Giving a Webinar for Your School?

Make it a Really Good One!

Errol Craig Sull

Many folks who teach online also have the opportunity to give a live webinar to colleagues and/or students—a great way, of course, to help fellow faculty enhance their teaching skills while also offering students real-time info on weekly assignments and spotlighting various components of the subject being taught. Yet, too often these webinars do not live up to their expectations, simply because the presenter did not have much experience in giving webinars or did not excel in all the skills necessary to have a webinar be dynamic, interesting, and successful. With this column those two "nots" will end!

Errol Craig Sull,
Online Instructor,
P.O. Box 956, Buffalo, NY 14207.
Telephone: (716) 871-1900.
E-mail: erroldistancelearning@gmail.com

I have been presenting live webinars for several years and have taught others how to do this; I also was a professional speaker for 7 years and a speechwriter for Jimmy Carter (when governor of Georgia). Based on this experience—as well as suggestions I've received from others over the years—detailed below are the "musts" required if one is to give a webinar that excels for all: colleagues and/or students, the school, and yourself! (Please do send me additional suggestions that have worked for you in presenting webinars: erroldistancelearning@gmail.com—I'll include them in the next issue!)

As you read the suggestions presented in this column, please note:

1. A few of the suggestions might seem obvious, but it is often the obvious, taken-for-granted steps that folks overlook, thus their inclusion.
2. This column is specifically focused on assisting individuals who will be giving online webinars. Some of the infor-

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mation, however, can also apply to face-to-face presentations or can be tweaked for use in face-to-face presentations.

3. There are several reason why one would want to give an online webinar: (a) The #1 online approach to informing a large number of folks in real time; (b) Allows for participants to interact in a "now" format in an environment (online) where this is not common; (c) Can clarify, illustrate, highlight, punctuate, interpolate, and explain materials that often are helped by further exploration; (d) Gives attendees an opportunity to ask questions and make suggestions in a live format.

The overriding rule of webinar success: you either own the audience or the audience will own you! This is the overall umbrella rule that has no wiggle room! The webinar presenter must be fully in charge of the presentation; the instant this no longer is the case the audience is in charge—something that can never happen.

The guide to giving a really, really, really good webinar:

A—Preparation:

- **Have a mindset of wanting to present.** It is crucial to become excited about the presentation: you have been called on to offer expertise, info, and clarification that others need! However, if one merely goes through the motions while giving a presentation the audience quickly picks up on this and will not stay focused on or engaged in the presentation. And always remember to expect the unexpected to occur during a presentation: not doing so can result in a shaky, caught-off-guard presenter.
- **Preplanning is crucial.** Know the material well … have additional notes at the ready if needed … understand the process/procedure expected of you in all areas of the presentation (such as fielding of questions) … do a couple of dry runs to have a good feel for fitting within the time allotted, all tech areas of the presentation, and possible tweaking of the presentation … and check placement of any visuals, audios, videos, and links.
- **Create a comfortable and secure environment.** This is often overlooked, yet the more comfortable one's surroundings during the presentation the more relaxed one will be, and thus more focused on the presentation. So, have a comfortable chair and keep a glass of water nearby … be sure your presentation room is sealed off from external noise … and keep a paper pad nearby for notes (do not use the computer—keys are noisy).
- **Be sure the online meeting software is fully functioning.** Many online webinars have had disruptions or have been stopped because this one crucial step was overlooked. It's important to run through all areas of the online meeting platform (WebEx, Adobe Connect, etc.) you will be using during a dry run … remind folks to have their screen on full size and to have their volume turned up; you do the same … be certain your PowerPoint, Prezi, et cetera, is correctly uploaded.

B—Presentation

- **Own the time allotted—never let the time dictate you.** Questions and comments from attendees may result in the live presentation being adjusted in how material is presented … never be tied to a duplication of the presentation's dry run; spur-of-the-moment thoughts and info on the subject may result in its alteration … be ready to limit or expand the "color commentary" on various points depending on the time factor
- **Use an engaging and outgoing personality when presenting.** Excitement and enthusiasm are catching—and a dry delivery turns off attendees' engagement … being a bit quirky or "off the wall" at times can help in keeping

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attendee interest … if you make an error admit it—always give the impression of being human and equal, never infallible and on a pedestal … be aware of political correctness and audience sensitivity: this is not your father's—let alone grandfather's—presentation!

- **Have handouts available for download**. Your presentation will not cover all nooks and crannies of its subject, thus handouts can offer more specific info for greater coverage. They allow for an extension of a presentation's learning beyond its X amount of minutes … attendees to webinars enjoy receiving tangible reminders of the subject covered
- **Have notes at the ready for each slide, if necessary.** When or if applicable, have notes available for any slide or bullet point that needs additional explanation. Go over these prior to the presentation so you are familiar with them … never prattle on and on—a presentation is an abbreviated form of more in-depth information … always present in a conversational style—reading the bullet points word-for-word is boring, and also insults the audience (they can read, too!) … be sure of your facts.
- **Be aware of speaking speed, tone, and projection.** Don't rush; allow your words enough time for the audience to absorb them … vary voice tone; never present with a monotone and speak with a volume that strong but not overly loud … enunciate … define any words, phrases, theories, et cetera the attendees may not fully understand.
- **Make your presentation interactive.** No matter how colorful and enjoyable the visual presentation may be a lecture format can quickly turn off attendees (note: if time dictates a lecture be sure it is an interesting and exciting one!) … if possible, build in activities and questions into the presentation and ask for comments on occasional bullet points … be on the lookout for "teachable moment" questions, activities, and comments … respond using folks' names.
- **Use humor, but with a caveat.** Humor can be a great bonus to keeping the attendees' attention on your presentation, but don't be a jokester; relate any humor to the subject and its bullets … there is a caveat: never use humor if you can't deliver it well—this will do harm, not good!
- **Use video and audio if helpful … include visuals.** Video and/or audio can assist in highlighting, spotlighting, or clarifying various points in the presentation … use sparingly, and rarely is an entire audio or video clip played (make sure the specific portion to be seen or heard cue it up prior to the webinar) … the use of visuals (clipart, photos, cartoons, graphs, etc.) can help engage the audience while also reinforce or more fully explain a point or a subject.
- **Acknowledge all questions, most comments.** Build in time to allow for questions and comments, as ignoring questions can make attendees feel you are not interested in them, that there is a disconnect … adjust the "how" of responding to questions according to the number of people in attendance and the presentation format … let folks know if there is no time to answer all questions they should contact you following the presentation.
- **Be an educator first, a presenter second.** Presenting our own challenges in the subject creates a more realistic and honest connect with the audience, including being humble and self-deprecating … never let the presentation become a floor show; its primary purpose is to offer information through the use of adept presentation skills … remember to thank your audience for attending: without them there would be no presentation!

Remember: Always present a webinar dressed in a tuxedo, never a pair of jeans!

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