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Make every communication count.

Best Practices for Excellent Presentations in the Virtual World

Introduction

It's a big sign of the times. First, large numbers of routine communications meetings were moved to the web. Now, many companies are rushing to shift even their large, high-stakes, face-to-face communication events – global sales meetings, leadership summits, and user conferences – to virtually delivered formats.

Experience shows that the transition to "virtual" is not a "natural" one for most presenters. Very few people come naturally prepared with the presentation delivery skills required to powerfully engage a virtual audience and deliver a clear, credible, and compelling message in a virtual venue.

When high-stakes business presentations must be delivered online, a presenter's lack of virtual communication skills becomes evident almost immediately. Even great ideas can get lost in a faceless drone, and audience attention spans can quickly evaporate.

The issue is not just learning how to operate the great technology; it's learning how to communicate well as a presenter using it.

Even most good presenters have a learning curve. Many presenters who are very effective with live audiences struggle to be as good as they want to be when they must present virtually. It could be nerves. It might be unfamiliarity with the virtual environment and its special demands on the presenter. Maybe it's just because they can't see the audience and are disoriented. In any case, it's a more difficult medium to master than it appears to be.

The multitasking menace is ever present. The virtual presenter's challenge is made worse because virtual audience members are so easily distracted, with huge opportunities to multitask right at their fingertips. When the speaker loses the audience's attention, Amazon, Google News, and email are waiting right there to consume the focus of the faceless crowd.

Virtual communication is a great thing, but not a sure thing. Despite its promise and potential to reach more people on a global scale with less cost and travel time, a virtual business presentation also raises a very real business ROI question:

What good is a virtual presentation if it's not able to keep people's attention?

We believe the new business communication rock stars will be those individuals and teams who master the art and science of successfully engaging, motivating, and even inspiring virtual audiences.

> " You'll need to deliver your one-hour presentation to the Leadership Council virtually. We're not traveling to meet face-to-face this year… That won't be a problem for you, will it? "

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The masterful virtual presenter possesses two demonstrable skill sets. These are (1) the skills to create and communicate clear, concise, credible, and compelling presentations to a dispersed and mostly unseen audience, and (2) the capabilities to keep his or her audience members as attentive and engaged as if they were all in the same room with the presenter.

Webcast quality expectations are being continually raised by internal and external audiences. The quality-focused virtual presentation strategies and tactics that you'll find in this whitepaper can help enormously, but it takes more than just reading about them to succeed at using them.

To present virtually on par with the best, most presenters require a process of experienced coaching, structured practice, and developmental feedback to master this surprisingly challenging new medium.

There is much good news. Our coaching and training experience indicates that these are very learnable skills. The even better news is that the personal and corporate competitive advantages gained should far exceed the effort you put into mastering these skills, especially when the stakes are high.

Please call on us whenever we can help improve your communication results in any setting – face-to-face or virtual.

Best regards,

Your Mandel Communications Training & Coaching Team

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Before You Begin: Think "Webcast" Presentation

This whitepaper addresses those virtual communication situations where you will be doing most, if not all, of the talking.

If you have had to sit through many webcasts or webinars, you know they can be excellent or terrible, interesting or deadly, and everything in between.

A webcast, because it is devoid of so many of the social clues available in a face-to-face presentation, puts quite a burden on the speaker, as you may already know from personal experience.

The information contained in this whitepaper can help ease that burden enormously and increase your odds of success substantially.

As you get started exploring these Best Practices, keep some key considerations in mind:

· **Speaker's Role** – The success of a webcast is directly linked to the speaker's ability to keep an unseen audience attentive and actively engaged throughout the session.

· **Best Uses for Webcasts** – A webcast is most effective for delivering information, analysis, ideas, or recommendations to a distributed internal and/or external audience.

  When a virtual session's objectives require a free-flowing give and take between the speaker and the virtual audience, that outcome demands even more presenter skill, such as the skills we teach in Mandel's "Working the Virtual Room" workshop.

