

## Webinars Help the American Marketing Association Boost Revenues, Keep Members



The American Marketing Association (AMA) has been using webinars for almost 10 years to deliver information and training to its members, drive revenue to the organization, and boost its membership rolls. And the webinars have definitely succeeded: even in a down economy, the organization saw its membership numbers stay steady; revenues from the webinars increased more than 100 percent within three years of the program's start and have continued to grow ever since.

The AMA is the professional association for individuals and organizations who are leading the practice, teaching, and development of marketing worldwide. It currently has about 32,000 paid professional members, including collegians and academics. The organization hosts 75 in-person events per year, including large trade shows and smaller professional development sessions, and it publishes seven print publications.

In 2002, the AMA launched a new website, [marketingpower.com](http://marketingpower.com). As part of the new marketing effort, the organization wanted to drive traffic to the site and improve its ability to deliver content to its members. "We wanted a way to give unique content to someone who couldn't attend an event in person," says Karen Gwynne, director of sponsorship with the AMA. "Not everyone can get to a live event, either for cost or scheduling reasons, but they were telling us they still wanted the information."

## **FINDING VALUE IN ONLINE EVENTS**

In its inaugural year, the AMA hosted 20 webinars for about 200 people each. Today, the organization runs more than 150 webinars per year, and some attract as many as 5,000 registrants—more than the number of attendees at all the AMA's in-person events put together. Partly as a result of the improved, interactive content, the [marketingpower.com](http://marketingpower.com) site now boasts 175,000 registered users.

Gwynne says four factors drove the move toward hosted webinars:

- Deliver more content to paying members. "We knew we were reaching a very small number of them with the in-person events—maybe 10 percent," says Gwynne. "We wanted another way to reach a larger audience."
- Increase the variety of topics covered. The AMA's focus was traditionally in the academic arena; webinars allowed the organization to test the waters and offer sessions on broader marketing topics, including branding, lead generation and industry-specific initiatives.
- Generate revenue. Currently, about 98 percent of the AMA's webinars are sponsored—a vendor or service provider pays for the AMA to host the event, drive registrants and offer best practices advice (the sponsor can provide its own speakers or contract with the AMA to do so instead).
- Attract new members. AMA uses the [marketingpower.com](http://marketingpower.com) site and the webinars—which are free and open to anyone who wants to attend—to attract new members to the organization.

Gwynne says the webinars have met all the organization's goals very well. Tens of thousands of people attend AMA webinars every year, a remarkable increase from the few thousand that could attend events in person.

Webinars also allow the AMA to target content at specific audiences, without incurring high costs or taking big risks. "We can get niche content out that we couldn't afford to put on a live event for, with not just speaker and venue fees, but food, transportation, and all that extra stuff included," says Gwynne. "Now we can do it online for a nominal fee." This also lets the organization test topics to see if they generate enough interest for an in-person event down the road.

Best of all, the webinars are generating real money for the organization. "When we started in 2002 our sponsorships were very small, and we just wanted to break even—that was how we pitched it to our CFO," says Gwynne. "But within three years, our revenues increased by 111 percent, mainly due to the [webinars]." Sponsors are finding them valuable for lead generation and brand building.

Trying to boost memberships has also been a success. Since most of the AMA's members are individuals, the economic downturn affects membership rolls—people simply can't afford the dues if they are unemployed. But throughout the recession, the AMA's membership numbers remained flat—it was gaining new members even as it lost old ones. And the organization has discovered that if people attend three or more webinars, they are more likely to attend an in-person event and/or become a member.

## **FINDING THE RIGHT TECHNOLOGY PARTNER**

When it started the webinar initiative, the AMA knew it needed to purchase the necessary software and hardware—but it also budgeted for a full-time program manager to ensure the quality of the content and to strengthen its relationships with potential sponsors. It hoped to break even within the first year, and it did. But Gwynne says they also needed to consider the value of softer benefits, like increased member loyalty and the perceived higher value of the organization. Only later did the AMA hope to make some money—and it managed to do that, too.

The AMA uses ReadyTalk as its conferencing provider, which Gwynne says has a superb product and even better customer service. "We chose them for their commitment to their technology and their customers," she says. "There was openness and honesty, and the product is so easy to use. They have a real commitment to excellence." Most critical in looking for a Web conferencing provider, she says, was finding reliable customer service. The AMA has a dedicated support rep, so it doesn't have to worry that one of the webinars will fail because of technical difficulties—a critical factor when you're broadcasting live to thousands of people.

