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Lauren M. Harrison

University of Nebraska, lauren-harrison@live.com

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Case Study on the First-time Use of a Webinar by a Small Marketing Firm

Lauren Harrison

Professional Project

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Author Note

Lauren Harrison, College of Journalism & Mass Communications

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Lauren Harrison,

4903 Underwood Ave #10, Omaha, NE 68132.

Contact: Lauren-harrison@live.com

Abstract

The term webinar has become part of the English language, but use of this technology is not yet widespread. Can a webinar help a small marketing firm reach its broad audience efficiently and effectively? That was the question asked by Harvest Retail Marketing before it decided to launch its webinar series. This paper discusses the advantages and disadvantages as well as best practices of webinars when used by a small marketing firm. The research also presents “next” practices that can be used in the planning and presentation of a first-time webinar by other small marketing firms.

Keywords: webinar, small marketing firm, training,
computer-mediated communication

Case Study on the First-time Use of a Webinar

by a Small Marketing Firm

Webinars are growing in popularity and have become an effective and affordable form of communication. Advancements in technology allow businesses of all sizes to use webinars to communicate with people across the country. These reasons led Harvest Retail Marketing to offer a webinar series to communicate with clients and create efficiencies in the workflow. Other small marketing firms can benefit from this case study on the first webinar in the Harvest series by learning about the advantages and disadvantages as well as best and "next" practices for webinars.

Introduction

Harvest Retail Marketing is a small Midwest firm whose seven full-time employees comprise the preferred marketing partner for the Trek Bicycle Company. Trek is one of the most recognized bicycle brands in the United States and is a global leader when it comes to the design and manufacture of high-end bicycles (Townley, 2012).

Trek products are sold exclusively at more than 1,700 independently owned and operated bicycle stores in North America. Harvest Retail Marketing provides direct mail, email marketing, website maintenance, social media marketing and custom advertising for the top 100 of these dealers.

Harvest Retail Marketing's employees share a common goal of bringing the right customers into the Trek stores ready to buy. Each dealer is assigned an account manager who works with the dealer to create an annual marketing plan to drive results and increase sales. Because the Harvest Retail Marketing team is so small and the demand for

work is so large, it is essential to create efficiencies that make the high volume of work manageable.

The primary form of communication between account managers and dealers is through email and phone calls. Harvest cannot use face-to-face training because the cost to travel to each dealer and the time spent is not economically feasible. In June 2013 Harvest decided to offer a webinar series to share valuable marketing information with dealers who opt-in from all across the country.

This case study will focus on Harvest Retail Marketing's decision to use a webinar, preparation for its first webinar, delivery of the webinar and post-delivery evaluation. By doing so, the study will provide a rich description that will help other small marketing firms that are considering entering into the webinar arena.

Purpose

The purpose of this project is to combine research into webinar advantages/disadvantages and best practices with Harvest Retail Marketing's experience in planning, delivering and evaluating its first webinar in order to provide a new set of "next practices" that Harvest Retail Marketing can use for succeeding webinars and that can guide similar small marketing firms' decisions and actions regarding use of webinars.

Research Questions

The research in this paper was guided by the following questions:

1. Why should a small marketing firm use a webinar?
2. How can a small marketing firm incorporate best practices into first-time use of a webinar?

3. What can be learned as a result of a small marketing firm's first-time use of a webinar that will add to the literature and help similar firms in their first endeavor?

Definition

For the purpose of this study webinar is defined as “a type of conferencing that involves a web-based seminar delivered over the internet” (Humphrey, 2013, p. 1). This type of conferencing allows presenters and participants to come together online from remote locations.

Webinars came about in the early 1990s when audio and video web-conferencing capabilities were created. Businesses and higher education institutes began to take webinars seriously in the early 2000s when high-speed Internet access became widely available and at a reasonable cost. Around this same time the cost of video capture software and web cameras decreased and webinar software providers made video conferencing accessible by providing affordable services. Companies began to embrace webinars and over the past decade the software capabilities have improved to the high quality services available today.

