Create Awesome Webinars

With the COVID-19 crisis, trainings, workshops and conferences have been cancelled, postponed, and put on hold. There is uncertainty as to when we will be able to gather in large groups again to enjoy these types of events. In light of these enormous changes, webinars have become the new norm for education and professional development.

Webinars are an efficient use of resources and make education and training widely available without the complications of travel. Even so, not everyone is a huge fan of webinars. Most of us have attended webinars that were so engaging and interesting that the time flew by. Most of us have also attended webinars that were so dismal that we may have left the webinar before it was over. Or, if we stayed, we were attending to much more interesting tasks, such as checking email or watching YouTube videos of puppies!

High-quality webinars are possible! A little guidance on preparing for, designing, and facilitating webinars effectively can help. But, a dynamic and engaging presenter is also key. The suggestions here will help dynamic presenters create and deliver high-quality webinars.

Get Ready

Determine if a webinar is a good option – Although webinars can take the place of some in-person events, not all training objectives lend themselves well to the virtual environment. Assess your desired participant outcomes when determining whether a webinar will advance some or all of your objectives. Ask yourself what you want your participants to know, understand or be able to do as a result of a learning experience, then decide if virtual training can reasonably accomplish those objectives. A series of webinars may support your objectives better than a single virtual event. Breakout rooms, homework assignments, and small group work between webinars may also increase the effectiveness of learning.

Clarify expectations – Clarify the topic with the agency or individual who is requesting the webinar. Find out who the anticipated participants are and their experience. Ask about the sponsor's goal for participants – what do they want participants to learn or be able to do as

a result of the webinar? Ask the sponsor to articulate their goals for you, as the webinar provider, anticipated products, existing materials support, technology expectations, required templates, preferred format, and time allotted.

Meet your technology support team, if you are fortunate enough to have one. Review the technology together, discuss how you will work together, who will welcome participants as they join, troubleshoot their technology, monitor the chat box, manage polling Q's, etc. If you don't have a technology support team, enlist a tech buddy to perform some of these tasks. This allows the facilitator to focus on the webinar and participant interaction.

Prepare handouts for the webinar. Summarize content in a handout, so participants can be present and not have to take copious notes, and provide additional resources for those who want to explore the topic further after the webinar. Encourage participants to print handouts as they join the webinar, and orient participants to the handouts once the webinar begins.

Get Set

Create a "Lobby Question," a question related to the topic to engage learners; participants will respond to the lobby question in the chat box as they join the webinar and wait for the official opening. A lobby question can also help the facilitator learn what participants already know or feel about the topic, and what they want to know.

Design a welcome and brief overview of the topic, content, activities, handouts and timing. If you have a tech partner, determine who will deliver which parts of the welcome, overview. Connect the responses to the lobby question to the overview, if possible.

Use simple graphics and images and very few words on PowerPoint slides. To engage participants and help them listen, rather than read the slide, use images that represent the concepts you are exploring, and put the content into the handouts. Use stories and analogies to illustrate main points; choose analogies that are so common most people will be able to relate to them, and stories from your own prevention experience.

Include the right amount of information – two-five main points. Don't attempt to cover everything about a topic in a webinar. Focus on key information and interactive activities that allow participants to engage with the information. Then offer resources for continued learning in the chat box or on the handout at the end of the webinar. Or plan a follow-up webinar to continue to build of participant knowledge.

Practice! Practice! Practice! Time yourself, and do a practice session with your technology support person. Identify items or content which you can easily drop if you run out of time. This ensures that you will cover the most important information and activities. Participants learn more from activities applying knowledge than they do from oral presentations, so don't drop these activities if you can avoid it.

Go!

Connect to the webinar 30 minutes before start time to partner with your technology support person, clarify polls and use of technology tools, make sure handouts are loaded, and troubleshoot any anticipated challenges.

Use a conversational voice with inflection – a bit more than you'd use in person, to keep people's attention.

Plan some interaction at least every 10 minutes, e.g., polling questions, simple questions that can be answered briefly in the chat box or as "yes-no" questions using a poll, invite participants to use the white board annotation function, use breakout rooms for small group activities or discussion, etc. Be sure to orient participants to any technology tools you plan to use on a webinar during the welcome and overview at the beginning of the webinar.

Allow 5-10 minutes at the end of the webinar for questions and resource sharing among participants.

End with thanks for participants, your technology support team, and your sponsor. Provide additional resources for continued learning, technical assistance and resources to address participants' questions.

Immediately after the webinar, debrief with your sponsor and/or your technology team. This is an opportunity to hear how the webinar went from others' perspectives, whether it met their expectations, what else needs to be done, and how the webinar could be improved.