PLANNING INTERACTIVE ONLINE EVENTS
TO ENGAGE EMPLOYEES, CLIENTS, DONORS, AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Lessons from an award-winning online event series

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Abstract

High-quality online events can engage multiple audiences, including employees, clients, donors, and community members, by showcasing an organization’s achievements and expertise. This session will share examples from Columbia University School of Social Work’s award-winning online events, including the planning process, methods for engaging participants, and challenges when running live online events. The session may appeal to disruptive leaders interested in innovation, new ideas, and broadening the reach of agencies’ programs for greater impact.

CSSW Online Event Series

Columbia School of Social Work held a series of seven online events and three virtual coffee chats between February 2016 to April 2017.

Benefits of Online Events

Compared to most in-person events, an online event can be convened relatively quickly and inexpensively. For example, it does not require flying in speakers and setting them up for the night. Speakers need to have an internet connection (Ethernet required) and headphones with a microphone to take part. For organizations that are interested in current-affairs topics, this enhanced convening power is a huge boon.

Online events offer unique opportunities, via the chatbox, for audience members to network and share resources with people they might not otherwise meet. It is not uncommon to witness, for instance, three-way exchanges among practitioners, scholars and students; or among experts in various parts of the country or the world. In some cases, these new-found acquaintanceships and communities continue to flourish off-line.

Online events can take advantage of various tools—e.g., video, polls or quizzes—to vary the pace and capture the audience’s attention. Attendees often say they learn more from an online event because they are more challenged and engaged, than when watching a speaker or panel in real life, which lacks an interactive or multimedia element.

The Elements of Success

The medium is the message and as online events take place on a screen, they must be high-energy and engaging: “edutainment.” Your script should time out the delivery of content with audience engagement activities. In general, attendees need a change of stimulus every 3-5 minutes. Multiple rehearsals are required to ensure that presenters know their cues, are familiar with the technology, and honor their time limits (a stage clock can be useful).

Organizers must pay careful attention to the quantity and quality of presentation materials. Because online attendees are easily distracted, it should not be assumed that a PowerPoint presentation from an in-person event can be automatically transferred to the online format. Instead, visuals must be compelling, with minimal text—preferably reworked by a design professional. Video should be no longer than three minutes. Poll questions should flow naturally from the presentations and provoke discussion.

The marketing aim of a successful online event should be more than double the number you’d like to see tune in during the event itself: drop-off is greater than for in-person events. For us the sweet spot was at least 200 signups, because around 100 attenders ensured a lively chatbox. We asked speakers to share the invitation with all their contacts, giving us the added benefit of reaching new audiences. We also extended our outreach through social media including paid content marketing.

Eight Top Tips

1. Don’t underestimate the amount of time required to do this well.
2. Provide tech training for speakers.
3. Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse!
4. Give equal weight to structure and flexibility.
5. Be ready for technical glitches; stay calm.
6. Allow enough time for the disruptive model to play out: it will require change management.
7. Showcase the event video in content marketing.
8. Enjoy being an innovator; take a moment to savor your success!

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