How Google Is Forever Changing The Webinar

Forbes

Ever been on TV? Get ready. You will be. And you better be good.

[1]

Last week I was hired by software company Sage [2] to do a webinar about the economy [3]. Except it wasn't a typical webinar.

For many of us in the tech world a typical webinar usually goes like this: you invite lots of people who then sign up on your website or through an event management service like Eventbrite [4]. At the date and time, the attendees login through a special URL that's been sent to them and call a special conference call number. You, the presenter, share your desktop using a service like GoToWebinar [5] or BrightTalk [6] and then display your PowerPoint presentation. And away you go.

But webinars are changing. Sage was determined to hold their event using Google+ Hangouts On Air [7]. What is so different about this service? What are the pros and cons of using this as a presentation vehicle?

I've written about [8] Google [9]+ Hangouts On Air before. But that was when it was first introduced. Since then it has gained in acceptance among the technology community and larger corporations like Sage. And Google continues to develop more features, like the ones introduced [10] last week. Just imagine this: a video chat service where an unlimited number of people can join your conference. For free.

Now suppose you want to do more than just have a video chat with 10,000 of your closest friends. Suppose you're a comedian who wants to hold a special performance. Or a music band who decides to broadcast a concert from their parents' garage. Or a budding interviewer who wants to setup a TV show from his or her living room like Kramer did on *Seinfeld*. Or, in my example, a small business owner who wants to explain how the fiscal cliff is affecting his business to 500 people who have nothing more exciting to do than listen to him on a weekday afternoon. That's what Google+ Hangouts On Air does. It's like having a giant TV studio to broadcast to the world…from your office.

Instead of just sharing the PowerPoint, the people at Sage wanted to present something a little more interesting. They wanted to actually have a camera on me as I presented so I could talk directly to the audience in addition to showing my slides. At first I wasn't so sure. I've never done this before. I'm not used to the

technology. And more importantly, I have a face for radio, not for video broadcast. But I agreed. And what did I learn? Google+ Hangouts On Air has its challenges. But it works. And it will change how webinars are done forever.

The biggest benefit to this service is it's free. Other web presentation services offer similar video capabilities but you have to subscribe to them. And setting up the event is no different than launching your own video chat. As long as you're a member of the Google+ community (see below) just login to your account and choose "Start A Hangout". Remember to check the box that says "Enable Hangouts on Air." You're broadcasting.

Huge: your event will be streamed live through your YouTube channel. So not only can people attend the live event but they can catch it saved on YouTube. And of couse will be searchable on Google. You're getting an audience both ways (unless you make it private which kind of defeats the purpose). You can link it back to your website and continue to promote it through social media, etc. The event is open to everyone, not just those who "registered." So random visitors may bump into it themselves online or view the YouTube video and can potentially show interest in your product or service.

These are big benefits. But there are also challenges.

For starters, everyone needs a Google sign on. Many of us already have this because we use Gmail or have a Droid phone. But there are plenty of people without an official Google ID and they would have to go through the sign up process which takes extra steps and could result in the loss of potential attendees. And you have to make sure you've got a Google+ account and YouTube channel. Plan to spend a lot of time initially on setup.

There's no real registration process like you'll get with a webinar service. You've got to share the link on your Google+ stream and direct participants to check there. And you'll miss some of the other features that many presentation services offer like sending automatic reminders and providing statistics. You can offer a conference call number but the service works best when users just listen to the audio through their headsets connected to their computer. Which means that attendees need to have their own headsets. As the presenter, I needed time to fiddle with my own headset, webcam and microphone settings. Expect plenty of tech hiccups on both sides. Have someone ready.

A first, I found the experience unusual. I had to get used to speaking to the audience through my webcam while also manipulating my slides. I had to get used to the fact that everyone could now actually see me as I do the webinar so I couldn't wear my usual Batman pajamas. And I had to reveal to the world my messy home office and sleeping dog on the floor.

Also, we had to utilize two computers to maximize the effect of the presentation. My desktop was shared so that my PowerPoint could be seen and I also had to login in again from a laptop and use that webcam to show me. That's because the service doesn't allow the presenter to simultaneously make use of the PowerPoint

and the webcam without switching between the two, which can be kind of a pain.

The presentation I did for Sage was a success. But that wasn't because of me. It was because there was a team of smart people from Sage involved. To really put on a quality Google+ Hangouts On Air presentation you'll need a team like this. They managed the sign up process. And while I focused on the presentation they liaised with visitors online, explained to them the process, answered questions through chat, trouble-shooted problems and tested out things in advance. I know this will get easier.

And here's where it's going: Google allows developers the option of creating a custom interface to their Hangouts On Air. So in future we can create our own registration pages and borders/banners around the event to make it more branded, seamless and user friendly. Intrepid people and startups are already doing this.

Within a year or two I believe technology companies like mine will be utilizing these services to change the way we do webinars. No longer will it be just a PowerPoint presentation. No longer will we have the benefit of privacy. Presenters will be not just heard but seen too. The better ones, the ones who perform well in front of a camera, will have the better events and draw more people.

I hate being on the bleeding edge of anything and Google+ Hangouts On Air is still bleeding edge. But not for long. I do plan to start using Hangouts On Air as my webinar platform within the year. I just need to get over my biggest fear: discovering that some embarrassing mistake I made while broadcasting an event is being aired on *Tosh.0*.

How about you?

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