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Are You Ready to Take Your Event Virtual?

Most publishers have a live onsite event brand and host web seminars. Can the two mix to create a powerful new revenue source? At *Elearning!* Media Group, we have hosted web seminars, virtual and hybrid events since 2008. The answer is "*It depends*."

Definitions

Before evaluating what your next virtual event step may be, let's define some key terms.

Web Conference or Meeting: This is a 1-5 person online conference call with a desktop share or PPT-like presentation. Your sales team probably uses tools like GoToMeeting, or WebEx for these online meetings.

Virtual Classroom: Like a traditional classroom, the virtual classroom has a presenter, white board and/ or desktop share. Students or attendees can be given audio and web cam access. These solutions usually have a low number of seats 25-100 on average. Some allow attendees to breakout into separate groups or rooms. Brands like Adobe Connect and GoToTraining are common.

Virtual Event Environments: These are like web meetings on steroids. Like a traditional event, the virtual event has a conference hall hosting online sessions, networking lounge for chat and meet ups, an Exhibit Hall for booths and attendees to convene and a resource center for white papers, research, articles, etc, for attendees to download.

7 Questions To Ask

Virtual Event Environments have changed a lot. As the web evolves so does the technology. But before jumping into the VLE practice, you should ask yourself some telling questions.

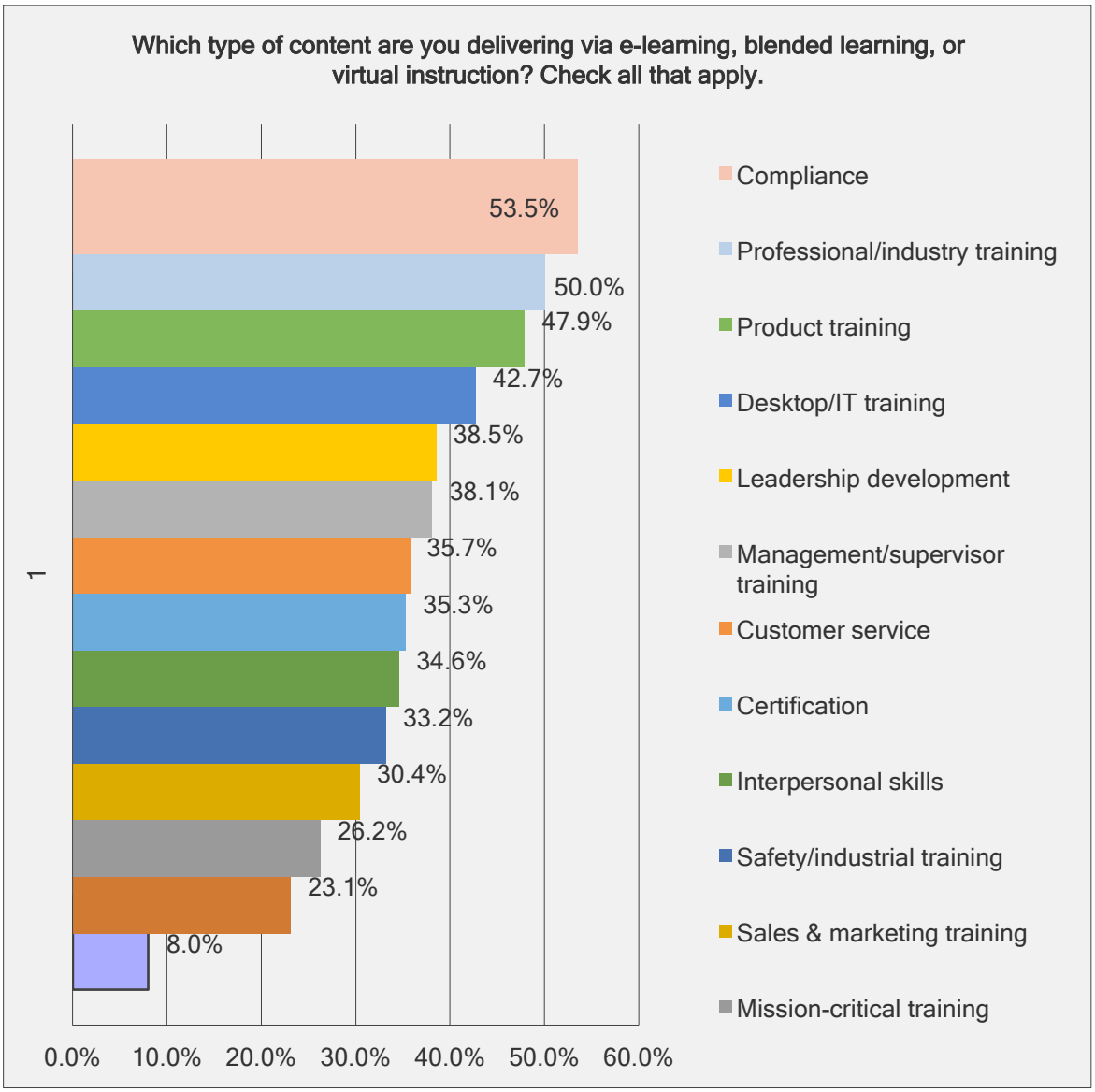
1) **Do you currently host successful web seminars?**
   If no, start your virtual program with a series of web seminars. After you do 6 successful events, then look to grow it. Success should be measured by total attendance, sponsor support and quality of content.