Limitations

1. The search for journal articles and academic studies about the effectiveness of webinars as a tool to communicate information did not produce the number of results expected. For example, no other case studies were found in academic literature, although webinar vendors often showcased specific companies online that had success using their products.

2. Because this is a very specific case study, primary research is limited to one small marketing firm and one webinar, the firm's first use in a proposed series.

Method

A mixed methods approach, employing both qualitative and quantitative research tools, was used to develop this case study.

Qualitative data was obtained by interviewing the president of Harvest Retail Marketing both before and after the webinar to get background on the decision to use a webinar as well as reactions to and reflections on its use. The pre-webinar interview began by discussing the underlying causes, considerations and concerns of holding a webinar. The questions asked included what he expected to gain by using a webinar, whether or not he was apprehensive about using this relatively new medium for training, if he knew of any companies that used it, and, if so, whether he was aware of their success. The president was also asked how he decided on the tool chosen, GoToMeeting, which has an online webinar platform that is free for participants to use. After the webinar took place, the president was asked if any unexpected problems occurred, whether GoToMeeting provided all the necessary functions, what changes needed to be made for future webinars and if the webinar met Harvest Retail Marketing's communication needs.

Further, this case study documents best practices that were found prior to the webinar, notes their use during the experience and comments and expands on them as "next practices" following the webinar experience.

The quantitative data was gathered after the webinar by sending short evaluation surveys to participants asking questions such as whether they had participated in any

webinars previously, how useful they thought the Harvest webinar was, how much information they gained, how relevant the content was, whether they liked the format, how easy it was to follow along, how clear the video and audio quality was, how user-friendly the software was, how comfortable they felt asking questions, whether or not they preferred to receive more information in this manner in the future, if they would share the recorded version of the webinar with colleagues, if they would attend another presentation in the Harvest webinar series and if they would recommend it to other dealers.

Timeline

The webinar in this case study was presented at 11 a.m. CDT on Tuesday, August 27, 2013. The research and preparation took place prior to that. The evaluation of survey results took place in August and September after the webinar was completed. A list of “next” practices was compiled after all of the feedback was received and will be applied to the second webinar in the Harvest webinar series, which will take place in January 2014.

Literature Review

Relevant theories regarding computer-mediated communication for educational purposes were reviewed and applied to webinars. In addition, this literature review provides an accurate description of why and how webinars are used by companies to communicate important information and review theories that can be applied to distance education. As such, it includes advantages and disadvantages of webinars as well as best practices of webinars noting how webinars can be used most effectively.

There is currently a lack of research in this area. Existing research provides some insight into how other companies have used webinars to communicate important information but more academic research must be done.

Theories

Two relevant theories that can be applied to using webinars as an educational tool include Social Presence Theory and Media Synchronicity Theory. These theories give insight into how webinars can be most effectively used to train employees.

There is no agreed upon definition of the Social Presence Theory but it focuses on “The degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience (and perceived intimacy and immediacy) of the interpersonal relationships” (Hiltz, 2013, p. 4). In other words, this is the sense of being with one another. This theory ranks different forms of media on their quality of social presence. Some forms of media have higher social presence which means they tend to be more sociable and personal forms of communication.

An example of a high social presence medium is video because viewers understand that the person in the video is real and can connect with their audience. Radio ranks lower on the social presence scale because it is more difficult to feel connected to the presenter since listeners cannot see visual cues such as facial expressions and gestures. Webinars rank high on the social presence scale because they can connect presenters and participants in real time and there are audio and video capabilities. High social presence and immediacy are highly correlated with favorable learning outcomes. Therefore webinars are an effective tool to use as a communication method (Hiltz, 2013,

p. 4). It is important that webinar presenters understand the Social Presence Theory and deliberately structure their webinar in a way that their participants can connect with them.