· **Audience Size** – The audience for a webcast event can range from the equivalent of a conference room to a group that could fill a large auditorium. Neither is easy.

· **Audience "Tune-Out" Risk** – When a webcast does not keep the audience members riveted on what is said and what is displayed on their screens, they have a strong tendency to disengage and multitask or just daydream.

· **Interaction** – To create interaction, a webcast presenter needs a creative, well-prepared audience interaction plan and a structured and engaging Q&A process.

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Engagement cannot be left to chance. While interactions between the audience and the presenter may or may not be appropriate during a specific webcast, audience "engagement" is vital to your success.

Excellent webcasts require all the communication talent you can bring from the stand-up presentation world, plus more. In the following pages, we explore the "more."

Winning Webcast Content

It All Starts with the Story

All too often, the process of creating webcast content begins with someone opening PowerPoint™, followed by a mental mind-dump where every thought in the speaker's head ends up on a series of text-heavy, bullet-point-driven slides. Any "story" that might have existed is often totally obscured by dense data, lack of listener focus, and the rambling flow of visually uninspiring slides. It's highly likely that you have been the victim of such creations.
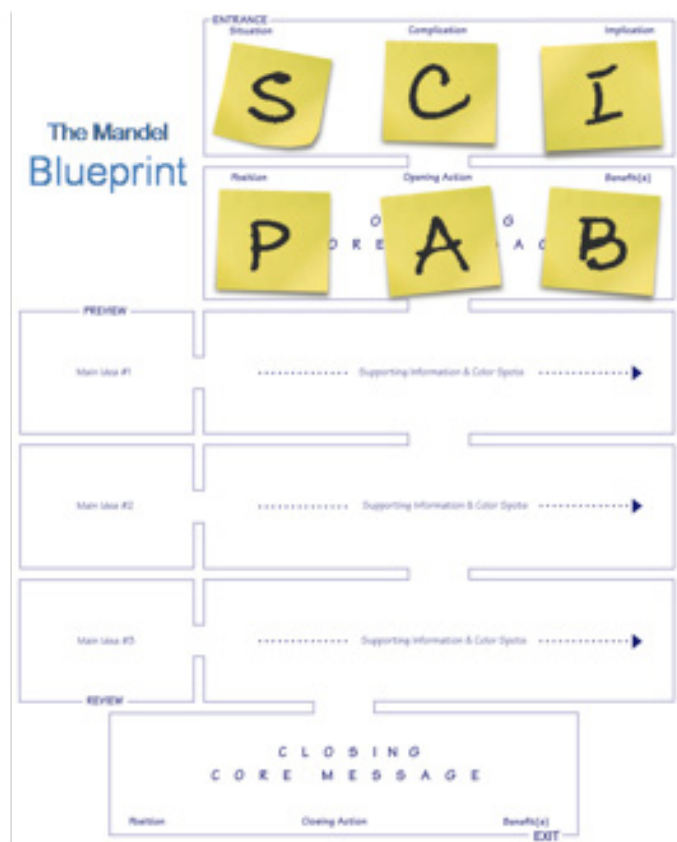
FIGURE 1: Use a proven storytelling framework like the Mandel Blueprint®.

A much more engaging and high-impact approach is to first create a written, listener-centric content flow, or "Blueprint"™ as we call it, of the story you want to tell. Then, based on that structure and its well-crafted, comprehensible flow, create the speaker notes required to flesh out and tell that story. Finally, create the slides to support the story and your webcast.

This process will help you create an easy-to-follow, compelling, and story-driven webcast that will set you apart from the typical virtual presentation that invites (and sometimes even requires) multi-tasking just to sit through it.

