

Top 10 Tips for Webinar Invitation Success

A Connect Direct White Paper

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Introduction

It's often said that one of the primary challenges of B2B direct marketing and demand generation is "breaking through the clutter." Nowhere is this more painfully true than with Webinar invitations, at a time when the volume of such events has increased exponentially.

The primary culprits in this flood of Web events are online publishers, who are now offering turnkey Webinar programs as a standard component of their lead generation services. Advertisers are drawn to these programs in part because they purport to be all-inclusive—publishers provide the speaker, write the content, host, manage, and promote the event.

Publishers can guarantee, in most cases, a minimum number of attendees because they have a pool of no-cost media at their disposal. Success is due more to a barrage of promotion rather than a finely tuned promotional strategy. E-mail invitations, in particular, are generic and templated (for reasons of economy), but no matter—e-mail enough people and eventually you'll make your numbers.

What does it take, therefore, for your event to stand out amongst a sea of generic, ordinary invitations? What it doesn't take is gimmickry. Wacky creative concepts, outlandish graphic designs, and jaw-dropping incentives ("Register today and qualify to win a 52" Plasma TV!") only have marginal impact on your campaign and may even cheapen your brand in the process.

No, what it takes is an adherence to basic direct marketing principles. Boring, perhaps—but when 9 out of 10 e-mail invitations show a complete ignorance of the even the most elementary best practices, it won't take much for your Web seminar to rise above the noise.

Here then, in random order, are 10 principles to keep in mind when designing your next Webinar invitation:

#1: Sell the Event, Not the Product

Your e-mail has one objective only: to get people to register for the event. Don't stuff your copy with superlatives about your product and then mention the Webinar as an afterthought. Even if your product sounds like the best thing since the iPod, if the recipient doesn't want to come to the event, you've failed. Period.

Instead, sell the benefits of your product in the context of the event. Rather than "our software cuts development time by 50 percent," say "Join our free Webinar and you'll learn how you can cut development time by 50 percent."

#2: Use Your Headline and Sub-Head Wisely.

The very top section of your e-mail, what the recipient sees when he/she first opens your e-mail is the most critical real estate in the entire design. Assuming that you've followed best practices and designed your e-mail so that your key message shows up legibly in the recipient's preview window (and not as a series of white boxes), that space should contain the following:

- a. What the event is (title or description)
- b. When it's taking place (date & time)
- c. Why you should attend (key benefits)
- d. How to register (click here)

Resist the temptation to use some clever, pithy headline—the kind that wins awards and makes marketers like you and me chuckle but has nothing to do with the event. Before the recipient sees or reads even one word of body copy, he/she should know: what, when, why, and how.

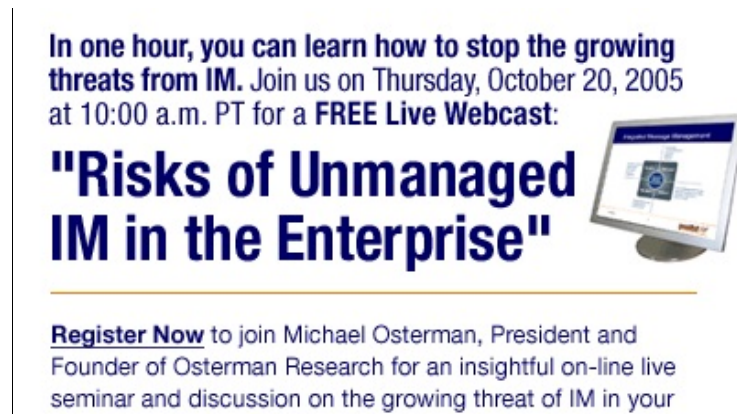


Fig. 1. The top section of your e-mail invitation should contain key information — what, when, why, and how — about your event.

#3: Don't Waste Your First Paragraph

It's always tempting to use the first paragraph of body copy to (in effect) "set up" your pitch for the event by describing the business conditions or trends that make the event a worthwhile investment. A typical example is the paragraph that begins:

"As an IT manager, you need ..."

Such introductions are wasted space. Moreover, they push down more vital selling copy below the fold and therefore decrease the chances that readers will see or read the copy that really matters. Instead, just lead with a clear and compelling benefit:

"In one hour, learn how to increase the performance of your Web applications by 300 percent ..."

You don't need to explain why application performance is important. Or how people have been attempting to speed up Web applications for all eternity but have failed until now. Your message will either resonate with readers or it won't. If they don't have Web applications, or feel their performance is just what it should be, no amount of explaining why they really need to speed up those applications anyway will make a difference.

