Creating and Delivering Effective Online Presentations

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December 2000
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Introduction—The Power of Presentations

The power of a presentation lies in the speaker’s ability to convey complex information in concise, understandable terms to an audience. From the halls of academia to business meeting rooms worldwide, presentations allow speakers to express lengthy, complex ideas, organized in logical sections of related information. Presentations allow presenters to effectively extract and emphasize major points within each section, effectively stitch the sections together, and further promote the audiences’ understanding of the message.

Evolution of the Presentation

Around 1987, a development of note occurred in the evolution of creating presentations with computer technology: new software applications now allowed text points to be easily embellished with images. This gave presenters the opportunity to create greater audience interest, prolong attention span, and facilitate the interpretation of complex data. Pictures and graphs could now work hand in hand with text points and accompanying narrative to enhance the audience’s ability to grasp and be influenced by the presenter’s material.

Narrated information combined with visual aids is highly persuasive. The underlying reasons for presentation effectiveness can be found in some interesting statistics from 3M Visuals Systems Design: Most people remember about 20% of what they hear. With visual aids, learning is improved by up to 40%—this directly correlates with the fact that our minds process visuals 60,000 times faster than text. Further, 3M Visual Systems Design found that presentations using visual aids are 43% more persuasive than unaided presentations.

These statistics make a good case for enhancing speeches, lectures, and other presentations with visual aids—graphs, charts, text points, photos, and other images—to make the greatest impact on your audience and leave the most lasting impression.

In 1995, another significant step in presentation evolution occurred: the capability to project a presentation directly from a computer. Until that time, presentations had been limited to static images on overhead projector transparencies or 35-mm slides. With the technological advance of projecting presentations directly from a computer onto a screen, animation and sound effects became standard features for grabbing audience attention. This development transformed the presentation, allowing presenters to engage more of the audience’s senses in hopes of increasing receptivity to the message.

The latest advance in presentation capabilities—online presentations—expands the concept of one-to-many communication. Online presentations combine voice narration with a slide presentation that individual participants experience on the web. Online presentation solutions offer real-time interaction between the presenter and participants using text-based chat or teleconferencing. Plus, participants can experience the presentation live or can view the archived presentation on demand. Now, anyone can easily deliver presentations that reach a much wider, geographically dispersed audience.
Today’s presenter has an unparalleled opportunity to share a message and persuade an audience around the globe.

The Growing Demand for Online Presentations

Market demand and technical innovation have come together to make it possible for individuals who are geographically scattered to participate in cost-effective, productive online presentations. The following paragraphs examine three factors—the global business environment, technical innovation, and the variety of business uses—that are working hand-in-hand to stimulate and support the growing demand for online presentations.

The Global Business Environment Stimulates Demand

Today’s global business environment is witnessing an increased number of mobile and telecommuting employees and an increased number of out-of-office meetings (with a correlating rise in costs associated with attending those meetings). These factors spur the need for effective virtual meetings and, therefore, the demand for online presentations.

Workers are increasingly mobile: The need for staying in touch and keeping connected has never been greater. Today’s business professionals travel significantly and many telecommute. In a 1999 survey conducted by GigaWorld IT Forum, 83% of IT managers and CIOs responding reported that 40% of employees in their organizations are mobile—using laptops or other portable computing devices to perform business. According to the 1992 U.S. Economic Census, companies with 100 or more employees average about 13 locations between headquarters and branch offices. Further, according to market research firm International Data Corporation (IDC), the number of telecommuters will increase from 8.7 million in 1999 to 11.4 million by 2004. It is increasingly more difficult to gather meeting participants for in-person discussions.