Specifically, here's how to create a winning webcast

- **Be audience centric.** It really isn't your story you're trying to tell; it's your audience's story. The people in your audience must to be able to see themselves in it. You will need to do your homework and get to know their world. Beyond basic demographics, you'll want to discover their "care-abouts" (their needs, attitudes, and desires) as they relate to your webcast subject matter. When you speak in the context of their care-abouts, you will have a much easier time keeping your participants engaged and tracking with you.

  One of the hardest skills to learn is content sacrifice. That is the discipline to not tell everything you know about your subject. You should never give your listeners more information than they actually need, so you have to resist the often strong temptation to include too much. Pick every point you make and every fact you share based on a specific and important audience "care-about." If you cannot verbalize that connection, create a way to make your point have value for your audience, or consider not including it at all.

- **Use a proven storytelling framework.** One of the secrets that master communicators use to efficiently create results-achieving communications is the application of a proven storytelling framework. The Mandel Blueprint™ excels as a highly effective framework for creating compelling webcast content. It supports many other critical communication applications as well, from preparing for high-stakes stand-up presentations, conversations, and meetings to planning important voicemails and emails. Whenever achieving your business goals depends on how well you plan and tell your story, the Mandel Blueprint is your best friend.

- **Add planned interactions and color spots.** Once you've finished outlining your overall webcast story, plan "color spots" that will help your audience stay engaged and remember your critical points and information. One particularly effective webcast technique is to involve your audience in a meaningful interaction with you, which could include use of the technology

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for a poll, a survey, or a creative use of the whiteboard. You should average at least one planned interaction, including Q&A, every 5 to 8 minutes. Other effective webcast color spots include inserting memorable stories and examples, video clips, relevant quotes and references, and "aha" producing analogies.

A Good Picture Is
Worth at Least a Thousand Words

How many webcasts or webinars have you sat through where the slides were so dense with text that the presentation felt like a group reading exercise? This approach negates the value of the webcast presenter and quickly puts the audience to sleep.

If you use word-for-word, text-driven slides in a face-to-face presentation, your listeners will be asking themselves, "Why am I sitting here? He should have just sent me the slides!" In a webcast, where you can't see your audience members and they can't see you, slides like that are the kiss of death and all but guarantee that your audience is going to check out.

- **Think in pictures.** Move beyond traditional bullet-point-driven slide templates. Sketch your vision for each slide on a blank piece of paper – a crude sketch is all that's needed. Then re-create that vision in PowerPoint®. Sites like iStockphoto.com are great sources for high-quality, inexpensive pictures and graphics to help you make your point using few words on the slide, if any. For high-stakes webcasts, you may want to engage a graphic artist to ensure a professional look and feel.

- **Put text into "sound bites."** Text can add value to a visual, but only if composed in short, high-impact, written sound bites. There is no need for complete sentences unless you are showing a quote. The "rule of three" applies to the number of sound bites per slide, and you should almost never have more than five. Don't forget to use your slide titles to make a statement in the same way that a newspaper headline does.

- **You're going to need a lot of slides.**
  As a comparison, a good guideline for the number of slides in a face-to-face (non-virtual) presentation is an average of one graphics-driven slide for every two to three minutes of presentation time. That keeps the audience's attention on you as the presenter, not on your slides, and avoids a big mistake made by too many stand-up presenters, which is to use their slides as a crutch. When you present virtually, however, that in-the-room-together slide pace will cause your virtual audience members' attention to wander because your slides are their

only source of visual engagement. If you're going to hold their attention, you need to keep the visual pace of your webcast moving briskly along, make it graphically very interesting, and keep it highly relevant to the audience's needs. Consequently, you should have some kind of slide movement – a meaningful animation, highlighting, or new slide – every 20 to 45 seconds on average to keep your audience visually engaged. (Here's a "build" slide that we used to get screen movement even as we discussed a webcast's opening agenda.)