The Media Synchronicity Theory focuses on “the ability of media to support synchronicity, a shared pattern of coordinated behavior among individuals as they work together” (Dennis et al., 2008, p. 575). This theory argues, “Task performance will be improved when task information needs are matched to a medium’s information richness. Media capable of sending “rich” information are better suited to equivocal tasks and less rich media are best suited to tasks with a lack of information” (Dennis et al., 2008, p. 575). The highest-ranking medium is face-to-face meetings and lowest is plain text. Within this scale is a variety of media including webinars, video and other forms of computer-mediated communications. Webinars have high media synchronicity because they bring together the presenter and participants in real time, can provide video and audio and are capable of delivering rich information.

A journal article about this theory titled “Media, Tasks and Communication Processes: A Theory of Media Synchronicity” published in *MIS Quarterly* gives an in-depth analysis of synchronous versus asynchronous communication. For the purpose of this project it is important to note that there are advantages of both types of communication and it is ideal to provide participants with the option to participate synchronously or asynchronously.

These theories can help a small marketing firm decide if a webinar is the best medium to communicate with their audience. In addition to these theories, scholarly research provides several advantages and disadvantages of webinars that should be taken into consideration when deciding to host a webinar.

Advantages of Webinars

A study published in the *Journal of Interactive Online Learning*, titled “Use of the Webinar Tool (Elluminate) to Support Training: The Effects of Webinar-Learning Implementation from Student-Trainers’ Perspective,” presents five advantages of using webinars to facilitate communication. They are:

- 1) Webinar tools are affordable.
- 2) They enable synchronous communication.
- 3) They facilitate real-time multimedia demonstrations.
- 4) They facilitate multi-level interaction.
- 5) They provide an environment in which participants can archive seminar content for personal review or for people who missed the real-time session (Hsu and Wang, 2008 p. 177).

To expand on the advantages mentioned in this study, webinars are an affordable way to communicate with a large audience without having to travel. They bring together the presenter and the participants even when these people are in different geographic locations, whether that be across the country or just across town. This allows everyone to save time and money. Webinar tools also allow the use of real-time multimedia demonstrations and multi-level interaction that can improve the quality of the webinar for both the presenter and the attendees. Another advantage that the researchers in this study pointed out is that webinars relieved the nervousness for introverted learners because they were able to stay at home or in a personalized learning environment in which they felt relaxed. This points out the versatility and convenience of webinars.

A white paper published by ReadyTalk, lists several other benefits for companies using webinars. The list includes accelerated learning process and the ability to train several at once on either synchronous or asynchronous times as well as allowing for more frequent presentations compared to requiring employees to travel to attend a meeting. Webinars make it easy for companies to hold shorter, more frequent training sessions several times a year (ReadyTalk, p. 2).

Results of a study titled “Webinar Training: An Acceptable, Feasible and Effective Approach for Multi-site Medical Record Abstraction: The BOWII Experience,” show that the majority of people who participated in a webinar for medical training reported that the webinar helped them better understand the medical record abstraction content. Similarly, “out of ten participants, 87.5% rated the webinar high on its ability to facilitate discussion of questions and issues,” and all participants agreed they would recommend this platform for multi-site medical record review training (Quinn et al, 2011, p. 6). This survey concludes that “conducting medical record abstraction training via web-based technology was an acceptable and effective approach” (Quinn et al, 2011, p. 6), but due to the small sample size, more research in this area needs to be conducted before generalizations can be made.

A white paper published by Strategic Finance includes an expansive list of advantages of webinars. Some were mentioned previously, but, additional benefits include:

- 1) Improves access to knowledge and skills development
- 2) Gathers and shares trends and best practices
- 3) Enhances customer service and credibility

- 4) Captures and stores events in accessible archives (Humphrey, 2013, p. 32)

The list of advantages shows that webinars are an efficient tool for businesses to use to use to train employees. Webinars are an easy and affordable way of communicating that is proven to be effective for participants and presenters, however there are some disadvantages that small marketing firms should be aware of and consider.

