



Webinars 2.0

More Than Just Lead Generation

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Executive Summary

The webinar (live, web-based seminar) has well established its value to marketers as an application to generate qualified leads, launch products or services, and provide training. However, a new paradigm is replacing this one-to-many “broadcast” approach that has been the standard of the early stages of webinar adoption. Just as today’s “Web 2.0” technologies support the immediacy and two-way give-and-take typical of conversations, webinars likewise include sophisticated capabilities that support two-way interaction.

As a result, webinars now offer a far wider range of applications for businesses—particularly as a means of reaching out to and nurturing relationships with existing customers. This new application of webinars offers companies the opportunity to cement customer loyalty, and uncover new avenues for serving customers.

The American Marketing Association for example is a professional association that is unique in its use of webinars. To the AMA, webinars are a means of delivering its primary service value to its membership: supporting the flow of expertise between marketers, and nurturing a professional community with a common interest and purpose. This reframing of the webinar model offers potential to any business that wishes to enrich its relationship with its customers.

The question for businesses selling products in the traditional sense then is: How might marketers use webinars to promote conversations and sharing of information with their most valued community members—their customers?



The New World of Interactive Marketing

Thomas Friedman's influential book *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century* (2005) underscores how the emergence of the Internet, with its easy accessibility to information and low cost-of-entry, has been a great equalizer between competing companies and even nations, letting small upstarts successfully take on entrenched rivals. Competition is more acute, innovation more intense, product life cycles shorter.

For marketers, the Web has not only changed the dynamic between the firm and its competitors, but has also had a profound impact on customer expectations. Just as the Web enables companies to have better information about the actions and claims of their competitors, it also allows consumers to have better information about the range of choices available to them from competing firms. As a result, consumers are better informed, and have higher expectations of both the products and services offered than ever before. Never has it been so important for businesses to provide value to customers than today.

This evolution of the marketplace is mirrored in the evolution of techniques used by marketers to reach their audiences. As noted by Nancy Costopoulos, Chief Marketing Officer of the American Marketing Association, the shotgun approach used in the past to push messages at broadly-defined target markets is being replaced by *permissions*-based marketing. Now, the consumer decides whether to participate with the marketer at all; and the marketing process becomes more akin to an ongoing, two-way conversation between marketer and customer.

Bridging the gap between seller and potential buyer has always been an essential marketing task. Today, the same phenomenon can be seen in the emergence of "Web 2.0" technologies that enable two-way, peer relationships over the Internet. These include social networks, collaborative "wiki" applications, and Web meetings and webinars. For businesses, the challenge is to harness the value of these technologies, using them to foster customer relationships that can be leveraged into a sustainable business advantage.



The American Marketing Association: Creating Beneficial Relationships

In its six-plus decades, the American Marketing Association (AMA) has been the leading source for information, knowledge sharing, and development in the Marketing profession. In addition to advancing the practice of Marketing, the AMA is likewise a marketer, seeking to build and provide value to its membership—which today exceeds 38,000 worldwide. In today's Web 2.0 world, the AMA provides an interesting study of a marketer that has long succeeded by placing the relationship with its constituencies front and center.

One important perspective from the AMA is that the college classroom is no longer the primary venue to learn the art and science of Marketing: things are simply changing too fast. As new technologies make their mark on our society—the personal computer, the Internet, mobile devices, Google marketing strategy and techniques invariably evolve to keep pace. The heart of the AMA's service offering then is to offer ongoing professional development that is up-to-date, relevant and useful to its members, but that also suits the requirements of their hectic schedules and workplace demands.

While publications, conferences and seminars have long been primary vehicles for interaction with its membership, the last decade has seen the Internet emerge as a major venue for providing service to the AMA's market. In addition to making publications and case studies available over the Internet, the AMA also has adopted chats and listserv technologies, and has taken great strides in creating online communities among its members. By taking part in AMA Special Interest Groups (or "SIGs" as they are called), members foster beneficial online relationships with peers, sharing ideas, knowledge and experiences. For Marketing practitioners, the AMA offers nine different SIGs, covering real-world topics like Marketing Strategy and Planning, Non-Profit Marketing, Business-to-Business, Brand Management, and so on. The academic community can choose from 18 different SIGs, generally of a more theoretical bent: Marketing and Society, Marketing and Entrepreneurship, Global Marketing, Consumer Behavior, Marketing Research, Marketing Communications, and a dozen more.

So for the AMA, the Internet has become a potent tool for communicating and delivering value to its target markets.



And as business travel bottomed in 2001, the Web took on a much greater significance in the continuation of these SIGs: the organization found that it could successfully continue its mission of bringing AMA members and marketers together with industry thought leaders, by offering webinars. While its on-site conferences remain core offerings, the AMA's calendar now also includes six to eight webinars per month, each with attendance ranging from hundreds to thousands.

