

How to Conduct a Successful Web-Based Presentation

By Angela DeFinis



Web-based presentation and meeting tools, such as LIVE Meeting, Webex, and GoToMeeting, have been transforming the business world. No longer do business professionals have to crisscross the country meeting every client, user group, and colleague face-to-face.

Today, with just a few clicks of the keyboard, business professionals can interact with any number of people to demo products, conduct business presentations, and answer questions in real time. Additionally, because there's no travel involved and the presenter stays in the office or works remotely from home, companies see a significant cost savings and increase in productivity.

However, as with any tool, there are disadvantages involved. When asked what they don't like about delivering web-based presentations, most presenters cite the following:

“Conducting a successful web-based presentation is possible. The key is to know the rules and tools that will enable you to accomplish your goals.”

- Keeping the audience involved is difficult. People don't have to pay attention. And if they don't pay attention, they won't fully understand what you're demonstrating, which can lead to lost opportunities or confused listeners.
- For live web demos, the audience can't see you and you can't see them. You can't "read" the cues the audience is sending and can't tell if they're engaged. The silence is often deafening and can lead to speaker anxiety.
- Regardless of the format, it's a challenge for the speaker to maintain high energy. You are sitting alone in a room with a computer. There is no energy coming from the audience to feed you. This one-way communication can lead to a low energy environment.

But the presenter isn't the only one who faces challenges. When attending a web-based presentation, audiences must endure a multitude of frustrations too, such as:

- Having to listen to a low-key speaker who provides little spark and energy
- Trying to keep up with and understand presenters who speak too fast
- Listening to speakers "read" a script and not making an effort to engage them
- Trying to decipher a message that is dense and disorganized

So what can you do to overcome the inherent challenges of giving a web presentation? How can you keep your audience engaged so they get the most out of your presentation, learn about your product, and feel motivated enough to take action? Your goal is to sound and look like an expert, have respect for every audience, and show credibility and professionalism while keeping control of people you can't see. That's a tall order! And it's just the kind of unwieldy situation that challenges



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many businesspeople and makes them wish for the “good old days” of face-to-face meetings.

Fortunately, conducting a successful web-based presentation is possible. The key is to know the rules and tools that will enable you to accomplish your goals.

The Model for Success

While we’re using the term “web-based presentation” loosely here, realize that for the purposes of this article, the term “web-based presentation” is an umbrella for all the various types of web presentations that take place. These include:

- The **live meeting format**, where the audience watches the presenter demo a product or software program or show a PowerPoint presentation on his or her screen, and hears the presenter’s voice—both in real time. Typically, the audience does not see the presenter.
- The **recorded demo**, where both the visual demonstration and the talking presentation are recorded. This may or may not include a video feed of the presenter.
- The **hybrid format**, where the recorded demo is running automatically and in the bottom corner of the screen the presenter is doing the voice over in real time. In this scenario, the audience not only hears the presenter but also sees him or her.

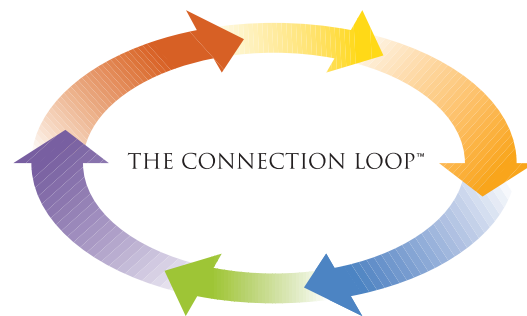
“Two key elements ensure that the audience stays engaged. The first is the speaker’s content, and the second is the speaker’s performance.”

Make the Connection

No matter what the format, presenters often say that if they can make it through the first few minutes of a web-based presentation, they feel as though they’ve made it over the biggest hump. They feel that they’ve captured the audience’s attention, and they settle in and relax. But then as the presentation goes on, something else occurs: Their initial confidence begins to fade, and they feel as though they are losing the audience. The energy level drops because they hear nothing but silence in response to their words. They start to feel that they’re simply talking

to themselves. They become dependent on reading their script without paying attention to their delivery. The lack of audience response can make them uncomfortable and anxious.

