

Developing Engaging Webinars

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Engagement Techniques	2
Voice	3
Video	3
The Presentation/Visuals	3
Branding	4
Pictures	4
Text	5
Polls/Quiz Questions	6
Q&A/Chat	6
Application	8
Conclusion	8
Appendix A - Content	9
Appendix B - Purpose/Outcome	9

Introduction

Bill Gates once famously said “Content is King” in his [1996 essay regarding the internet](#), but even Gates acknowledged the importance around the *delivery of content*, saying “*If people are to be expected to put up with turning on a computer to read a screen, they must be rewarded with deep and extremely up-to-date information that they can explore at will. They need to have audio, and possibly video. They need an opportunity for personal involvement that goes far beyond that offered through the letters-to-the-editor pages of print magazines.*” Although Gates’ talked about print, at the time, even he didn’t know how far the internet would go. And everything he said about print, gains even more importance in virtual presentations, because of all the proverbial squirrels virtual events must contend with.

Work, household priorities, social media and the most recent cat video beckon virtual participants with just the flip of a screen. When people are in a live classroom setting, of course they can get up and walk out or check their email, but social rules often help keep people in their seats and paying attention. Social rules like staying seated during the entirety of the session and only looking at their email, social media or the latest meme their friend posted for short periods of time, before they feel presenter or others looking at them, causing them to draw back into the presentation. These rules don’t apply in the virtual world.

Content ([Appendix A - Content](#)) and the purpose ([Appendix B – Purpose/Outcome](#)) of sessions will not be covered, but brief supplements on these topics are provided to provide a little more foundation in these areas. But in order to help keep participants glued to their screen and the content being delivered, we will dive deeper into interactive techniques that can be used to deliver content through the utilization of webinar features. And although the entirety of the presentation, the style and development of it are extremely important, in the virtual world attendee engagement is critical, not only to keeping people engaged, but in attendees learning the content in an effective matter.

Some of the core engagement techniques, common to most webinar platforms, that will be explored throughout this document are:

- Voice
- Video
- Presentation (Visual)
 - Branding
 - Pictures
 - Text
- Polls/Quiz Questions
- Question and Answer (Q&A)/Chat
- Application

Engagement Techniques

If content is king, engagement is queen. Although engagement is key in any learning environment, it becomes even more critical in the virtual world simply because there are more proverbial squirrels to contend with. People are typically at their desk or at home attending a virtual event with other work, household chores, and social connectivity beckoning them with just the flip of a screen. When people are in a classroom setting there are a lot of social rules they would have to break that keeps them in their seat and paying attention that don't exist in the virtual world. To help keep people engaged, there are a few techniques you can use. Not all of them are technically features of a virtual environment, but they may have additional emphasis in the virtual world.

- Voice
- Video
- The Presentation/Visuals
- Storytelling/Relatability
- Polls/tests/questions
- Application
- Q&A
- Chat

Utilizing some of these techniques just comes with the territory when presenting virtually and using them all could be overwhelming. The key is finding the right balance that's critical in keeping people engaged and achieving the goals of the presentation. We'll explore some of these options while supporting their learning.

Voice

Although you may not think of audio as a feature of a virtual environment, there's no avoiding that it is an important part of the experience. Because of this, voice is probably one of the most important and underrated parts of a webinar. It doesn't matter how good the presentation looks, how interactive it is, or how good the content is if people must listen to someone drone on and on about a topic. This doesn't mean someone has to have a great radio or TV voice or have a great personality, but they should show passion around the subject they are teaching. Sometimes excitement about the topic comes out in the speed or manner in which they talk, the passion behind what they're saying, their ability to relate to the listeners through storytelling and many other facets of their presentation style. There is no one right way, but the passion behind what they're saying should come out in their voice and style while presenting.

Video

Video is a unique feature of the virtual environment because although people are used to seeing others in person at a live event, it can be an odd thing for a presenter. Some presenters love it, others hate it, and still others just need time to adjust to this new view of themselves. Because of this, determining how to handle this feature may depend a lot on your presenter, your negotiation skills and what your expectations are of your presenter. Do you expect them to be on video the whole time, or just part of the time? No matter what you decide, video shouldn't be a requirement for someone that doesn't like to be on camera, even though it can add an additional level of engagement because it:

- Makes the person real. They can be seen and aren't just a voice.
- 90% of communication is body language, so they can be expressive, use hand gestures, etc. to convey their message in a more engaging way.