Disadvantages of Webinars

The same “Use of the Webinar Tool (Elluminate) to Support Training: The Effects of Webinar-Learning Implementation from Student-Trainers’ Perspective” study mentioned earlier also reported a few disadvantages. These include:

- 1) Possible slow network speed
- 2) Risk of lost Internet connection.
- 3) Minimal peer interaction (Hsu and Wang, 2008, p. 184).

However researchers noted that technical problems such as slow network speed and loss of Internet connection can be avoided if the presenter tests the webinar tool in advance and is prepared in the event of any malfunction. The webinar in the Harvest series used this information to do the appropriate technical testing and encourage participants to ask questions in order to facilitate a discussion to increase interaction among participants.

Another perspective comes from Gregory Siskind who was quoted in an article in the *American Bar Association Journal* saying that he has not found much interest in webinars and they are more work than conference calls for both the presenter and the participants. He said “The web’s been around for 11 or 12 years and there were companies whose whole business plan was built around webinars as early as ’95 or ’96

and it has yet to take off” (Krause, 2005, p. 66). Since this article was written in 2005, technology has improved, becoming much more user-friendly. However, Siskind points out that webinars are more work than conference calls for all parties involved. Although this is true they are also more effective at communicating information to a large audience and now they have video capability.

Webinar Best Practices

A study published in the *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education* titled “Instructional Design and Assessment” provides a detailed evaluation of how webinars can be used to train pharmacists as part of a continuous improvement development program. This study was proposed “due to a lack of research on what makes effective webinars within the contexts of professional development and continuous education” (Burns et al., 2012, p. 1). A survey was given to all participants to gain feedback about the webinar series. A total of 97 pharmacists completed the study and out of this group 75.5% had participated in webinars in the past and 49% were very likely to attend a similar webinar in the future. The researchers in this study found several reasons that might limit future participation. These include “time of the program, topics may not be of interest and/or useful to their practice, the cost of the webinar, standalone topics offered rather than a series” (Burns et al., 2012, p. 4). The issue that was most important to this group of participants was timing. Since professionals have busy schedules it can be challenging to pick a presentation time that works for a large audience. This study found that 68% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they preferred asynchronous offerings because they are more convenient to fit into their schedules (Burns et al., 2012, p. 4).

Scheduling is a major factor that can limit participation of webinars due to other priorities. Because of this, a best practice is to offer a synchronous as well as an asynchronous recorded version of the webinar to cater to people who are unable to attend at the scheduled time.

A book written by Jon Wuebben titled *Content is Currency* provides an expansive list of best practices for webinars. These include:

- deliver solid, high quality information;
- recruit known, respected guest speakers;
- make registration easy and
- give attendees something for free (Wuebben, 2012, p. 208). These best practices will be useful to other small marketing firms when planning and executing their first webinar.

The list below contains additional best practices found through secondary research.

The best practices for using webinars to communicate information include:

- 1) Determine compelling topic that will make the right people want to attend (Communique, 2003, p. 2).
- 2) Select an appropriate presentation time that is convenient for all time zones. 10:00 a.m. PST, 11:00 a.m. MST, 12:00 p.m. CST, 1:00 p.m. EST is best (Communique, 2003, p. 3).
- 3) Provide an asynchronous option for interested participants that cannot attend the scheduled time (Burns et al., 2012, p. 4).
- 4) Send multiple emails/posts advertising the webinar (Bannan, 2010).