In selecting WebEx Event Center as its official webinar platform, the AMA discovered a number of capabilities that provide for outstanding interaction with its attendees.

- The “Share, Don’t Tell” format of webinars creates better interest and involvement in the event.
- Attendee profile information from advance registration can be shared with speakers, for use in preparing the presentation.
- Audience polling features allow instant feedback that could be used to tailor content to the audience’s interests and experience level.
- The ability to include multiple presenters, from different locations
- Chat and Q&A provide attendees the ability to ask the expert, or interact directly with the speakers; these valuable exchanges are also archived in the event data files.
- Attendees can be channeled to surveys or other weblinks, which allow for the capture or delivery of additional information, beyond the timeframe of the webinar itself.

The AMA has found great value in recording each webinar, complete with all visual content and audio, for hosting on the their website (MarketingPower.com). This allows members who missed the actual event to still gain value from it on-demand. At the same time, this on-demand content can be repurposed, for lead generation and inclusion in other programs. The event’s speakers or content providers also benefit, by using the on-demand content for their own purposes.

The AMA’s use of webinars is unique in some important ways. For example:

Breaking down the barrier between customer and prospect

While it is most common for webinars to target new customer prospects, the AMA challenges this approach by offering its webinars to both AMA members and prospects. Also, content presenters are not AMA staff members, but rather fellow



members of the marketing community—and this peer-to-peer communication between member and prospect further turns the common webinar “lead capture” paradigm on its head.

Beyond lead generation: The care and feeding of a community

And while the AMA does indeed hope to convert prospects into members via its webinar program, its primary purpose is to play the role of host, providing a venue for its attendees to benefit from each other. Much of the uniqueness of the AMA’s approach to webinars is a factor of its educational mission; its purpose is not to sell products, but to elevate the practice of marketing. As a professional association, the idea of creating and *nurturing a community*—of fostering beneficial conversations among like-minded members—is central to its mission.

The AMA’s leverage of the webinar platform opens up some compelling issues, with significant implications for marketers. How can webinars help companies to more effectively reach out to their customers after the sale, fostering conversations that provide mutual value to both the customers and the company itself? And, how might businesses improve their marketing results by leveraging interaction between customers and prospects within their webinar programs?

These questions go to the heart of the Web 2.0 phenomenon. So, before we provide answers to these questions, it is important to do a quick overview of the interactive features built into WebEx webinars, which enable and support rich, two-way interaction between company and customer.



The Webinar Platform: More Than a Presentation

Built on the foundation of the online meeting, the webinar is optimized as a platform for communicating with larger groups, from dozens to as many as 35,000 or more at one time. WebEx Event Center—the “killer app” for group presentations—is used extensively throughout the business world to capture new prospects into the sales pipeline. Developed in response to the needs of today’s marketers, the platform includes a rich set of features in support of its use as an intelligent marketing tool, which go far beyond the most basic notion of providing an “online podium and projection screen” for a presenter to address a large group. It is useful to explore these added-value features, and their implications for marketers seeking to find better and more effective ways of reaching their target markets.

Important *pre-event* elements of the webinar platform are the ability to actively cultivate attendance among a target audience, and to profile and qualify attendees via a customizable registration tool. In lead generation applications, each registrant is scored based on their responses, and these scores are used to prioritize leads for post-event follow-up. In applications that are more focused on gaining information rather than capturing leads, like the AMA events, responses can be used to code attendees—for example, to differentiate communications before and after the event. Design of the registration pages is simple to accomplish, and templates can be created so, for events like the AMA’s, a standard data set is captured against each registrant, without the need for constant customization.

Automated email management is another feature of WebEx Event Center that the AMA uses, both to generate interest in the event, and then to help drive follow-through attendance among registrants via reminders. For example, those who pre-register for an upcoming webinar are sent a reminder as the date nears, and then a final alert one hour before the start time, with a clickable link embedded. This feature also leverages calendaring applications (Microsoft Outlook™, Lotus Notes™), to assure the best chance of actual attendance at the event.

WebEx Event Center has a rich set of functionalities that optimize communication and interaction *during* the event. Because the actual presentation that the attendee sees mirrors the screen of a host’s PC, content can literally be any application or media supported on the host system. A



PowerPoint® presentation is used in almost every AMA webinar, though any number of rich-media applications such as html pages, Flash animations, streaming video, and proprietary software can all be used effectively to engage an audience.

While most lead-generation uses of webinars are built primarily on a host-to-audience communication model, two-way interaction—where the audience has a voice in the proceedings—has always been an important feature of WebEx Event Center. The AMA for example leverages polling and Q&A functionalities to get feedback during every live webinar. In addition to posing questions to the presenters, these features can also be used in a variety of ways by marketers to capture quantitative measures of audience responses. This could be either in reaction to material or ideas presented during the session, or inherent attitudes regarding, say—brand positioning.