Virtual meetings help companies cut travel costs and increase productivity: Meetings are an inevitable part of transacting business. According to a 3M Meeting Network Survey, most people spend 1 to 1.5 days a week in meetings, and managers spend 50% or more of their work week in meetings. An NFO InfoCom study revealed that the typical executive flies to 4.6 meetings a month, wasting hours in transit, on airplanes, and in hotels—all for a meeting that lasts, on average, 2.2 hours. Further, the National Business Travel Association reported that most corporations are substantially cutting back on travel; more than 60% indicated they are using conferencing solutions to conduct meetings more cost effectively and productively. A survey conducted by The Denver Post showed that in the last 10 years, the number of meetings involving remote participants increased by 300%. Meetings are the medium by which business is conducted, yet they also impact productivity and budgets. Conducting effective virtual meetings with online presentations eliminates the hassle and expense associated with in-person meetings that require travel—enabling participants to transact business faster, with more focus, and more productively than in traditional meetings.
Businesses readily outsource services: Increasingly, businesses are outsourcing critical functions to reliable, qualified, experienced providers in order to focus on core competencies. Companies may outsource critical services to outsourcers, also called application service providers (ASPs). Examples of these services include telecommunications and teleconferencing services and networking support as well as Internet-based applications. According to Dataquest, the worldwide ASP industry is poised for explosive growth: The market is forecast to grow from $1 billion in 1999 to more than $25.3 billion by 2004. Most companies choose to partner with an online presentation application service provider rather than purchase costly hardware and software, build the infrastructure, and staff internal resources to support the activity.

Technical Innovations Accommodate the Demand
A variety of recent technical capabilities—increased access to the Internet, standardized multimedia computers, common use of presentation applications like Microsoft PowerPoint, and the increasing acceptance of webcasting and other Internet-based communications solutions—provide an infrastructure that makes it possible for anyone, anywhere to conduct or participate in cost-effective, productive online presentations.

Businesses rely on the Internet: Increasingly, companies rely on the Internet as a mission-critical medium for communicating and conducting business. It transcends geographic barriers and offers immediacy like no other medium available, helping businesses be more effective in this global and competitive economy. According to Daily eStat, eMarketer, within the next three years, the number of businesses accessing the Internet will rise from 4.5 million by year-end 2000 to over 6.7 billion by 2003. This enables businesses to communicate with customers, employees, suppliers, and investors worldwide since, according to Dataquest, the global Internet population will reach 250 million in 2002 and 300 million by 2005. In addition, the growth of broadband Internet access plays a critical role for effective, web-based communications. Daily eStat, eMarketer reports that the number of business broadband subscribers will increase from 3.51 million in 1999 to 11.30 million in 2003, and the number of residential subscribers will increase from 1.92 million in 1999 to 20.73 million in 2003.

Multimedia computers and standardized applications enable anyone to present and participate in online presentations: The current market for PCs has virtually standardized on full multimedia capability, including sound cards and speakers. This enables computer users to take advantage of new web-based technology and capabilities, such as streaming audio and video. (Streaming refers to the method in which large data files, such as video clips and real-time video or audio, are delivered over the Internet. These files are actually streamed bit by bit to the end user’s computer, rather than downloaded in one lump sum. This provides a faster, smoother—and real-time, when appropriate—viewing or listening experience.) In addition, free streaming media player applications, such as the Microsoft Windows Media Player and RealNetworks RealPlayer—which allow computer users to hear streaming audio over the Internet—have been widely embraced and are easy to download and install. These players provide a core functionality needed for online presentations to be readily adopted. In addition, many business professionals are familiar with presentation software packages. More than 90% of respondents in a 3M Visual
Systems Design survey use PowerPoint or other software to create and deliver presentations.15 A study by the Olsten Center confirms the popularity of PowerPoint, citing usage by companies in corporate America at 86%.16 Standardized presentation software will help speed the adoption of online presentations.

**Online presentations are an outgrowth of accepted communications solutions:** Online presentations belong to a family of related communication solutions that accommodate the increasing number of remote meeting participants. Also called distance presentations or web-based presentations, online presentations are built on the webcasting technology described below and, like webcasting, are becoming readily adopted. Presentations magazine cites a 1999 3M Meeting Network survey that suggests 3% of Internet-equipped presenters currently use webcasting software or services for presentations, but nearly 20% expect to begin using such tools by 200117—a 567% expected increase in two years. In addition, a recent Presentations article reveals that a 1999 study of 120 “best practice” corporate education departments found that many training departments deliver as much as 70% of all organizational learning via their corporate intranets.18

The following definitions clarify how online presentations relate to other solutions that support remote communication.