That’s why it’s important to continually strive to keep your audience engaged. We call it keeping them “in the loop.” The DeFinis Communications’ core learning model, called The Connection Loop, is designed to help presenters organize and deliver successful presentations to both face-to-face and web-based audiences.



Two key elements ensure that the audience stays engaged. The first is the speaker’s content, and the second is the speaker’s performance. Understanding and building these key elements is a critical part of any presentation’s success. It will help you take control of both your content and delivery so you can overcome the discomfort caused by the silence you face in web-based presentations. Let’s start by looking at content development.

Content is King

The DeFinis Navigator is a content design tool that gives you a formula for “what” is being delivered. It provides a method for organizing your message and helps you and your listeners stay on track. By organizing the sections of your talk into distinct parts, the information you share is easier for the audience to follow and digest. But this structure is not only a benefit for the audience. It is also helpful for the speaker. It’s the cure for the “I can’t keep my thoughts straight” challenge.

Let’s take a look at how to structure your content. The DeFinis Navigator has a few fundamental components. The first is audience analysis. Once you know your audience, then you can begin to organize your content into three categories: The Opening, The Body, and The Close.

Analyze Your Audience

The first step is to *analyze* who is in your audience so you understand more about their needs. Think through questions like: “How many are familiar with my subject? How many equal or surpass my expertise? What do they need from me?” These types of questions will provide a guideline for creating your content.

Once you have analyzed your audience, then you can begin to structure your message with The Opening, The Body, and The Close.

The Opening

We all know that the presentation can be won or lost in the first few minutes. This is especially true in a web presentation. Your intent is to gain immediate attention, provide an outline of the agenda, and establish your credibility. This will keep your audience engaged from the start! The opening has four parts: The hook, the introduction, the purpose, and the agenda. Each one of these plays an important role in setting the stage for your presentation.

The Body

The body of your presentation consists of 70 percent of your talk. So it’s important to have a method for organizing all that information; otherwise, it may be overwhelming for you and the audience. You want to make sure that you have no more than three to five main points.

Each main point must be supported by a series of “Touch Points.” These can include stories, anecdotes, analogies, quotes, rhetorical questions, examples, technical information, directions, comparison and contrast, facts, statistics, charts, graphs, visuals—and humor. The point is to “touch” your audience intellectually and emotionally throughout your presentation. The more you are able to expand your use of these resources, the greater your ability to persuade and engage.

The “Value Point” is the benefit your main point supplies for your audience. “Value Points” connect the audience to your message and provide a link back to the overall purpose. They also answer the important question on the mind of every audience member: “How will this information help me better understand and solve my problem?”

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The Close

A strong close recaps the core purpose of your presentation and reclaims lost audience attention. The close is your final opportunity to persuade your point of view and to make your call to action. An effective close has four key elements: The summary, the Q&A, the thank you, and a final thought.

Transitions

Transitions are important for keeping you and your audience on course and are especially important in web presentations. Take the time to craft your transitions and memorize them. Transitions are the super glue that keeps the message together. If you have developed and memorized your transitions, you will always know where you are going. Even in the worst of circumstances, you’ll be able to stay on track.

Encourage Involvement

Now that you’ve taken the time to develop your content, the next step is to maintain everyone’s attention. Since participants know you can’t see them, they are likely to multi-task while they’re involved in the presentation. Sometimes the multi-tasking is business related, such as checking email or finishing a report, but usually the multi-tasking will be more distracting in nature, such as online shopping or checking sports scores—things they would never dream of doing if you were face-to-face.

One of the main reasons why people tune out during a web-based presentation is because they don’t know what to expect. They may feel that what you’re saying doesn’t directly apply to them, or they may believe that you’re going off track from the agenda simply because they don’t know the agenda. That’s why it’s important that you take some steps in your planning phase to make sure everyone’s in alignment with the presentation’s goals and objectives.

As part of your preparation, it's important to include a brief discussion of ground rules in your opening and give people directions. These could include time expectations, any directions or instructions you want the audience to follow, and question asking protocol (if doing a live web-based presentation).

Finally, use some humor early on to gain people's attention. Light-hearted statements said with a smile in your voice, such as "If you log off early you'll get a virus" or "If you minimize the meeting screen your hard drive will crash," can take the edge off and gently remind people that they will miss important information about your product or service if they don't focus on the agenda at hand.

