

Collaborating Virtual Style: Hints from STC's SIG Leaders

How to Put On a Web Seminar

By Jane Smith, Associate Fellow and **Past-Manager, IDL SIG**

In each issue of Tieline, a representative of the twenty STC special interest groups (SIGs) shares wisdom, hints, and lessons learned. Each is free to focus on a different aspect of facilitating STC communities—whether those communities are based on subject matter or geographic location. SIG leaders are currently exploring various collaborative tools and management styles to benefit their members, and to recruit new volunteers and leaders.

As designer, author, and artist Edwin Schlossberg says, “True interactivity is not about clicking on icons or downloading files; it’s about encouraging communication.” SIG leaders are working on just that. We hope that some of the information in this series will be applicable and helpful to other STC community leaders as well.

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The Instructional Design and Learning special interest group (IDL SIG) was the first SIG to sponsor and put on a Web seminar (in March 2006). Since then, we’ve put on two more. Through the planning and management of those Web seminars, we’ve learned many lessons. To provide tips for others, I’ll divide the process of producing a Web seminar into several stages:

- Planning
- Registration
- Production
- Presentation/Execution
- Evaluation

Planning

Begin planning your first Web seminar six to eight months in advance of the date. For subsequent seminars, you can compress the timeline. Key decisions you’ll make during the planning stage include:

- **Selecting the speaker and topic through an RFP process or by invitation.** We’ve found the invitation route takes less time and allows you to control the topic more effectively to meet the needs of your members—as gauged, perhaps, by a member survey.
- **Selecting the date and time.** After trying hard to plan our Web seminars on the same day of the week and time as those offered by the national STC office—but overlapping once—we

strongly recommend that you select a day of the week other than Wednesday. Keeping the time at 1:00 PM Eastern Time works pretty well for people, except if you have a large international audience. We have made our seminars available to our international audience on a recorded basis.

- **Deciding the duration.** We have provided a one-hour presentation followed by a twenty-minute question-and-answer period, and that has worked well. Since our Web seminars are very interactive, the hour goes quickly. We often intersperse question periods in the hour as well.
- **Determining the price.** We have viewed our Web seminars as a service to our members and have kept the price affordable: \$50 for SIG members, \$65 for nonmembers. With this pricing, we have always made some money even after paying our speaker.
- **Evaluating the seminar.** It's important to plan your evaluation process at the beginning. If you plan to have an online survey, you'll need to involve your Web committee or someone else to set up the evaluation and gather and analyze the data.

Selecting the tool

While selecting the tool is part of planning, it deserves its own topic because of its importance. Several factors are critical in choosing the tool:

- The functionality you require
- The experience of the people who will be using it
- The price
- Ease of use

With regards to functionality, typical options include:

- Ability to upload a *PowerPoint* presentation
- Web interface for production and presentation
- Teleconferencing capabilities
- Combined phone and presentation tool, especially for the Web interface
- Ability to mute and unmute all phone lines at any point during the presentation
- Ability to enable participants to “raise hands” to respond to the presenter’s questions or to ask their own—with a Web interface that makes it easy for production personnel
- Chat capability, preferably with the ability to turn the entire group chat off and on during the presentation
- Subgroup chat capability, which allows smaller groups of participants to engage in chats, role plays, or other activities

- Ability to present polling questions along with the answer distribution
- Ability to share an application with another participant; this functionality is only useful for small groups, but, for tool training, it's ideal for creating interactivity and enabling participants to try out procedures

The IDL SIG has always insisted on a high level of interactivity between participants and the presenter, so many of the above functions are critical. There are a number of good tools available. We have used *AccuConference*, and it works well. I can provide a referral to any community so that it can benefit from our SIG's good introductory rate. The national STC office uses *Genesys* and will be looking into providing accounts to communities at a very affordable rate as well.

Publicity

Critical to the success of your Web seminar is timely publicity. This includes getting the word out to your community members, all STC members, and members of related communities outside STC. We generally open registration six to seven weeks prior to the seminar and plan to have our first round of publicity go out at that time. We send a second reminder three weeks later, with a final reminder about the cutoff date one week prior to the event.

Registration

Our webmaster had coded our registration process on the Web, which interfaces to a database that both he and the treasurer can access. This functionality allows us to track payments and issue login and call-in information to registrants. We take checks and PayPal payments, with a check registration cutoff date of ten days prior to the event.

Production

The first stage in production is preproduction. At this point, we work with our presenter to ensure interactivity in the seminar. Using sound instructional design principles, we review his or her presentation and provide recommendations on where and how to build in interaction with polling questions, chats, phone conversations, and other activities, based on the functionality of the tool.

A week or ten days before the event, we upload the presentation to the tool, create the polling questions, and prepare the presentation for the rehearsal. Two to three days before the event, the production team meets with the presenter for a rehearsal. At this time, we assign responsibilities and do a full walk-through to ensure that everyone understands his or her role, including when to open chats, phone lines, and other interactive elements. The rehearsal is critical to the success and smooth operation of the event.

Presentation/Execution

At the time of the presentation, start the Web and phone interfaces for the team at least fifteen minutes before the official start time. Start with an introduction. As SIG manager, I introduce the Web seminar presenter and topic. Then get into the presentation as quickly as possible. At the end, thank the presenter and all the team members by name and responsibility. Then ask the

participants to complete the evaluation. Some tools enable you to send participants to a Web site upon closing the Web seminar, which ensures greater participation in the evaluation.

Evaluation

Plan to keep your evaluation short, with most of the questions based on a rating scale. But do include a few open-ended questions to capture more detailed feedback as well as ideas for future seminars.

Immediately following the Web seminar, we have the production crew and presenter call back into a different conference line—for a few minutes—in order to get some immediate feedback and to once again thank everyone. A full debrief should take place at a later time, preferably within a week. Through these team evaluations, we fine-tune our process for the next time. After several iterations, the process is well oiled and should go smoothly.

Stay Tuned for a Related STC Web Seminar

In summary, planning a Web seminar takes some work for the first one; however, once you've done a few, it becomes much easier. Having a strong team of several volunteers helps spread the work around so that no one is overwhelmed by the number of details involved.

In the next few months, I'll be putting on a Web seminar on how to put on a Web seminar with Lloyd Tucker, STC Director of Membership, Meetings, and Education, and we'll go into more details, especially with regards to timing and "gotchas." We look forward to seeing you then.

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