

# Energizing Virtual Meetings

By JOEL GENDELMAN

**E**xecutives of Fortune 100 companies are directing their organizations to conduct more meetings using electronic conferencing software (e.g., Adobe Acrobat Connect Pro, WebEx). Technical communicators are concerned that the limitations of the medium will severely diminish the effectiveness of their presentations. They want to prepare themselves to develop and conduct electronic meetings that are compelling, interactive, and motivational.

I believe that it is not the medium that creates compelling communication; it is the communication strategies used. Electronic meetings have several inherent drawbacks (e.g., lack of visual feedback, more difficult social interaction), but there are also strengths (e.g., the ability to collaborate over great distances unbounded by time). Flexibility and creativity enable technical communi-

cators to duplicate all of the benefits of a physical meeting in a virtual meeting.

To follow are a wealth of ideas that are useful in organizing virtual meetings.

## Gain Attention

Begin your virtual meeting with a well-thought-out introduction. Introduce yourself and, if time permits, invite participants to introduce themselves. Ask them to share background information, including professional and personal interests and hobbies. Try posting your picture and, if possible, pictures of participants. Experiment with innovative methods for gathering and sharing participant background information (e.g., matching unique experiences with the appropriate participant).

## Establish Relevance

A great way to establish relevance is to poll participants to determine their

background and interest in the subject. It is always a good idea to use a variety of media, such as animations, background information, current events, cartoons, articles, thought-provoking questions, quotes, and stories.

## Present Information

In presenting information electronically, use similar multimedia as you would in a face-to-face presentation, but be sure to vary the types (for example, use media such as text, graphics, animations, video and multimedia presentations, illustrations, diagrams, schematics, models, audio presentations, and concrete objects). As with any other type of meeting, it is always important to keep things on track, so consistently refer to the meeting schedule that you presented at the beginning of the presentation and provide content summaries throughout the session. Attention spans can be short in the Internet world, so present information in short chunks and in a logical flow. Be sure to vary the pace and format of your presentation every five to six minutes.

Incorporate compelling communications strategies that include storytelling, guest-speaker presentations, simulations, analogies, homework assignments, case studies, discovery learning, relevant and irrelevant examples, experiments, mnemonics, and games.

As in any powerful presentation, support your main ideas with graphics whenever possible. Using too many colors and fonts confuses people, so keep the format simple, especially if you are using PowerPoint.

Since simplicity is the soul of wit, keep your presentations simple and clear. Tell participants what you are going to tell them, tell them, and then tell them what you have told them. This should be easy, since you have plenty of media to play with. You can set the stage in a multimedia presentation, then present the topic via a whiteboard presentation, and finally review the topic in a discussion using the chat or a polling feature.

Simplify your life by enabling participants to download documents instead of passing them out. Be sure to use PDFs, since they display and print more

predictably than other document formats. Use the whiteboard as you would a flip chart. You may point to, highlight, draw, and notate on the whiteboard. In addition, refer to websites and other resources as valuable sources of information, references, and exercise materials. Try something different and present information from another point of view (e.g., customer, competitor, user, and engineer). Finally, anticipate and prepare for participants' questions. Distilling important information for participants is also useful, so construct job aids that distill relevant information.

### Conduct Demonstrations

When conducting demonstrations, experiment with using case studies related to real-life situations. Ask participants to explore controversial issues. Finally, request that participants share their own experiences related to the content.

Showing photographs or video presentations of salient portions of your demonstrations can help focus participants' attention. You can also use the drawing and text tools for highlighting and labeling. Screen sharing is a powerful method to demonstrate computer applications. Be sure to use the drawing tools to label and highlight sections of the screen. Finally, select examples and activities that mirror the setting where participants will apply their new skills.

### Facilitate Practice

Incorporating practice is a powerful method for maintaining participation and interest. Assign participants to groups and ask them to collaborate on specific assignments. The group size should be no more than four participants. Assign and rotate roles within each group to ensure sharing and cooperation. If applicable, synthesize activities completed outside of the meeting. Encourage lively presentations of no longer than five minutes in length. Encourage participants to use the whiteboard. To increase the relevance of your practice, use case studies, roleplays, and simulations that mimic real-life activities.

If participants cannot interact with the real systems, provide links to train-

ing databases or test sites. If you would like participants to demonstrate their usage of applications or share information as part of interactive demonstrations or exercises, simply use your virtual meeting application to display their screen to the rest of the group.

### Instigate and Manage Discussions

Managing discussions requires being both bold and careful. Open discussions with a provoking comment. Plant ideas by asking a leading question on the whiteboard or in a chat window. Discussion can quickly get out of control, so include a proposed outline of the discussion. Also keep the discussion on course by clarifying the theme of the discussion and the topics that you expect to cover. Closely manage discussions. This instruction cannot be stressed too strongly. You have some powerful tools at your disposal, so do not be afraid to use them. Use the microphone, whiteboard, chat window, or email as media in the discussion. Give learners "interesting" roles during discussions. Finally, always end discussions by restating the goals of the discussion, summarizing the results, and pointing out how the results relate to the next topic.

### Assess Participant Engagement

Polling questions are a powerful vehicle for verifying understanding, waking-up participants, determining their level of engagement, or identifying where participants stand on particular issues. Ask questions that are clear, pertinent, brief, and challenging. Utilize the polling capability to ask true/false or multiple-choice questions and see how many participants select each choice. You may keep these results to yourself or share them. Include questions with a degree of difficulty that matches the level of the audience. You never want to come across as negative, so avoid feedback that is too brief or abrupt; participants may interpret such feedback as angry. You may wish to have groups use materials and assessment instruments located in a shared folder to complete in-basket exercises (e.g., completing customer service transactions in a variety of situations).

### Develop and Conduct Exciting and Motivating Activities

Create constructive conflict or "creative abrasion" by:

- Asking leading questions
- Representing other points of view
- Exploring the content in a new context


Extract positive outcomes from difficult situations by:

- Directing the question to the group
- Asking the group for solutions or methods to find solutions
- Calling upon specific participants to help out

Sometimes presentations require taking some risks, so build suspense into your presentations by creating activities (e.g., discussions, games) where the results are not predictable. Also feel free to change the rules while the activities are still in motion. Do so using chats, selective emails, and several shared folders to provide different groups with varying rules and instructions.

A good method for fostering collaboration is to conduct group activities. Enable groups to communicate using chat areas or emails. If you are bold, you can have groups set up their own virtual meetings in order to work together. Be sure to assign a leader for each group.

### You Are on Your Way

I hope that you will find these ideas useful in creating and delivering technical presentations that engage participants. Good luck and enjoy! 

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