   We host monthly sessions attracting 300-1400 attendees. Post session evaluations are always positive and a great source of future content. We also discovered less than 20% of the attendance overlapped with each other. This was an indication that aggregating our audience in a virtual event was a good idea.

2) **Is your audience ready to go virtual?**
   Believe it or not, not all audiences prefer online to onsite events. Landscaping industry and Physicians are two examples. We queried our audience and found 75% of them wanted to attend our onsite event, but could not due to time or budget constraints. Yet, all 100% said they

would attend a virtual event if given the option and relevant content. Finally, with the pace of change, more content is going online. Just look at YouTube, Instagram, etc. In the learning audience, up to 60% of all training is now conducted via online, e-learning or blended. The top training content delivered is compliance, professional/industry, and product training; all areas publishers excel. (See table 1)

Table 1:



Source: 2015 E-learning User Study www.2elearning.com

3) Do you have the right content to deliver virtually?

To determine what works best with a virtual audience, we looked at the web seminar tracking and the post session evaluations. We found 50-60% of our audience was focused on the basics. Despite doing E-learning 101 type fundamentals, we repeat them every year as the audience

changes about 30% year to year. We look to readership studies for topics or solutions our audience is investing. So, content is pretty simple. But, who will present?

Doing online presentations are very different than onsite. We hosted call for presenters for our virtual events and required them to provide links to past virtual presentations. This was a life-saver. We also had our editors present, but we started small. They would do introductions and Q&A only at first. Then moved to a panelist role for a few. (Sometimes the editors didn't move farther than that.) We also recruited high level thought-leaders to present. This is an opportunity for you to secure an online keynoter that you could not afford for your onsite event. You will be surprised. As word spreads that you are hosting virtual events, speakers will come to you. Of course, sponsors will be first in line.

4) **If you build it, will the sponsors come?**
In 2008, our first event attracted 1122 registered attendees. Our largest event was 2500. Our sponsorship packages started at $2500 to $15,000. We sold booths ($2500), session presentations ($9950) and platinum event sponsorships for $15000. Leads were earned based upon the sponsorship. (Booth got booth leads only, sessions got booth and session leads, and platinum got all the leads.) You can calculate the price of your sponsorships by taking your industry's average cost per lead and multiply it by the number of leads you get for each of these elements. Session leads should come close to web seminar attendance. Some media companies do guaranteed leads for each event, and price based upon the quantity.