- Teleconferencing: The most common method to communicate with remote meeting participants, teleconferencing allows each individual or group to actively interact in the discussion via their own telephone or speakerphone.
- Video conferencing: Built on teleconferencing technology, video conferencing combines dedicated audio, video, and communications networking technology. During a video conference, two or more groups of people gather in specially equipped conference rooms or the video conferencing provider’s location to communicate in real-time.
- Webcasting: Also called Internet broadcasting or web conferencing, this one-to-many form of communication via the Internet features a speaker or panel discussing a topic using a phone or PC microphone. Listeners are passive, rather than active, participants in the discussion. The audio is streamed via the Internet.
- Collaboration: Also called application sharing, this capability is founded on webcasting technology as well. Through a connection of two or more computers, each end user or group uses collaboration software to view shared information and alternate control to manipulate—in real time—documents such as spreadsheets or presentations.
- Video webcasting: Also built on webcasting technology, this one-to-many form of communication streams audio and video over the Internet to remote viewers. Participants interact via chat, a teleconference call, or PC microphones.

**Diverse Uses Further Increase Demand**

Online presentation solutions are poised to help organizations maintain a competitive edge, increase their ability to share information and react quickly to shifting market needs, and lower operational costs. Online presentations that support an optimal mix of text and graphics, synchronized narrative, and audience-feedback mechanisms create the most persuasive and memorable experiences.
Business applications for online presentations are numerous and varied and are further increasing demand. According to Collaborative Strategies, the top five departments in *Fortune 1000* companies most likely to use real-time collaboration products and services (which includes webcasting and online presentations) are, in order: sales and marketing, operations, human resources, IT, and training.  

The following paragraphs present typical applications in which online presentations enhance business and communications practices.

**Sales, marketing, and other business meetings:** Online presentations can be an effective tool for scheduled or impromptu meetings, such as internal sales and marketing presentations or presentations given by sales reps to worldwide prospects. When a high level of interaction is required, the presenter may choose to combine the web-viewing experience with a conference call. Web-based presentations are perfect for holding weekly sales meetings with field sales reps, demonstrating products and services to prospects, launching new products, and informing customers about company news. Whether viewed live or on demand, the online presentation is a powerful communication tool that can help you enhance company teamwork and build customer relationships.

**Investor relations:** Online presentations are a key component in companies’ financial communications programs for complying with the Security and Exchange Commission’s Regulation FD (Fair Disclosure), which became effective October 23, 2000. Regulation FD requires public companies to disclose all “material” information publicly to eliminate selective disclosure of information and help to level the investment playing field. (Learn more about Regulation FD and the SEC’s recommendations for using web-based tools to broadly disseminate information at www.sec.gov/rules/final/33-7881.htm.) By augmenting traditional forms of disclosure with online presentations, companies are able to extend the reach and availability of information to the general public in a broad and nonexclusionary manner. Live and archived online presentations are particularly useful for comments on IPO and merger announcements, quarterly earnings announcements, shareholder meetings, and other financial communications.

**Public relations:** By leveraging online presentations, press conferences can become virtual, creating an effective venue for announcing your company’s breaking news and helping your company comply with Regulation FD. With web accessibility—live or on demand—your news becomes available to a broader range of media and analysts, because virtual events are more convenient to attend. Enhancing traditional press conferences with a live, online presence also helps your company comply with Regulation FD.

**Employee communications:** The increasingly global economy, increase in telecommuters, and rapidly growing number of mergers and acquisitions in business today result in companies with employees who are geographically dispersed, sometimes around the globe. The traditional company meeting where all employees gather at a single location is an expensive and often impossible proposition. With robust online presentation services, executives can maintain close communication with all employees, regardless of location.
Chat functionality allows participants in remote sites to post comments and questions, and archiving capabilities allow those who missed the live event to experience it on demand.

