The Internet and emerging technologies provide dynamic opportunities to deliver information, promote discussion, and create and maintain connections around the world or across the hall. The webinar is a tool increasingly used by businesses, professional organizations, and educators to share information anywhere, anytime, through various Internet-capable devices.

The term "webinar" refers to a type of conferencing that involves a Web-based seminar delivered over the Internet. The broadcast can be one-way, from the speaker to the audience, or two-way, with the participants able to interact with the presenter(s) or other participants via audio or text. Presenters may speak over standard telephone lines or use Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) technology. In a two-way audio webinar, participants may use either the telephone or VoIP.

Have you attended a webinar? Are you considering hosting a webinar? In this article we share information about the benefits, considerations, and tips for success based on our research and experience hosting webinars.

How to Host a Successful Webinar

By Roberta L. Humphrey, CPA; Christy S. LeGrand; and Deborah F. Beard, CMA

The Benefits Are Many

Once you've acquired the initial hardware and software, a webinar can be a cost-effective and efficient way to build credibility for your products or services, train employees and communicate with them, provide continuing education, and gather and share information on emerging issues. In our current economy, everyone strives to save money. Webinars can cut costs and improve services to your employees, customers, vendors, and colleagues. Travel time and expenses can be eliminated or reduced significantly. (A more complete list of benefits appears in Table 1.)

Does your Human Resources team need to let your staff know about a new procedure for, say, filing their flex-spending claims? Webinars can provide that information right away, right to each employee's computer, much more quickly than trying to plan a physical meeting. This can be done in one location or over multiple offices simultaneously—almost anywhere there's Internet service—with minimal disruption to employees' daily activities.

Many webinars are essentially "static" in nature: Information is delivered with no response expected (like the typical offsite, company-wide meeting). But the technology really comes alive when a presenter uses it to encourage interaction and active participation. For instance, the attendees could be asked to answer poll questions or allowed to ask questions of management anonymously. This type of communication can be used to gain insight into customer (and employee) needs and deliver better products and services while enhancing the presenter's credibility. As a bonus, the webinar can be recorded and shared later on.

Our Experience in Holding Webinars

Our webinar experience comes from offering them through the Douglas C. Greene Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship (CIE) at Southeast Missouri State University in Cape Girardeau. The CIE is the economic outreach arm of the University that services clients in 24 counties covering nearly 15,000 square miles, with the goal of helping small businesses start and grow. With funding from the U.S. Department of Labor and the Small Business Administration, the CIE is experimenting with various "distance training methods" to provide education and training opportunities for business owners and aspiring entrepreneurs. (For more information about the CIE, visit www.semo.edu/cie.)

To better connect with our clients and to reach more of

Table 1: Benefits of Holding a Webinar

◆ Provides timely information and discussion

◆ Improves access to knowledge and skills development

◆ Gathers and shares trends and best practices

◆ Provides efficient and cost-effective programming

◆ Encourages attendee interaction and participation

◆ Enhances customer service and credibility

◆ Captures and stores events in accessible archives

◆ Minimizes travel time and cost while reaching a wide geographic region

them, we decided to add webinars to our toolbox. We began by offering our webinars to a small group of businesses already familiar with our services. We started with one-hour, noontime sessions on three consecutive Wednesdays.

After receiving positive feedback, we have successfully hosted dozens more educational webinars and have used this tool to conduct meetings, deliver certification training, and even sell products. One of the most successful webinars we recently facilitated involved free Google resources for businesses. It covered various topics, including creating a Google Places page (now Google+ Business, which allows for a Web listing of the business independent of a website), Google Analytics (which provides feedback and statistics on website visits), Website Optimizer (which allows you to test alternate versions of your website for effectiveness), Google apps (Calendar, Gmail, Docs), and Google AdSense (where Google places ads on your website and pays you when visitors click on them). Our lead business counselor, a former small business owner, constructed the webinar content in approximately four hours by researching Internet information

