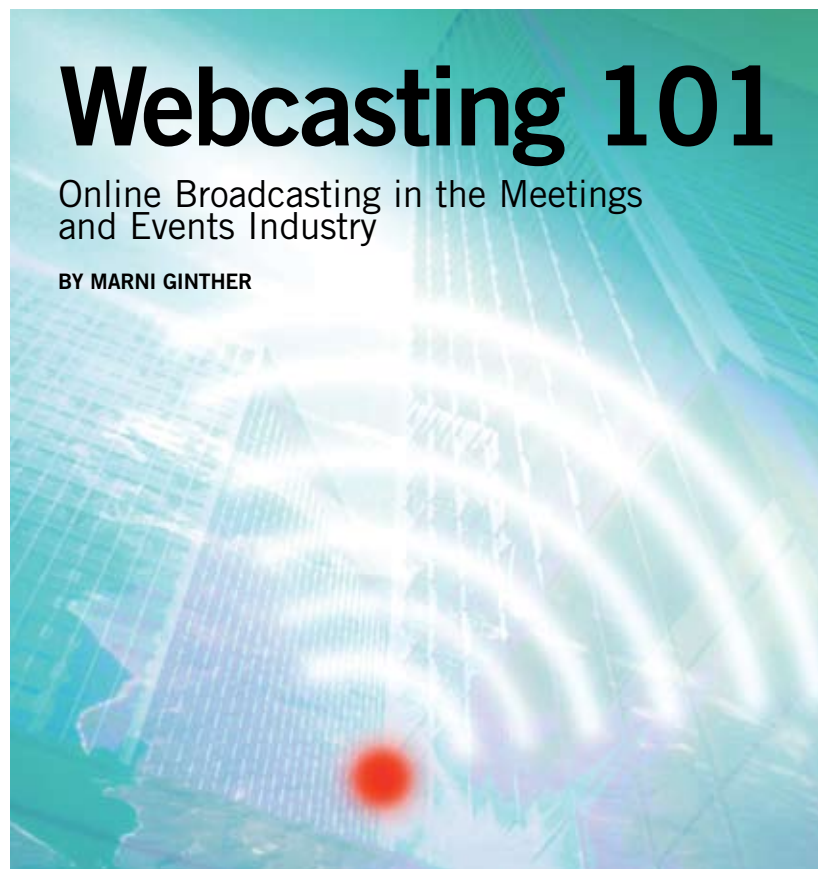


# Webcasting 101

## Online Broadcasting in the Meetings and Events Industry

BY MARNI GINTHER



**SIMPLY PUT, WEBCASTING IS EXACTLY WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE**—broadcasting on the Web. Yet, webcasting differs from a webconference in that it can incorporate elements of your on-site event and market them to a wider off-site audience. Of course a lot of technical expertise goes into webcasting an event. As planners recognize the benefits of this technology, new products and service providers are making it easier for planners to turn what may seem like a daunting new technology into a user-friendly tool.

**MEETINGS OF THE FUTURE?** > With rising travel costs and continuing developments in webcasting technology, will webcasts start displacing physical meetings and events? Dan Rayburn doesn't think so. Rayburn is the executive vice president of Streaming Media and co-author of *Hands-On Guide to Webcasting*.

"Webcasting, bottom line, is a valuable communications tool. It should be thought of just as that, a tool," he says. "So I don't really see trends in the market because of fuel costs or lack of travel changing that."

Rayburn's company, Medford, N.J.-based Streaming Media, hosts multiple tradeshow and exhibitions each year for the webcasting and streaming media industry, and while he uses webcasting as a complement to those shows, he doesn't see it taking them over.

"Nothing can ever replace what can be accomplished with a handshake in person," Rayburn says. "People like us in the tradeshow industry are not telling our 3,000 attendees to please stay home and watch it through the Web."

Charles Peters, director of corporate development at Netbriefings Inc., a St. Paul-based webcast service provider, says about 60 percent to 70 percent of his clients are meeting planners. Webcasts may never eclipse or replace events. Nonetheless, Peters sees a growing trend in the number of meeting planners considering webcasting as they plan events.

"A term you're going to start hearing out there is 'the secondary audience,' meaning the people who would be attending a webcast of the event, but not attending the event itself," Peters says. Such "attendees" aren't necessarily people who would have normally attended your event without the webcast alternative; they represent a wider audience. Increasingly, the planners Peters works with take this audience into consideration when choosing the venue and setting up the event.

Netbriefings recently helped the Parkinson's Disease Foundation prepare a large gala for a webcast. "We worked with them on the layout of the tables and the chairs and the corridors to provide the best logistics for the attending audience. We also set up the shot and production to be out of the way of the attending audience," Peters says. "But at the same time we assured we were getting nice shots of the presenters and the audience so that the people who are virtually attending feel a part of the meeting."