5) **Marketing your event**
Like your web seminars or onsite event, attendees registered because of content and marketing. Expect to run print ads, web ads, online promotions and email campaigns to support your event. We also offered sponsors VIP passes to email to their prospects and customers, just like expo hall passes in traditional events. If you get 100 attendees to your web seminar. Don't expect 1000 attendees to your event with 5 sessions. Remember, attendees come because of the content, so make it good and they will register if you market appropriately.

6) **Staffing**
Do you have the team around you to make the virtual event successful? The good news is there are very good virtual event environment vendors in the marketplace. Most have many years of experience and team members to manage your event. I recommend using their full services for your first 1-3 events. Have your team members (editor, event manager, online editor) shadow their team as they build out the first event. Like a physical event, you will assign a team member to session content, another for event marketing and microsite development and maybe a third to build the environment. But, they will not be alone with the proper platform partner.

7) **The Technology**
Before jumping in with both feet, you should attend many virtual events. Experience the differences of the platforms, the navigation, etc. Some solutions are very engaging with live social streams adjacent to the session speakers. Others are like web seminars embedded into a wireframe. Don't be in a hurry to get all the bells and whistles launched. If your audience has

not attended a virtual event within your industry, chances are they will be happy just to login and see the session. Plan to build additional features as you evolve and your audience with you.

Since 2008, we have used numerous virtual event partners. Currently, INXPO is our vendor and a Best of *Elearning!* winner. InterCall is a platform partner we have used as well as Sonic Foundry, Adobe Connect and Cisco WebEx. There are lots of options but take it slow.

Results

Virtual Learning Events are very popular with both sponsors and attendees. Here are comments from prior event participates with *Elearning!* Media Group.

Attendees:

"*With the economy the way it's going, we are looking to strengthen our virtual knowledge in many areas, as well as improving our use of technology*," —J. Morlan, Eaton

"*This is my first online virtual conference. I pulled others into my office to take a look at the interface and options--very impressive! I plan to attend future summits."* —S. D'Aurora, Wright-Patt Credit Union

"*Don't you love it! This is a really good way to get people engaged. I 'walked' around the lounge and 'talked' to people."* —M. Krug, NOAA, Department of Commerce.

"*First time at a virtual event. WOW! I'm getting the hang of it. It is cost effective and a great concept."* —S. Clemens, Kaiser Permanente

Sponsors Feedback:

"*We had more than 150 live demonstrations going on in our booth over the day…and many new customers as a result of our participation. We love the platform and would like to leverage it in other ways."* —Dave Pitcher, Clarix Technologies (Adobe reseller)

"*We had three sales representatives working the virtual booth simultaneously, from across the country. Before the end of the event day, we had several sales prospects…which could result in a 10 fold return on our initial investment."* —Todd Nelson, formerly Blackboard Inc.

"*We connected with five new serious prospects during the live day…a very good outcome for our first event*." —Wendy Ruano, OnePlanet.

"*As a platinum sponsor, we secured over 1500 leads from our participation. This was a great number of leads for our sales team to work."* —Mark Sharp, formerly Atlantic Link Global

Learn More

There are lots of resources to learn more about virtual events. *Elearning*! Media Group has numerous session online on best practices, as well as prior events on-demand you may access at www.2elearning.com . Our next event is The Virtual Learning Summit on November 4th, 2015.

The theme is Creating Great Learning Experiences….Virtually. Executives from World Bank, INXPO, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and others share their best practices, how-to advice and case studies. We invite you to join us. Learn more at: http://bit.ly/1NDgm99

About the Author

Catherine Upton is Group Publisher, Elearning! Media Group, and CEO, B2B Media Company, LLC. She has been in the learning and workplace technology industry since 1999. In 2004, she joined B2B Media Company to run Elearning! Media Group. The industry is a robust $220 Billion marketplace served by 13 Elearning! Media Group brands.

Prior to joining B2B Media, Catherine was a director at Advanstar and publisher at Bobit. She serves on the WPA Board and the Federal Government Distance Learning Association Board. She has an MBA from Chapman University and a BA in Business Administration from CSU Fullerton. To contact her, email cupton@b2bmediaco.com or call 888-201-2841 x842.