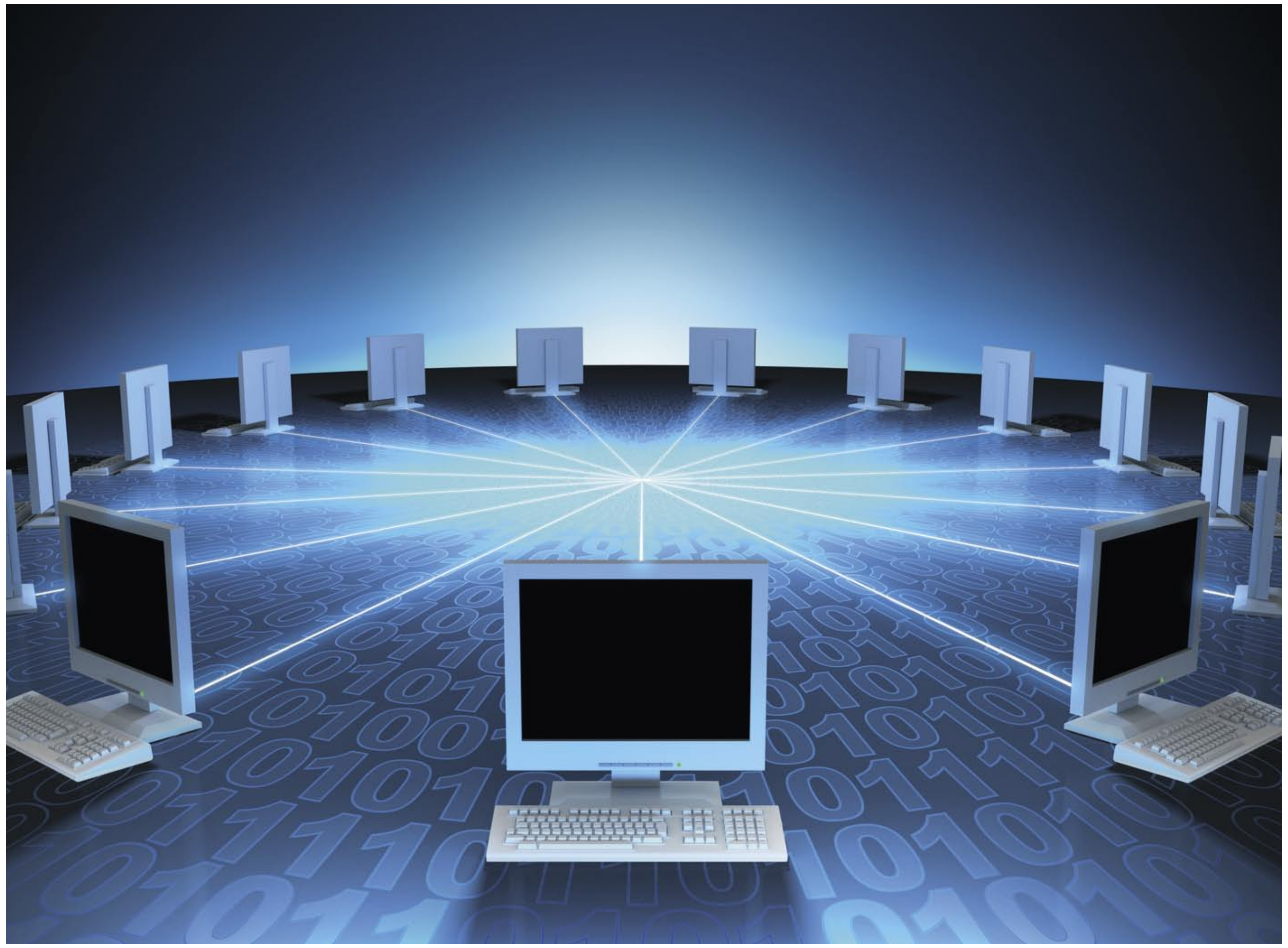
P4 OPINION

Winning webinars

Communicating interactively with customers and staff through internet seminars



Pharmaceutical companies still depend on major congresses as one of the key channels for communication to their target customers. The pace of research and frequently condensed launch paths mean that these channels have to be worked harder to satisfy corporate commercial objectives. However, a recent survey of opinion leaders showed that they had to be more selective about which international congresses they attended. Many stated that they were finding it difficult to gain the funding or time away from their units to attend more than one major meeting per year.

Bearing this in mind, the advances in communication in Web 2.0, can help marketers expand the impact of their marketing activities and data dissemination around congresses and meetings without dramatically increasing the cost. Other industry sectors realise that 'webinars' can be a company's most cost effective customer interaction tool. Pharma needs to catch up and start to look at 'Return on Webinar' (RoW) as a new measure.

Webinars can be an effective tactic for positioning a company as a valued and credible information source and facilitating direct interaction with the best-informed clinical specialists. They create dialogue and allow customers to get to know you and your products better and in an appropriate manner with scientific balance and integrity. A webinar gone awry, however, can have the opposite effect, so it is not a project that should be quickly thrown together. Time must be taken to plan and prepare properly, beginning with the following essentials.