Distance learning: Most universities offer the option of distance learning as an accepted part of their curricula. IDC reports that 58% of two-year educational institutions and 62% of four-year institutions offered courses via distance learning in 1998 and expects those percentages to increase to about 85% by 2002. In addition, IDC forecasts that the number of college students enrolled in distance-learning courses will grow from 710,000 in 1998 to 2.23 million in 2002. Lectures given over the Internet using online presentation tools allow students in any location to attend class. Plus, archiving the presentation means no one ever has to miss a lecture, and students can replay the content until they feel confident about the topic presented.

Company training: The need for training employees is varied and ongoing. According to the American Society for Training and Development, 75% of the U.S. workforce will need training in the next few years to keep pace with market demands and increasingly global competition. Human resources, IT, and customer support departments can create a repertoire of live or on-demand online presentations to train and communicate with employees in multiple locations. Applications can include presenting company policies and procedures, rolling out new benefits plans, and training customer support personnel on new technology.

In general, anytime you need to convey new or updated material to dispersed attendees, an online presentation traverses geographic boundaries. As an added benefit, online presentations can be archived, allowing your audience to view the presentation whenever and wherever most convenient, increasing the accessibility and retention of the information.

Selecting an Online Presentation Solution

As discussed earlier, many businesses choose to outsource their online presentation solution to qualified, reputable providers. This allows businesses to free up their internal resources and focus on core competencies.

The online presentation provider you select will become a partner in your business communications, so you want to ensure the provider is reliable, can grow with the needs of your business, and provides comprehensive services to support your company’s various needs. The solution you choose is key for delivering effective online presentations that can translate into increased productivity and revenue.

There are many factors to consider when choosing a solution, including specific features that meet your needs, ease of use, and total event costs. The following sections help you clarify your online presentation needs and suggest specific features to ensure your presentations are successful.
Features that Support Impromptu Meetings with Presentations

Online presentations are a great communications tool for scheduled or ad hoc meetings with small groups. Examples include weekly sales meetings with field reps, customer demos, team meetings with remote employees, board meetings with out-of-office board members, corporate training, and distance-learning classes. In short, anytime you need to meet with a small, dispersed group—whether scheduled or impromptu—and require a high level of interactivity, look for a solution that offers the following features.

Reservationless conferencing: Some providers require that you reserve, well in advance, a particular day and time to conduct an online event. The reality of business is that priorities shift, and you may need to reschedule existing meetings or quickly pull together impromptu meetings. You need the ability to flexibly reschedule and conveniently present—on virtually a moment’s notice—to all meeting participants, no matter where they happen to be. Look for a browser-based solution that allows you to schedule and present anytime. Also, browser-based solutions allow the presenter and the attendees to be at any multimedia computer with an Internet connection to participate—they don’t need to be at their own computers.

Upload a variety of file types for a presentation: Look for an online presentation solution that accepts a variety of file types, such as PowerPoint presentations and .gif and .jpg image files. Also, look for a solution that allows you to upload URLs, so you can incorporate web pages into your discussion. Ensure the solution allows you to upload the file types that meet your typical meeting needs.

Change your presentation after upload: Providers offer different methodologies for uploading your presentation prior to the event. Some require you to email your finalized presentation one-to-two days before your event. Others provide instructions to upload your PowerPoint file, for example, directly from your online PC to the provider anytime prior to the event. Look for a solution that offers the flexibility to add new slides, images, and web pages to your uploaded presentation, so you don’t have to resubmit the entire modified presentation and reschedule your meeting.

Manipulate your presentation during the meeting: Look for the flexibility to change your presentation on the fly—the ability to add new slides, images, and URLs and to resequence or omit slides during the meeting. These capabilities provide the greatest degree of flexibility, allowing you to modify your presentation in response to questions that arise during the discussion.