One reason or often unheard objection from people, when they don't want to be on video, is that it shows some vulnerabilities. People can see them, the camera may not be flattering, and it may show a lot of other flaws about their presentation due to the camera being focused on them. Some of these aspects can be eliminated or minimized through techniques like camera angles and choosing when to show someone on camera, but some of the vulnerabilities are important in building credibility. Because people are social and have a desire to be connected to others, even those that would be deemed antisocial, seeing and "connecting" with a real person can bring a level of personalization and credibility that isn't possible if just the presentation is shown.

Adding video doesn't have to be an all or nothing part of the presentation. Bookending the presentation by showing video at the beginning and end of the presentation can be an effective way to garner credibility and create a connection with the presenter. For example, the video could be shown during the introduction, Q&A portion of the presentation and wrap up, while allowing the visual parts of the presentation to be the star of the show.

The Presentation/Visuals

If content were truly king, we wouldn't have to do anything but provide the information in text form. And since sharing a presentation is the most common way to utilize the virtual environment, with the presentation often being the focus, we need engaging ways to present the materials to hold people's attention. Even more important to remember is that the information being presented is often not unique, it can be learned via text and a variety of other sources at the touch of a few keystrokes. The

presentation is what differentiates your information or what makes it worth remembering, that makes the difference. For example, if you put two advertisements next to each other, one in plain text and one that looks nice, with the right amount of color and a nice design, the nicer looking one will get more attention and has a higher chance of driving people to purchase the product. All advertisements try to grab your attention and hold onto it while delivering a message that you'll remember, many times even delivering it in a manner which has nothing to do with the product itself. In learning we need to take a similar approach, constructing our presentations so they are visually appealing, memorable, and get the right messages across.

Branding

Most organizations take a highly branded approach to presentations, requiring inflexible templates that are what you might expect from an internal board-type presentation. Pre-defined templates that use specific formats, words and other devices may work the first time you see them because they're new and different. But when new and different becomes old hat and variety in the message, presentation, and the same devices are used repeatedly they become no different than any other presentation they have already seen from the organization. This highly branded approach causes learner fatigue, inhibits learning and starts to chip away credibility because the learner can't differentiate one presentation from the other, making it feel as if they've already attended the presentation.

Visual appeal is often very underrated and is an essential piece to learning because it helps keep people engaged. People are visual beings and differentiation helps us retain information. This becomes even more apparent when pictures are used to represent critical items that learners need to remember. We take in a lot of information every day and our brains are hardwired to forget things. We even forget things that we see every day, because in the big scheme of things, they aren't important for us to remember. For example, what you ate for dinner last night, in the big scope of things, doesn't really matter, so you generally forget about it quickly and in a few days, sometimes within a few hours, and you may have a really hard time remembering what you ate.

Before you ditch the branded presentation completely it does have some value, because the branded elements will garner trust from the learner and a comfort in the information that is being presented to them, but it should allow for flexibility. If you can get away from a highly branded template, careful consideration needs to be given to develop a presentation template that is consistent in its branded aspects but can readily change from presentation to presentation. For example, a presentation template that is highly branded on the first and last slide, while on the main slides, only having a small logo and a simple design element. This would allow a lot of white space to be used for relevant pictures, examples, etc. Using that space effectively, then becomes the challenge.

Pictures

Pictures help people retain information through a concept called association that is often an underestimated, but powerful tool. Association has to do with linking one thing with another and most often, when people learn new things, like a new language, they link words with pictures. Often times those pictures have nothing to do with the actual topic. In learning Japanese the phrase Good Morning or Ohayo Gozaimasu, is sometimes taught in a strange way. Picture this, the sun rising, a woman labeled mom saying hi and a picture of the state of Ohio. Translation, "When my mom gets up in the morning the state of Ohio Goes Hi Ma". Good morning in Japanese is pronounced Ohio Goes Hi Mas. Remember our brains are hardwired to forget, not to remember. So silly tricks and visualizations like the whole

state of Ohio saying hi to your mother in the morning is a very powerful way to associate and learn something quickly and easily. This level of extreme example doesn't need to be taken to heart, but visualizing concepts in pictures should be considered.