- 5) Send reminder emails/posts one day and one hour before the presentation (Bannan, 2010).
- 6) The presenter and moderator should sign in at least 15 minutes before the presentation begins to go over last-minute details and make sure the system is running correctly (Communique, 2003, p. 3).
- 7) Include a photo of the presenters so participants can visualize who is speaking (Mitchell, 2010).
- 8) Include the purpose and objectives of each stage so that participants will understand why time is being spent on that portion of the agenda (Mittleman, 2008, p. 3).
- 9) Keep participants actively engaged by incorporating questions throughout the presentation (Fripp, 2009, p. 16).
- 10) Allow participants to ask questions after the presentation (Fripp, 2009, p. 16).
- 11) Keep content simple, meaningful and “learnable” in a short period of time (Humphrey, 2013, p. 36).
- 12) Provide resources for additional study or reference (Humphrey, 2013, p. 36).
- 13) Offer some takeaway tips (Humphrey, 2013, p. 36).
- 14) Seek and use feedback (Humphrey, 2013, p. 36).

Process

After reviewing the best practices found through secondary research, the presenter and president at Harvest Retail Marketing decided on a topic that would appeal to a large audience, chose the webinar platform, set a date and time that would be convenient for all invited parties and promoted the webinar to clients.

Content

The topic that was chosen was “5 Social Media Essentials for Independent Bicycle Dealers.” This was an appropriate topic because social media is one of the most asked-about topics from dealers. Account managers are frequently asked about content creation, contests, post frequency and much more. The webinar was scheduled for 11 a.m. CDT on Tuesday August 27th, which is a time that was appropriate for all time zones. Best practices ascertained from the literature were incorporated into the webinar planning phase and were used during the execution.

Platform

The platform that was chosen was GoToMeeting. The president of Harvest Retail Marketing was asked why he chose this platform in the pre-webinar interview. His response was:

The system appears to be the most robust and trusted name. They have all of the webinar functionality that we were looking for. And unlike some of the other alternatives, they have the scheduling and registration maintenance built right into the system. I'm not committed to them long term because of the high monthly cost. The software as a service market moves very quickly and I'm keeping an ongoing awareness of the alternatives. I'm very interested in the development of the company Fuze. We also use Join.me for some applications and I'd be surprised if their service offerings don't expand in the next year. Competition is good and I don't feel that our customers will object to us utilizing different software tools over time as long as we are choosing high quality and reliable vendors (R. Atkinson, personal communication, August 8, 2013).

The platform, GoToMeeting, was high quality software and had all of the tools required for this webinar, however due to cost the president is considering changing platforms. When asked during the post-webinar interview if GoToMeeting provided all of the necessary functions, the president said, “Yes. The integrated scheduling feature is very nice and the functionality during the webinar is great, but

the cost is prohibitive” (R. Atkinson, personal communication, October 21, 2013). He went on to say that the cost is too much for the six webinars that are currently planned as part of the Harvest webinar series. He said, “I don't think we can devote the time to doing more webinars to justify the cost.”

Promotion

An email campaign to promote the first webinar in the Harvest Webinar series was created to increase awareness and encourage participation. Three emails were sent to the entire Harvest database of clients that includes 290 people. The first email was sent on August 12, the second on August 19 and the third on August 21. Those who registered received two additional reminder emails. The first was 24 hours before the webinar, and the second was one hour before the webinar. The email campaigns included a short description of what participants could expect to learn during the webinar and a link to register.

Delivery

This researcher, an account manager at Harvest Retail Marketing, delivered the webinar. The presentation was organized around the top five essential topics clients should know about using social media to market to their customers and was free to attend. The webinar was 50 minutes long and included 10 minutes for questions and answers. The presenter shared her contact information with all participants and responded to all follow-up questions during and after the presentation.

The webinar had both synchronous and asynchronous aspects to reach the maximum number of people. The scheduled webinar was synchronous and was used to answer questions in real time and facilitate a discussion with participants. The content of

the webinar was recorded and provided for dealers who were unable to attend at the scheduled time.

The president of Harvest Retail Marketing moderated the webinar. He recorded the presentation, moderated the questions and was on hand in case of any technical problems or unforeseen issues.

