



What's new with **WEBCASTING?**

Webcasting as a tool in the event production kit has come of age in the last couple of years. The advent of 4G remote connections for cameras and audio, high bandwidth web connections in venues and fast internet at home and in the office mean that high quality results are within the grasp of any would-be users of webcasting. It's not just the maturity of the technology, either, it's also the quality of audience engagement. Webcasts have evolved from the dull, static 'let's all watch a video together' presentations of the last decade into dynamic, interactive platforms, delivering multiple types of content at once. They're now immersive, inspiring, and a pleasure to participate in.



Interact and engage

If you are contemplating webcasting, what is the secret to developing a good webcast? It is making your remote audience feel engaged and connected. There are a myriad of ways to achieve this. Today's webcasts are built in their own customised HTML designed 'skin' that can be populated with not only the event or brand's graphics, but multiple video, chat and social media widgets. This means that a remote viewer feels as if they are looking at an extension of the hosts' website and can interact in real-time with the event.

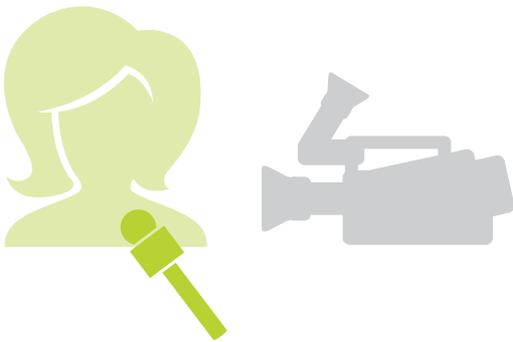
With a social media feed such as Twitter built into a webcast, participants can comment on the content and see feeds from other attendees, both remote and at the event, that are using the same hashtag. Regular Twitter users will be more than familiar with the phenomenon of major event hashtags trending in the top ten when large conferences are running. Proprietary widgets such as Chatroll enable a live chat feed for the event participants only, meaning a web viewer can ask a question of a presenter and have it answered in real time. It's this kind of personal connection that has made webcast events so much more appealing for attendees who can't make it to the physical event.



I'm ready for my close-up

All of the action that occurs at a live event can now be seamlessly presented via the web. For speakers presenting content, a video window carries a live feed of their presence on stage while another video window carries the content of their presentation. Complex video presentations can include cutaways to audience members during Q&A, or just for reaction. Mobile cameras operating via 4G uplink make this possible, along with a dedicated video director calling the shots.

The mobile camera and audio capability adds a lot of fun options to a webcast. We all love the glitz and glam of a red carpet, so why not add one to your event? As attendees arrive, roving hosts can carry out red carpet interviews with the VIPs and luminaries of your industry. Capturing this kind of content is another way to build deep engagement with your audience. Anything you can do to make the webcast experience as close to (or even better than) being there helps your message get further and stay longer with your customer.



Evolution of a revolution

The market demand that drove the evolution of webcasting was the need to communicate with an audience that could not physically attend an event. This demand was particularly strong from large corporate AGMs, where communicating to shareholders and the market was an economic imperative. This concept of a virtual extension or "live broadcast" of a real-life event is what defined the parameters of webcasting for most of the last decade. Most event producers or organisers still think of a webcast in this fashion, and might consider it an extravagance for an organisation that doesn't have a global reach. The truth is, there are now a lot of compelling reasons to webcast beyond the obvious limitations of seating in your venue or geographic location.

When an event is webcast, it becomes a detailed, multi-dimensional record of your event. Think of it as a video with multiple screens, audience participation, text of interactions, evidence of engagement and user-generated content. A webcast after the event can be hosted on your own website and made available for consumption on-demand by anyone who missed out on attending. This ensures that the content that was so lovingly created keeps working for you long after the big show. People watching a webcast after the fact can still interact with your organisation via email contact built into the interface, providing a way to ask questions and have them answered. It may not be in real time, but it certainly gets you a customer interaction that you would have otherwise missed.



It's in the can

All content captured during a webcast can be edited and repurposed. This means you've just created a rich mine of video content to deploy according to your marketing strategy. Every organisation is currently trying to produce high-quality, engaging video content because it's compelling, efficient and the future of communication on the web. It's a struggle for most organisations to do this as they usually don't have the staff, the experience or the technology. If you're already putting your company's best face on at a public event and have professionals on hand to create the video and interactivity, it's a sensible investment to add a webcast component and keep the event as an asset.

If you're running an annual event, your asset becomes even more valuable. Content from previous years can be used to market the upcoming event. Email blasts to your database with video highlights will remind repeat customers why they came last time and how much they enjoyed it. Examples of content in 'teaser' form pushed to potential customers will entice them to find out what it's like to attend. This grows attendance at both the next live and webcast event.



You're in charge now

The technological advances within the webcast space have caused a shift in power away from traditional media. If you run an event that you believe has a broad audience (an industry awards night, for example) and would draw a viewership on television, you may have approached a free-to-air or cable broadcaster to cover it. It's very common for them to decline. There are now several major music and entertainment awards that traditional media don't think are sellable to their advertisers, so everybody else's chances of having a 'bankable' event aren't looking too good. The good news is, we don't need them anymore.

Your event can now hit a targeted market, as large or small as it needs to be, globally, and in perpetuity. You can decide if the content is free or must be paid for. You can even sell advertising embedded into your webcast which can change over time according to the amount of impressions per message. Everyone is now a broadcaster with only their imagination and ability to impress the market limiting your audience growth.

Getting it right

With the compelling business case for webcasting and the huge range of ways to present to a virtual audience, how do you ensure that your webcast will be technically flawless and engaging to an audience? The key is in lots of preparation, on both the part of the content provider (the organisation hosting the event) and the technicians responsible for delivering the goods.

For the organiser, it's simple stuff that has always applied. Are your presenters engaging? Are they rehearsed? Have you checked all the presenters graphic and video content for quality, formatting and functionality? If you're going to create a detailed interactive record of an event, it's inviting disaster to let any unrehearsed or unchecked piece of content go live on a stage. It's become a cliché, and no-one wants to see another presenter trying to run a video from PowerPoint or Keynote fumbling about awkwardly while saying "It was working in the office." Same goes for any externally linked web content – make sure you have a functioning internet connection. Again, sounds basic, but it's amazing how many people go in unprepared and are disappointed with the result.

Ready to go live

There are a lot of telling technical questions you can ask your webcast provider to put your mind at rest. Have they webcast from this venue before? Are they using a wired connection to the web, and if so, have they organised bandwidth to be reserved with the venue's IT staff and their internet service provider? It's always good to see some previous examples of their work, which they should be able to show you still being used on their customer's websites.

Make sure that the webcast includes Adaptive Bitrate Streaming. It's the intelligence in the web stream that sees the device you are viewing the webcast on and how much bandwidth you have, then automatically adapts the stream to run as smoothly as possible. This means any annoying pauses or 'buffering' should be eliminated. This technology is more important than ever now people are regularly consuming content on tablets and smartphones as well as PCs and Macs.



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