Say It with Style

Now that you have your content structured, organized, and developed, let's look at the second part of The Connection Loop—your delivery

Web-based presentations are perhaps the most difficult of all to do because your audience cannot see you—and you can't see them. Because you have almost no feedback to rely on, it is nearly impossible to "read" the audience and adjust your presentation accordingly. When doing any type of web-based presentation that does not include a live image feed of yourself, you can't use your physical delivery skills—eye contact, facial expressions, posture, gestures, and movement—to help keep your audience in The Connection Loop. You must instead rely solely on your voice and words to help you stay connected, keep your web audience energized, and transfer your knowledge with greater power and passion.

Let's start by looking at your voice and language skills. We call them Vocal Resonance and Distinctive Language.

VOCAL RESONANCE

Vocal Resonance is your ability to make a sound in such a way that your audience clearly hears it, understands it, and is drawn in by it. Your voice is an important channel for information transfer. Your knowledge, enthusiasm, passion, and commitment come across to the audience through your voice. When it comes to Vocal Resonance, focusing on three key areas is essential:

- **Vocal Clarity** is the ease with which a listener can understand what you are saying. Nothing is more frustrating for a web audience than listening to a

presenter and barely understanding every third or fourth word because of a soft voice, mumbling, or poor pronunciation. Participants in your web-based presentation don't want to work that hard! The skills that help you achieve vocal clarity include volume, enunciation, and pronunciation.

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- **Vocal Variety** is the interest you generate in your listeners when you produce changes in various vocal characteristics, such as your rate of speech and pitch. You express your attitude toward your topic (and your audience) when you use vocal variety to express the range and depth of your emotion. You can sound at different times excited, enthusiastic, serious, and knowledgeable just by varying your tone of voice. The skills that help you achieve vocal variety include rate of speech and pitch.
- **Vocal Emphasis** is the way in which you accent syllables, words, and silence to stress importance and to give meaning to your sentences. You achieve vocal emphasis when you use proper inflection and strategic pauses. Using these skills helps the audience to understand what you think is important and meaningful about your message.

DISTINCTIVE LANGUAGE

When you employ Distinctive Language skills, the actual words, phrases, and sentences you use must do more than merely inform; they must inspire and motivate your listener to take action. When you present your ideas via a web-based presentation, your vocabulary and language choices can do a lot to support your success. For effective verbal delivery, your language must be distinctive and contain the following three elements:

1. **Concise sentences:** Researchers have learned that fifty percent of adults have difficulty understanding a spoken sentence longer than thirteen words. After word eleven, a third forget the beginning of the sentence. After word eighteen, only fifteen percent of people understand anything! Keep your sentences short, between eight and thirteen words.

- 2. Audience Focused:** Use language that is appropriate to the topic, the audience, and the situation. Engineers like technical language, finance people like numbers, executives like language that expresses the bottom line. Match your language to your audience.
- 3. Powerful words and phrases:** Select and use powerful words to make your point. Words like “strong,” “belief,” “benefit,” “action,” and “focus,” to name just a few, show passion. Flavor your presentation with the most powerful word in the English language—YOU.

Additionally, avoid the following three common language challenges.

- 1. Non-words:** Whatever you do, don’t let your use of non-words, such as “um,” “ah,” and “andah” pollute your presentation! If you do have a tendency to use non-words in everyday speech, your first step is to become aware of when and how often you use them. Then begin to substitute a strategic pause for any non-word usage. You can also use shorter sentences, a slower rate of speech, conscious breathing, or a smile to help you control these distracting sounds.
- 2. Distracting Words and Phrases:** Polished presenters use few, if any, of the following filler words: “like,” “really,” “you know,” “I mean,” “basically,” “in terms of,” “so,” and “actually.”
- 3. Slang:** Avoid contemporary slang, which could weaken your credibility. Phrases such as “you guys,” “folks,” and “awesome” are fine to use in everyday conversation, but carefully consider your audience before using them during your presentation.