The pictures used in presentations should:

- Be meaningful or representative of the concepts you're trying to teach, even if they don't seem to make sense without an attached story or anecdote.
- Have an emotional tie to them because they can be memorable and tell a more personal story.
- Be consistent in nature. All bold or all subdued, for example, is a way to brand.
- Be big. Stay away from getting caught in the trap of pictures being relegated to a picture box that's a specific shape and size on the right side of the screen.
- Be photos, rather than line art. Icons are ok, if they represent the content and are recognizable and aid in understanding the concept(s).
- Not be used simply because the slide looks boring.

Even after all this, it's still possible to have a boring slide. If the slide is boring, use a more branded slide with only few important words on the point you're trying to relay. Used properly, these techniques will avoid a lackluster presentation.

One last thing on pictures, which relates to slide transitions as well. Use animation sparingly, because although it may look great on your screen, it may not work on the webinar platform. And even if it does work it may be choppy due to lags in technology, causing your presentation to lose some of its look and feel.

Text

Text doesn't sell, so why would plain text help someone learn? If we drive this concept a little further in relation to learning, we've all seen slides that are so full of text we can't possibly read everything on them while the instructor drones on and on without giving us a visual clue that they've moved off bullet one, much less bullet fifteen. When you see a slide with that much information on it your brain immediately gets turned off to the presentation and we often tune out, with many ceasing to pay attention to the presentation at all.

To help people stay engaged, limit your slides to a single concept and as few words as possible on each slide. Think 40 slides with one line each, instead of 4 slides with 10 lines each. Many organizations even go so far as to adopt a 6x6, 5x5, or 4x4 policy, which puts guidance on the number of words and bullet points allowed per page. For example, a 4x4 would limit someone to four words per line and no more than four bullet points per page. The fewer bullet points and words per line, the less likely the presenter will read their slide and even if they did, they would have to include a lot of information not specifically listed on the slide. The fewer words and bullet points per slide helps people stay on their screens because they know they're going to constantly change, thereby increasing their engagement. Additionally, if the presenter makes references to the screen, especially if they have examples or even a picture of something they find interesting, it will keep the presentation up on their screen instead of their work and if they have switched off, they can likely be reengage in the presentation.

Polls/Quiz Questions

One way to “physically” engage someone in a webinar is to interject polls or questions. Although people are not required to participate, asking a poll or quiz question early in the presentation will help engage people by allowing them to interact with the presenter/presentation and provide a base expectation this technique will be used again. Because they think it may be used again, it will help keep them engaged, however, if it is not used consistently throughout the presentation this engagement method can quickly become meaningless in holding their attention.

Basic poll questions are close ended, meaning they are multiple choice and contain a limited amount of choices (close-ended poll and quiz questions will be covered in Q&A/Chat). Poll questions can be a great way to engage the audience while also directing the course of the presentation. For example, you can poll your audience on the main topics that will be covered in the webinar with a question like, “Which of the topics we’re covering today do you struggle with the most?” and then offering a defined list of topics. This can direct the instructor to spend more time on the most desired topics while limiting the amount of time spent on topics the audience doesn’t need or want as much information about.

Quiz questions aren’t different from poll questions except they can help measure the learner’s understanding of a given topic either before, like the poll question example, or after. This can also help the instructor determine how effective they are relaying the information or how well their learners are catching on to the topic. It also helps reinforce learning by requiring them to apply what they’ve learned. With quiz questions done in a poll format, getting a wrong answer isn’t held against them, but this can be a very effective technique in helping bring a real learning aspect to the presentation and help the learning stick.

Depending on the other engagement techniques you use, polling or quiz questions should be used frequently throughout the presentation to keep people engaged. The cadence, or how often you use them should be consistent and should be based on the material. Some ideas on when to use them are:

- The beginning of the presentation
- Topic transitions
- When core concepts are critical to the learning
- Difficult sections of the material
- The end of the presentation

When you use polling or quiz questions, be prepared to also use the Q&A or chat feature of the presentation to gain a better understanding of what people are struggling with and be prepared to cover the information again, either offline, during or at the end of the presentation.