Create Effective Speaker Notes...Then Use Them Masterfully

A webcast is the wrong place to try to "wing it." Timing is tight, audience attention spans are short, and the lack of eye contact with the audience makes it almost impossible to assess people's actual engagement level from moment to moment. The speaker's over-elaboration and/or inability to clearly and concisely make points are two of the key reasons why so many webcasts are deadly dull and unsatisfying for both the speaker and the listeners.

- **Create robust speaker notes.** Use this feature in PowerPoint, or other slide creation software, to create detailed speaker's notes (almost a script), and then stick closely to your notes during the webcast. Before the webcast, practice, practice, and practice some more. Use descriptive language to help your audience visualize what you are talking about. Be sure to clearly notate all of your slide changes, animations, and slide transitions in your notes so you won't miss a beat.

- **Take a "less is more" approach.** Focus your content on the "must know" information only. You need to sacrifice all the "nice to know information" and trust that, if your audience wants more detail, they will ask for it in the form of questions. Try to keep your audience's care-abouts as your top priority when creating your notes.

- **Put notes into a "storybook."** Print your speaker notes out in "Notes Pages" view, and put them in a three-ring binder so they are easy to flip through as you move through your script. Trust your content and let your notes guide you through your webcast delivery. Try to resist the urge to spontaneously over-elaborate or go off on a tangent unless there is an urgent and highly compelling reason to do so. It can be harder to get back on track and back on your time line than you might imagine.

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Engaging Webcast Delivery Skills

Use Vocal Energy to Engage Your Audience

When you're face to face, over 80% of your overall audience impact comes from the visual cues that you give off as you speak – things like body language, gestures, facial expression, and eye contact. By comparison, in a webcast, more than 80% of your personal impact will come from your voice alone. You need to maintain your composure and channel your energy to an audience that you can't see in order to come across vocally as clear, strong, credible, and compelling.

FIGURE 6: Mandel's Brad Holst photographed while conducting a live webcast (not using a webcam). Note the use of gestures and high energy.

- **Speak with conviction.** If you don't sound like you're interested and having a good time, what chance is there that your audience will feel any different? Let your natural energy come through by varying the volume, tone, and pace of your voice to add authority, interest, and emphasis to your content. Many speakers find they have to consciously amplify their vocal energy during a webcast in order to come across to their audience in an engaging, conversational manner.

- **Don't race.** Many webcast presenters sound like they are in a mad rush to get their content out. These speakers would benefit from slowing down and pausing more. After you emphasize a key point or bring up a new slide, pause to take a breath, give yourself a moment to think, and allow the audience to process your information. The common habit of using non-words (ums and ahs) and unnecessary filler words (and, so, like, you know, etc.), can make a person sound uncertain and ill at ease when speaking face to face. In a

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webcast, such words really stand out and sound even worse. These junk words can damage your credibility and make it hard for people to listen to you, so practice replacing them with a new habit – a healthy pause.

- **Keep up an engaging pace.** Don't race, but don't go so slowly that your listeners can begin to daydream. Think of some really good radio commentators or entertainers; then figure out what pace would keep your audience engaged with you and your content as effectively as those radio professionals engage their audiences. You will notice that radio professionals also vary their vocal pacing and add pauses as appropriate to help keep their audience members attentive and engaged.

- **Be in command of your body.** Stand or sit forward in an engaged posture with your weight balanced and your feet flat on the floor. Gestures are just as important in a webcast as they are in face-to-face communications. Gestures (even when your audience can't see them) will add emphasis to your words and provide a healthy outlet for any nervous energy you may experience. While your audience won't see any of this, they will definitely hear it in your voice. Body posture and movement influence both vocal projection and inflection. The more you involve your hands, arms, and body, the more energized and confident your voice will sound.

Be Ready for Q&A

Don't forget to anticipate, prepare for, and practice answering the questions and objections you're likely to get from your audience. While that's great advice for any presentation, Q&A in a webcast environment is especially tricky, since you can't visually gauge an audience's nonverbal reactions to your responses. Remember, you're not fully prepared for Q&A until you've practiced how you'll handle possible questions – particularly the hard ones – out loud and multiple times.