Look as Good as You Sound

With all that said, does this mean you don’t use physical presentations skills at all? No. You obviously use them if you have a live video feed of yourself. Even if you are doing a recorded presentation or a voice feed only, research tells us that if you “act” the part of giving a live presentation—that is, act like you have people in front of you in a room—your energy will increase and you will project greater clarity, power and passion. Therefore, consider the following points:

- **Stand up tall and erect, use gestures, smile, raise your eyebrows, and move.** If you want to go all the way, bring a few photos of family or friends into your office, set them up strategically around the room, and make eye contact with them. This is not a joke. If you look at someone or something—even though no one can really see you—you will transfer more passion,

energy, and excitement, and show greater interest in your topic. Additionally, the moment you stand up, you open up your diaphragm, breath deeper, and are able to project your voice with more force and power. This alone will make you more commanding and energetic on the phone. One great way to enhance your physical presence is to use a stand up desk. These are desks designed taller so you can stand, rather than sit, behind them.

- **Your appearance matters.** When doing a web-based presentation that has a video feed of you to the audience, dress appropriately and professionally, as you would for a live face-to-face presentation. To avoid slouching over your desk as you present, a stand up desk or a portable lightweight tabletop desk are ideal. Ultimately, no matter how knowledgeable you are on the topic, people will judge you based on what they see. Disheveled hair, clothing that is too casual, and a slouching posture give a negative impression to your audience. Remember that your appearance counts. If you look professional, you represent yourself and your company well.

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- **Use gestures sparingly.** When doing a live video presentation, be careful of using your hand gestures in a way that blocks your face or is distracting. Live web demos are a lot like live TV interviews. You are speaking with just your head, shoulders, and upper body visible, so keep your torso still and don’t wave your hands and arms in front of your face. Use your facial expressions and your voice to show your enthusiasm, not your wildly excited hand movement.
- **Get rid of distractions.** If you do web-based presentations from your home, distractions are inevitable. Dogs bark, kids run into the room, the doorbell rings . . . these are just some of the challenges presenters face. However, with some proper planning, you can minimize the distractions so you can maintain your professionalism. First, make sure any background that appears in the video feed is clean and organized. The last thing you want is a messy office or bedroom to distract your audience. If your children are young and

don't understand that you need quiet time, get them involved in an activity they enjoy before you start your presentation, or hire a babysitter to keep them occupied. Keep pets safe in another part of the house with plenty of food, water, and toys. Remember, just because you're used to your kids or a pet running in and out of your office doesn't mean your audience will tolerate the distraction too.

Ultimately, your audience expects a high level of professionalism from you. This includes having a professional voice and vocal skills, as well as a professional appearance and neat environment. People do judge you by how you look and sound. If either your voice or appearance doesn't match your listeners' expectations, they'll think you and your company are second-rate.

Even more important is to understand that your competition is upping the ante already. They're taking their web-based presentations to the next level. If you don't follow suit, you'll be left behind.

Special Considerations for Each Web-Based Presentation Format

Each web-based presentation format has its own unique nuances. The following guidelines will help you further enhance your presenting style so you can effectively connect with your audience, educate your listeners, and achieve success in every web-based presentation you give.

LIVE WEB-BASED PRESENTATIONS

- People are generally more forgiving of little errors and imperfections during a live presentation, but that doesn't mean you don't prepare or present yourself as polished as possible.
- Schedule your live web-based presentation when the greatest number of people can attend. If your audience is geographically dispersed, plan to run the webinar in the mid-afternoon. That way, people from a greater number of time zones can attend.
- Experience has shown mid-week days (Tuesdays, Wednesdays, or Thursdays) are generally best. People are not just starting or ending their week.
- Conduct surveys before and after. This gives you unique insight into your audience. As people exit the web demo, ask them a short series of follow-up questions. For example: What did you like most about this presentation? How likely are you to integrate this new tool or feature? Would you like further training?

What else would you like from us? Would you like any additional information?

- Arrive at your computer at least 15 minutes early to get logged in and do a final test to make sure the technology is working, and do one final review of the tools/features to be used.
- An interactive web demo will naturally be more successful than a static one where attendees just listen (or get tired of listening and leave).
- Q&A sessions, surveys, and other interactive activities can mean the difference between an unproductive demo and one that prompts audience members to take action.