For Alli Libb, online event program manager, customer service is important, but so is ease-of-use—for attendees, hosts and presenters. She says ReadyTalk's training is terrific—fun, entertaining and effective—but the platform is so easy to use, even for first-timers, that she

- What to look for in a Web conferencing provider:**
- Scalability – support for thousands of participants
  - Customizability – ability to brand and customize event e-mails and Web pages, and quickly create a polished registration page
  - Pre- and Post-Event Tools – marketing campaigns, social media promotion, reminder e-mails, post-conference surveys, follow-up e-mails to attendees and no-shows, immediate access to reports and recording
  - Recording Features – industry-standard formats, embeddable media player, social media promotion, easy editing tool, customizable playback registration, automated podcasting
  - Open APIs – allows for integration with other key systems like Eloqua and SFDC

Karen Gwynne offers the following best-practices recommendations for webinar success:

- Put content before the revenue. “If you don’t deliver a quality program, it won’t last. To get people to spend an hour of their time with you, you must offer top-notch, relevant content at a level they can’t get anywhere else.”
- Partner with a provider you can count on for customer service and support. “When we didn’t have that, we always worried whether the event would go off OK. It’s a reflection on us if the software isn’t living up to expectations.”
- Dedicate one or more program managers to work on the events, help sponsors, and work with the audience as needed. “This will ensure that everything you do, end-to-end, is the best that it can be. In the long run, a program manager and staff will pay for itself, and then some.”

can set up a registration page “in minutes.” Attendees, of course, don’t need any training at all to get the most from the webinar experience, and the platform ensures there aren’t any technical barriers standing in the way of people who want to attend.

Gwynne also likes the fact that ReadyTalk asks the AMA for recommendations on new features and capabilities; she’s looking forward to support for video, something she and her team requested. She also values the provider for its own thought leadership; she often attends ReadyTalk’s webinars on how to best leverage the technology, as well as other useful events on management best practices and boosting personal productivity.

The AMA also considered price, of course; Gwynne says that even with a dedicated support person, ReadyTalk came in at the low end of the spectrum. In fact, the pricing was so good, the AMA started using the ReadyTalk product for its internal conferencing, too—and it saved 50 percent on conferencing costs in the process.

For maximum event success, the AMA makes ready use of Q&A and polling within the webinars themselves, and it records and archives all its events so that members can review them after the live session. Speakers are looking forward to the ability to incorporate video content into the webinars, too. The organization also uses the ReadyTalk technology to develop podcasts, executive sessions, and other interactive content, which it can record and use in many different ways and for many audiences.

Next up for the AMA: Paid webinars with content developed by the organization itself. These won’t be sponsored; instead, members will pay an additional fee to attend them, thereby increasing revenues for the organization. As Gwynne notes, members who can’t attend in-person conferences are often eager—sometimes even desperate—for the information they contain, and webinars can help fill that gap.

But Gwynne says the best proof of the effectiveness of its webinars comes from the AMA’s members: “We have a large academic community, and they use our webinars in the classroom for teaching. That’s the biggest compliment we could get and a clear sign the program works.”

## CONTACT US

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Buenos Aires  
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Shanghai  
Silicon Valley  
Singapore  
Sophia Antipolis  
Sydney  
Taipei  
Tel Aviv  
Tokyo  
Toronto  
Warsaw

**Silicon Valley**  
331 E. Evelyn Ave. Suite 100  
Mountain View, CA 94041  
Tel 650.475.4500  
Fax 650.475.1570

**San Antonio**  
7550 West Interstate 10, Suite 400,  
San Antonio, Texas 78229-5616  
Tel 210.348.1000  
Fax 210.348.1003

**London**  
4, Grosvenor Gardens,  
London SW1W 0DH, UK  
Tel 44(0)20 7730 3438  
Fax 44(0)20 7730 3343

**877.GoFrost**  
[myfrost@frost.com](mailto:myfrost@frost.com)  
<http://www.frost.com>

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For information regarding permission, write:

Frost & Sullivan  
331 E. Evelyn Ave. Suite 100  
Mountain View, CA 94041