Evaluation

A post-webinar survey was sent to participants immediately after the webinar. Only four of the 18 participants completed the survey, so a personal reminder email encouraging participation was later sent, which garnered one additional response. A second post-webinar survey was sent to the entire Harvest database on November 15 to learn more about why the dealers chose to participate or not and how they would like to receive information in the future. This second survey was intended to encourage participation from all dealers, so those who responded to the survey were entered into a drawing to win a batch of homemade cookies of their choice. The special incentive increased participation, with a total number of 13 respondents.

Knowledge gleaned from the first webinar is included in this research and will also be put into effect for the second webinar. This case study on the Harvest webinar series provided insight into how webinars can be effective for communicating information, and it established best and “next” practices to use for improvement.

Results

This case study found that webinars are an effective tool for small marketing firms to use to communicate information. The data gathered from primary research in the

form of two post-webinar surveys shows a high level of interest in future webinars and provides information to use to add to the list of “next” practices for future webinars.

Pre-Webinar Interview

The pre-webinar interview with Harvest Retail Marketing’s President gave insight into why the Harvest webinar series was created and what goals he hoped to accomplish.

When asked what led to the creation of the webinar series, he stated:

Our long-term opportunity is to position our company as an expert consultant, as the premier experts on bicycle retail marketing. If we are simply a service provider then we are vulnerable to customers coming and going, especially customers choosing lower price alternatives. But if we are the experts, then customers have a harder time considering alternatives, and they are less likely to question our pricing. The webinars are a way for us to establish this position while at the same time portray ourselves as partners who are interested in helping our customers improve by becoming more informed (R. Atkinson, personal communication, August 8, 2013).

Atkinson hopes that the Harvest webinar series will help secure better engagement with existing customers and establish new lines of communication with prospective clients. When asked what he hoped to gain by using webinars to communicate with dealers he said:

The webinar is a tool to spread a message quickly to a large group of people in a personal and interactive environment. If we simply release a white paper, then we are putting the message out passively. We are a small company and with a webinar there is an implication that we have a message that a broad audience wants to hear. It reinforces our position as authorities on topics relevant to our services (R. Atkinson, personal communication, August 8, 2013).

The webinar will increase the number of dealers an account manager can communicate with, which makes Harvest Retail Marketing more efficient and provides valuable, high quality content to the dealers. Atkinson had some apprehension about using a relatively new form of communicating with dealers. When asked about it, he said:

My only apprehension comes from a lack of faith in technology and the costs associated with the more robust systems. I love technology, but it inevitably fails at the least convenient time. Hosting a webinar is a very public activity, and if the technology doesn't perform as expected then it reflects poorly on our business. Regarding costs, I am averse to entering into arrangements with companies that put a fixed cost on my monthly expense sheet. A service like the one we are using from Citrix costs \$99 per month for the capability we need. There are less expensive alternatives, but they leave us more prone to technology failure. So obviously with a \$1200 annual investment we need to make sure that the webinar series is ultimately contributing to our sales (R. Atkinson, personal communication, August 8, 2013).

As mentioned previously, Atkinson is considering switching webinar providers. His goal is to find a platform that is less expensive than GoToMeeting but still provides all of the necessary functions. The options he is considering include FuzeBox, WebinarsOnAir, and using Google+ hangouts to host future webinars in the Harvest webinar series. All of these platforms are significantly less expensive and provide all of the necessary functions for a successful webinar.

The final question in the pre-webinar interview was if Atkinson knew of any companies that currently use webinars and if he was aware of their success. He responded:

In our industry there is a company called Leisure Trends that has made huge inroads using webinars. They are the providers of industry performance data and their webinar series has become a must-attend event. Whereas I don't have an inside line on what this has meant for their business, I can say as an observer that they increased their relevance to the market seemingly overnight using this vehicle. Our goals are slightly different, but we are speaking to the same customer base, and they have proven to be thirsty for knowledge (R. Atkinson, personal communication, August 8, 2013).

As Atkinson mentioned, Leisure Trends and Harvest Retail Marketing have a very similar customer base. The success that Leisure Trends has had is a positive sign that dealers will be interested in attending the Harvest webinar series.

