5 Steps to Moderating a Webinar

By James Hilliard, professional moderator

GoToWebinar

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Introduction

In 2007, if you hosted a live webinar, that fact made you unique. In 2012, that is no longer the case. As tools have become easier to use and less expensive to acquire, businesses of all sizes have embraced webinars as an effective part of an overall marketing strategy, leading to an explosion of webinar content. On any given Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday, typically at 10 a.m. or 11 a.m. Pacific Time (a favorite time for marketing teams), you can find hundreds of companies hosting live webinars.

So how do you make your webinar stand out and be seen and heard by the right people? Is the answer to use better marketing automation tools? Probably. Is another answer the need to have pithier headlines and abstracts that speak to your users needs? Yes. Do you need to think about shorter content and different times? Absolutely. There are many aspects of the webinar lifecycle that impact the event's appeal and how it resonates with an audience, but in this paper we'll focus on how the event is moderated, because, at the end of the day, you can have great technology, great headlines and the right time and day — and your event can still crash if you have not spent the right amount of time preparing for the delivery.

I attend about 3 webinars a month as a participant and about 20 a month as a host and a producer. My experiences have led me to believe that how an event is moderated goes a long way in its success, and not just the success of the one event, but on all of the events that a team will produce and share with their audience. Good moderation makes your attendees feel important and valuable to the webinar. Good moderation makes you and your presenters look and sound like the knowledgeable professionals they are. Good moderation makes your company look like the trusted partner it is. Bad moderation will do the exact opposite, leaving viewers feeling indifferent or turned off.

Over the next few pages I will share with you five building blocks that will help you create a solid foundation from which your webinars can grow and flourish. Whether you are looking for tips for yourself or for the moderators you hire, all of the ideas I will share in this paper *do* work. I have put them into practice over the past seven years and used them on over 1,000 live webinars. So let's get started.

Sample results from Google search for: "live webinar September 18th"*

RMM Live Overview Webinar - 09/18/12 11:00 am (PDT)

September 18: Live Webcast on Accelerating Innovation: Energy Storage

09-18-2012 - Webinar - Introduction to the Heat Island Effect Webinar from 10:00am to 11:00am

Live Webinar Event – September 18, 2012: 7 Steps to Starting a Non Profit

*Just a few of the 66,000,000 results from Google

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1. Find your voice.

Your goal as a moderator is to make a webinar inviting and engaging. But you're mostly there to make it run smoothly. When something goes wrong, you're the person who is supposed to keep the event going until it's back on track, and the best way to do so is with your voice. If a guest gets disconnected, you need to jump in and speak. If a slide builds wrong and a guest gets flustered, you need to jump in and speak. And you need to be able to handle these situations with poise. And to do that, you need to find your voice. In this sense, I'm not talking about the sound coming from your voice box; I'm talking about personality and confidence.

Allow me let you in on a secret: Anyone can be a moderator! Male or female, young or old, accent or not. Anyone can be a moderator! I believe the key is to be real. We all relate better to real people. Those Dove ads that celebrate women of all shapes, size and colors, those are real. They move us away from the unattainable model fantasy. So when looking for your voice as a moderator, please, don't try to be a radio announcer from the 1950s with his hand cupped behind one ear, belting out words from the deepest part of his vocal range. Be real. Be yourself.

While I do want you to be yourself, there are things you can learn from others, and the first step is listening. So I encourage you to:

- **Listen to other webinars.** If you don't like the long, monotone introduction to a webinar by a moderator, then don't perform that way on your events. Listen to how people speak in your weekly meetings. If the meeting moderator fails to include other voices, do the opposite on your webinar and be more inclusive of other speakers.

- **Listen to some talk radio.** On the radio front, let me suggest Ronn Owens on KGO 810AM in San Francisco. He has always been a favorite of mine. He moderates his show in a way that many of you may end up moderating your webinars, by acting as both the moderator and the content person. Ronn has a conversational style; he doesn't stand in front of people and force an idea down their throat. That makes people want to call his program — the webinar equivalent of raising a hand or sending in a chat or text question. He also does what all great moderators do: He makes sure that everyone has a voice and is included in the conversation, and he does that whether he is running solo, sharing his opinions or facts about a topic or if he has a guest (what we would call a subject-matter expert). As a young producer and aspiring radio host during the late '90s, I listened to Ronn often. That played a big part in helping me find my voice. So whether you listen to Ronn or someone else, listen to the pros.