#4: Include 3-4 bulleted benefits

Assuming that your reader has made it past the headline, the sub-head, and your compelling first paragraph, and still wants to know more, it's an effective technique to express 3-4 of your most compelling benefits for attending the event in bulleted form. Again, these are benefits for attending the event, not why people should buy or use your product.

Another reason for presenting benefits in bulleted form is that if the reader chooses to scan the e-mail first before reading it word for word, he/she is more likely to pick up key selling points that will motivate him/her to read further.



Fig. 2. Place key selling benefits prominently in your invitation so that they're readable at a glance.

#5: Include a Speaker Photo and Bio

Without a speaker photo, a Webinar invitation inevitably takes on a corporate tone, one of a company presentation. A speaker photo creates a more personal tone, and makes the event seem more "real", more tangible, and thus more compelling.



Fig. 3. Speaker photos help humanize your invitation and make the event seem more "real" and tangible.

Incidentally, it doesn't matter particularly who the speaker is or his/her qualifications—a photo simply reminds potential attendees know they're going to be listening to a real human being. Will a high-paid analyst or industry expert increase registration and attendance at your event? It can't hurt. The bigger question is whether that speaking fee could be applied

more efficiently to 1) marketing to a larger audience (i.e. broadcasting to more names) or 2) increasing the perceived value of the event in other ways, for example: adding an incentive for registration (see #9 below).

#6: Be Cautious About Graphics

Even those of us who have been designing e-mails for years need reminding that the perfect, error-free HTML design we just pitched to the client isn't necessarily a reflection of how that design will be received and viewed by the target audience. It would take an entirely separate white paper (and many have already been written) to detail the various ways to optimize your e-mail design for viewing in Microsoft Outlook and other e-mail clients.

In general, it pays to be extremely cautious in the use of clipart and any other graphic images if they're not directly tied to the event (examples of relevant images include speaker photos, or a photo of the free gift prospects receive when they register.) Spam filters are generally unfriendly towards graphics of any type, but even if your images make it through to someone's inbox unscathed, it's wise to keep the vertical height minimal so as not to force selling copy below the fold.

Also, use HTML for your headline copy (vs. a graphic image)—it won't look as good and you won't have complete control over the font, but more of your readers will see it.

Lastly, it's generally a good practice to include one or two lines of selling copy above your headline, in plain HTML and in small type, so that if your design is a sea of white boxes and nothing else is visible, the reader will at least be able to read that one message and hopefully be motivated to "download images" and read further.

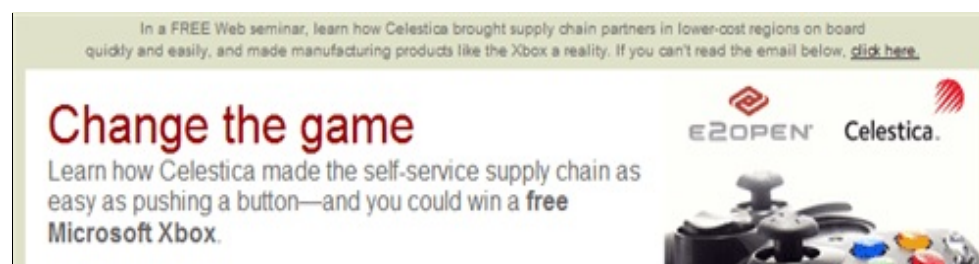


Fig. 4. Place a line of text at the top of your invitation above the headline to ensure that every reader sees key selling benefits at minimum.

#7: Call to Action: Early and Often

Direct marketing experts have been repeating this advice for decades, and nothing has changed. Do not, under any circumstances, wait until the end of your e-mail to ask people to register for the event. Include clickable buttons or links in the headline, in the body copy (at least twice: after the first paragraph and at the close), and in the sidebar if you have one. It may seem like overkill, but it works.

#8: Include Attendee Quotes

It's always puzzled me why attendee quotes are such a fixture of event promotions if the event being promoted is a user conference, or technology exhibition, or even a training course, yet few companies utilize them in promoting Webinars. Granted, if your Webinar is a one-time event never to be repeated, this point is moot, but otherwise, a few simple words of praise attesting to the value of the event can have significant effect.