Post-Webinar Surveys

Survey 1

Feedback was received from webinar participants in the form of a survey. Out of the 18 participants in the webinar, five completed the post-webinar survey. Sixty percent of survey participants responded that the content, structure, presenter and platform were excellent, 20% said very good and the remaining 20% ranked all of these categories as good.

Please rate the following aspects of the webinar					
	Excellent	Very Good	Good	Fair	Poor
Content	60%	20%	20%		
Structure	60%	20%	20%		
Presenter	60%	20%	20%		
Platform	60%		40%		

Eighty percent of participants had previously participated in webinars, and 80% would like to receive more information via webinars in the future. The one participant who would not like to receive information via webinars was not the same participant that had never participated in a webinar before.

Have you participated in any webinars previously?	
Yes	No
80%	20%

Would you like to receive more information via webinars in the future?	
Yes	No
80%	20%

All participants were either likely or very likely to share the presentation with a colleague or employee. This emphasizes the importance of providing an asynchronous option for interested participants who could not attend.

How likely are you to share this presentation with a colleague or employee?				
Very Likely	Likely	Unsure	Not Likely	Very Unlikely
60%	40%			

Other feedback that was shared through the survey was a suggestion to go more in depth about advertising strategies, content creation and tone recommendations in future webinars. Overall there was no negative feedback, which could be tied to the fact that the presenter used the established best practices to make the webinar run as smoothly as possible.

Survey 2

A second survey was distributed to the Harvest Retail Marketing database of dealers to gauge interest in webinars. Thirteen clients responded to the survey, and all are interested in attending future webinars in the Harvest webinar series. The most significant data gained from this survey is that 69% of respondents would prefer a recorded webinar that they can view anytime compared to 31% who prefer a live webinar presentation to allow for questions and answers.

Which method of viewing a webinar is best for you?	
Scheduled webinar attended live	Recorded webinar viewed anytime
31%	69%

Although all respondents were interested in future webinars, all of them still prefer a personal email as the main form of communication. This information will help Harvest Retail Marketing decide when it is appropriate to communicate on an individual basis compared to a group webinar.

How do you prefer to learn about marketing advancements from Harvest?				
Personal Email	Email Campaign	Phone Call	Webinar	Recorded Video
40%	30%	15%	15%	

A key finding gained from this survey is that 92% of respondents agree that the webinar should be kept to a maximum length of 30 minutes. Harvest Retail Marketing will use the information gained from this survey to adjust the strategy and execution of future webinars.

How long should a webinar last?				
15 Minutes	30 Minutes	60 Minutes	90 Minutes	Other
8%	92%			

Another valuable finding was that most dealers preferred to attend a webinar before work or mid afternoon. This presents a challenge when dealers are located in all U.S. time zones. Nonetheless, this information will be helpful when scheduling future webinars.

When are you most likely to attend a webinar?				
Before work	Lunch Hour	Mid Afternoon	Late Afternoon	After Work
38.5%	7.7%	38.5%	15.3%	

Post-Webinar Interview

The post-webinar interview with Ryan Atkinson also provided helpful feedback. Atkinson felt that the manual process of pressing ‘record’ on the webinar in GoToMeeting left room for human error. The person who was supposed to hit record forgot and therefore the recorded presentation started approximately five minutes after the presenter started talking. This mistake led to a gap in information for asynchronous participants. Other than this error, Atkinson felt that GoToMeeting provided all of the necessary functions, however due to cost, he felt that it is too much to spend for the small number of webinars in the Harvest webinar series. The only additional change that Atkinson identified that needs to take place to improve the next webinar is to be more proactive with invitations. He said, “If we are going to invest the time to generate great content, we need to build a better audience.” Finally, Atkinson thought that the use of webinars is a good way to meet Harvest’s needs to communicate directly with dealers. He said,

It is a good tool to give actual voice to a message in an interactive way for customers. We are currently experimenting with a video to convey a bulk message, but it’s just one-way communication. The webinar is nice for the ability to ask questions of the presenter in real time (R. Atkinson, personal communication, October 21, 2013).