"GoToWebinar is bulletproof. Their secure and reliable web conferencing tool provides the perfect solution to support our global customers, partners and internal employees."

Denny Michael
Vice President of Marketing,
AVST

- I also believe that part of finding your voice, is **listening to yourself**. That means practicing. For those of you that feel you are a good public speaker, I think you are probably correct. But you can always do better. So practice. It won't hurt and doesn't take a ton of time. You can practice reading almost anything out loud. Company press releases, the meeting notes from your team, magazine articles, white papers, or the sample open and close webcast scripts I've included in this paper.

- And while speaking out loud is good, **recording yourself is even better**. You don't need anything fancy here. You can record using your PC's internal mic (Windows Start/Programs/Accessories/ Entertainment/Sound Recorder) or even your iPhone or digital camera. The idea is to hear yourself how others hear you. And again, I am not talking about the actual sound — I'm talking about tone and style. Are you sing-songy? Do you drop the last syllable of every sentence? Are you monotone? Those are all characteristics that you can adjust and practice and ultimately eliminate from your delivery over time. If you're having trouble self-critiquing, ask someone else to give their opinion on your sound.

And don't just do this three times before your next webinar and think you are done. I have moderated over 1,000 webinars over the past seven years. My version of this drill is to listen to the archive version and look for ways to improve. One of the things I look for is speed of delivery. I tend to talk fast, but that can get me to start fumbling words. So when I hear that, I make notes to slow down on delivery. The lesson I take away from my review usually sticks for a few events, but before I know it, I'm doing it again. Those review sessions keep me on track.

For those of you that hate how you sound and are scared to death to speak in front of a group, but have to due to your companies webinar plans, I suggest the following: Join a Toastmasters Group (http://www.toastmasters.org/), Reach out to the National Speakers Association (http://www.nsaspeaker.org/), local community college classes for a Speech 101 class or, for the daring, join a local improvisation class or community theater group. All of these ideas will help build your confidence – the one ingredient that I believe everyone needs to be a great moderator (and friend and spouse and colleague and parent — I could go on and on.)

2. Find your guest's voice

To find your guest's voice, you need to talk with them and listen to them. Join that practice call. I try to do this for every event that I work on, even if I have worked with the featured speaker a dozen times in the past. The goal is to really listen and hear the guest, so that you as the moderator can make the proper adjustments to your moderation that will compliment the speaker rather than take away from them. A moderator should not be the star. A moderator should be a great supporting character.

When I am the moderator and I am talking to a presenter in the practice session, I often start by talking about something personal and unrelated to the topic that will be delivered on a webinar: recent travel, sports, college background, family. (Religion and politics not recommended, unless your webinar is going to be a debate!) I then listen. I listen to the tone, to the smile behind the story. I listen for the person's character. Are they light and bubbly or more serious? After a few moments, we get into the webinar content and I ask them about that. Many times, due to the pleasant energy created by the personal chat, the business content is also approached with enthusiasm. However, there are plenty of times that the speaker's tone changes when we get to the dry run of the webinar content. They sound very business-like. They sound stuffy. Sometimes they even read, rather than speak. That is when I try to gently intervene and mention that I have noticed the tone has changed. Often that little mention is enough to help a speaker reset, tap into the friendly tone from earlier in the practice and find a great presenter voice.

Another way to let your guest's voices shine is by mirroring their speaking style. If they do speak faster, up your pace to match it. If they speak softly, dial back your projection a bit. If they talk with a Brooklyn accent, well, don't try to match that. I've never seen this scenario play out well. The idea is to let that voice be the focus and make the adjustments as needed to not overshadow them.

In the situation where you are both the moderator and the content presenter, you then want to work more on making your voice match the voice of your audience. Part of this focuses on things like tone and pace, but it also incorporates the audience. If they are a technical bunch, make sure you are using language that they relate to and use. Get those acronyms down. If they are a business bunch, leave out some technical jargon. If you are dealing with a multi-national group, err on the side of going a bit slower with content and moderation direction so that you don't lose those that don't speak the same native language as your do.

3. Prepare your environment.

This part of the whitepaper is a section that I have found most people really appreciate and get the most use out of. It is also the section that I have truncated into a real pocket guide (separate one sheet) that you can print out and have at your side as you prepare for and deliver your next webinar.

The studio set up at Hilly Productions in San Ramon, California.

