Get Interactive! Ensure Your Webinar Speakers Engage Their Learners

By Kathleen Edwards, CAE

*I'm responsible for planning webinars for my association. I keep hearing about the need to making webinars **more interactive**. Why is this so important? What do adult learners expect from a webinar in 2011?*

Think about it from your own standpoint as a learner: how would you describe your reaction to a learning experience in which you're merely "talked at?" Not too effective, I'd bet. Yet that is often what happens in a webinar environment – mostly because we don't always make the time to ensure an effective learning experience _for the learner_.

When asked, most people describe the best learning experiences they've ever had with words like "dynamic," "engaging," "fun," "interactive," and more. You can achieve these types of comments in webinars, too. There's simply no reason you can't inject at least some interactivity into your webinars, and you're doing your participants a disservice if you don't.

Why is it important?

Adults learn for different reasons than do children – typically because they want to or have to, for personal *and* professional reasons. One of the most important questions they want answered when considering any program is "what's in it for me?" _Why_ should potential participants care about your webinar? _What_ will they learn that will make a difference in their lives? In addition to needing this personal relevance, adults:

• want to make connections between what they already know and the new things they are learning.

• want opportunities for practical application.

• bring their life experiences to any learning opportunity; as a result they have a lot to contribute and they want to do so! Given the right opportunities, they will.

• generally consider themselves self-directed and responsible; they want to have at least some control over the learning experience, and want to be treated with respect.

Effective learning results more from two-way conversations between content leader and participants, and between participants, then it does from one person acting as a "sage on a stage" who has all the answers.

Malcolm Knowles' principles of adult learning, very briefly summarized above, have stood the test of time. Nearly 40 years after initial publication of Knowles' book, *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species* (revised 1990) took them from theoretical to practical, the principles are bolstered by research into how the brain functions and how it learns. John Medina's 2008 book, *Brain Rules: 12 Principles for Surviving and Thriving at Work, Home, and School*, brilliantly and practically explores what brain science says and how it can influence the way we work and learn. You may have heard some of the "buzz" surrounding the book and its website; increasingly, learning professionals are referring to Medina's rules, along with Knowles' principles, to help ensure programs are designed in ways that support participant learning.

So what does this mean for your webinars?

First, ensure each webinar has its own set of learning objectives: statements about what participants should know or be able to do when it's over. Often, speakers haven't articulated desired outcomes; without tightly focusing content on not more than two or three objectives (for most 90-minute webinars), there's a risk the content won't be covered in enough depth to make it worthwhile for participants. Effectively written learning objectives serve as a filter to ensure "need to know" content is covered before anything that's "nice to know" is added. It may seem obvious; however, it's especially important for speakers who resist engaging their audiences by claiming they don't have time to do so! That's usually a red flag that means "way too much content."

A quick hint about effective objectives: they need to be observable; e.g. you can't observe whether people "learn," "know," or "understand," so those words and others like them aren't used in well-written learning objectives. Depending on the subject, use words like "describe," "explain," "demonstrate," "differentiate," and other active-voice verbs that state what the participant will <u>do</u> with what was learned.

With objectives clearly articulated and as webinar content is being developed, give consideration to how the audience can be engaged. Don't include activities just to include them! Help your speakers make connections between their content and the opportunities to engage their audiences offered by online platform tools.

Engage participants using web-conferencing tools

The choices you make about engagement depend in large part on the anticipated size of the audience. What you can do with 25 or 30 sites is very different from what you can do when you have 1,000 sites participating; however engagement is a critical element in the success of both. Besides making those important practical connections, engaging audiences with what they see and hear during the webinar can help avoid their attempts to multi-task. Medina's Brain Rule #4: We don't pay attention to boring things – we'll find something else to do. Research cited by Medina for this rule shows we are biologically incapable of paying attention to more than one thing at a time; we *switch* tasks, we do not multi-task. So it's important for your speakers to find engaging ways to keep participant attention focused on the webinar.

Help speakers think about the webinar content and how it can be explored in ways that engage the audience. Encourage appropriate use of these web-conferencing tools:

- <u>Polling</u> – an effective way to determine audience opinions, experiences, and attitudes. Especially effective for large groups, polling gives you an instant "participant snapshot" that can help speakers adjust on the fly how they will cover content. Or, polling might demonstrate to individual participants that they aren't alone concerning a particular issue. Polls, however, can be limited by the platform in terms of how many response options can be offered to or checked by participants, so don't rely on polls alone.

- <u>Annotations</u> – use this feature to draw attention to specific text, images, or data on your slides as you talk about them. The movement on their screens helps to keep participants engaged; as their eyes connect with it, their attention becomes more focused on what the speaker is saying.

- <u>The telephone line</u> – with large audiences it's difficult to have a free-wheeling discussion, yet you can still encourage vocal participation. Participants who want to make vocal contributions

can simply press *1 on their telephone keypads to signal the KRM moderator their interest in speaking. You may want to limit such interaction to set time frames, or allow it at any time during the program. The latter requires a speaker skilled at time management to ensure content is fully covered.

- Shared applications – will the webinar include software training, review of documents, or website exploration? Most webinar platforms allow application-sharing that enables participants to see the speaker's computer desktop, offering an important, research-based change of pace from the typical slide file used for webinars. Speakers can share real-life situations and examples, and participants can be asked to explore visuals and ideas as well as solve problems.

- Video – some people find incorporating a live-streaming video of the speaker into webinars helps to make the program more engaging. Before considering it, however, evaluate the reasons for doing so and ensure they're the right reasons for *your* audience. Streaming video of the speaker does provide the illusion of eye contact found in face-to-face programs; however, since it's one-way it doesn't ensure participants *are* engaged in the program. Some may even find it distracting. If video could enhance the program for your audience and is appropriate for the content, however, certainly explore its use.

