

## **Virtual Meetings: Participatory Approaches to Facilitating Meetings Online**

### **Ideas from Participants on How to Maximize Participation**

**June 18, 2015**

#### **Group 1: Preventing Death by PowerPoint**

##### **How can we ensure that presentations in virtual meetings are interactive and engaging?**

- It can be difficult to monitor the chat box during a presentation. This can be distracting for a facilitator or for participants trying to follow both the chat box and the oral dialogue. An approach that may help to address this issue is to assign specific roles for the event, including a chat box facilitator (as opposed to a facilitator or producer) who could be responsive to conversation taking place in the chat box.
- Facilitators may want to add time into agenda to go over the chat box to recap questions and notable comments. Some participants took the approach of collecting questions from the chatbox and having them sent to presenters to answer and email out responses after the meeting. Alternatively, the facilitator could designate someone on the production team to copy questions out of the chat box as they appear and paste them to the side in a presenter-only area or paste them into a separate document (like Google Docs).
- Allowing sufficient time for question and answer (Q&A) after a presentation is important. One participant sets aside at least 10 to 15 minutes for Q&A after a presentation.
- Another good practice is to work with presenters beforehand to talk about content, but also to ensure enough time is being set aside for discussion and engagement. In some cases, this means suggesting that they cut back on the technical knowledge in their presentation. In these cases, you could still send the longer version of the PowerPoint presentation out to participants after the meeting.
- There may be evidence that making something active happen on the screen every 3 or 4 minutes (e.g. changing the layout in Adobe Connect) can help to increase engagement. Polls and introductory questions before a presentation can also help to ramp up participation.
- Going over the agenda at the beginning of the meeting and recapping what was discussed at previous meetings (for groups that meet regularly) may help to keep people on track.
- If you have the opportunity to do multiple “deeper dive” discussions and there is not enough time to cover this in plenary with the whole group, you might break up into two separate calls or into breakout rooms (in Adobe Connect) in order to engage more people on a deeper level. This may require recruiting “expert” to guide the separate discussion or assigning facilitators/organizers of the small groups.
- Sometimes technology will not go as planned (or a presenter does not show up), so you need to be ready with a back-up plan in case this happens.
- If technical troubles arise, have the facilitator toss out some discussion questions or get conversation moving until everything is back on track.

## **Group 2: Stimulating Oral Discussion**

### **How do you ensure that all participants engage in interactive discussion using their microphones?**

- As a facilitator, make an effort to stop talking and invite others to speak. Make people feel that they are being heard by acknowledging participants for speaking up and incorporating their feedback with your own. People like to see their ideas acknowledged and put to use.
- As the facilitator, it is important to be clear in the questions that you ask of the group and give them the reason why you are asking them. People are not likely to respond well (and most often won't respond at all) if they don't understand what you're looking for when you ask a question.
- At the beginning of a meeting, have participants introduce themselves and let others know that it is okay to speak. Supporting participants in testing their microphones can be helpful—optionally through an ice breaker activity at the beginning. This can set a positive tone right away and make people feel comfortable from the start in using their mics.
- As a producer or facilitator, you could type a message in chat box to introduce new topics and instructions.
- If you'd like more control over the flow of discussion, you could suggest that people raise their hand before they speak.
- Try sticking with open questions instead of closed questions to encourage more dialogue and debate.
- Delegating group members to lead activities before the meeting even begins is another approach that can help to increase participation.
- Consider sending out questions to participants ahead of time and asking all the participants to come prepared to discuss the questions during the meeting.
- Someone from this group posed the question of whether there was a maximum number of participants you could have in a participatory online meeting? A representative from the group suggested that it may, in fact, be possible to do a participatory meeting with over 100 people, but it would depend on the circumstances.