Table 2: Some Leading Webinar Providers

PROVIDER	WEB ADDRESS	FREE TRIAL	ADVERTISED PLANS (PRICES AS OF MARCH 2013)
WebEx	www.webex.com	14 days for meetings of up to three attendees	• One host per location, maximum eight attendees, unlimited meetings: $24/month • Up to nine hosts, maximum 25 attendees, unlimited meetings: $49/month per host or $468/year per host • Up to nine hosts, maximum 100 attendees, unlimited meetings: $89/month per host or $828/year per host
GoToWebinar	www.gotomeeting.com/fec/webinar	30 days	• Maximum 100 attendees: $99/month or $948/year • Maximum 500 attendees: $399/month or $3,828/year • Maximum 1,000 attendees: $499/month or $4,788/year
GoToTraining	www.gotomeeting.com/fec/training/online_training	30 days	• Maximum 25 attendees: $149/month or $1,428/year • Maximum 200 attendees: $349/month or $3,348/year
DyKnow	www.dyknow.com	None advertised	• Customized quotes offered
Blackboard (formerly Elluminate)	www.blackboard.com/Platforms/Collaborate/Overview.aspx	30 days	• Web conferencing for 50-400 attendees with a customizable moderator (customized quotes offered) • Personal Web conferencing with a fixed moderator; unlimited live online sessions, maximum 100 attendees (customized quotes offered)
iLinc	www.ilinc.com	15 days	• Customized quotes offered
Adobe Connect	www.adobe.com/products/adobeconnect.html	30 days	• Maximum 500 attendees: $0.32/minute • Up to nine hosts, maximum 25 attendees, unlimited meetings: $55/month per host or $540/year per host with annual commitment

and using his own prior experience. Webinar participants were surprised and very pleased with how much they could do for free with Google.

Selecting a Service Provider

A webinar's content is only half the equation. The second half involves hardware, software, and technical support for hosting. When we began, our university Information Systems department didn't have any available software or software agreements for hosting a webinar. They suggested checking into some of the key Web-conferencing players in the market that might fit our needs, including WebEx, GoToWebinar, DyKnow, Elluminate (now part of Blackboard), and iLinc.
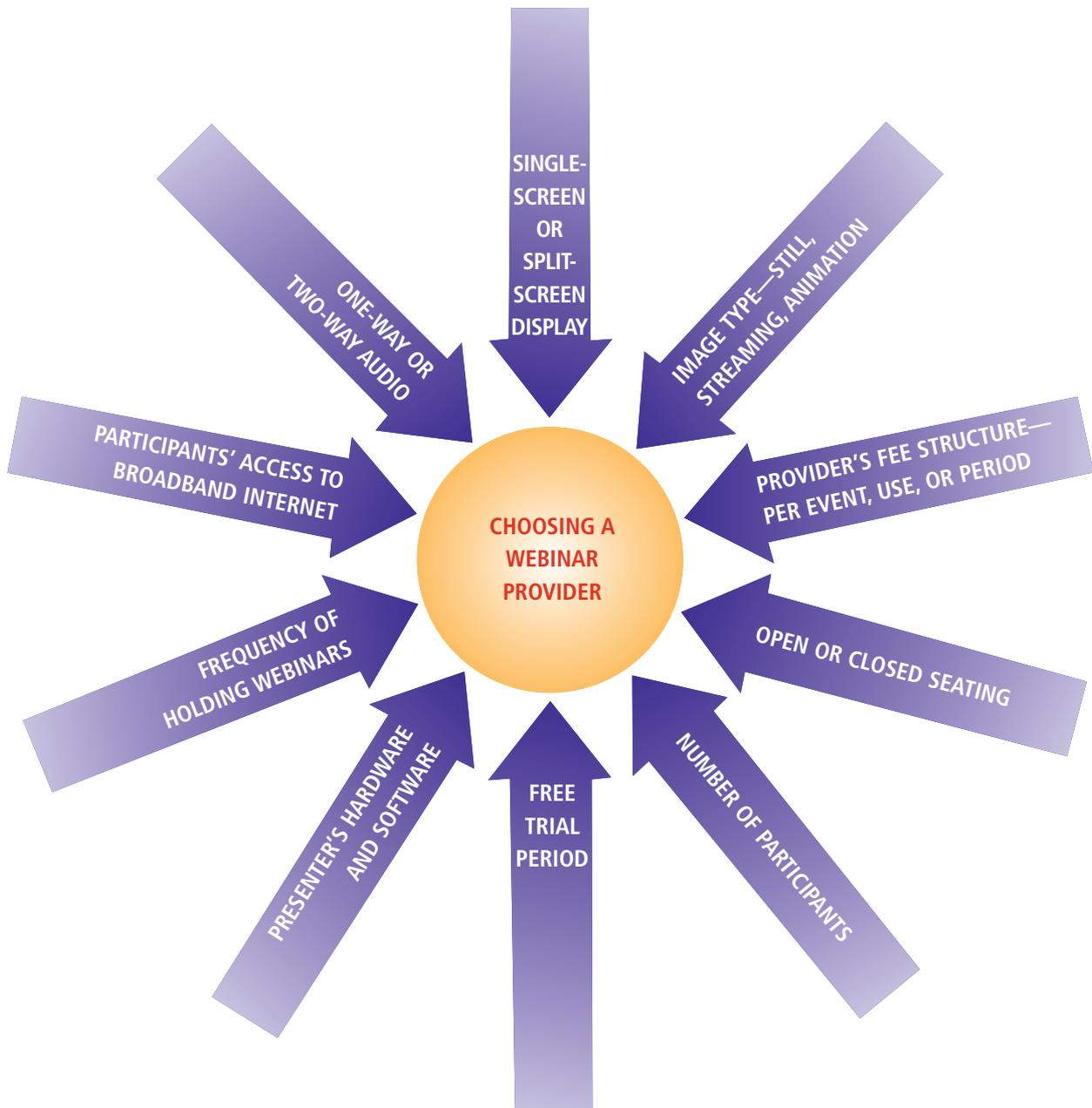
To get started, we initially used GoToWebinar on a trial basis. But later on, after asking ourselves several questions and doing our homework, we adopted Adobe Connect as our webinar provider. You, too, may find that Adobe Con-