Allow all participants to join the discussion: Presentations are most effective when participants can question or comment on the material throughout the meeting. An online presentation solution should offer options for meeting attendees to communicate with the presenter. While chat functions are an excellent way for participants to ask questions during the presentation, a small group discussion may require a higher level of interactivity. Therefore, look for a solution that allows the presenter to complement the online presentation with a conference call.
Security: The topic of security for online presentation solutions can address multiple fronts, including the privacy of your presentation, the security of the ordering site, and the security of the provider’s actual physical environment (after all, you’ll want to ensure your presentations are available and safe should something happen to the provider’s facility).

- Password-protected presentations—A key feature when conducting presentations to an internal audience, password protection gives you the confidence to discuss sensitive or confidential information. The solution you choose should also require a password to access your account and your uploaded presentations. Some solutions offer multiple levels of security, depending on the roles of those who need to access the account information and presentations.
- Secure e-commerce site—If the solution requires that you order online, ensure the ordering site is secure, so you are comfortable providing private information, such as your credit card number.
- Secure facilities—When evaluating solutions, ensure your content will be protected. Does the provider store the equipment in a secure datacenter or other facility? You want to be confident that your presentations are always available and secure.

Features that Support Presentations for Medium- to Large-Size Audiences

Planning to conduct an online presentation for several dozen, several hundred, or several thousand participants? Perhaps a new-product launch to an audience of customers and prospects, an employee announcement, panel discussion with industry experts, celebrity interview, seminar, virtual press conference, or earnings announcement for investors and analysts? These large events require an online presentation solution that is scalable and reliable, provides easy access for participants, allows the presenter to control the audience interaction, and offers archiving capabilities.

Scalability and reliability: Consider this scenario: Your public company is currently hosting an online presentation event to announce its quarterly earnings and discuss newly released products. A larger-than-expected audience consisting of analysts and hundreds of inquisitive investors is attending your event and pelting the presenters with questions. Originally scheduled for two hours, your live event is now four hours long and counting. In addition, the presenters have shown more than 200 slides, including 50 slides prepared and uploaded “just-in-case.” Is scalability important? It’s critical. Be sure to choose an online presentation solution that flexes to your event needs, including number of participants, number of slides in the presentation, and length of presentation (you don’t want your event cut off if it runs over the originally scheduled time). Reliability is just as critical. Ensure the online presentation solution you choose is reliable and uses proven technology. When researching whether a provider’s solution is reliable, ask about redundant or back-up systems for servers, phones systems, and other appropriate systems. Before signing on the bottom line, participate in several online presentations hosted by the provider to experience the technology from the end user’s point of view. Interview references who use the solution for communicating with large audiences. Finally, ensure the provider offers customer service during your large event. A crack customer service
team can answer questions for the presenter and attendees and can help ensure your live event runs without a hitch.

**Presenter-controlled audience interaction:** Look for a solution that offers flexibility in presenter/audience interaction—a solution that enables the presenter to select the communication medium, such as chat and teleconferencing, and that allows multiple presenters. Look for chat functionality that supports different access levels; for example, you may want to assign several people as presenters or chat moderators. Further, if the chat function enables the moderator to disconnect a disruptive participant from chat, then online presentations actually have an edge over in-person presentations. Also, you may choose to augment your online presentation with a conference call for increased interaction between the presenter and some or all participants. Depending on the event, you may choose a solution that can offer a combination of chat and conferencing. For example, during a virtual earnings announcement and presentation, the company’s executive staff, key analysts, and journalists may be conferenced into the call. Other investors, customers, and interested parties may interact via chat.

**No downloadable or executable files required:** Look for a browser-based solution that only requires a standard web browser. You and your audience should not need to download additional software. With the vast combinations of hardware and software on every desktop, troubleshooting a downloaded file that does not work as intended can be frustrating and counterproductive. Participants who plan to attend an online presentation but can’t because the solution is cumbersome are not likely to join future events enthusiastically.

**Event statistics:** Look for a solution that supplies statistics for your presentation, such as the number of attendees who joined the event, how long they attended the event, and the list of attendees. Look for additional features, such as an audience attendance monitor, which shows whether participants are attending the entire presentation.

