

TRAINING

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Web-Based and

EVENTS BALL-POINT PENS

by WAYNE TURMEL

What do the ball point pen and synchronous web-based events (a ten-dollar word for virtual meetings) have in common?

World events sometimes have unexpected impacts on the technology we use. Case in point: the needs of British pilots during World War II directly led to the invention and acceptance of the ballpoint pen because there was a need for ink that wouldn't freeze at high altitudes.

The Swiss gentleman who invented the ballpoint was at it for quite some time, and couldn't find a buyer—after all, what was wrong with the fountain pen? It worked, it was relatively cheap and, as an added bonus, it kept the laundry and dry-cleaning industry busy and profitable cleaning up after it. Why mess with a good thing? When the need arose in an unexpected way, someone was there to exploit it. The rest is history.

The weeks following September 11th have seen the acceptance of what until a short time ago had been a growing but still a fringe technology: the virtual meeting. Competing web-based technologies like Placeware, NetMeeting, Webex and others have been around for a couple of years now, touting the ability to bring groups together for training, sales meetings, or just about any other purpose without the expense and trouble of physically getting together. It never quite seemed to catch on.

Then suddenly, the landscape changed:

- Most Fortune 500 companies have slashed their travel budgets—some by as much as 40 percent.
- Hotels and other businesses dependent on the business traveler have laid off staff and adjusted earnings for at least the next six months.
- Companies selling virtual-meeting technology reported a 200 percent increase in quarter to quarter revenue for the fourth quarter of 2001 from the beginning of the year.
- The need to communicate hasn't been reduced one iota.

Nothing about the technology changed very much over the last year. It's still a group of companies with mostly similar features trying to distinguish themselves and capture market share. There aren't a lot of people using it, and most people's experiences have been less than inspiring. The technology is still buggier than a baboon's behind. Firewall issues can still bring meetings to a screeching halt. The world, however, is suddenly ready to move full speed ahead into the world of virtual presenting, ready or not.

So you're suddenly told to move your meetings to the web. Given that we don't know who the players will be a year or more from now, it is wisest to concentrate

less on the individual vendor than on the fundamentals of a good virtual presentation. There are four pieces to be aware of, and only one of them is technical:

1. What platform will you use?
2. What is your goal?
3. What do you need to support your goal?
4. How well will you facilitate the meeting?

Choose a platform

Remember, form follows function. Before settling on a platform, determine the lowest-tech solution that will meet your needs. Do they need to see visuals or share information on-line? Then a simple conference call won't do it. On the other hand, if it's just walking through a PowerPoint presentation, you may not need to bother with full-blown webcam capability. Don't bite off more than you have to. The more technology, the more potential for glitches.

If your company has already settled on a platform, get comfortable with it, test its capabilities, and work within its constraints. Don't make it harder on yourself than you have to.

Identify your goal

This is a time-honored question and one that's too easily forgotten. What are you trying to accomplish? Who is your audience and what do you want them to do? One major difference between web-based presentations and face-to-face meetings is that time and attention span are even more limited. Only present what is absolutely vital to reinforcing your call to action and your ultimate goal.

Support the goal

Do you need visual aids? How elaborate do they need to be? Will you just do a data dump, or do you have to allow for Q and A? Will participants be able to bust in at any time, or will you have to schedule time for comments and questions? The

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answers to these and many other questions will dictate your preparation and your ultimate success. Plan ahead, then cut everything that isn't absolutely vital to your success. You will have a hard enough time getting your message through to a distracted audience without their being bored to boot. Always assume they're bored.

Don't believe me? Anyone who hasn't answered email while on a conference call, raise a hand. I thought so.

Facilitation

Can you handle the flow of conversation? How well do you listen to your participants and respond to their questions and challenges? Can everyone hear and see what everyone else sees and hears?

Remember that without the visual component (and even with webcam it is severely reduced) your tone of voice, your word choice and your ability to facilitate communication become even more important. Questions need to be restated, ramblers need to make their points, and "Ums" sound way louder and more annoying over a wire than they do in a conference room.

You will wind up conducting virtual meetings and even virtual training. It's inevitable and the sooner you get comfortable with the nuts and bolts, the sooner you can become a good facilitator. The individual platform (Placeware vs. Webex) will be less important than the ability to master the basics. Especially if you are an external consultant you had better be able to work across platforms.

Just as in the classroom, presentation skills will make a big difference to your success and learning the technology is only a first step. It's what you do with it that makes all the difference.

Come to think of it, that's another thing web-meetings and a ballpoint pen have in common.

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