

Computer technology continues to leap ahead and at *Facilitate* we like to keep an eye on developments and look creatively at ways of making new technologies work for our clients. Webcasting has been available for some time, but early technology was clumsy and unreliable. Recent advances, in our view, make the medium a viable one for the first time, so we have prepared a brief run-down of the technology and our own assessment of how it can be used.

1 What is a webcast?

Put simply, it's a broadcast over the Internet, either live or recorded. Like television, a webcast delivers sound and pictures simultaneously, but unlike television it does this down a telephone line. The technical limitations of the Internet mean that a webcast is not as good in terms of quality as a television broadcast, but it is considerably cheaper and potentially accessible to a larger audience. In addition, recent software advances have made the webcast a viable educational medium and one that is far less expensive and complicated to set up than the current medical satellite television services.

Although a webcast can be live, like television, this brings with it substantial disadvantages. The time of a live webcast may not suit everyone and there is no opportunity for repeating the webcast once it's over. While the spontaneity may be an attraction to some healthcare professionals, it is daunting for most as it is an unfamiliar environment. A recorded webcast, however, can be viewed on demand, making it especially convenient to the target audience. It also allows the opportunity to edit the program, making it more professional and tailored to the audience's needs.

2 When is a webcast an option?

Any satellite symposium or stand-alone meeting is a potential webcast. Such events are an important way for pharmaceutical companies to educate physicians about new approaches to treatment and to communicate product data. However, taking delegates to congresses is expensive, and due to other commitments, not everyone important to the sponsoring company may be able to attend.

One option is to produce and distribute a highlights report or journal proceedings, but while these publications have their role to play they lack immediacy and are a poor substitute for the real thing. Video is an alternative, particularly for use at small regional meetings arranged by the field force; but for the individual physician who prefers to study alone, a webcast is the ideal medium.

Webcasting is a useful communication tool in bringing together the immediacy of television with the interactivity of the internet. Unlike some webcast systems, the one *Facilitate* recommends uses *web streaming*. This means that the video and audio files start playing as soon as they are activated by the viewer, without waiting for the entire file to download. The webcast flows into the viewer's computer in a continuous stream. There is also the option for two-way communication between those watching the program and those supplying the material.

3 How does a webcast work?

The symposium is recorded on video and placed on a dedicated website (this can be immediately or within 24 hours of the event, depending on the degree of editorial control that is required). Viewers see a composite picture that includes a video recording of the speaker, synchronized with the slides the speaker refers to, along with the option of speaker notes and thumbnail outlines of the whole slide presentation.

The advantages of the system are that it is a timely and inexpensive way to communicate with a geographically diverse audience. The webcast can be CME accredited and, if appropriate, a CME questionnaire included. A webcast can be used to enhance an existing website, with all of the video and audio files hosted on a linked but separate streaming media server that will not produce any extra burden on the existing web server.

4 How is a webcast created?

Creating a successful webcast requires careful consideration of two areas:

- Scientific development and communications
- Technical planning

At *Facilitate*, we emphasize the importance of a thorough briefing for the faculty prior to committing to the webcast. For example:

- Faculty should understand the objectives of the webcast, how it is to be used, and the processes involved in creating it
- Written permission is required for recording their presentations for subsequent use specifically for the webcast
- The slide set for each presentation *must* be available in advance of the event and once submitted, cannot be changed in either content or order.

From a technical perspective we recommend the following points are considered:

- Agree the schedule for webcast going "live" (eg, 24 hours after the event)
- Brief and book the technical supplier (we use a single company that takes complete responsibility for video recording, synchronizing with presentations, and setting up the webcast)
- Agree visual format of webcast (eg, use of branding in screen design).

The process for generating a webcast of a scientific symposium follows the process shown in Figure 1.

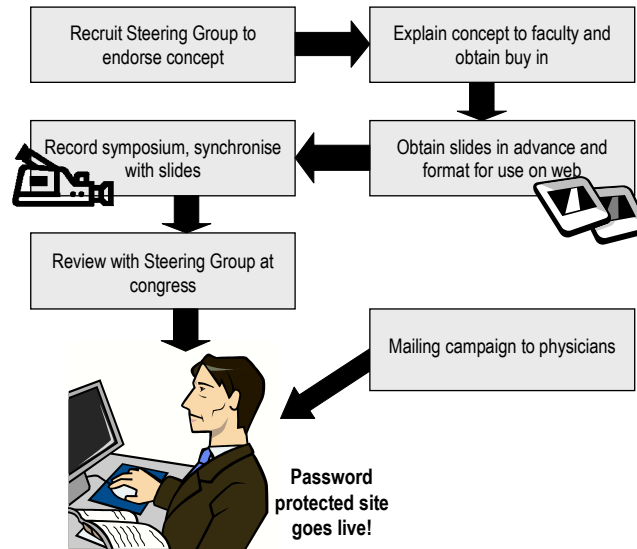


Figure 1 – The process for developing a webcast

5 What are the technical requirements?

Anyone wishing to view a webcast must have a multimedia PC or Mac with a reasonably high specification (see table below). This is unlikely to be a problem for most computer users, but should be checked in advance with the more important members of the target audience.

PC	Mac
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 266MHz Intel Pentium processor or better • 64MB or more of RAM • 56.6Kbps or better modem • 16-bit sound card and speakers • 16-bit color or better video display card • Windows 95 (Media Player 6.4), Windows 98, Windows 2000, Windows 2000 ME (final release version only for Media Player 7.1) or Windows NT 4.0 with Service Pack 4 Media Player 6.4 • Microsoft Internet Explorer 4.01 or later or Netscape 4.05 or later 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mac OS 8.1 or later • 32 MB RAM • Virtual Memory turned on, set to 64MB • 604 PowerPC* (200 MHz or better) • 56Kpbs modem Internet connection • Microsoft Internet Explorer 4.01 or later or Netscape 4.05 or later

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If you have any comments on this fact sheet, please contact Ann Dieckmann (ann@facilitate-uk.com)