More Great Tips (And An Invite) For Running Interactive Webinars
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After my recent posts about boring webinars I was surprised to learn how many people are ok with the expectation that their participants will multi-task. If we were designing an in-person meeting, workshop or training session, would we assume that participants would be working on their email, having side-conversations or searching the Internet? I think not! We would create an agenda that keeps people engaged and challenges them to think creatively, share ideas, ask questions, solve problems, role play, test assumptions, take another point of view …

The level of interest in this topic has prompted me to offer the first in as series of free webinars on this very topic – How to Get Great Results from Virtual Meetings and Webinars. Please click here to register for this event on Wednesday, July 22nd at 8:00 AM PDT (11:00 AM EDT; 4:00 PM BST).

My original five surefire ways of running an engaging and effective webinar were:

1. Design your agenda with a distracted participant in mind.
2. Give out slides in advance – review briefly and then start asking provocative questions
3. Skip the video – prepare for a good dialogue between a moderator and expert.
4. Don't compromise the interactive learning portion of your workshop.
5. Look for ways to engage your participants before and after the webinar.
   Click here to look back at the full post

My post generated a good conversation across various social media about what it takes to make webinars interesting and engaging. Here is an edited compilation of some of the tips and techniques I found most useful.

 * We learn by doing, not by listening.
 * Think like a facilitator – rather than a speaker or presenter. Start with the session objectives and think about how to engage your sized group to produce those outcomes. Design your agenda with challenges, activities, exercises and then look for ways to make this happen virtually.
 * Webinars do not have to be high tech. Sometimes a good focused phone conversation with your eyes closed is better than a presentation. Think about how you listen on the phone to a colleague, friend or family member when you are also driving or at your keyboard or doing the washing up. Think about that same conversation if you are seated in a comfortable chair with no other distractions. Pay attention to the meeting space - create a virtual environment conducive to the experience you want to create.
 * Use a structured process to signal where the conversation is going. Share the process ahead of time, guide the group through the thinking exercise or discussion step by step. Use each step to switch your tone, check in for understanding, engage silent participants, ask a provocative question, ask someone to summarize the key issues, etc.
 * Know your content with your eyes closed.
 * Develop your virtual platform skills – how to engage participants you can't see. Tone of voice impacts the level of participation and affects how people listen and engage. Practice your phone voice – hear the difference when you are soft and conversational and when you are projecting and assertive. How does your voice change when you stand up or sit down? How does each style impact your listeners?
 * Use two presenters/facilitators for vocal variety and different perspectives. This allows for one to present while the other handles the behind-the-scenes questions, etc. Or switch from a presentation format to a question and answer or conversation format. This takes preparation, planning and practice but can be more engaging to listen to and more likely to prompt input from participants.

* Use animated materials (video clips, Flash animations) and dynamic slides (test that the software allows for this). Better still include these in the invitation and have people watch ahead of time and come read to discuss what they saw.

* Solicit questions ahead of time. This helps prepare participants for a good conversation as well as help you adjust your material to match the interest of this particular group.

* Keep it short. Two short sessions with thinking or question time in between is often better than one long session.

* Get people up and out of their chairs.

* Using small groups to engage and collaborate – before, during and after a webinar. Simply pairing up participants and asking them to have a 15 minute phone conversation about the webinar material ahead of time significantly boost the level of attention and participation during the real time session.

* Use props. Send them out in advance – in the mail or electronically. Ask people to pick up an article on their desks.

* Call on people randomly and by name. Keep them guessing – will I be next?

* Talk to people ahead of time and get to know something about them and their interest in your topic. This gives you something to refer to in your session and a way to connect with them on the call.

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