nect fits your needs, or you may want to go with someone else. For help in this regard, we listed the providers we researched—including their Web address, available free trial period, and advertised plans—in Table 2. You can find additional smaller providers of webinar hosting at www.webinarbase.com/top-webinar-software-providers.

With a large number of providers available, your organization will need to consider several factors when selecting one, including the expected number of audience participants, frequency of the webinars, services offered by the provider, various audio and video technical considerations, trial-period availability, fee structure, and participant registration requirements. Other factors to think about are in Figure 1.

The number of expected attendees is an especially significant factor in choosing a webinar provider. Some offer one service for a small number of attendees, while others can accommodate larger groups. For example, there's a maxi-

Figure 1: Factors to Consider in Choosing a Webinar Provider

SINGLE-SCREEN OR SPLIT-SCREEN DISPLAY

ONE-WAY OR TWO-WAY AUDIO

IMAGE TYPE—STILL, STREAMING, ANIMATION

PARTICIPANTS' ACCESS TO BROADBAND INTERNET

PROVIDER'S FEE STRUCTURE— PER EVENT, USE, OR PERIOD

CHOOSING A WEBINAR PROVIDER

FREQUENCY OF HOLDING WEBINARS

OPEN OR CLOSED SEATING

PRESENTER'S HARDWARE AND SOFTWARE

FREE TRIAL PERIOD

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS

mum of 25 attendees for Citrix's GoToMeeting and a maximum of 1,000 attendees for ITS more expensive product, GoToWebinar. Some products seem tailored for the business market (such as WebEx and GoToMeeting), and others seem to be intended for use primarily for distance education applications (such as Blackboard and iLinc).

The Look and Sound

You have several options for audio and video. First, you need to determine if one-way audio from the presenter to the attendees is sufficient, or does the presentation

require two-way audio so the speaker and the attendees can converse? Not surprisingly, one-way audio is the least complicated to accomplish, and all providers appear to offer it. Participants receive the audio feed over the Internet and hear it through their computer's speakers. With one-way audio, return communication may take the form of typed questions, answering a poll, or, in some systems, by an electronic "show of hands." Depending on the system, the way this works is that the participant can click a button to respond to a poll question or send a message to the speaker.

