bolsters the audience's confidence in responding because they have collaborated on their response, but better ideas typically arise as a result of multiple brains working together.
- Use analogies. By comparing new information to something your audience is already familiar with, analogies activate the audience's existing mental constructs, which allows for quicker information processing, better understanding, and greater interest in the topic being presented.
- Focus on the relevance of your topic for your audience. This is possibly the most important audience connecting

technique. Be sure to spend time detailing the specific links between your topic and your audience's lives. For example, "This point about customer feedback is especially important for online retailers, because of your starred reviews." Relevancy is the best antidote for apathy, and it brings with it a high level of participation.

When you use engagement techniques throughout your webinar, you get a more involved and participative audience who will likely remember more of your content.

8. AIDS ARE ONLY TOOLS

Keynote, Prezi, Slide Rocket, Powerpoint, YouTube clips—the greatest presentation helpers ever developed can also be the biggest roadblocks to effective presentations. When used well, visual presentation aids facilitate understanding and let webinar audiences absorb information in wonderful ways. Unfortunately, these aids can also lead to poor presentations. Remember, your visual aids are not the presentation. Your content and delivery are the presentation. Visual aids are merely tools.

Far too often, presenters think they are writing a presentation when they are only drafting slides. These two acts are different. Acting as if they are the same is akin to a pastry chef spending hours icing a cake without regard for the quality of the cake itself. You must break this association, or you will fall prey to the classic pitfall: Creating your visual aids under the illusion that you are making progress in crafting your webinar. The result is that, after spending so much time creating slides with wipes, fades, and embedded videos, you fail to practice your presentation and you lose your focus on delivering the message that your audience needs to hear. This all-too-common practice leads presenters to read their slides rather than connect with their audience. Your slides are a tool meant to foster understanding and engagement, not a teleprompter.

When you do deem visual aids are necessary and useful, avoid creating slides that are "eye charts" full of lots of details in small fonts — these are particularly impenetrable in webinars, when audience

members may be viewing on a small laptop screen. Instead, challenge yourself to think visually. Is there an image that could represent your point in a more meaningful way? Could you create a simple diagram or flow chart to help get your point across to your audience? Google Image search can be a useful tool to get your creative visual juices flowing. Type in the concept you are trying to convey and see what comes up. The images you find might have copyright issues, so I don't recommend using everything you find, but you will get an idea of the type of visual variety that is possible. And if you must portray complex information on a slide, consider using builds and reveals to help your audience focus by showing them only what you want them to attend to.

Visual aids are essential to successful webinars. But you must remember that you are evaluated more on your webinar's content and its value, not on the slides you create. Only after you have something to say and are saying it well, should you create visual aids that are appropriate and serve enhance your presentation by engaging your audience and helping them to understand your content.

9. DELIVER IN A VARIED MANNER

The single most important delivery element in a webinar is your voice. Even if you are using video to show your face, your voice reigns supreme. Unfortunately, especially in webinars, audience attention can easily wander, and once it is gone, you will have a hard time getting it back. To counter these natural tendencies of your audience, you must employ variety in your voice. You have likely been the victim of a monotonous speaker who drones on in a flat vocal style much like Ben Stein's character in the classic movie "Ferris Buller's Day Off." Adding variation in your volume and speaking rate serve to keep your audience's attention and motivate them to listen.

By speaking expressively, your passion for your topic comes through. However, for many presenters, this type of speaking is not natural. I

often instruct these less expressive speakers to infuse their presentations with emotive words, such as "excited," "valuable," "challenging," and to inflect their voice to reflect the meaning of these words. If you are speaking about a big opportunity, then speak "big" in a big way. Over time, you will feel more comfortable with this type of vocal variety.

Since most of us are not used to speaking for long periods of time, you also need to build vocal stamina and support your voice with proper breathing. The single best technique to improve your speaking endurance is to read out loud for 10 to 15 minutes at a time. It doesn't matter what you read as long as you read aloud frequently starting at least a week prior to your webinar. Not only will this reading out loud help you to develop an appropriate speaking stamina, it also helps you find a natural cadence and breathing rhythm.

Through thoughtful preparation and practiced presenting, you can maximize the effectiveness of your webinars. The nine steps covered here all distill down to the simple notion that as a webinar presenter you are in service of your audience's needs and, therefore, must create an engaging, easy to understand, educational experience for them.

ABOUT MATT ABRAHAMS

Matt Abrahams is a passionate, collaborative and innovative educator and coach who teaches Strategic Communication for Stanford University's Graduate School of Business and Presentation Skills for Stanford's Continuing Studies Program, while also teaching at De Anza College. He has published research articles on cognitive planning, persuasion, and interpersonal communication. Matt recently published the second edition of _Speaking Up Without Freaking Out,_ a book written to help the millions of people who suffer from anxiety around speaking in public. Additionally, Matt developed an iPad app called eValue8 that provides instant, proscriptive feedback to presenters. Matt also curates

NoFreakingSpeaking.com to help those looking to be confident presenters.

Matt is Co-Founder of Bold Echo Communication Solutions, a presentation and communication skills company that helps people improve their presentation skills. Matt has worked with executives to help prepare and present keynote addresses, IPO road shows, conduct media interviews, and deliver TED talks.

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