Wilder Research

Tips for conducting effective webinars

Webinars provide an interactive, effective way to share information, and offer a cost-effective approach to reaching people over a wide geographic area. They allow you to visually demonstrate materials such as documents, video clips, and websites, and to get instant feedback. You can also record your session for later use.

Wilder Research recently evaluated a training series that participants could attend in person or via webinar. Wilder found that the increased accessibility and time-saving of the webinar training far out-weighed a slight loss in overall satisfaction of participants.

Like many organizations, Wilder Research is now using webinars regularly for trainings, presentations, and meetings. We share these tips that we have found helpful for keeping audiences focused and engaged:

- **Identify your purpose.** Just as with an in-person training or presentations, a successful webinar must have a well-designed, thoughtful approach, a clear set of goals, and content that is valuable to your audience.
- **Act like a facilitator rather than presenter**. Start with the session objectives and think about how to engage your group to produce those outcomes.
- **Involve multiple actors.** Ask partners or collaborators to conduct a portion of the webinar. Do a run-through ahead of time, to check content, flow and timing. It is also an opportunity to make sure you are all comfortable using the webinar format.
- **Consider having "pre-work."** If you have a lot of information to cover, consider providing participants with material to read in advance. This will reduce the amount of time spent in a one-way presentation, give participants more time to process the information, and increase the time available for reflection or discussion.
- **Use a structured process**. Share the process at the beginning, guiding the group through the 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.
- **Use a variety of approaches**. When doing an in-person training or presentation, varying your approach (i.e., presentation, small group activities, large group discussion) will keep your training more interesting, and draw on a broader array of learning styles. The same philosophy applies for webinars.
- **Make it visually interesting**. Give people something to look at. You may want to use some PowerPoint slides, but don't over-do – avoid pitfalls such as too much text on a page. Intersperse your slides with pictures, illustrations, video clips, polls or other interactive demonstrations.
- **Make it interesting to listen to.** Your tone of voice impacts the level of participation and affects how people listen and engage. Practice your webinar voice, and test out how your style impacts your listeners.
- **Create opportunities for participant interaction**. Rather than just pausing for questions/comments, encourage participation. Try starting with an icebreaker, poll, or other interactive activity to engage all participants. Participants should have an opportunity to ask questions, either verbally or by typing them into the webinar chat screen. If you are trying to have a group discussion, you may need to get the ball rolling by calling on specific participants or planting questions yourself. Discussions will likely be more productive when there is a specific purpose, such as brainstorming solutions to a problem, prioritizing options, or making decisions.

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- **Be aware of participants' comfort levels**. Not all participants may be comfortable engaging in a webinar. The technology interface may be unfamiliar, and some may not feel comfortable asking questions or talking through the conference call or computer interface. Provide positive feedback for interaction/discussion.
- **Monitor participant attention.** Many webinar systems allow you to monitor participant attention (typically defined as having the webinar visible on the screen, rather than being active behind something else such as an email account). Sudden drops in attention may indicate that people have lost interest – consider strategies for drawing the participants back in, just as you would in an in-person training if people suddenly look bored or disinterested.
- **Be flexible**. Your approach may need to be modified as you go. The technology sometimes presents challenges, or you may realize that your webinar plan will not successfully engage participants or cover needed information. Rather than forging ahead with your original vision, be open to modifying your approach as you go.
- **Evaluate the webinar**. Invite open feedback about the quality of the webinar and suggestions for improvement. Your evaluation can be done through the webinar system itself, or embedded into other evaluation activities as appropriate.

How can I make sure my webinar is technically trouble-free?

Webinars require specific software and technical know-how. Often, the presenter and/or the participants experience technical glitches that frustrate everyone. The following strategies can reduce the risk of difficulties:

- **Do a technical run-through in advance.** This is especially important if you are collaborating with others who are unfamiliar with the technology. If presenters are at remote site, practice switching the presentation to each presenter, and have presenters test all features they will use, such as mute buttons.
- **Set up ahead**. You need to plan at least an hour for set-up. Have presenters meet at least 30 minutes ahead of time. Check sound before starting the webinar. Go to any web sites you may be using and open all documents.
- **Check bandwidth.** Make sure you and your participants have enough bandwidth to use your materials as intended – if your bandwidth is limited, you may not be able to use features such as video.
- **Provide instructions**. Give your participants detailed instructions for how to log in and how to use the webinar interface (such as how to ask questions). Invite them to do a system check-out ahead of time to make sure the webinar will work on their computers, and have someone available during the webinar to provide technical support.
- **Close unnecessary applications.** Remember that participants can see what is on your screen. Make sure that programs such as your electronic mail are closed to prevent messages from popping up while you are presenting.

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