Compelling content

We all know that content is king and you will have carefully crafted the programme to meet your objectives and those of the audience you'd like to reach. You will be seeking to ensure that they realise that you understand their problems and potentially offer a solution. Accordingly, the content should be relevant, useful, engaging, and focused on the audience's interests or concerns. There has been a rapid technological advance in recent years that has exposed the limitations of traditional PowerPoint presentations. Using state-of-the-art systems such as *i*Engage, it is easy to create interesting case studies and fully interactive presentations without the need to involve programmers or technical experts. This non-linear, flexible presentation approach is fully integrated with voting capability and also captures all the voting data for later analysis.

Captivating speakers

Your faculty needs true expertise in the therapy area and must be credible in the eyes of the audience. For the largest draw and to gain the greatest RoW, speakers must have an established reputation – real therapy area experts and influencers. You may also consider having a panel discussion as part of the session. Another option is to incorporate pre-recorded video interviews into the content. The key, however, is to edit well and to use one of the faculty as a moderator who can ensure the webinar remains interactive for the participants.

Leading-edge technology

When looking for a partner agency, consider whether it has the team in-house to deliver the service and whether it offers any specific features that will increase the RoW without taking up too much bandwidth.

Ensure that you archive the webinar after the event, as this will allow attendees to revisit the content and also increase the exposure to those who were invited but unable to attend the original event. Ensure the webinar can be replayed via a web browser but also burned on to CD/DVD or downloaded to a personal digital assistant (PDA) or other mobile device, such as a smart phone.

Convenient timing

If you have choice over when to hold the webinar, keep the audience's schedule in mind when setting the date. For example, it is best to plan for the middle of the week, as Mondays and Fridays tend to be busy and could yield lower attendance numbers.

Time of day is another consideration. Lunchtime is often the easiest hour to make time away from work, but if the audience is spread among different time zones, try to pick a time that suits all.

Advance promotion

This step is often forgotten, but it is essential to ensure maximum RoW. Start promoting the webinar up to six weeks in advance to give attendees a chance to plan, but not enough time to forget. Use web channels such as email, banner ads, e-newsletters or even Twitter to keep the event at the forefront of their minds.

To maximise attendance, include an 'add this event to my calendar' feature to the web registration page. Include a short video from the chairman outlining the aims of the session. You should also always confirm registration by email and, as one final reminder, send another email out a day or two before the event with a rundown of all the important information that participants may require.

Make use of your affiliates and encourage your speakers to publicise the event in their own circles.

User experience

It is important to give the user a positive experience. The following steps should help achieve this:

1. Make it interactive

No one wants a one-way conversation. In this Web 2.0 era you need a way to keep the audience engaged. This is obtained by using programs which produce a level of interactivity only conventionally seen in more complex systems. The result is a seamless presentation incorporating interactive voting and instant access to resources such as video, graphics, scans, and other vital audience engagement tools.

2. Ensure good flow

Limit your webinar, including the question and answer session, to a maximum of 90 minutes and remember that attendees have probably made time to attend the event, so it's important to keep to the agenda and respect the expectations established at the time of registration.

3. Leave nothing to chance

Poor execution and technical difficulties can easily lower user confidence and cause attendees to drop off early. Before the event date, take time to test the technology and rehearse the entire webinar at least once – and do so at least 24 hours ahead of time so that there will be time to make any last-minute adjustments. Ensure that there is back-up built into the system so that even with major technical failure there is an alternative in place.

4. Follow-up

The webinar is merely the first step to getting the most RoW from an event. Afterwards, it is important to continue to develop those relationships in support of your original goals. This is where Web 2.0 tools come into their own and, by creating a dedicated channel linked into the registration site, it is possible to keep the dialogue going indefinitely.

It is always desirable to request immediate feedback from the audience and learn how attendees felt about the event and whether they still have questions or require additional information. Make sure that you thank your attendees and send a follow-up email to everyone who attends to thank them for participating and offer supplemental information that they may find useful; this will further establish your company as a trusted industry resource.

It can also be useful to ask the speakers to resolve unanswered questions later, and send them out to attendees as bonus material. Provide ongoing accessibility and allow attendees to revisit the content, and enable new users to view it for the first time, by archiving the recorded broadcast on your site. Make it known that the webinar is still available on demand by including that info in your thank you note to attendees, and by emailing the link to no-shows and new prospects.

5. Measure performance

Of course, the real barometer of success will come through the cold, hard numbers, so decide in advance what you want to achieve; for example, webinar registrations, attendance, leads, sales, whitepaper downloads.Then put the metrics in place to measure your performance against those goals. This measure of RoW should be easy to demonstrate and early adopters will gain a huge advantage over competitors who are ignoring the power offered by Web 2.0 tools.

The best way to achieve the highest RoW is to be curious and learn all you can about the potential of these new tools. Web 2.0 tools facilitate communication and secure information-sharing and collaboration between companies and their customers. Pharma has never been more empowered to communicate with and understand its customers. Is your company ready?

The Authors

Alex Monaghan is director of client services at Wells Healthcare Communications, www.wellshealthcare.com. To comment email pme@pmlive.com.