- **Keep responses short and to the point.** You'll get a follow-up question if you're too brief, but you'll have no way of knowing if you've over-elaborated and lost your audience's attention.

- **Prime the q&a pump.** Have four or five relevant questions ready to suggest and answer yourself just in case your audience is shy and hesitant to speak up. Willingness to ask questions is often a cultural issue. For example, a Dutch audience is likely to jump at the opportunity to ask a question to engage with you, while a Japanese audience might be more reserved as a sign of respect.

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- **Have a dedicated q&a facilitator.** When speaking to a small audience, you may invite spontaneous verbal questions from the audience through webcast tools like the "raise hand" feature. That's not practical when speaking to a large audience. For larger groups, it's a good idea to bring in a subject matter expert to act as a Q&A facilitator. The facilitator can respond via text chat in real time to questions submitted through the Q&A panel. This creates a very real sense of interaction for a large webcast audience. With your guidance, the Q&A facilitator also can be on the lookout for pivotal questions from the audience that you would like to answer verbally.

Sit Locally…Speak Globally

With both visuals and sound, webcasts can enable you to reach a global audience without ever having to leave your office. It's important to remember that even though you're sitting locally, you often will have to think and speak from a potentially diverse, global perspective.

- **Be culturally aware.** When you will be speaking to an international audience, learn all you can about their customs, etiquette, behaviors, and expectations. Insert culturally appropriate visuals, language, and examples where you can. Your personal demonstration of cultural sensitivity will go a long way in creating goodwill with your global audience.

- **Be sensitive to time differences.** This is important when both scheduling and delivering your webcast. You may need to deliver your webcast outside of your traditional office hours, which can be challenging if that is naturally a low energy time for you. Be sure to get the rest and nutrition you require to perform at your best for the time of day or night when you must deliver your webcast. Although it may seem trivial, don't say "good morning" if most of your audience members are located where it's afternoon or evening. That slip can make you sound globally unaware and awkwardly disconnected from your audience.

- **Use jargon, slang, and colloquialisms very sparingly.** Words and phrases that may work just fine in your locale may sound incomprehensible to a global audience for whom your language is often a second language or is spoken differently from what you're used to hearing. This is particularly important in a webcast, as the lack of eye contact makes it difficult to

> "Because you can't see your webcast audience, you should invest in extra preparation for Q&A."

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assess your audience's understanding of your content. You can also make your webcast presentation more globally listener friendly by making an effort to enunciate your words clearly and speak at a reasonable pace.

- **Practice your webcast with people who understand the culture(s) of your audience.** When the stakes are high and you want to be really sure that you are on safe cultural ground, check out your webcast content with someone who knows the cultural nuances well. Better yet, use this person as one of your practice partners and get her or his feedback and advice on both your content and your delivery.

Assuring Webcast Success

Take Control of Your Environment

- **Secure a private office or conference room.** You'd be surprised how often webcasts are conducted from a cubicle. Cubicle presenters, not wanting to distract their neighbors, speak in hushed tones that sound boring and meek to their virtual audience. Find a private room and tape a sign on the door to prevent interruptions: "Webcast in progress; please do not disturb." Then, ramp up your energy and enthusiasm and let them loose.

- **Set up a presenter-friendly delivery space.** Once the webcast starts, you are going to be very busy and literally tethered to the computer. Make sure everything you might need is at hand. Use a headset with high-quality audio, arrange your computer desktop the way you want it, set up your notes for easy reference, and have things like water, tissues, and even cough drops close by.

- **Plan for bulletproof backup.**
Think about what can go wrong from a technology standpoint and proactively prepare for it. Computers can crash, phone and internet connections can be lost, and power can go out. Have your mobile phone ready with the call-in number already entered, the pass code written down, and the ringer turned off. Have a backup computer, ideally a battery-powered laptop,

FIGURE 7: Create a presenter-friendly delivery space.