Overall Atkinson was pleased with the performance of the first webinar of the series. Despite a minor human error with the recording function, there were no technical problems, and participants were satisfied with the content they received.

Best Practices

The list of best practices below contains suggestions on how to execute a successful webinar based off of the primary research in this case study. Small marketing firms can use these best practices as well as those previously mentioned, which were found through secondary research.

- 1) Invite a large number of potential attendees through email, social media, blog, website and direct mail.
- 2) Have a backup computer and a printed copy of the presentation available in case technology fails.
- 3) Give a brief introduction of the presenters, the company and the presentation topic at the beginning of the webinar.
- 4) Appeal to all levels of expertise or have segmented webinars to appeal to different ability levels.
- 5) Summarize content at the end of the presentation and send to participants via email.
- 6) Do not go over time; maintain the planned length.
- 7) Send video link of recorded presentation for asynchronous learning. (Harvest send to all registered dealers even if they didn't attend.)
- 8) Ask for feedback from participants; use feedback to improve future webinars.

- 9) Provide contact information and invite participants to follow up with any additional questions after the webinar.

The best practices mentioned in the case study are broad enough to be applied to any topic or field. Small marketing firms can easily apply these best practices to their planning and execution to ensure their webinar is successful.

Next Practices

The first webinar in the Harvest webinar series was a success, but it could have been better. The presenter and president envisioned many more registrations and more feedback from those who participated in order to improve future webinars. Next practices include:

- 1) Create personalized email invitations to attend the webinar.
- 2) Share testimonials from dealers who attend the first webinar.
- 3) Provide one tip as a teaser of what participants can expect to learn during the webinar.
- 4) Provide incentives to attend the webinar and respond to the survey.
- 5) Consider a shorter webinar of about 30 minutes
- 6) Use a webinar platform with an automated recording function.
- 7) Create a digital archive of recorded webinar presentations.

As mentioned above, personalized invitations will likely increase the number of participants because it makes them feel as though it is worth their time since the invitation was specifically for them. Accompanying the invitation should be a teaser of what the participants can expect to learn more about when they attend the webinar. This will increase the number of participants and increase excitement and anticipation for the

webinar. Other ways to increase participation include providing an incentive to attend the webinar and sharing feedback as well as keeping the length to a maximum of thirty minutes to respect the time of the participants. Before the webinar presentation, it is important to choose a platform with automated recording functionality to ensure the webinar is recorded in full and will be useful to asynchronous viewers. Finally, after the webinar is complete, it's very important to ask participants for feedback to improve future webinars, and to create a digital archive of recorded webinar presentations for participants to view at a later time.

Conclusion

Although participation in the webinar and in the post-webinar surveys was far less than desired, this case study will help businesses that have not yet ventured into training through webinars to learn from the Harvest experience. The research and feedback from the post-webinar surveys show that webinars are an effective way to create a two-way conversation between presenters and participants via a web-based platform, as suggested by the Social Presence Theory.

All of the survey respondents said they would share the presentation with a colleague, which makes having an asynchronous option necessary to meet the time-constraints of the dealers. This finding relates back to Media Synchronicity Theory and shows that both synchronous and asynchronous presentations should be provided to participants. The advantages of webinars outweigh the disadvantages, and the best practices outlined in this case study can be used with "next" practices to help companies plan and present successful webinars.

The most important take-away is that far more effort must be put into promoting the webinar, and into encouraging and providing incentives for registration and for feedback. Increasing the effort in all of these aspects of the webinar planning will increase the number of participants and thus the quantity of feedback to help improve future webinars.

The quantitative and qualitative data gathered in this case study add to current research, particularly in the area of first-time use by a small company with a widespread audience and limited resources. More research in this area must be done with larger populations in order to make generalizations that apply to more businesses.

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