Q&A/Chat

The question and answer feature and chat feature can add a lot to a presentation if they’re used appropriately and roles are assigned to monitoring these features. Roles are handled in additional documentation on this subject, but in short, someone should be assigned to the chat and/or the Q&A feature in order to monitor it for questions that can be answered through the feature, or could be relayed to the presenter during the session.

For the presenter of the session, the question and answer features are usually difficult to monitor and respond to while presenting, so it should be monitored by someone assisting with the webinar.

Additionally, prior to the presentation, a system should be put in place to do one or a combination of, the following:

- Relay relevant questions to the presenter
 - During or after the presentation.
 - Via voice, text, or chat.
- Have monitors answer questions through the Q&A feature, dependent on the monitor's expertise and how many monitors are used.

Methods that provide participants with immediate feedback helps further engage them during the presentation, but there may be a lot of people on the webinar. Acknowledging that you will not get to everyone's questions and that you will be taking them at random is important. Even if their specific question isn't answered live and immediately, other participants may ask a similar question, keeping their engagement level up, while getting them the answer they were looking for. In the event their question isn't answered at all, if others are getting their questions answered, a psychological connection to the webinar occurs because they anticipate their question may get answered. Because of this, they stay more "tuned in" than they would if questions weren't allowed or answered during the presentation.

Questions should be used throughout the presentation but leaving time at the end of the presentation for additional questions or coming back to questions that weren't answered, is another great technique. Although this doesn't have the same effect as answering questions during the presentation it can add a positive level of engagement to end the presentation. Time constraints may not always allow for questions at the end, but this should be used when possible. And one method to remind a presenter to take questions at the end is a "questions" slide, placed right before the closing thank you slide.

Another engagement technique when answering questions is mentioning the person's name who asked the question, has a great point or has a right answer to a question. It's important to take care when utilizing responses to questions, only using correct answers when using people's names and not call out those with incorrect answers. This same technique can also be used at the beginning of the presentation, welcoming people by name as they enter the webinar.

Although poll questions were covered earlier, it's important to note that not all poll questions have to be asked via a multiple-choice format unless, in the instance of continuing education credit, the poll question answers must be logged for compliance. Open ended poll questions can add a lot to a session if people are asked to respond via the chat feature of the webinar. Like the close ended question that was asked earlier what would happen if we asked this question open-ended, rather than giving people predefined choices?

"Which of the topics we're covering today do you struggle with the most?"

Asking this in an open-ended manner could help garner specifics around what the learners really need help with. The downside to this is that it requires someone to monitor the chat and determine if the comments are relevant and sort out what really needs to be covered before relaying that information to the presenter.

Polls, quizzes, Q&A and chat are all similar approaches, so a combination of these should be considered to get to the heart of the information that will be useful to the presenter, while engaging the

participants in the presentation and providing personal value to them. If used correctly, participants will feel like they're a part of the presentation and will likely stay engaged for its entirety.

Application

Applying what someone learned can often be critical to the learning process, and although this is not a webinar feature, use of webinar features could be critical to this learning technique. Application is a technique used where people apply what they learned to a given or similar situation. Some application can be accomplished with polls, quizzes, chat, and Q&A, but you may need to go further in supplying information to the attendees that can be accomplished through a simple poll or chat.

A simple example of application is showing someone how to add, then giving them similar math problems to apply what they've learned. There may not be many uses for the utilization of a webcam in having someone show you how to do something they learned, but screensharing could be.

Screensharing could be used in smaller group settings by having a participant show how they navigated somewhere in a program or a webcam could be used to physically show someone how something was done.

Handouts, worksheets and scenarios could also be used to provide participants with hands on activities, solving problems on "paper" and then sharing their answers in the chat. The presenter could then provide tips as the participants solve the problem and then review how the problem was solved.

Application, although a little more difficult virtually than in person, can be used effectively with a little practice and forethought to make the activities relative, give participants practice, and make the learning stick. This hands-on technique can also bring another level of engagement to your session.

