

6 Ways to Create Great Virtual Meetings

How to create online events that excel.

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The virtual and traditional meeting worlds are converging, as evidenced by [hybrid meetings](#), simulcasts, meetings archived to Web sites, and emerging uses of [mobile devices and apps](#) before, during, and after in-person meetings. As the line blurs between on site and online, meeting managers are increasingly responsible for the success of meetings in both worlds.

Although Web-based meetings have entered the mainstream, the quality of the user experience is generally quite poor. Most business-to-business webinars feature unseen presenters clicking through slide after slide, with little to stimulate attendees. To fight the boredom, most of us bring along a smartphone or iPad so we can “multitask,” which is another way of saying “pay only partial attention.”

This suboptimal state of virtual meetings is a major opportunity for meeting managers to elevate the virtual meeting experience using tactics that for the most part are easy, available, and low-cost. What’s needed is someone who will aim higher, plan better, and lead the team in the emerging field of virtual meetings. Here are six things you can do to ensure you will be that someone.



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1. Choose the Right Platform

Meeting managers need to research the options so they can make an informed choice that best supports each virtual meeting. Are you planning a high-profile event for VIP customers, or a down-to-business team meeting? Variables such as meeting duration, number of attendees, communication goals, and budget all are factors to consider when sorting through technology, pre-production, venue, and configuration options.

The platform your company uses for internal Web conferences may not be the best choice for your virtual meeting. Some platforms are optimized to stream video over the Web in high definition, while others support basic webcam video along with various multimedia and interactive features. Virtual meeting providers also differ in the level of support they provide to sponsors and presenters.

2. Make a Personal Connection

Virtual meetings are convenient and cost-effective, but they lack the immediacy of an in-person meeting, which is a powerful thing to lose.

You can begin to compensate for this loss by using Web-based video, which, even though it's easy, effective, and nearly cost-free, most B2B virtual meetings aren't using. It does more than provide "talking heads"—video creates connection by conveying the presenter's facial expressions, gestures, and passion.

There's no good reason, other than a presenter's reluctance to be on camera, not to at least deliver live-presenter video using inexpensive desktop webcams. However, you do not need to use video constantly; your virtual meeting plan may include times where the focus is on other media.

You need to decide which of the several live-video options—high-definition streaming video, multiple simultaneous video displays, and live video supported by mobile devices—will best match your meeting's needs. It's also your job to make sure live video is effectively incorporated into the virtual meeting plan.

3. Engage Your Audience

Your virtual meeting must respect and engage the intelligence of your medical professional participants. Include interactive elements that make your audiences think; otherwise your event could devolve into a passive and ineffective experience.

Fortunately there are many tools available to support audience involvement, such as polling, structured texting, and open chat. Most platforms offer a tool that allows participants to respond to multiple-choice questions, with instant display of group results. Polling is easy to implement and popular among participants, creating a positive group dynamic in which everyone has a voice. Polling also allows presenters to gain insight about the unseen audience's opinions, knowledge, and profile.

Thanks to mobile devices, texting is rivaling the voice telephone as a preferred way to communicate, and your meeting plan should leverage this rapidly growing channel. With structured texting, all participants are prompted to respond by texting via an on-screen tool. You can instantly display all text responses, or just selected ones, creating a rich environment for sharing views and ideas.

Open chat also leverages texting by allowing participants to submit questions or comments at any time during a virtual meeting. This can be a way to facilitate Q&A in virtual meetings, especially for larger groups. It's important to explain the use of open chat during initial housekeeping announcements, and to periodically remind audiences to use the chat tool.

4. Be Visually Dynamic

The golden rule of virtual meetings is "don't be boring"—constantly strive to add dynamic visual interest. Luckily, virtual meetings offer an array of multimedia options, ranging from elegantly simple to simply dazzling.

Many platforms will automatically accept slide effects built in PowerPoint. This includes bullet-point builds and simple animation effects for charts, text boxes, and graphic elements. It's also possible to pre-build effects such as underlines, highlights, circles, and check marks in PowerPoint so they appear with a simple "next" click.

An important best practice is to keep visual effects synchronized with presenter comments; there is something compelling about hearing the presenter make a comment as the text for that comment visually pops. Generally, slide animation effects should be used more aggressively for virtual meetings. While it's possible to overuse such effects, it rarely happens. Don't worry about annoying your remote audience—worry about boring them!

Another best practice is to move your meeting away from “death by PowerPoint.” Most Web meeting platforms support screen-sharing functions that transmit anything a computer screen can display. For instance, you can present actual source documents, articles, or other print materials instead of a slide that describes them. Likewise you can take the audience on a guided tour of a Web site, allowing them to view in real time as the presenter clicks through Web pages and accesses Web-based multimedia.

Most Web meeting platforms can also support advanced multimedia such as 3D animations and recorded video segments. If you have multimedia available, look for opportunities to use them to add some dazzle.

5. Focus the Content

Although we can do many things to make virtual meetings more interesting, ultimately we must recognize that the natural attention span for virtual meetings is limited. While we might expect an in-person audience to sit through a full-day meeting, we can't expect the same people to sit in front of a computer screen for six or eight hours. To work around this, consider breaking a virtual meeting into two sessions held on two consecutive days. Also, consider moving some presentations off the live meeting agenda and producing them as self-learning modules available on a Web site. In addition, eliminate unnecessary content to tighten up the time assigned to each presentation.

Even for shorter meetings, you should strive to focus content and condense the total meeting time. Consider assigning 20 percent less time per presentation and set specific limits on the number of slides per presentation. Although these measures may seem heavy-handed, anything that helps tighten presentations will benefit presenters and audience alike.

6. Maintain a Brisk Pace

A sure way to lose an audience is through interruptions or a slow pace. A professional Web meeting moderator can ensure good pacing by facilitating introductions, transitions, and Q&A. Moderators can also provide coordinating background functions such as polling, texting, and special animations.

Plan in advance to ensure the meeting has a steady pace. Create a detailed plan of all meeting components as well as a verbatim script of all the moderator's planned comments. To organize multimedia elements, create a storyboard of slides and multimedia effects. Special multimedia also need to be queued up and ready to play.

Interactive exercises require special preparation. Poorly constructed polling questions can disrupt the tempo of a virtual meeting, so you may need the help of an experienced instructional designer to develop concise polling questions.

Rehearsals can help to ensure a virtual meeting is well-paced and professional. In addition to presentations, rehearse the process for text-based Q&A sessions, interactive exercises such as structured texting, and transitions from live video to Web tours, shared documents, recorded video, or other multimedia.

Take the Lead

The prevailing virtual meeting experience might be poor, but you improve it by using the multimedia and interactive tactics at your disposal. The missing element is leadership, and medical meeting managers are well positioned to seize this moment. By applying best practices, you really can achieve great virtual meetings.

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