**Archive option for on-demand viewing:** For many online presentations, especially large events such as new-product launches, corporate-wide announcements to employees, earnings announcements, and corporate trainings, you need the ability to easily archive the live presentation, so your audience can view the original event if they missed it or replay it to review the information imparted. Whether your presentation is viewed live or on demand, the solution you choose should precisely synchronize the voice narration with visuals.

**Look for a Solution That’s Easy to Use**
Whether your event is small or large, the online presentation solution you select should be easy to use. The list of features that make a solution easy to use differs from person to person. Whether you’re technically savvy or a computer “newby,” here are some key features to look for:

- friendly, intuitive web interface;
- simple method for uploading presentation materials;
• an intuitive presenter toolbar or control panel to flexibly access, manage, and deliver presentation content;
• the ability to use a phone to present, including mobile phones;
• a customizable invitation or tips for inviting participants;
• uncomplicated, easy-to-understand method for participants to join the presentation;
• customer support available online and by phone should problems arise.

Comparing Costs
When shopping for an online presentation solution, compare pricing structures and peripheral costs. For example, is the solution priced at one flat fee regardless of how many participants will view the presentation? Does the provider charge per participant minute? Or does the provider offer the service on an event-by-event basis?

Be sure to comparison shop several providers, listing features and functionality each does or does not provide. Also, check the contractual obligations the provider may impose as a condition of using the service. It could take the form of a sign-up fee or subscription fee locking you into a certain amount of time or a certain number of presentations. You may need a flexible solution that adjusts to your changing needs. Factors that might affect the total cost of your event include:
• length of presentation,
• number of participants,
• toll versus toll-free number for the presenter,
• conference call fees,
• audio upload fees,
• number of presentations or slides you can upload,
• number of streaming media players the audience can select to hear the event (such as Windows Media Player and RealPlayer),
• fees to archive your presentation for on-demand replay,
• and special services, such as training and rehearsing presenters and post-session attendance and activity reports.

Tips for Preparing and Conducting Online Presentations

Preparing Your Presentation
As with any presentation, you should know your topic thoroughly. If you are giving a presentation using materials you did not create, be sure to review the slides and other content, such as embedded web pages. Conduct a practice session before the scheduled event to make notes on timing, pacing, and points to emphasize. A practice session also gives you the chance to reorganize slides, add or delete content, familiarize yourself with the technology, and add additional charts or graphs to further illustrate a point.

Target your message to your main audience, while keeping in mind others who may participate. For example, if you are conducting a launch event to announce a new
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product, keep in mind your top-tier audience of industry editors, reporters, and analysts. Within the content, you might also want to address any secondary audience members, such as customers or prospects. For a presentation to be successful, all audience members must be motivated to hear what you have to say.

As you create your presentation, there are practical and aesthetic considerations to make slides interesting and easy to read. Slide-creation software programs, such as PowerPoint, have been around long enough to establish a minimum set of expectations for presentation quality. They have made it easy to use impressive visual aids in even the most mundane presentation. However, don’t invest time adding creative animation effects to your slides. Because online presentation solutions convert each PowerPoint slide or image into individual graphics, these animation effects won’t automatically transfer into your online presentation.

As a presenter, you’ll want to keep the following advice in mind. Remember, these guidelines apply to any presentation—no matter what medium you use to deliver the message.22

- Visuals should support, not replace the presenter.
- Keep your presentation simple and avoid cluttered slides.
- Limit each slide to the presentation of one major idea.
- Condense text points into key words that will trigger narration and discussion.
- Use charts and graphs, but remember to focus on the major messages they convey rather than the specific data points.
- Proof slides to eliminate typos, redundancies, and factual errors, especially if you’ve made last-minute changes to your presentation. Consider asking someone to proof your presentation; often, an objective reviewer can spot errors you’ve missed.
- Keep in mind that most presenters speak for about 2 minutes per slide. So plan accordingly and stay within the allotted time.
- Prepare by having additional slides, charts, and graphs uploaded in case you need to fill the allotted time or illustrate a point. Additional materials give you the flexibility to expand, contract, or modify your presentation on the fly.