Location, location, location. As the great Dr. Seuss once asked, (paraphrased!) "Would you, could you in a Box? Would you, could you with a Fox? In a cube with a rube?" The answer is NO! Especially not in the cube. Move to a conference room, or an empty office, or your home office. Wherever you are — the office, your home — find that quiet location, void of distraction, so that you can focus. A good moderator will also make sure their guests are also in a location where they can focus and present without distraction. I am also a big fan of having multiple phones, multiple computers, printed out slides and guest phone numbers on hand. I want a copy of everything I would need should something go wrong during a live webcast. I even like to include a slide as part of the PowerPoint that your are sharing that reads

something like "We are experiencing some technical difficulties, please stand by." Use language that is appropriate to the audience and try to keep it lighthearted. A techie group might appreciate "Error 406. Webcast Not Responding. We are running an algorithm to determine what is wrong. Smiley face, etc." This is a way to communicate to your viewers if a guest drops a phone line or makes another mistake that does not allow you to talk to the audience.

The next environmental preparation technique may sound obvious, but all too often I have seen this overlooked. As a webinar moderator, you must know the tool you are using. And I'm not talking about general familiarity. I am talking about knowing it so well, you could train an employee of the platform provider on the tool and they would learn something new from you! I go back to earlier in this paper where I talked about your responsibility to keep the show going. To do this effectively, you have to know the webinar solution inside and out. Know how to switch organizer and presenter control. Understand how to pause a screen and pull up a new presentation. Wow people by being able to create a poll question on the fly to get valuable insights from your audience.

I encourage teams to create several practice sessions and get in and play with the buttons, but not just once and not just in the early stages of moderating webinars. Review the platform you work on. Look for the latest updates and new features. Understand when it is appropriate to use some features instead of others. Here is an example: A client of mine uses GoToWebinar for lead-generation events with 350 or so live attendees. Using the poll function of GoToWebinar, I know that we will get about 65-70 percent of people to respond in about one minute, and the resulting bar graph of responses will look good. However, with the same client, when we do smaller events with 10 attendees, we just utilize the raise hand function instead. It is faster to execute and helps us keep the more intimate feel that a 10-person event naturally has compared to a 400-person event. Trial and error is likely your best bet when choosing what tools and functions to use. As the moderator, I believe it is important to be aware of how attendees interact with the content and tools. Use those insights to fine-tune future events.

"GoToWebinar is simple to use, brings people together, and makes it easy to control who has access to our presentations."

Aaron Havens
Director of Technical
Support, CSI Software

4. Actively listen.

When I moderate events, I try to focus on just that event. No cell phone, no Facebook, no prep for another event. On some events, that is easier said than done — you will find that you just do a great intro to content and speakers and then, 40 minutes later, you will do a nice close and be done. While that may sound like the easy scenario, I suggest it is the hardest. It is often the type of event where the speaker feels they have everything under control, but, as the moderator, you can't make that assumption. As the moderator, it is your job to be prepared for something to go wrong at any moment. You need to be actively listening for that dry-throat moment where the guest really needs a drink of water. You need to listen for the speaker's dog barking in the background that flusters the speaker. You need to listen for the "I-can't-find-the-poll-that-I-promised-I-had-ready" moment. As a moderator, that is when you come in to support that guest. Here are some things that I have said or done recently when these moments come up. And trust me, they will come up:

Scenario #1: Dry throat

Upon hearing a guest voice start to waiver, I simply waited for a complete thought, and then jumped on to do a quick time check and call to action. While not verbatim, it came across like this. "Hey Connie — I've just seen a few questions about the idea you are sharing. I want to remind Jeff and Carol that we will come back to those questions in about 15 minutes during our Q & A. With that, let me turn it back to you." Connie got a sip of water, we did not call attention to the dry throat and she was able to calm down and proceed again at a slower pace. My only cue that Connie needed a break was that her pace had picked up and it sounded, only if you listen carefully, like she was sort of gasping. It was a small detail, but if I had not been paying attention, Connie could have quickly lost a lot of confidence and energy and not been able to share the quality information she still had to cover. You can craft a handful of these simple interjections to call upon and they work for every type of event.