- Whiteboard – in response to speaker questions, people at participating sites can type right on the screen, either on a content slide or blank slide. This can be used effectively when you want quick one- or two-word responses, such as "Type one word to describe the most effective learning experience you've ever had." Be sure to provide participants with ideas for how they can "claim their real estate" to avoid on-screen word pile-ups! The whiteboard can also be used for a variety of visual activities and games that support the content.

- Questions – they're effective learning tools when participants ask them of speakers during a dedicated Q&A break. Additionally, thoughtful open-ended questions posed by speakers can encourage reflection and practical application. Speakers can even use questions as brief activities, providing 30 seconds to a minute for participants to come up with their answers, and then addressing likely responses appropriately.

To learn how these technology tools work ask your KRM moderator for a demonstration. Once you're familiar with them you can more effectively coach your speakers in making decisions about their use.

Caveat: Engagement is not just about the technology

Ensuring participants are actively engaged in your webinars doesn't depend entirely on using the technology during programs. Participants can be engaged before, during, and after their webinars using some of the same techniques used in face-to-face learning.

Supporting speakers

The biggest obstacle you'll likely face in making your webinars more interactive is the comfort level of your speakers. Especially if they're not actively engaging their audiences in face-to-face programs, doing so virtually may be a big challenge for them. That's where you come in.

Know the technology and its capabilities well, have a pretty good understanding of adult learning, and consider reading Medina's book to see what brain science has proven and what that might mean for your webinars. Another good resource to have available is the book *The*

[*New Virtual Classroom*](#) by Ruth Colvin Clark and Ann Kwinn. It includes guidelines, research, and examples you can apply to get the most from your organization's virtual learning opportunities.

Take advantage of the KRM team's expertise to ensure speakers are clear about what LiveMeeting tools can do and how they might support content. Work with your speakers to discover where and how they might engage their audiences, and help them design effective programs. Before the webinar, speakers might provide a website to review, an article to read, or a couple of questions to consider and be ready to answer at the start of the webinar. Afterwards, speakers might be willing to answer emailed questions for a period of time. If speakers use Twitter, Facebook, or similar social media tools, talk about allowing learners to connect with them using those tools. Ensure speakers have sufficient time to practice their delivery, and encourage them to actually do it. You might even want to consider scheduling formal rehearsals and provide constructive feedback so speakers can improve prior to the live event.

Yes, it will take more of your time. However, it's well worth it in terms of giving your speakers what they need to succeed while ensuring your audiences get what they need to learn effectively and, importantly, implement what they are learning.

Handouts

While many speakers simply provide a copy of their slide files, the best handouts often don't include slides at all. They are more of a workbook that combines content-focused note-taking with key information supporting, not duplicating, the verbal and visual message. The pages leave room for note-taking; combined with participants' own notes, effective handouts serve as later reference tools that support implementation of new learning. Encourage speakers to prepare handouts that go beyond the webinar slides; you may even want to require it. Checklists, reference resources, FAQs, and tip sheets are highly useful and can help provide both the relevance and engagement adult learners need.

Effective speakers engage participants with the handout during programs by periodically making appropriate reference to it. Activities might include things like having participants write down their individual answers to questions, filling in missing words shared by the speaker, or anything else the content might suggest.

A handout can also serve as a post-webinar discussion guide, especially if a number of people are listening at each of your audience sites. One idea might be to work with the speaker to create a handout page comparable to a "reader's guide" for book clubs – a series of questions that can be used after the webinar as conversation-starters, reflection tools, or action steps. Suggest that workplace teams schedule 30 minutes following a webinar to discuss its implications for their organization, using the page as a guide. Provide brief written instructions for how to use this page, and have the speaker reinforce its use during the live event.

Increasingly popular: blended learning

A few years ago, as virtual learning became more popular, organizations rushed to put a lot of learning events online. Over time, however, it's been established that effective practice is what is now known as "blended" learning: a purposeful combination of face-to-face and virtual learning events. For example, a webinar, followed by an in-person learning event (typically one

or two days), and finishing up with another webinar. This blended format works well for in-depth programs, especially those that require a high level of interactivity. For example, for one of its seminars, one KRM client:

- covered introductory material in an initial webinar to ensure participants had the same basic knowledge critical to successful completion of...
- ...a highly interactive, day-long in-person event that included real-life situations and case studies, followed by...
- ...a closing webinar to review case study results and talk about implementation strategies...
- ...all held within about three weeks of each other.

Some organizations have found short-term webinar series effective. Instead of a single webinar, two to four 90-minute webinars are held a week apart. The speaker has time to go into some depth on the topic as well as allow time for actively engaging participants in exploring it. Additionally, participants can be given short "homework" assignments between webinars that allow them to think about and perhaps begin to apply what they are learning.

The bottom line: engagement is not only important – it's critical

Learners today are being influenced by a whole universe of new thinking and new technologies. They can get any needed information 24/7/365 – what they need, exactly when they need it, as brief or as in-depth as they need it. The proliferation of social media allows learners to collaborate in creating their own content and learning opportunities. Increasingly, organizations are using social media as part of the learning experience.

With that kind of active engagement in learning available, if you want people to attend your webinars – and come back for more – those webinars have to be relevant, focused, and engaging. Know your audience. Remember Knowles' principles and Medina's rules. Remember, too, that success raises the bar for every webinar that follows.

Make a commitment to your learners that you will offer them the best possible learning experiences. Then make a commitment to your speakers that you will do everything you can to ensure they have the knowledge and skills they need to enable you to keep that first commitment. Guess what? Everybody wins.

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