Other, freeform means for an audience to register feedback during an event are also available. With integrated chat and the ability to pose a question or register a comment with the event host, webinars offer marketers a means of capturing qualitative input. “White board” features allow the host to dynamically integrate new insights and build consensus, much as would take place in a typical conference room brainstorm session. Importantly, webinars allow both quantitative as well as the more free-form, insight-based “qualitative” input from the audience to be documented and compiled, for decision support, concept generation, or any other marketing purpose.

Given the richness of the tools available to interact with webinar audiences, the AMA finds it beneficial to rely on WebEx Event Assist services, which provide an expert WebEx producer to help manage the events. This is particularly important in the case of very large webinar events, where thousands of attendees may be in attendance.

The interaction isn't over when the event is finished. *Post-event* features allow the AMA to follow-up with non-attendees, and communicate over the longer term with registrants/attendees, whether to continue the conversation, or provide key materials from the event. Integration of webinar registration, attendance and subsequent interactions into CRM systems also allows tracking and analysis over time. And by hosting recordings of webinars on a Web site, the AMA can repurpose the content for additional programs and new members who were not able to attend.



The New Toolkit—Using Webinars to Support Customer Communities

In considering ways of enriching customer relationships through community-building, it makes sense to look at methods that companies are already using to reach this goal—and then consider how webinars might be used as a more effective alternative. For example, three common vehicles that companies already use to work with their existing customers include preferred customer programs, customer advisory groups, and user conferences. How might these be enhanced using webinar technology?

The *Preferred Customer Program* is generally a kind of frequent-buyer's club where the marketer's goal is to increase loyalty and bring customers back for repeat purchases or additional services. This type of program can be enhanced in a number of ways using webinars. For example, the online brokerage firm can offer a slate of special "platinum member" webinars to target customers, where special attention is lavished upon these investors, useful topics are covered, new investment vehicles are introduced, internal contacts are introduced, and so on. Webinars offer a rich array of opportunities for truly offering value to the target customer, while being a very cost-effective alternative to achieving the same results using physical seminars, or even regional investor centers. At the same time, the webinar format can be used to capture important insights and feedback from customers, which helps the company to refine its messaging or service offering to its broader customer base.

The *Customer Advisory Group* is a marketing program with an inverse goal. Rather than seeking to propagate habitual customer behavior, typically the goal of the customer advisory group is to *align the marketer's behavior with the needs of the customers*. Keeping decision-makers in sync with realities of the customer is a constant concern, and is especially important in growing companies where executives might become far removed from the customer. This can be an acute problem where the company is serving a technical market, such as surgical equipment, and the daily experience of the customer is foreign to the typical person working in the company. Even non-technical companies can face this issue, which is why a very large national restaurant chain requires all managers to



actually work in a restaurant at some point during the year.

The webinar can be an effective means of reaching and learning from customers in these contexts. Importantly, the webinar offers excellent targeting and screening ability, to zero in on a particular region or customer segment, and capture rich customer detail in advance of the event. The flow of the webinar can be designed to elicit a range of feedback, both quantifiable responses to survey questions, as well as free-form input using chat or Q&A tools. And what might be one of its most compelling advantages is the ability for any member of the company to experience the customers' thoughts and issues through the on-demand recording, hosted on the company intranet.

A third application is the use of webinars as a means of supporting a *User Conference*. The most common purpose of the user conference is to help ensure that the customer is getting optimal value from the company's product. The user conference is very common in the world of computer software, but can be a useful strategy in any situation where significant skill is attained through experience using the product.

As in the other applications discussed, webinars offer a wide range of opportunities to support user conferences. The most important aspect of the user conference is the delivery of expertise and knowledge—and in that, the user conference most closely resembles the AMA model. The focus is predominantly on user techniques, though content can address any topic of value to an audience. Also, it is very common in user conferences to have customers with strong experience lead the presentations.

Webinar capabilities like audience polling and instant feedback provide a means for checking the learning levels of the attendees, and determining needs for future education. The ability of webinars to support multiple speakers, and virtually any kind of presentation are clearly well-suited to a user conference venue. Automated email follow-up can help assess how much the training has impacted actual user performance in the field.

In addition, the use of webinars as an alternative to the physical user conference can result in tremendous cost savings, especially when compared to flying a large contingent from the company to a hotel for multiple days. In fact, WebEx Communications has chosen to move the entirety of its user conference program to a webinar model, as the value for cost ROI has proven unbeatable.



These three use cases represent only some of the ways companies can use webinars to engage in conversations and foster stronger relationships with their customers to improve their business results. Using the example of the American Marketing Association, organizations may find that webinars offer untold opportunities to support value-based conversation between the firm and its clients. Richly interactive technology has already evolved in the webinar platform, and will no doubt continue to evolve as marketers explore new avenues for reaching out to their markets, and creating sustainable advantage in a business world that is more fractious and competitive than ever.

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