

How Effective Are Video Teleconferences?

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The Oregon State University Extension Energy Program produced its first video teleconference, in June 1992, to explain building commissioning—a relatively new concept in the Northwest—to architects, engineers, utility people, general contractors and others involved in design and construction of new commercial buildings. Site facilitators asked the audience to complete and return a brief survey that would help the energy staff determine the effectiveness of video teleconferences as an educational delivery method. Results indicate that participants liked the method and felt they learned the information presented. Although they would have liked better graphics and more-polished speakers, the overall reaction was positive.

Introduction

Writing in a 1991 issue of the *Journal of Applied Communications*, Dave King (p. 55) said he felt the jury was still out on video teleconferencing. Results of a survey of those who attended the video teleconference we produced in 1992 may help the jury reach a verdict, even though our topic and audience were not typical of Extension topics and audiences. After all, as recently as 1990 a video teleconference was not a typical Extension method (Bouare and Bowen, p.6).

The topic of our video teleconference was building commissioning.

The target audience included architects, engineers, utility people, general contractors and others involved in design and construction of new commercial buildings.

The teleconference format included a main speaker, four panelists, and a moderator. The speaker spoke for 35 minutes, followed by a five minute intermission. Each panelist then spoke for five minutes. After that, they responded to questions from the viewing audience.

The teleconference was broadcast to 17 sites in Oregon, Washington, Montana and Idaho. Site fa-

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ilitators handed out an eight-question survey to the 150 participants in the teleconference.

Results

One hundred fifteen surveys were returned, with 100% of participants indicating they would attend another teleconference if it were on a topic of interest.

After listing the teleconference goals, we asked how successful we were in meeting those goals. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being "most successful," 8% rated the teleconference 1; 51% rated it 2; 29% rated it 3; 10% rated it 4; and 2% rated it 5.

In contrast to a 1988 study in Arizona (Iams & Marion, p. 13) that found 10 miles to be the maximum distance respondents were willing to drive to attend an educational meeting, 66% of our respondents said they would have traveled one hour, one way, to attend the program if a traditional classroom format had been used to present the information. Twenty five percent said they would have traveled two hours, one way. One respondent would have traveled six hours, one way!

Although participants ranked the traditional speaker-audience format as the most effective way of receiving the information, they ranked the teleconference format second, a videotape of the topic third, and, a publication fourth.

But when we said, "given the time constraints of your job, what method is the most convenient way to learn this material," the traditional speaker-audience format dropped to fourth place (20%). The teleconference format was named first by 32%; videotape second with 26%; and a publication third with 22%.

Ninety minutes seemed to be the right length for the teleconference:

83% said the length was "just right." Thirteen percent said it was too short, and 4% said it was too long.

Participants were able to ask questions of the teleconference panel via telephone, fax or electronic mail. We asked, in the survey, what method they found most effective for interacting with speakers. Thirty seven percent favored telephoning questions to an operator who would relay questions to the speakers; 34% said they like to ask their questions directly to speakers via an open telephone line. Twenty seven percent favored faxing questions to an operator who relayed them to speakers. Two percent favored electronic mail.

In written comments, participants said they would have liked better graphics, more-polished speakers, and accompanying handouts or publications.

Additional written comments, however, indicated that we succeeded in teaching them what building commissioning is and what its costs and benefits are. These comments were consistent with their ranking of how well we met our goals.

Conclusions

Because video teleconferences are one way to train people throughout a region (King, p. 50), they are worth looking at seriously. And as John G. Richardson (p. 23) said, "Extension agents and communicators need to be aware of the effectiveness of their various information delivery methods and aware of the new delivery technologies... Furthermore, as newer communications media...are introduced, agents need to know how well clientele accept these newer sources."

Video teleconference participants who answered our survey provide evidence that this new delivery

technology is a useful method of delivering information to Extension audiences.

References

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