

A Beginner's Guide to Webinars

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Introduction:

This short document is intended as a simple overview of some of the opportunities provided by online platforms which can replace or supplement physical presentations/ events in the short term for those who may not have had cause to run such activities before.

Many companies provide the platforms delivering or running this type of activity and will be able to (and no doubt are), providing more comprehensive and technical detail than this document does. My experience has been from a practical point of view: managing a team responsible for hundreds of local and global online events ranging from one-off webinars, internal training sessions, on-demand training materials to more sophisticated multi-speaker/ session events. I have worked in vendor selection for several companies starting or developing their online presence and helped set up campaigns for individuals and companies starting in the area. In addition to the previous, I've also presented many webinars myself and will include in this document a list of potential issues new webinar organizers may encounter.

Why Run an Online Event?



At this moment in time, as the effects on mass gatherings continue to unfold and change in definition due to the Coronavirus, more and more companies and individuals are having to rethink planned activities with haste. For others, it might be something they've been thinking of doing but haven't got around to yet because of technical concerns, lack of know-how/confidence or budget concerns, but find that circumstances have somewhat forced their hand. There are clear benefits to running such an event: cost, reach, timing, scale, ease and personnel requirements can all factor into a choice of online over face-to-face. I'll break some of these down in a moment.

What IS an Online Event?



For this document, I'm keeping the term very broad. You may consider:

- One-to-One meetings
- Web conferencing or Small group meetings
- Live Webinars (with the possibility of interaction)
- Webinars-on-Demand/ Webcasts (recorded sessions) which are generally available at any time online.
- Online Training session (may be live, may be recorded, may be interactive, may have a pass criterion via LMS linked, may be internal or external.)
- Webinar Conference/ Summit: a series of related sessions over some time, under one overall theme umbrella.

Platforms

There are hundreds of online event platform providers, with functionality ranging from pure 'event' provision to full service including all those elements that have to happen before and after the event. Which one is best for you will depend on your budget, personnel resource, audience size and requirements. This document isn't intended as a vendor comparison guide, but among the leading providers, you may wish to consider:

GoToWebinar (www.gotomeeting.com/webinar)

ClickMeeting (clickmeeting.com)

EverWebinar (www.everwebinar.com)

WebinarJam (<https://home.webinarjam.com>)

WebEx (<https://www.webex.com/>)

Costs

Costs will depend on your provider and may vary depending on factor such as:

- The number of services you want to utilize
 - The number of administrators you need to have
 - The number of seats you need to have (places within the Webinar)
 - How you will store the material
 - How much personalization of branding you need
- And many, many other factors.

Most providers will have tier-based plans and charge flat fees. Many will also provide one week/ month/ session free to give you the chance to get a feel for them.

How It Works - The Absolute Basics

At the most basic level, the process is not very different from a physical event.



1. Advertise the event (remembering to make the what, when, where, who, why very clear)
2. Keep attendees up to date in the build-up
3. Make sure you're prepared for the event: you have your room set up (in this case virtual and physical), and the conditions are suitable for attendees and presenters
4. Hold the event, making sure attendees are looked after during the entirety of it
5. Follow up to ensure the event was successful and that attendees got all the information they expected and needed from it

Of course, additional steps are sitting behind the above five key points but, once you've familiarized yourself with the processes nothing more complex, and in many cases, less time consuming/ demanding than the traditional physical events you've organized.

Fundamentally, the Webinar operates within part of your broader marketing mix. It should not and cannot work effectively as a completely independent piece. To this end, you will need:

- A notification method: you can advertise on social and your website, but you should build a GDPR compliant sign up list. This is vital for reminders, updates and follow up.
- A registration method: this may or may not be included within the webinar software platform.
- An email provider - (via the webinar platform or independent) to provide the above messaging.



- Ideally, you should be able to link your event to your CRM system - to record who has registered/ attended/ missed the session. You will want to treat them differently, with different follow up methods.

In addition to the above software requirements, you will also need:

- A webinar team: at the minimum, this will include your presenter, an administrator(with knowledge of the software) and a support assistant (to moderate the session if interactive- to manage the chat room, and answer any user problems immediately before or during the session and support the presenter)
- A suitable space to run the session (quiet, well lit, good internet connection)
- Appropriate hardware: a good camera/ webcam and a high-quality microphone
- Suitable quality slides (even if not using in-session, then you will need a pre-presentation holding slide)



