

How to Give a Webinar Presentation

by Dorie Clark

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As more and more companies cultivate a global workforce and international client base, it's increasingly necessary to present remotely. For years, teleconferencing was the best option, but in the past five years internet speeds and web conferencing technologies have become sufficiently robust to support a shift to live video streaming. But presenting in a webinar – when you often don't have access to visual cues about how the audience is responding – can sometimes feel disconcerting or awkward.

In the course of promoting my books, delivering client trainings, and teaching executive education programs, I've conducted several hundred webinars over the past few years. Here are the strategies I've found to be most effective in engaging executive audiences.

First, make use of the camera. It's shocking to me how many professionals still consider it acceptable to host webinars with no video, merely providing voiceover as they click through a series of slides. At the dawn of the webinar era, there were legitimate bandwidth concerns; you sometimes avoided using video so that you wouldn't overtax the system and cause it to freeze (and that's still a concern in some situations).

But most of the time, the internet quality should be just fine. And just as television flourished only when its creators stopped thinking of it as "radio with pictures," it's essential for professionals steeped in teleconferencing to realize that successful webinars must make use of the inherent strengths and possibilities of the medium – namely video. Many professionals don't like looking at themselves on camera, but that's not a valid excuse when you consider how much more engaged listeners are when watching a real person talk to them, rather than a disembodied voice. It may feel uncomfortable to present in the absence of audience feedback, but one popular trick is to simply imagine a good friend of yours "on the other end of the line" and pretend you're presenting to that person.

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Second, an important corollary point: If you're using the camera, you have to be mindful of visual aesthetics. We've all been on the receiving end of this, watching colleagues whose eyes were permanently skewed to one side because of the placement of their camera, or whose laptop lens gave us a view of their chin and the ceiling. If you're going to be presenting online, it's essential to plan your visuals carefully. Specifically, adjust your camera so that it's giving a straight-on view of your face (even if that means propping your

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laptop up on several books). Test it out with a practice session to see how your chosen backdrop will appear to participants.

For instance, you'll likely want to avoid presenting in front of a window, because the light coming in from behind you may render you almost too dark to see. Similarly, make sure the backdrop is professional, such as a bookcase or diplomas or a tasteful piece of art. One participant in my "Recognized Expert" course purchased a brightly colored abstract painting because he knew it would provide a memorable visual anytime he was interviewed or conducted a webinar. As with any television appearance, it's best to avoid busy patterns or dangly jewelry, which can distract a viewer.

Next, it's a good idea to rehearse the mechanics of the webinar software you're using. When I conduct webinars for clients or universities, I'm expected to use their preferred software; I can count at least seven types that I've had to employ. The fundamentals of each platform are similar, of course, but the particulars are just different enough that it's worth a brief run-through, including how to toggle between slides and screen sharing (this is the part that most frequently stymies me in the moment), how to mute or unmute participants (it's a very good idea to mute everyone upon entry to avoid random blasts of noise), how to access questions or comments, and how to run instant polls.

One often-overlooked element is ensuring you're able to maintain eye contact with the camera so that you appear to be looking viewers in the eye. Some platforms display video images in one corner by default – and if so, it's likely that your eyes will drift over there, making you appear to be staring off to one side for no reason. Guard against this by familiarizing yourself with the platform and adjusting the default settings as needed.

Finally, one essential element that's worth deciding on in advance is how you'll handle audience participation. Depending on the number of attendees, you may ask them to "raise their hand" if they have a question, type their questions into the comment box, or use a separate Q&A feature. Whatever you decide, make sure you're explicit at the beginning of the webinar and remind people periodically throughout, to avoid frustration or confusion.

It may take participants some time to formulate their questions, especially if they're writing them down, so it's a good idea to give several minutes' warning before you dive into the Q&A. Otherwise, you may encounter a few awkward moments of silence when you ask for questions and people are still busy typing. If the number of attendees is large enough (implying that there will be a heavy stream of comments), you may want to have an assistant on hand who can help you dig through questions and identify the most promising ones, so you don't have to multitask.

In the corporate world, professionals are increasingly asked to present via webinar. (In fact, how to do it effectively is one of the most common questions I receive during the executive communication programs I teach for Duke University's Fuqua School of Business.) The financial and time-saving benefits of online presentations are obvious, so it's a trend that will only continue to grow. By mastering these techniques and enhancing your webinar presentation skills, you'll make yourself a more persuasive and effective leader.



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