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logged into the virtual meeting room using a different ISP than your primary computer: for example, a wireless ISP if your primary computer is connected through your network. Just like an airline pilot, you should always be calm, cool, and communicative with your audience if something does go wrong.

- **To cam or not to cam?** Webcams are everywhere and are used to let people see each other online. They are commonly used in business, particularly for online meetings, where they can be very effective. However, webcams get mixed reviews when used by webcast presenters. Often the audience is actually distracted by the busy webcast presenter who is flipping the pages of his or her notes, advancing and annotating slides, responding to chat, and trying to gesture all at the same time, much like the Wizard of Oz behind his curtain. Busy with all this activity, the presenter's eyes are rarely directed toward the webcam, and this can be off-putting to audience members because they perceive it as a lack of direct eye contact.

  A good use of visuals usually helps communicate your message better than a continuing, postage stamp-sized webcam picture of the webcast speaker, unless the speaker's facial expressions and use of gestures add a great deal to the message. Our advice: Use your webcam if and when it adds to your communication effectiveness online. When in doubt, pump up your use of visuals. (When delivering webcast-style presentations, Mandel presenters rarely use webcams, but we do use a photo slide to introduce ourselves visually.)

Eliminate Computer and Phone-Generated Distractions

As a webcast presenter, you'll have a lot going on all at the same time – following your script and notes in order to speak coherently, advancing slides and animations, conducting surveys and polls, using the highlighter, and the list goes on. While you're under the pressure of delivering a webcast, seemingly minor or even apparently harmless computer and phone distractions can derail your presentation in ways you can't imagine until they happen to you. Fortunately, they're all easy to prevent.

- **Turn off instant messaging, auto email notifications, and calendar reminders.** This is vitally important. You'd be surprised just how much a pop-up can distract a webcast speaker, even if the audience can't see it. And if you happen to be sharing your desktop with your audience, it can potentially be embarrassing.

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- **Clean up your computer desktop.** This is extremely important if you plan on sharing your desktop with your audience. Think about what a sloppy, disorganized-looking desktop may say about you. Make sure your desktop doesn't contain anything that might be offensive to your audience or make an impression that you don't want your audience members to have.

- **Turn off call waiting.** The intrusive beep of an incoming call can be just as distracting as a pop-up; plus, it may briefly cut off your voice every time it sounds. You may want to leave a "busy message" on your voicemail system to let callers know that you're currently conducting a webcast and to tell them at what time you'll be available to take calls again or be free to return their call. This will keep them from making repeated attempts to get through to you.

Practice, Practice, Practice!

Everyone has to practice somewhere, and it often feels like many webcast presenters are practicing in front of their actual audience. It is critical to practice every aspect and every word of your webcast several times before the event. Remember this sage advice from the world of high-performance athletics: Practice like you want to play, because you'll end up playing just like you practiced.
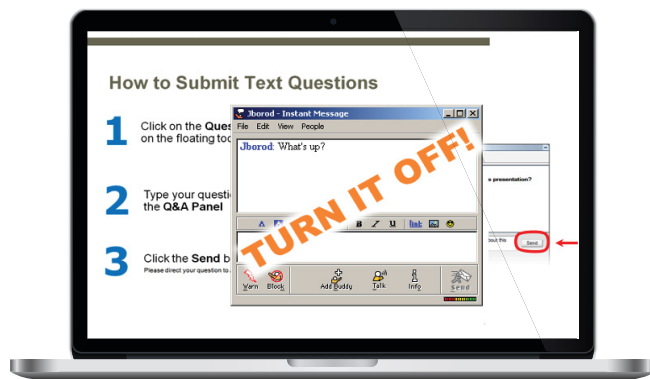

FIGURE 9: Even minor things, like an instant message, can be very distracting when you're presenting a webcast.