Scenario #2 Dog barking

As a moderator, you will have stressed location, location, location to your guest, but interruptions happen. Recently there was a delivery at home that sent two German Shepherds into a frenzy in the background of one of my guests. While I am usually not a fan of calling out the issue at hand, those barks could not be ignored. On this occasion, I made reference back to a comment I had made to the guest earlier in the event about sending him a book. "Gary, I didn't expect the book to get there that quickly. My fault. Let's do this, you settle your companions there while I remind the folks on the line that we have some more of those books to give away." I went on to discuss for a moment a book giveaway and within 30 seconds, Gary was back and we moved on — no big deal.

Scenario #3 Can't find the button

These situations come up most often. A presenter or guest gets trained on the tools but forgets how to access or deliver the function. From the moderator, a very simple, "Hey, let me go ahead and push that poll for you," is likely all it takes. Said with a smile, the event can continue, and the guest can settle back in.

Bonus Scenario #4 Missing or dropped guest

This is the worst-case scenario — one I hope doesn't land at your feet. But if it does, here are two real examples of how to deal with it. (Note: Names have been changed to protect the guilty!) I was on an event where the editor of an online media company did not show up. We had our checklist of backup numbers and cell phone, but we couldn't reach him. Still, the show had to go on. Luckily for me (not necessarily for the audience), the editor's slides where chock-full of text. So, when the event started, I simply said that the "editor was unfortunately unavailable, however, did want to make sure we still shared some key ideas." I proceeded to read some of the bullets per page, also referred guests to the publication for more info on the topic, and then moved to a second presenter that delivered her prepared presentation.

A variation on the missing guest is the dropped guest. During the summer of 2012 I was on a pre-call for a webinar. Both guests were live, loud and clear on the phone leading up to start time. The event began at 11 AM (PST). At 11:02 I turned it over to Ken, and he was not there. Crickets. Nothing. Nada. Big trouble. I couldn't talk to the content because he had great slides full of pictures that made absolutely no sense if he wasn't talking. I quickly hit the chat tab in GoToWebinar. He said he was talking and not muted. I chatted, "Can't hear. Call back." I then moved to the second guest and flipped the script. Instead of the product information first, we went through the case studies, then come back to product. That would buy us 10-15 minutes to get Ken back. Ken dialed back. I used the chat to tell him what we changed, and the event proceeded. Not a single user left. The event was a success. As for what happened to Ken: Would you believe the batteries in his headset died during my two-minute introduction? I hope it doesn't happen to you, but if it does, I hope these examples help you continue on.

5. Know your role.

As I wrap up this Pocket Guide to Moderating a Webinar, I am thinking about many other stories and ideas I could have shared. I've seen and heard a lot during the 1,000+ events I have moderated. I hope the checklist is something you find useful. I hope some of the examples of dealing with the unexpected and preparing your environment help you. I hope you find your voice and can help others find theirs.

As I stated at the beginning, you can have great technology, great headlines and the right time and day, and your webinar can still run into big issues if you have not spent the right amount of time preparing for the delivery. And to that end, I leave you with this thought: The role of a moderator can be viewed like an insurance policy. A good policy that focuses on the small details, covers all the variables and is there when you need it is worth the monthly premium. If your message is worth sharing to an audience via a webinar, then you and your team need to invest time and effort into making sure that you moderate events in a way that is inviting and respectful of your listeners' time, and keeps your message flowing without distractions and interruptions. Becoming a moderator is a journey, a process. Give yourself room to experiment with the ideas that I have shared. Give yourself time to grow. In time, your events will have that added feel of professionalism and comfort. Add great slides, speakers and content, and you will have folks coming back to spend more time with you on future webinars.

I end this paper, as I end all of my webcasts, "I'm James Hilliard, and I look forward to talking to you all down the road."

Sample Webinar Intro and Outro Script – Hilly Productions, Inc.

Intros and outros should be short and sweet. Please use the following as a guide and modify to your voice and style, but keep your script to one page; anything more is too long.