Conclusion

Don't underestimate the power of doing one or several dry runs (or practice runs), to test and gain familiarity with some of the features ahead of the live presentation. Not only will this help ensure everything goes as smoothly as possible during the presentation, many of the features, like quiz and poll questions, require some forethought and setup. And although voice and video, can be done on the run, it's not just the presenter that should be involved in the dry run. Everyone that will be involved in running the presentation, such as the person monitoring the Q&A/Chat, the host, the presenter and any other assigned role, will benefit from a practice session. The dry run doesn't have to be a full-fledged run of the entire presentation and can be just a section of content, but it will allow you to practice how you will handle questions and various features of the webinar. For example, how should the Q&A/Chat monitor contact the presenter or relay a question? Should they interrupt the presenter mid-stream, wait until there is a natural pause, or wait until the end of a section of material? Working with the presenter will be critical to creating a smooth experience for all involved.

Perfection is not the goal, learning is, so carefully consider what techniques you use. Also consider that, if you're new to this, it's not going to be perfect. Start by using a few techniques and add more as you get used to the virtual environment. And after you've wed the king and queen of presentations, it will help create an effective virtual presentation, allowing attendees the *"...opportunity for personal involvement that goes far beyond..."* the content. Just beware that eventually all of this will be old hat, just don't slide back into the old model of boring presentations.

Appendix A - Content

It would be remiss to not address content at all because it is foundational to any presentation, but since the focus of this is on engagement in a virtual setting, not content, we'll only touch on it briefly here.

Three foundational aspects of this content and it being king, are the content must be:

- Accurate
- Relevant to your audience
- Consumable

Accuracy helps ensure participants that you are a trustworthy source. If any of your content is inaccurate, even the smallest item, you could quickly lose credibility.

A large part of the delivery of content is knowing your audience. Your audience likely has at least some knowledge of what is being presented, so keeping it relevant to their skill level or level of understanding and then relating to them using the right balance of examples, storytelling and other techniques will provide the right context to attendees.

Throwing a lot of information at people may show your breadth of understanding on a topic, but it is seriously going to limit participants learning and engagement. If the point of what you're trying to convey is to hear yourself talk, hurl information at them all day, little learning is going to occur. The content should be broken down into smaller digestible sections that are delivered via various engagement techniques to help make them remember and apply the information to their own situations. So, if you think you have too much, you probably do and should break it into smaller or more sessions.

Although these three factors are not the only items to consider with content, they are three of the more foundational aspects that need to be considered when presenting, no matter what the delivery method. And although content may be king, the point of relaying content is to impart knowledge, wisdom or practice to the person learning or listening. Without engagement, people are likely to say the presenter is intelligent on the topic, but they are less likely to pay attention to the material, drift off, learn and be able to apply what they've learned.

Appendix B - Purpose/Outcome

The purpose or outcome of your webinar will help drive the features used to engage participants. Every event, educational or otherwise, should start with one question; "What do I want participants to be able to do by the end of the presentation/meeting?" This purpose or the outcome you're after usually breaks down into one or more of the following categories. You want them to:

- Know something.
- Do something.
- Apply their knowledge.

Passive information sharing, like informing someone of a new policy or procedure, is usually part of the purpose of every learning session, but it can also be the one of the sole focuses of a session. For example, a documentary or even the nightly news (not counting commercials) is typically 100% passive. The news informs you about what is going on in the world or in your community and the participant

watching can decide what to do with that information. Sessions like this, that don't contain interaction, can quickly become boring without the right delivery techniques and the information is likely to be forgotten unless it is relevant to the person learning. But even relevance by itself doesn't help the learning stick. When presenting, the goal should always be for people to take action on the information that is given to them.

When you want people to do something, you want them to act on the information given to them. This is often seen in commercials or how-to training. Most infomercials and even many commercials are great examples of demonstration-type presentations. How they engage you is showing how relevant the product is to you, what you can do with the product and how you can use it. Then they want you to do something with that knowledge, like go buy the product and immediately know how to use it. In the real world of training, how to guides and supplementary resources become important as do other engagement techniques that will lead them to replicate what they've learned to this specific knowledge.

Application is the most involved type of presentation and the one that most true learning revolves around because it requires someone to learn something and then apply it, often in a similar or different situation. For an easy example, think of the math classes you had in school. They taught you how to add and subtract, but they didn't teach you how to add and subtract every number combination. Then they had you apply this learning to word problems where you had to use those skills at a higher or different level. This type of learning may involve both passive and demonstrative learning. For learning to occur here, engagement is critical in making the learning stick.