Live webcasts allow events to reach a wider audience than simply the people who are physically in attendance. If that webcast is then saved and users are allowed to access it on demand, it expands the event's audience even more. And since attendance is over the Internet, Peters says, webcasting offers tracking and statistical capabilities that a physical event alone never could.

When people attend a webcast of your event, you're capturing information about them—such as a valid e-mail address and phone number—that you simply cannot track with a live audience. "You can also be monitoring statistics from the background in real time," Peters says. "That will show

when the person came to the webcast, how long they stayed and when they left. And you can also gather data using polling and surveys to learn even more about the audience and attendees.”

This kind of detailed information can give meeting planners unprecedented insight into what attendees are thinking and feeling at different points in the meeting. “If a presentation kicks off and people start dropping off within five or 10 minutes, you realize at that point you didn’t reinforce the message strong enough for them to stay,” Peters says. Since participants have attended online, their contact information has been tracked, allowing a questionnaire to be sent only to the people who left at a specific time, asking them why they left.

As a consultant for businesses interested in using webcasting applications, Rayburn says one of the most important things for businesses to realize about webcasting is that it’s not as new or as complex as it’s made to seem.

“It’s just another business communications tool just like the fax,” Rayburn says. “It’s simple; it’s easy to use; it’s cost-effective; it’s not as complex as people want to make it out to be and it works very well.”

**ANATOMY OF A WEBCAST >** “A lot of people confuse webcasting and webconferencing,” Rayburn says. “Webcasting is a one-to-many technology; web conferencing is a one-to-few.” Each has its place. Which one works best for you will depend on your needs.

A webconference can be likened to a guided online tour through a speaker’s PowerPoint presentation. But a webcast is much more. Like a broadcast, a webcast requires many steps involving a cross-disciplinary range of equipment and knowledge.

In an article on his Web site, Rayburn outlines five components of a webcast. The first is recording, or “capturing” the audio and visual content. The complexity of the camerawork and setup involved in this step depends on the size and type of event you want to webcast.

Next you need to acquire a signal over which to transmit the content you’ve captured. There are different ways of transmitting a signal, such as a phone bridge or via satellite. Once the signal reaches its destination, it will need to be encoded, which is step three. Encoding basically refers to the digitization of the content so it’s ready for the fourth step—distribution over the Internet. The fifth step is the Web site interface, which refers to what the webcast looks like when the viewer logs on to watch it. Are there interactive features such as chat, audience polling or message boards? Is the webcast hosted on its own mini Web site or on a page within the Web site of a larger organization? The interface makes a lot of difference in the user’s experience of the webcast.

The size, scope and cost of each of these steps depend on the size and complexity of your event and the type of webcast you want to produce, Rayburn says. Other cost-affecting factors include whether your webcast is live, or simply recorded for broadcast on the Web at a later time, and how your audience is going to access your webcast.

“Are they coming in to visit the webcast from their home, are they at work, or is it an employee meeting where everybody is behind a corporate firewall?” Peters asks. If you don’t make these considerations before going ahead with your webcast, he says, you could produce the most picture-perfect presentation that never actually meets your audience.

**OUTSOURCE OR DO IT YOURSELF? >** Terms such as “signal acquisition” or “encoding” can seem daunting, so can renting heavy, expensive equipment and learning how to operate it. “If you’ve never done this before you should absolutely outsource everything to a third party,” Rayburn says. “Get your feet wet learning how it works. Keep in mind it’s live; you get one shot and one shot only to do it right. That’s not the kind of thing you want to take on yourself.” Several companies Rayburn suggests for first-

timers include On24.com, Thomson Reuters Financial’s webcast services or Talkpoint.com. These companies can carry out the whole webcast for the client, beginning to end. Eventually, Rayburn says, it’s the needs of each particular business that dictate the amount of involvement in the webcast.

After assessing the benefits of webcasting, many companies invest the time and money in equipment and training to learn to do it in house, Rayburn says. “I’ve worked with a lot of customers who, after they’ve outsourced it over a year or so, decide, ‘if we spend X amount of dollars and we do it ourselves, and we build a studio, we’re going to make that money back in six months and we’re going to be able to use it more often,’” he says.

Similarly, Netbriefings’ clients are looking for different levels of involvement. “What we like to tell people is that we can do as much as you want or as little as you want,” Peters says. ■

## contact info

### Charles Peters

Director of Corporate Development

Netbriefings Inc.

[cpeters@netbriefings.com](mailto:cpeters@netbriefings.com)

[www.netbriefings.com](http://www.netbriefings.com)

### Dan Rayburn

Executive Vice President

Streaming Media

[mail@danrayburn.com](mailto:mail@danrayburn.com)

[www.streamingmedia.com](http://www.streamingmedia.com)

## bottomline

Webcasts hold many potential benefits for the meetings and events industry. They are becoming easier to produce because service providers are streamlining the process for clients who don’t have the technological expertise to do it themselves. And for those who want to set up their own webcasting capabilities, the tools, training and resources are readily available.