Do you survey your Webinar audience after the event or otherwise solicit comments from attendees? Then use them. You don't even have to quote the person by name. In the context of an invitation, most readers aren't going to question a quote from "IT Supervisor, General Motors" as long as the comment seems genuine and not overly effusive. Remember, the ultimate goal of your e-mail is to get the reader to register for the event, and above all, that requires convincing that person that your event is a valid and useful way to spend a valuable hour out of his/her day. Knowing that peers have found the same event informative and eye-opening could help close the deal.

#9: Use Incentives Wisely

It's a measure of just how saturated the Webinar landscape has become when most every invitation includes a drawing for a free iPod or iPhone or whatever else is the "gadget du jour." We've heard it said that such incentives "can't hurt," but that's not true. iPod drawings are a dime a dozen, they don't make your event stand out in a crowd (they do exactly the opposite), and if you're marketing to a business audience, they may cheapen your brand or devalue your event. (If they have to entice me with an iPod, how good can the event really be?)

Fig. 5. When using incentives, consider offers that are relevant to the topic and don't cheapen the event or your brand.



That's not to say you should avoid incentives altogether. Far from it. Used appropriately, incentives can complement the business value of an event by providing the reader a compelling personal incentive for registering. Here are some ideas to consider:

1. Offer an information kit or book or "portfolio" (emblazoned with your company's logo), but only for attending the event, not just for registering
2. Introduce the incentive only at the registration page, not in the e-mail itself. In theory, this means you'll attract fewer unqualified leads who may only be interested in the incentive

3. If you have the option and the capability, consider an A/B test of the e-mail or landing page—one version with the incentive, one without—to gauge the precise effect the incentive has on response
4. In place of a drawing, offer an instant gift to the first 50 or 100 people who register for the event. Generally, people respond better if they feel they have better odds at receiving what it is you're offering, plus you'll introduce a note of urgency to the invitation and encourage people to register immediately.

#10: Subject Lines: Test, Test, Test

There are few hard and fast rules for subject lines because any two audiences respond very differently. One exception is the 40 character rule (subject lines should never be longer than 40 characters) because it's generally accepted that the average e-mail recipient only sees the first 40 characters of each subject line in their inbox.

If you do nothing else, always test. Subject lines are make or break for your invitation. If you're fortunate enough to have an in-house database to market to, test your invitation to that list, with as many subject lines as you can while maintaining statistical significance (rough rule of thumb: 5,000 names per test cell), then roll out the winning subject line(s) to the lists you have to pay for.

The most important variables to test are 1) Topic and 2) Benefit. If the subject matter of your event is a "hot" topic, it's wise to test at least one subject line with that topic front and center. If your topic is more obscure or less well known, then lead with a benefit of attending. Just remember: subject lines should communicate "what" and "why": what the event is, and why the reader should attend.

Here are examples of a topic-oriented and benefit-oriented subject line, respectively:

(Topic) Free Webinar: Best Practices for Green IT
(Benefit) Free Webinar: Cut Remote Access Costs by 30 Percent

Yes, we still use "Free" in subject lines. Not always, but if we have the opportunity to test, we try to include at least one test cell that includes what David Ogilvy called one of the "two most powerful words in advertising." Using "Free" increases the chances your e-mail will be caught in spam filters but (as of this writing; times change) it also increases response rates.

Note: if your religion (or your CMO) prevents you from using "free" under any circumstances, don't use "complimentary" in its place. It simply takes us too many valuable characters. Better to skip the word altogether and just use "Webinar: [Insert Benefit or Topic Here]."

About Connect Direct Inc.

Named one of the "Top 100 Agencies for 2008" by *BtoB Magazine*, Connect Direct (CDI) is a full-service marketing agency specializing in turnkey, integrated demand generation and lead management strategies for high-technology companies. Founded in 1990, the company serves a wide range of high-tech and other B2B clients from its offices in Silicon Valley and Seattle.

About Act-On

Act-On is a demand generation service that unites marketers with sales teams and business partners to identify and qualify prospects. Using Act-On, marketers have powerful tools to manage campaigns through email, web forms, microsites, and webinars.

A successful webinar starts with getting the right attendees to the event. Marketers use Act-On for merging prospect lists, scrubbing data to ensure quality, scheduling marketing campaigns to qualify attendees, creating and sending professional looking invitations, registering attendees, and sending follow-up reminders. Once a meeting is finished, marketers use Act-On to pass quality leads to the sales team within minutes. The Act-On service is designed for enterprise level marketers, yet is equally powerful and usable by smaller businesses.

For more information, visit www.actonsoftware.com or call (877) 530-1555.



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