We found that our audience needed more hands-on examples and interaction with the instructor when dealing with numbers.
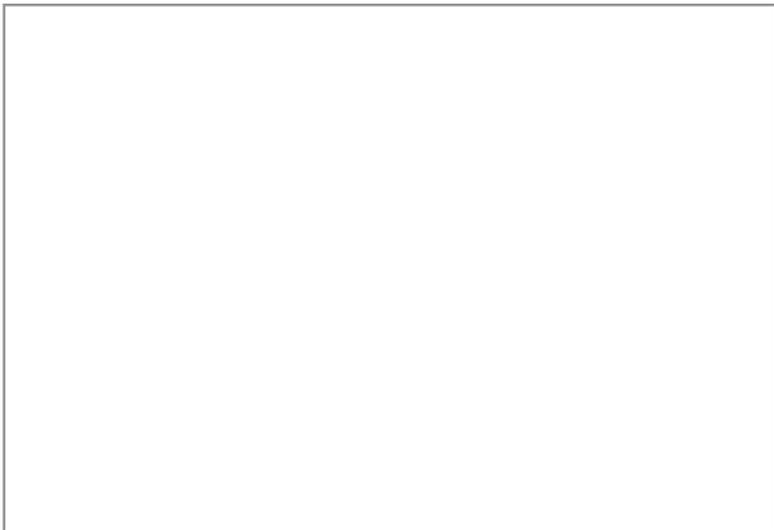
Two-way audio requires a bit more thought and possibly additional expense. One manner of implementing this is to have the audio transmitted to and from attendees by an Internet-based VoIP conference call phone system. While this is usually included free or at a relatively low cost, sometimes the connection and audio aren't as clear or as reliable as a landline phone call. Also, some VoIP systems have a resulting delay for the audio program, making a conversation or even a monologue awkward. Another choice is to conduct the video portion online and have the two-way audio carried by a standard telephone conference call. Some webinar providers offer a toll-free number for attendees and pass the additional cost of this along to the subscriber.

There are choices to make on the video side as well. Will the presentation consist of still images (such as PowerPoint slides), computer animation (that may be embedded in your PowerPoint slides), or streaming (live, real-time) or recorded video through the computers? Some lower-cost providers have practical limits that discourage the use of video and even dissuade use of simple slide animation. On the other end of the spectrum, some of the more robust solutions are optimized to incorporate full streaming of live, real-time or recorded video. We reworked our PowerPoint presentations, removing animation, and made things as simple as possible. That just seemed to work best for us given the type of generally low-tech content we typically use.

Another video consideration is whether you need a single screen or a split screen that allows two different visuals to be viewed at the same time. For example, in a split-screen presentation, one side could be a still image while the other side streams video. Naturally, the webinar provider's fee increases as the broadcast configuration becomes more complex.

All of the providers we explored suggested broadband (such as cable or DSL) Internet access; in fact, some video choices may explicitly require broadband Internet access. If your webinar participants are in a rural area where broadband Internet isn't available, you may be limited on which video formats and providers you can use.

Kicking the Tires

When selecting a webinar provider, be sure to investigate and understand its hardware requirements. All of the systems we considered were compatible with PC-based computers, and most also operate with Mac-based machines.

The ability to archive the webinars and to pretest the provider's services are important considerations. For instance, all the providers we explored offered the ability to record webinars at no added charge. Most had a free trial period, too, from 14 to 30 days. But be sure to obtain an explicit explanation of the free trial period. In our case, we thought we had 30 days, while we actually had only until the end of the month during which the trial started.

In our investigation we found that some vendors require the participants' IP addresses be registered with the vendor in order to take part in the webinar, referred to as the specified-attendees option. The specified-attendees option seems to be associated with more fully featured providers who target the online academic or continuing education markets. Other webinar vendors allow open seating, which means anyone can participate and different participants can take part in each webinar. If you're conducting webinars for the public at large or for a group that could be changing (such as the staff of a large company),

the specified-attendees option may be a significant cost consideration. Because we offered classes to a group that had some, but not complete, overlap for every session, we limited our choice to solutions with open seating.

Since cost is an obvious factor, be sure to inquire about and understand all options available, and don't buy more features than you really need. As you can see in Table 2, most webinar providers charge a monthly fee. Several have discounts, though, up to 20% off for a 12-month agreement. For those of you who want to dip a toe into the webinar water before making a full commitment, Adobe Connect offers a pay-per-use feature with no contract. That might be a worthwhile first step.

Additional Considerations

In webinar broadcasts without a physical telephone, our presenters preferred a headset initially. A headset microphone is optimized to pick up only nearby sounds and is much less likely to pick up ambient or background noises or voices. The headset also leaves both hands free. Nevertheless, things got complicated for us when there was more than one presenter.

The reason? Most computers have only one audio card, even though there are multiple USB ports in each computer. Having only one audio card means only one USB headset can be connected at a time. Each presenter needs a headset, which means each person needs a computer with its own Internet connection. This may limit which rooms are available for broadcasting. In our offices, most rooms don't have multiple Internet connections. Stringing long Ethernet cables from adjoining offices is possible but not safe: Someone may trip on the cable, hurting themselves or destroying the cable or the Ethernet port.

