Running webinars: Top-tips for stimulating engagement

Resource type: provisional guidance

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The following top-tips are largely drawn on experiences IDS have gathered through activities undertaken as part of the Making All Voices Count programme. Here's what we've learned from this:

1. Preparation is key – they may only last an hour or so but each event requires many hours of planning and preparation. From building the rationale to last minute rehearsing on the day, expect a project duration of several weeks and overall time input of many days.

2. Know your audience – research who the key targets are well in advance so you can time the event to suit, get it in their diaries and understand how to tailor the event to meet their needs as well we the project's. Sending out bios of those who accept can inspire people and lead to better questions.

3. Consider the kind of engagement you need and if you're likely to get it – though you could make a webinar out of many occasions, think carefully and use it sparingly so that you reserve your 'highlights' for the particular audience you have in mind.

4. Not every narrative is 'right for telly' – while the your methodological choices may have very real implications to the statistical significance of your findings, the detail of this may be best kept out of your webinar presentation and instead clearly linked to in a prominent way for those who have niche interests in the area.

5. Imagine yourself in the audience – what things matter to you when you watch other people's webinars? What are you prepared to tolerate but what just looks really amateurish? Watch what other people do, write a collective list and prioritise what you can do about the issues you all find more problematic.

6. Technology problems are inevitable – from batteries running low in radio microphones to momentary breaks in the Internet (or worse) technology creates as many problems as it solves. The challenge is how you pre-prepare for the ones you can predice (and also those you can't) in a way that doesn't put your audience off

7. Going 'Live' is an intense experience – despite best intentions getting everything in place in the few hours and minutes before an event is likely to be stressful and exhausting. Remembering to keep background noises to a minimum (mobiles for instance) is important but easy to forget. The event itself can feel a bit of a blur – reflecting on how it went is best done with at least day or two break to let your mind settle

8. Make contingency plans – it isn't only technology that causes problems, so every person in the team needs to know 'what happens if...', who makes instant decisions and how their actions should adapt. From coughing fits to noises next door, there are an infinite number of potential issues but most of them can be covered with a handful of contingency responses.

9. Simplify the process of audience interaction – the make the most of your connection with an audience try to provide them with the easiest way(s) to have their say. Equally, give webinar

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panellists the maximum amount of time to think about questions before they have to answer (and give them a way to choose what they respond to)

10. Work to a pre-prepared script and stick to an appropriate time – the challenge of keeping to time and on focus is rarely this difficult. Some presenters may struggle to communicate complicated ideas effectively in a matter of minutes so support them to produce a script in advance (not 15 minutes before) and, if necessary, project it up on a screen behind the camera so they aren't reading notes and facing the ground

11. It's a relationship building exercise so…make sure you 'work the room' and connect with the people you really want to hear from and to speak to. Clearly, this goes hand-in-hand with efforts to balance diversity of voice and perspective

12. The relative value of 'real-time' versus post-event engagement – where the webinar output is to be made available online after the event the number of attendees on recording is potentially just a fraction of those who will view it the in months afterwards, and who may engage. Design the event and the process for interaction to maximise the potential value of this. It may make sense to get the recording right and compromise real-time interaction (re-recording is expensive).

13. Experience is the best way to learn – even for those who have the technological knowledge getting experience through 'having a go' is the best way to understand how to deliver successful webinars. Oh, and getting feedback from critical friends in the audience too.

14. It is a team effort – in addition to the people visible to the audience the team is likely to include several other people playing one or more distinct roles, to some extent reminiscent of a television production studio. Web technical support, camera and sound specialists, social media rapporteurs, time-keepers, and floor-managers can all contribute to an event that looks professional and overcomes issues that crop up.

15. There are other approaches to communicating a narrative, interacting with an audience and building relationships in digital spaces – we also produce video-diaries, manage online dialogues, write blogs, construct debate graphs, curate Storifys and draw interactive 'Tiki Toki' timelines.