- **Practice the delivery of the content.** It will take at least three "talk-throughs" to master the pacing of your content and the engaging use of your voice for emphasis and variety. Always practice using your notes. At first it may sound like you're almost reading them, but that will quickly change after several practices. With repeated and improving practices, your words become part of your mental muscle memory. Practice sessions are also a great opportunity to check the timing and flow of your webcast.

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- **Practice the tools and logistics.** Become thoroughly familiar with all the features and tools you will use during your webcast, which could include polls, surveys, Q&A management, use of a highlighter, whiteboards, and hand-offs to other presenters. If you're using the support services of a webcast producer (strongly recommended for high-stakes webcasts), be sure to have your producer join you at practice.

- **Record your practices and practice with a coach.** If you're preparing for a high-stakes webcast, especially if it's one of your first webcast deliveries, you will strongly benefit from engaging the services of an expert business virtual-communications coach. At the very least, ask someone you know and trust to attend at least one of your practice sessions virtually and then solicit that person's feedback. Record your practice sessions so you can coach yourself and have recordings for your coach to review. The combination of recorded practices, coupled with expert feedback and instruction, is a key piece of Mandel's proven coaching methodology. You don't really know how you are coming across until you become a listener and a viewer of yourself.

  At Mandel Communications, we have a team of virtual communication coaches who are expertly qualified to help you. Our role is to make your every practice better, until the real thing is a smashing success!

> **Coaching and practice are required to master the art and science of effective webcast presentations.**

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Conclusion

All of us are witnessing a huge sea change in how the business world communicates, and it is happening fast.

Business presentations via webcasts and webinars won't go away, even in the best of economic times. The cost and time savings are just too appealing.

Seize the opportunity. Make this powerful business communications trend work for your career and for your organization's success by building and keeping your virtual communication skills current, relevant, and sharp.

Please contact us whenever we can help.

Sincerely,

**Your Mandel Communications
Training & Coaching Team**

> **Everybody wins when you make it easy for your webcast audience to stay totally engaged with you.**

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About Mandel Communications

When the stakes are high, the quality of what you say and how you say it can make all the difference.

Every day, worldwide, organizations are turning their people's communication skills into a strong competitive advantage through Mandel's training, skills-building practice, and expert feedback.

Call on Mandel Communications whenever your organization needs to:

1. Build the Skills to Improve High-Stakes Presentation Results

- Sales Presentations
- Customer Briefings
- Presenting Ideas at the Executive Level
- Technical Presentations
- Executive and Manager Communications

2. Build the Skills to Sell Effectively at Executive Levels

3. Develop Trusted Advisor Relationships

Working with Mandel, you will gain a unique combination of demonstrable benefits:

- **Rapid skill improvements that can make the winning difference.** Mandel-trained professionals, managers, and executives can quickly create content and messaging that are listener-centric, clear, and compelling. Equally important, your communicators' personal "presence" will become increasingly "real," reassuringly confident, credible, and interactive.

- **Job performance improvements whenever masterful spoken communication skills are a key requirement for business success.** We will precisely tailor all that we do for you to achieve your organization's unique business goals, and our skills-building processes and tools will concentrate directly on producing your desired on-the-job results.

- **Global skill-building scalability.** To align with our client organizations' global activities, Mandel has expert trainers and coaches located throughout Europe, AsiaPac, India, and North America, and we build new communication skills in fourteen (14) different languages.

- **Face-to-face and virtual delivery options.** Clients consistently evaluate Mandel's face-to-face group training workshops and coaching services as world class in all aspects. Equally impressive are our capabilities to use digital delivery media—such as virtual meetings, virtual collaboration platforms, and telepresence—to create outstanding skill-building results for you when face-to-face work is not the best option.

Please contact us whenever a significant improvement in spoken communication results could benefit your business performance. It would be our privilege to discuss these benefits with you.

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