**Give yourself
lots of time**



**Promote your
event / webinar
whenever possible**



**Create higher
levels of
registration**

10 Key Challenges/ Issues/ Potential Solutions:

- **Issue:** Finding an appropriate webinar platform (appropriate meaning price/ usability/ audience capability/ interactive requirements).
- **Potential Solution:** Taking one platform as an example (without being a recommendation) [GoToMeeting](#) provides Webinar services which include:
 - Pricing available for one month: **£199.**
 - Up to 500 Participants (the more expensive Plus version allows for 1000)
 - Reporting and Analytics
 - Polls, Handouts, and Q&A
 - Full-Service Registration
 - Automated Emails
 - Accept Payments
 - Custom Branding
 - VOIP, Phone & Toll-Free
 - Custom URL
 - Video Sharing
 - Video Embedding
 - No Download
- **Issue:** We need to do it quickly as an alternative to a physical event we had planned
- **Potential Solution:** The set up of event registration and webinar hosting service is quick - it can be done in an hour once you've decided on the right provider. What WILL take time is the advertising of the event, the presenter and supporting materials preparation, practice run(s) and room set up. A virtual presentation should not be treated as a 'quick fix' or an 'easy' solution, but nor should it be considered overly complicated or technically restrictive. Treat it with the same professionalism and planning as you would a physical event, and you will be okay.
- **Issue:** Technical know-how requirements for running webinar sessions (ticketing/ set up/ moderation/ follow up/ room set up/ trouble shooting).
- **Potential Solution:** *GoToWebinar* and most other high-quality offerings are relatively intuitive, and their websites have extensive user support. An experienced administrator will be able to get to grips with it quickly, but they will need to be able to manage registration queries, as well as have the ability to set up a registration area, email communications, updates and the event itself.
- **Issue:** Having a semi-permanent environment suitable for set up and broadcast for the required period, so that equipment and presentation space does not need to be broken down/ set up. The area needs to have dependable broadband/Wi-Fi.
- **Potential Solution:** the critical issue is to have a non-echoing, undisturbed, bright room with good Wi-Fi. A meeting room is normally sufficient.
- **Issue:** ticketing: are you going to charge for the event or not? If charging, the event registration system you choose will have its own service fee business plan.

This is often a percentage of the ticket price (5% is not uncommon). If you are not charging, there may be a flat fee based on the number of seats (places), or, in some cases, no charge.

- **Potential Solution:** It will depend on what you are offering and what your intentions are. If you are advertising a product or service, then attendees may expect the event to be free.
- **Issue:** a virtual event is not as attractive to presenters/ audience as a physical one, and some would-be attendees may not have software/ hardware to access.
- **Potential Solution:** There are benefits and drawbacks of a virtual event. Of course, it does not offer the 'interactive' meeting a physical conference offers. However, from my experience of 500+ webinars, you will be surprised how much unprompted chatter happens in the webinar chat room before the Webinar starts. This may have implications for your session moderator, but it can be very positive. You should also consider whether you are offering this as a core, on-going activity, or you are using it as an 'emergency' substitute because of unpreventable circumstances. This may require a different messaging to your attendees, but generally, the understanding from them will be that 'something' is better than 'nothing'.
- **Issue:** would lose sponsorship opportunities you may have arranged for your event.
- **Potential Solution:** firstly, it is worth considering that there will be less expense required (presenter travel/ hotels/ payment for premises/ refreshments/ etc. that you may have had to pay for a physical event). Sponsorship is viable - every Webinar has a 'joining period' so any holding card could be more relevant, and potentially reach a wider audience, for would-be advertisers than your original face-to-face physical event was going to be.
- **Issue:** additional pressure on the presenter(s)
- **Potential Solution:** it is true that presenting to camera, and without immediate reaction, is a different experience than presenting live. This could be offset to some degree by not having a direct-to-camera approach or by having a small audience of in-house team IN the session: to both put the presenter at ease, and potentially to be putting the questions that may arise in the chat room to them.
- **Issue:** Use of Visuals
- **Potential Solution:** there are options: this can either be via visuals behind the presenter, or shown on a screen by them, or by intercutting with PowerPoint (or similar) slides- NOTE that this WILL need strong admin support who has the technical capability to interject into the session. In addition, most quality webinar providers give the option to include attachments along with the presentation - so that additional (or the same) slides can be included at the same time or after the performance.
- **Issue:** A lack of 'Call to Action'
- **Potential Solution:** in fact, the Webinar can create a more forceful call to action than a physical presentation. This can be done
 - Within the session via presenter speech

- Within the session via on-screen slides
 - End of the session via closing comments and slide
 - Via follow up email
- **Issue:** Our customers don't have the software/ hardware needed to 'attend' one of these webinars.
 - **Potential Solution:** if they have a computer, internet connection and an email they're most likely good to go. The majority of webinar provision software does not require complicated downloads: if additional programmes are needed to access a webinar room, then it will be downloaded automatically as part of the joining process.

Summary

Many companies may be using webinars as last-minute substitutes due to event cancellation during this particularly difficult time. They can be a challenge to set up for the inexperienced but, as long as appropriate thought, time, planning and testing are given to it, it can be as helpful as any physical event.

Remember that the webinar/ webcast/ online session is a component of the marketing mix and not a self-standing piece and, with appropriate preparation, hopefully, you'll find it is an invaluable tool in your customer support.

Good luck to anyone embarking on their first webinar sessions and if you have any further questions, I'll do my best to help. You can contact me at simon@bewickconsulting.com

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