RECORDED WEB-BASED PRESENTATIONS

- People are often more critical of a recorded presentation. They expect recorded presentations to be professional . . . and perfect.
- Recording your demo gives you the opportunity to make sure everything in the presentation is up to the standards you want to present to the world. Therefore, if something doesn't look or feel quite right, take the time to redo it.
- Keep these short. People have much shorter attention spans when watching a recording. They are more easily distracted and unwilling to put up with "filler material."
- Whereas one-hour live web-based presentations are common, most experts say that a 15-minute recording is the maximum for large audience retention and comprehension. Even better, keep your recorded presentations to two to five minutes.
- When creating your script, use a content planning tool like the DeFinis Navigator to help you write and prepare your formal script. If you're going to read your script verbatim, test it out before recording so that it sounds conversational. Listening is different than reading, and web audiences want to hear script content and delivery that is natural and conversational. One technique is to give the presentation aloud and record it as a first draft, and then use that recording as the raw material to write the final script. Scripts are tricky—they must be well written and delivered naturally to keep you and your audience in the loop.
- Sometimes people simply record a live presentation and then make that available as a recorded demo. That's a mistake. Live presentations often have a looser feel than recorded ones, and they have more audience interaction. That difference in style and audience interaction can be frustrating when someone is trying to quickly get the topic points on a recording.

- If you *must* archive a live event, take the time to clean it up before going public. Balance audio levels, remove introductory comments on how to use the live console, edit out pauses for poll responses, etc. Yes, it's tedious work, but it results in something that reflects better on you as a presenter and your company as professionals.

HYBRID FORMAT FOR WEB-BASED PRESENTATIONS

- Create an outline and script. Since the demo is running automatically with only your voice or voice and image being broadcast live, many presenters think they can “wing it” and follow along rather than organize and script their presentation. A script is the number one step to guarantee focus and to ensure that you stay in step with the running demo.
- If there's a video feed of yourself, dress in solid colors; stripes tend to transfer poorly through a webcam, creating blurring lines.
- If you want your facial features to stand out clearly and not be washed-out by lighting, make-up is typically encouraged. It is also ideal to make sure that your hair is pulled back, so your face is seen and there are no distractions when you present.
- Smile! People who smile look more relaxed, and are more likable and believable than those who don't.
- If possible, have two computers logged into the demo feed. If your computer freezes or you have technical problems as you're presenting, you can quickly jump to the other computer and pick up where you left off.
- Keep gestures to a minimum. You don't want your hands moving in front of your face causing distraction from the demo video running on the screen.



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DeFinis Communications, Inc.

Founded in 1997 by Angela DeFinis, DeFinis Communications, Inc. offers a full range of professional public speaking programs, products, and services. We support leading corporations in developing effective communications strategies and all aspects of presentation skill and speaker development. Our offerings include presentation skills programs, speaker coaching, media training, leadership integration programs, corporate events, and keynotes. By building knowledge and skill, accelerating performance, and providing tools for continuous learning, we help our clients successfully compete in a demanding marketplace.

General Telephone and Microphone Tips

- If your phone has an ear bud or mic input, use it. That way your hands are freed up, you don't fade in and out or make extra distracting noise when you move the phone around, and you're less likely to accidentally hang up in the middle of your most important point by pressing a button with your cheek.
- No cell phones! The sound quality isn't as clear as a landline phone.
- If you're using the microphone on your computer, test it beforehand to make sure it works.
- If possible, get a high-quality microphone. There's no need to spend thousands of dollars on a studio-quality microphone, but if you do many web-based presentations a week, you might benefit from a better mic. Try one of the newer USB-equipped large diaphragm condenser microphones on the market right now. Or, purchase a basic podcasting system, complete with mic and soundboard.
- Make sure you're not too close to the mic (you'll sound distorted) or too far away from the mic (you'll create an echo).
- Don't move your head around! You don't want your voice to fade in and out.

Make the Most of Any Meeting

Conducting web-based presentations and meetings can be a successful and rewarding experience...as long as you employ the suggestions mentioned. By taking the time to establish a meaningful connection with your audience, and fostering that connection throughout the entire web-based presentation, you'll receive greater audience involvement, increased meeting productivity, and more results from your efforts. When it comes to presenting with web-based collaboration tools, a little planning and foresight go a long way to meaningful results.