❖ **Introduction: 60-70 seconds**
❖ **Slide 1: Title and Open**
  - Hello and welcome to (insert title)
  - My name is (your name) the moderator for today's webinar.
  - This event is sponsored/brought to you by (company/group sponsor)
❖ **Slide 2: Twitter info**
  - You can follow other attendees and share with your own followers on Twitter. Use the hashtag and handles you see on the screen.
    Note: To say "#SampleScript," say "hashtag sample script." To say "@HillyProds," say "at hilly prods."
❖ **Slide 3: Interactions during the event**
  - We really would like to hear from you and would like to include your voice in the conversation, so, ask questions, share comments, even challenge our ideas, use the Question and Answer panel on the right side of your GoToWebinar player to share at anytime during the webinar.
  - We will also have a few poll questions. Those will pop up right on your screen. More about those later.
❖ **Slide 4: Guest intro**
  - At this point, I want to introduce our featured speaker so we can get into our content.
  - Our guest is James Hilliard, author of *5 Steps to Moderating a Webinar*.
  - James has hosted over 1,000 webinars, and has a passion for helping teams create engaging online events that really connect with listeners. Today, he's going to share just a few tips that will help you create more successful webinars for your teams. James, welcome!
    Note: the guest intro is not a resume read; it's not a list of past titles and companies. No one cares about James that much. They care about the webinar subject. They care about the content promised, so the guest introduction shares one idea about the guest, and one idea of "WIIFM" — what's in it for me, for the audience.
❖ **Sign off: 25-30 seconds**
  - That is all the time we have for our webinar today. Please look for our follow-up email that will alert you to the on-demand status of today's event so that you can review any material you missed or simply go over again. Also, please take a moment to fill out our 4-question exit survey.
  - On behalf of (insert guest speaker), as well as the team at (insert sponsor), thank you for joining us and taking time to view our presentation. My name is (moderator name); have a great day.

Moderator checklist and reference guide

One week before the webinar, you need…

- ✓ Date and time of the event
- ✓ Title of the event
- ✓ Speaker bios
- ✓ Webinar sponsors
- ✓ Dial-in phone number and webinar URL
- ✓ Guest(s)'s phone number and email
- ✓ Organizer's phone number and email
- ✓ To have complete the rehearsal call

One hour before the webinar, you need…

- ✓ To perform a platform test
- ✓ Join the conference by phone or VoIP
- ✓ A hard copy of the poll questions and seed questions
- ✓ A hard copy of the presentation slides
- ✓ A hard copy of your script or outline

During the webinar, you need…

- ✓ To turn your cell phone on airplane mode or turn it off

The Quick Guide to Moderating a Webinar

Print this out to leave on your desk for reference before and during webinars.

#1: Find your voice.

- Be yourself. Your voice sounds like it sounds; don't try to change it. Instead, learn to use it as a tool.
- Listen to other webinars and talk radio. Emulate the good stuff, and do the opposite of the bad stuff.
- Take a speech class or join an improvisation group. Also check out Toastmasters or the National Speakers Association.

#2: Find your guest's voice.

- Listen to them. Ask personal questions and listen for passion; then encourage them to use that tone on the webinar.
- Make adjustments to match your guest. If they talk fast, pick up your pace. If they have a slower pace, tone it down.
- Be a great supporting cast member, not the star.

#3: Prepare your environment.

- Location should be calm, quiet and free of distraction for you and your guests.
- Have all your info ready. Print out the presentation slides (just in case!), have backup phone numbers on hand, as well as a backup copy of your introduction script.
- Be an expert using the webinar platform. Be able to train anyone about the tool.

#4: Actively listen.

- Be ready to jump in when the phone line dies or a dry throat comes on.
- Create several short 10-30 second scripts you can use to cover dogs barking or slide builds faltering.

#5: Know your role.

- As a moderator, you are the insurance policy. Prepare, focus on the details and remain calm.
- Support your featured guests and team with poise and confidence. They will look to your leadership.
- Being a good moderator takes time and experimentation. Be patient on this journey.

About James Hilliard

Since 1995, helping others tell stories has been James Hilliard's passion.   It began in San Francisco as a radio producer. In the early 2000's he moved from behind the scenes to in front of the camera as a technology reporter. Currently through Hilly Productions, Inc., he works with teams from Google, AT&T, Citrix Online and many others, as an integral part of their marketing efforts with a focus on webinars and podcasts. His experience on camera, in the edit room and live on the radio, helps him bring compelling conversations to audiences around the globe on a variety of technology and business topics.

Hilly Productions, Inc.

About GoToWebinar

GoToWebinar

Webinars Made Easy.

Citrix GoToWebinar is the easiest-to-use do-it-yourself event tool that projects your message to up to 1,000 online attendees. With GoToWebinar, you can reduce travel costs, generate more qualified leads at a lower cost and enhance communication with customers, prospects and employees. Host unlimited webinars for one low flat fee and give attendees the option to join from a Mac, PC or mobile device. GoToWebinar Premier Event is also available to provide custom-built solutions for thousands of attendees and available with video streaming. To learn more, visit www.gotowebinar.com.