Announcing Your Event
When publicizing online events in which you want to invite the general public—such as panel discussions with industry experts, earnings announcements, and interviews with celebrities—plan to submit press releases, send email notices, and post announcements on your company’s web site. Be sure to include standard information about the event, including date, time, time zone, and password as well as the URL link audience members will need to access the event. Also include recommendations for web browser versions, minimum high-speed connection speeds, and any streaming media players required to experience your online presentation. (The solution you choose should provide links for the appropriate free streaming media players, such as Windows Media Player and RealPlayer. Also, there should be a method for participants to test their systems to ensure they will be able to view and hear the event. Encourage participants to test their systems well in advance of the actual event.)
Don’t assume that all participants have a high level of comfort attending an online presentation. There may be some barrier with this relatively novel form of meeting. You may need to add more information about how to join the event and what to expect during the event. Also, provide the phone number and email address for contacting the online presentation provider’s customer support. These measures can help ease any anxiety and pave the way for participants to get the most out of the event.

For large presentations, such as virtual press tours or product launches, send an email invitation one to two weeks before the event, so prospective participants can plan to attend. Also send a follow-up reminder a few days before the event. The email invitation should include the URL link to join the presentation, so participants can join the event with a simple mouse click. Again, include the online presentation provider’s recommendations for browser versions, high-speed access, and streaming media players. Also, post an announcement of the event prominently on your company’s web site for your external audience and on the company intranet for your internal audience.

For smaller, company-internal events, such as sales presentations or regularly scheduled employee meetings, you can email an invitation to those attending. Include the URL link for participants to quickly and easily attend the event. Post a meeting notice appropriately on your company’s intranet. For internal events, security may be a concern, especially if you plan to present financial information. As discussed earlier, be sure to use an online presentation solution that adheres to tight security measures and offers password protection to your event. Be sure to include the password with your event invitation.

Conducting the Online Presentation

Using the Internet as the message channel adds a level of complexity to your presentation. This is also where the value proposition of online presentations comes into focus by:

- increasing the reach of your message by transcending geographic boundaries,
- reducing the need to travel to meetings so attendance is affordable and easy,
- providing the ability to archive the presentation so audience members can access it at their own convenience.

The relative novelty of online presentations introduces challenges and opportunities unique to the technology. Some practical considerations for conducting effective online presentations follow.

**Challenge:** You are using new technology to conduct your presentation.  
**Solution:** Being comfortable with any new technology requires practice. Therefore, practice on a test audience—actually using the technology—at least once before your live event. Ask someone to moderate chat during the practice session and live presentation. During the practice session, be sure to get familiar with the chat function and other capabilities you plan to use during your live presentation. Iron out the kinks before you stumble in front of an audience that you want to impress. Have an objective third party participate in your practice session and give feedback on the flow of your content, length of your presentation, the chat activity, layout of your slides, and the pace of your...
narration. Listen to the feedback and amend your presentation appropriately. Dr. Cris Guenter, Professor of Education at California State University, Chico, has significant experience using online presentation tools and gives this advice: “Your level of comfort as a presenter and the ease that you demonstrate navigating the technology will make it easy for your audience to focus on the information you’re conveying.” She adds, “Technology increases the reach of your presentation and makes it more accessible to a wider audience, however, it isn’t the primary driver of the content. Remember, the message of your presentation is what’s important. Technology gives you the ability to add dimension and richness to your presentation. It is the means to an end and not an end itself.”

**Challenge:** With no eye contact, facial expressions, or gestures to emphasize points, how do you engage an audience you can’t see?

**Solution:** Use voice inflection to punctuate your presentation. Your voice should convey enthusiasm and dynamism to engage your audience. Your narration should flow naturally. Never simply read a slide. Instead, add value by briefly elaborating on the key ideas of each slide, keeping your overall presentation as concise as possible. Here’s another solution: Have multiple presenters narrate the presentation. The added value of different perspectives, different voices, different levels of expertise, and complementary or opposing points of view can be a powerful mechanism for holding audience attention.

**Challenge:** Participants are tempted to be multitasking at their desks—watching the online presentation and working on something else simultaneously.

