Setting up for blended events

How to set up events with both in-person and online attendees

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Once you're familiar with the basic audio, video and screen-sharing functionality of webinars, you might start thinking about ways to expand your reach or how to take advantage of the more robust features included in GoToMeeting, GoToWebinar and GoToTraining. One of the biggest challenges for producers of large online conferences is administering satisfactory events in a blended environment—that is, events with both in-person and online attendees. Here are some setup and technical tips for blended online conferences.

Invitation and registration

With respect to conference invitations, some users prefer to send the registration email provided by GoToWebinar or GoToTraining to invite their entire audience, explaining that all are welcome to come to the event live if they can make it. Other organizations prefer to more closely monitor attendance using RSVP options asking attendees to designate whether they will attend online or in person; then they follow up with the registration information for the online event as needed. This comes down to personal preference.

Presentation setup

If you are both hosting the session and presenting on it, having at least two computers or monitors in the room with you may sound complicated, but it actually simplifies things. Having two computers allows you (or a colleague) to tend to questions and chat on one computer while you host and move through your presentation on the other. In the next event that you both host and present, try the following setup for streamlined success.

Computer 1 – Organizer's computer:

1. Start the event and join as an organizer
2. Optimize your workspace to access the attendee list, questions and chat or any other critical features
3. Promote Computer 2 to panelist* and presenter

Computer 2 – Presenter's computer:

1. Save and open the presentation locally
2. Connect to the projector, if necessary
3. Join the webinar as a panelist
4. Accept the presenter role and share your screen when ready
5. Collapse or minimize the webinar panel (not utilized on this computer)

*The panelist role is a feature of GoToWebinar. If you are using GoToMeeting or GoToTraining, Computer 2 can remain an attendee or be promoted to organizer.

An alternative to using two computers is using a computer with two monitors, and screen sharing from only one monitor. However, many users find it easier to use two computers rather than toggle back between the presentation slides on one monitor and the control panel on the other.

No matter if you're using one computer or two, connect with a Local Area Network (LAN) or Ethernet connection. Avoid wireless Internet connections as a turbulent connection may cause screen sharing or audio issues.

Managing slides

Many blended events are delivered on stage before a live audience and also streamed to online viewers. The proper setup for this type of event varies depending on the presenter's preference. Some prefer to move through their own slides and stay in full control, while others prefer to focus on delivering their presentation without worrying about the slides progressing and will assign someone else to push the slides for them. Here's the proper setup for each preference.

For presenters that prefer to manage their own slides, there are a couple of options. If you just need to move through slides, a USB remote control will let you walk the stage freely while commanding the slides. Remote control setup is as easy as opening the presentation materials in slideshow mode on the computer with the remote control plugged in and pressing the advance button. For this setup, the presentation computer will need to be within range of the remote control but not necessarily on the stage.

Without a remote control, you could stand before a lectern with a laptop and move through the slides manually. Though this isn't the most engaging of formats in terms of stage presence, it works when you plan to exit your slide deck and give a live demo or show something in a web browser.

Finally, for presenters that prefer delegating the slide control to an assistant, simply station the presentation computer near you but off stage in a location where your assistant can receive visual or verbal cues from you to move the slides. Rather than saying "next slide" repeatedly, try to work out a pause for breath at the end of a slide or perhaps another signal. If possible, consider having the slide deck manager practice going through the presentation with you before the live event to make sure the transitions go smoothly.

Audio setup

To follow the appropriate audio plan for your blended event, ask yourself the following three questions:

1. Is your live presentation being held in a large conference room or an auditorium?

If you're looking at a conference room style of setup, you may have the easiest time using the room's built-in conference phone for audio if available. Some conference rooms are set up with VoIP options that may improve the quality of sound. Be sure to find out what's available to you and decide if you'll need help getting set up and from whom.

If you are broadcasting from an auditorium style setup, you'll likely need to work with the Audio/Video (A/V) professional available to you.

2. Are you broadcasting through a microphone to speakers in the live room?

If your answer is yes, you probably have a fairly large live audience and it's important to make sure that both your live and online audiences can hear clearly. The A/V professional will require an audio mixing console and microphones appropriate for the presenter. In order to hear the live room audio online you may opt to use telephone or VoIP.

- **Telephone:** To line the audio from the house mixing console to a telephone, use a telephone patch device like the one shown here: http://www.fullcompass.com/product/260888.html. Connect the phone patch device to your telephone as instructed and send an audio line signal from the mixing console to the phone patch device. The phone patch device referenced uses an RCA cable from the mixing console but other models are available.

- **VoIP:** To line the audio from the house-mixing console to VoIP, an organizer's computer will need to be near the mixing console. Simply send a line audio signal from the mixing console to the 3.5mm or 1/8" auxiliary microphone input on the organizer's computer. Some adapter plugs may be needed to make the fit, but this is certainly the simpler of the two solutions.

Be sure to avoid sending an audio signal that is too strong or hot to the webinar audio conference. Just like with any other audio mixing, clipping and distortion is possible but is easily avoidable by performing a sound check on the webinar audio.

To expand the reach of your events, consider adding integrated international and toll-free audio for GoToMeeting, GoToWebinar, and GoToTraining. Learn more.

3. Do you need to hear online attendees in the room?

There are a couple of reasons that you may need to hear audio from the webinar in the live room, including a live question and answer session with the audience or if you have a remote presenter. Using the same hardware recommended above, connect the webinar audio to a channel line in on the mixing console. If you're using a phone patch, make sure that it is "bi-directional," meaning that it can both send and receive sound. If you are using VoIP, simply run a cable from the computer's speaker output to the channel line in on the mixing console.

Your A/V professional needs to remain at the mixing console for some quick muting and unmuting of channels. With the online audience listening to the live room and the live room listening to the online audience, you are bound to get feedback or echo. It may be loud and disturbing so please prepare when you are setting up. To avoid hearing an echo or feedback loop, make sure that you manually mute the silent line.

For example: A presenter is speaking from the live room. Ensure their microphone is live and the webinar audio is muted. When you turn to the webinar audience for questions or comments, ensure that the webinar audio is live and that all microphones in the live room are muted. When the presenter in the room is ready to respond, make sure their microphone is unmuted and the webinar audio is muted.

Summary

Coordinating a successful blended event takes some planning and consideration, but once you've done it, it's easy to replicate. To help smooth the process, make your presenters aware of the work that you are doing to make sure the audio does not give feedback and ask them to be prepared for pauses while changing audio settings as needed. It is highly beneficial for the presenter or event moderator to be able to see the A/V professional for easy gesture signals like a thumb up or okay sign.

Now you're ready to take events that blend the in-person and online experience. By doing so you are offering all of your delegates a chance to be at the same meeting no matter their location. One final word of advice is to over prepare. Take some time to get into the live room and test out the audio and the connection setup you've chosen. Have a technical rehearsal with your A/V professional to avoid surprises and limitations. Lastly, know exactly what you need to accomplish from the start using the questions and tips above and start setting those expectations early.

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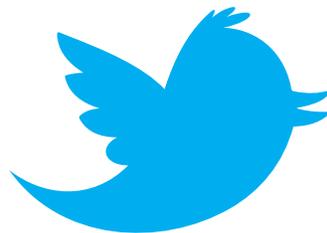
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