A safer, cleaner way to link multiple computers in a room with only one Internet connection is to use a wireless network. Our wireless access was spotty and far too unreliable for a webinar. As wireless technology improves, however, this may become a better option. The initial webinar provider we used strongly discouraged the use of a wireless network because of the potential for service interruptions.

For our first webinars, we broadcasted from a room with only one Internet connection, using a headset with a microphone. There were multiple presenters, so they passed around that single headset. Obviously, this isn't ideal if you plan to have a lot of interactivity between presenters.

An alternative to headsets is a stand or handheld microphone. We found that a "multi-pattern USB con-

Table 3: Lessons Learned and Tips for Success

◆ Keep content simple, meaningful, and learnable in a short period of time

◆ Encourage presenter/participant interaction

◆ Have technical support and a backup plan readily available

◆ Provide resources for additional study or reference

◆ Archive the presentation, and make it accessible

◆ Offer some takeaway tips

◆ Seek and use feedback

denser microphone" on a stand works well. This configuration allows multiple presenters to use the same microphone and control the direction from which sound is picked up. Our stand microphone delivers crystal-clear sound quality to our webinar participants. It's always wise, however, to run sound tests before you begin the webinar.

For our most recent webinars, we employed a single computer attached to a stand microphone and had no headsets. The same computer is connected to our electronic interactive whiteboard so that all of the presenters can easily see the live broadcast and any content on the screen. We continue to use one-way audio, from the presenters to the participants, but the participants are able to type in questions for the presenters, which are then delivered via the webinar software.

Lessons Learned

One of the lessons we learned, which is listed in Table 3, was to keep topics simple. With our use of one-way

audio, gauging audience comprehension was difficult with no visual or auditory feedback. In addition, we've learned that the topics shouldn't be too theoretical or mathematical (granted, not always easy when it comes to some of the issues management accountants and other financial professionals must deal with). We found that our audience needed more hands-on examples and interaction with the instructor when dealing with numbers. You'll probably need to experiment a little in this regard until you strike the right balance.

Webinars also need to keep the audience engaged. Presenters should ask for input by requesting participants to "raise hands" or answer a poll since audience members can easily get distracted if they lose interest or become bored. For us, the audience seemed more engaged when we used real-world experiences and examples.

If you're going to use headsets, we recommend a USB (or other digital format) headset with an on/off switch and volume control for each presenter. Analog-based headsets and microphones are much more susceptible to noise, static, and interference. Adapters for converting an analog headset to a USB port are available. We used these adapters with great success, vastly improving audio quality.

We provided the initial three webinars to our clients under the provider's free trial. For the next 12, we purchased a service plan for $99 per month to serve up to 100 attendees at a time. Now our university has an agreement with Adobe Connect, so the webinar provider cost is absorbed outside the CIE. Grant funding has enabled us to offer all our educational webinars free to our clients, although we charge a fee if the program is part of a certification. We'll consider charging a fee for educational webinars only if our grant funding fades.

If we can give a webinar, you can, too! None of us were techies when we started, and we still aren't. Keep it simple, and provide for a good amount of interaction—through polling, question and answers, or both—throughout the session. People are busy these days, so give them a reason to participate. Be sure, too, to have technical support ready for both the presenters and participants. A toll-free, dedicated phone number and e-mail address of a technical support person should be provided before the event. In one of our webinars, we lost our Internet connection. Have a plan to handle this and other undesirable situations.

At the end of the webinar, provide a summary of takeaway tips and additional study or reference resources, including a link to an accessible archive of the webinar. It's especially important to seek and use feedback to improve future webinars and, by extension, your products or services. Some of the comments we got prompted us to dedicate one person to make sure that the speakers addressed all of the participants' typed-in questions. Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive overall: Time after time, participants have reported that they received "tons of valuable information" and have often requested a copy of the presentation notes.

When are you going to give this tool a try? **SF**

Roberta L. Humphrey, CPA, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of accounting in the Donald L. Harrison College of Business at Southeast Missouri State University in Cape Girardeau, Mo. You can reach her at (573) 986-4916 or rhumphrey@semo.edu.

Christy S. LeGrand is assistant director of operations for the Douglas C. Greene Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship at Southeast Missouri State University. You can reach her at (573) 225-4279 or christylegrand78@gmail.com.

Deborah F. Beard, CMA, Ph.D., is a professor of accounting in the Donald L. Harrison College of Business at Southeast Missouri State University. Debbie is a member of IMA's St. Louis Chapter. You can reach her at (573) 986-6742 or dfbeard@semo.edu.

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