**Solution:** Ensure your content is well organized, keep the presentation brisk and short, and encourage attendees’ participation using the chat function. Dr. Guenter, a veteran online presenter, shares tips for organizing online presentations: “Take a modular approach to the content. Move logically through your material, presenting foundational information first and building on key ideas. Keep the layout of the slides consistent. Following these simple guidelines lets you focus on the content—the message of your presentation—and not on the delivery mechanism.” Be sure to present in a “protected” environment, where the ambient noise level is low and any on-site audience members understand the need to remain quiet. Also, allow time for questions and answers. (Choose an online presentation solution that allows you to go over your allotted time, should you need to.) Frequently engage participants in an interactive communication channel, such as the chat function or conference call. (When using chat, allow for a time lag between asking a question and getting a response—typing takes time.) Dr. Guenter adds this tip: “Online presentations allow you to use dynamic, live linking to complementary web sites that add vibrancy to the presentation and augment content and visual appeal. This adds a component of discovery that engages your audience. Your online presentation has more stickiness—more staying power—with your audience.”

**Challenge:** Participants will view your presentation on different equipment—some on laptops, some on monitors at their desks, some via a projected image from a computer screen.

**Solution:** Select a legible font, one that is not too stylized or elaborate. Use a large type size—18 points or larger (another reason to stick to one major idea per slide)—to
accommodate the variety of equipment that participants will use to view the presentation.

Choose colors that are easy to read. Images should complement your main message, not

**Challenge:** Taking a pulse on a transparent audience.

**Solution:** Use the online presentation tool’s chat function or conferencing capability to

hold a two-way conversation with your audience. With chat, a moderator can monitor the

chat screen while the presenter keeps the material flowing. As the presenter, you can

pause periodically during the presentation to field questions that the moderator has

filtered. (Be sure to read each question aloud before addressing it as part of your

presentation.) Again, the chat function should augment the primary purpose of the

presentation and not detract from the message. Periodically during the presentation, you

can survey your audience via the chat function to gather data. Based on audience input,
you can reorder the content real-time to address questions and issues. Another way to

stay in touch with your audience is to conduct your online presentation with a conference

call. This is a manageable tactic for smaller meetings that require a higher level of

interactivity. Or, combine chat and a conference call for certain events. For example,
during a company-wide announcement, employees may listen to the presentation and

interact via chat; the executive team may be conferenced in from several locations to

present the announcement and address questions fielded by the chat moderator.

**Challenge:** Participants will join the online presentation at different Internet connection

speeds.

**Solution:** Don’t assume that everyone joining your online presentation has a high-speed

Internet connection. Therefore, don’t rush through individual slides; allow a minute or so

for each slide to download before moving on to the next slide. In addition, not all online

presentation solutions may optimize your uploaded presentation for fast downloading.

You may want to run a trial event using your solution. Depending on the results, you may

need to modify your presentation to download faster. If so, here are a few rules of thumb:

keep graphics to a minimum, use small graphics with small file sizes, and use a flat color

for the background instead of a gradation.

**Following Up Your Event**

If the online presentation solution offers statistical data about your event, such as the

names and number of participants, be sure to request or track that data. For both smaller

meetings and larger events, you may want to provide participants with the URL link to

access the archived event for on-demand viewing. Email the link to participants or post

the link on your company’s web site or intranet. Finally, consider emailing or posting on

the company web site an evaluation form, so participants can provide feedback to help

you refine the presentation content and polish your presentation skills.
Conclusion

Effective presentations are the language of influence—no matter the medium used or the specific wisdom imparted. The recent marriage of traditional presentation tools and the Internet provides an enormous opportunity. As a presenter, you can expand the reach and impact of your message to an audience well beyond the holding capacity of a single room. Online presentations increase the reach, persuasiveness, and power of your message.
References

23. iTalk interview with Dr. Cris Guenter, Professor of Education, Department of Education, California State University, Chico.

Note: We’ve included the URL link in the above references where applicable. However, be aware that links are somewhat ephemeral—there’s no guarantee these links will remain accessible.