

Be Not Afraid of the Webinar!

by Jean Wilcox Hibben, PhD, CG[SM]

When I first heard the term *webinar* my mind conjured up images of some gnarly beast with webbed feet and claws, ready to tear my business to shreds. Obviously I watched way too many horror movies in my younger days (*The Giant Gila Monster* and *The Tingler* were two particular favorites). But I was so wrong. Like many other terms (back in the 1980s, the English language began to be overtaken by words that were invented or re-invented with the advent of computers—and this was prior to the Internet), *webinar* is simply a combination of *web* (as in "the world wide . . .") and *seminar* (in which the *sem* is removed). Actually, a *seminar* is simply the Anglicized version of *seminarium,* Latin for "seed plot." (Interestingly, other words that come from the same root word *seed* include *semen* and *disseminate.*[1]) So a seminar is where it is expected that seeds of knowledge will be disseminated (pardon my redundancy). With that reasoning, a *webinar*, then, should be where, um, webs are disseminated? (See what happens when an etymologist is asked to write about webinars?)

Actually, that presumption may not be far from the truth. After all, the word *web* has been around a lot longer than the Internet and often refers to a complicated netting or something woven.[2] When we put together a webinar, a great amount of information is woven together to arrive at the final product which, hopefully, will not tie up the attendees' brains in a complicated series of threads. So perhaps *webinar* is the perfect term for the Internet-hosted seminar.

All that said, I shall share a little of my webinar experience of Saturday, 31 March, when I was involved in the Utah Genealogical Association's Virtual Chapter's very first, inaugural webinar. (Here's where the virtual fireworks go off.) Actually, the beginning of this experience was when a representative of the newly formed Virtual Chapter (how do you know who is really a member?) cornered me in St. George, Utah, after hearing my very intense, though often funny, presentation "Clue to Clue: Tracking a Family over Time and Miles." She thought it would be a perfect candidate for their first attempt at a webinar. It sounded like fun to me and, if anything went wrong, we could use the decades-old excuse "there were technical problems" and I would not be to blame.

Of course, no one wants to have any glitches in the process so the next step was to organize a run through of the equipment and system that would carry my PowerPoint slides magically into cyberspace and to many computers, all at the same time as I was operating them on my own computer. (A moment of silence to respect the computer gurus who make these things happen, please. . . . That's enough; they need to go back to work.) We had just over a month between the time I was booked and the date of the debut, so finding a time when I was available, the two wonderful operators (each had a role, but I confess I don't know who did what)—Janet Hovorka and Suzanne Curley—were available, and the appropriate technician was able to be contacted on a moment's notice was not easy. But we did find a single hour (accounting for the one hour time difference from Pacific to Mountain Time) that we could all "meet" (and, in all seriousness, I am not giving credit to the horrendous amount of time that was spent with Janet, Suzanne, and one or more

[1] *http://www.word-origins.com/definition/seed.html*
[2] *http://www.word-origins.com/definition/web.html*

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techs to get the preliminaries arranged for our hour run-through, none of which involved me.

> Aside: Gena Ortega arranged for me to do a webinar about two years ago, which probably means it was closer to four years ago, and we had some difficulties with slide transference. That is not a psychological term where I imagine myself in love with my slides. It simply means that my PowerPoint slides did not convert to the system that was used; at least, not as well as I would have liked. And I am not one to use just a few slides; I use a lot and many of them employ motion. My biggest fear with this experience was that the slides would malfunction or that the material on them would not be compatible with the viewing program.

The run-through was a perfect idea. We had a little trouble getting my 87 slides (don't gasp) to load so we devised a couple of backup plans.

> Hint #1: Have at least one backup plan for anything involving technology or availability of necessary human intervention.

We discovered that my 2003 WordArt (which transferred into my 2007 PowerPoint without a hitch) did not like the system that was to be used. I made a note of all slides using WordArt and spent the next couple of days making alternative displays for them. Not a big problem.

We had some sound difficulties and discovered that the system over-rode the volume control on our computers! (Very strange: my volume was on "mute" and I was hearing myself—as an echo—over the computer.) We discovered that sound needed to be controlled on the system.

> Hint #2: Be sure to check all your controls in advance so you know where they are when "the heat is on."

There was a week between the run-through and the "Show." I sent out copies of the very nice flyer UGA put together and also contacted my mailing list of followers so they would know about the event. I was careful to remind everyone that the time on the flyer was MDT, not PDT. I must have checked my watch and surrounding clocks a dozen times, re-computing the time so that I wouldn't be late to my own party. As planned, Suzanne, Janet, and I "met" on line about 90 minutes before show-time so we could do another run-through of the slides. (I had sent them a revised copy of the slides, with the converted WordArt.) The slides wouldn't load from their end. So I tried from my end and, while I couldn't get them to load the week before, they all just jumped on board with my second attempt. (See, a backup plan is a nice thing to have.) Whereas during the run-through the week before my slide transitions sometimes would get hung up, we went through all of them an hour before the program and everything went smoothly. (I hoped that the slides would cooperate again once I got "on the air.")

Some webinars are handled with a headset/microphone plugged into the computer (that's the arrangement I had with Gena's program a few years ago and it went very well), but this system was setup for the speaker to call in on a telephone (it was an 800 number so there shouldn't be any unexpected billing surprises) and then talk on the phone while everyone else listened on their computers. (Janet and Suzanne were also on telephones, in "control" positions, so they could talk if something happened to my connection, voice, or both.) The screen setup showed my photo and the logo for the Virtual Chapter of UGA in the left lower corner, the "roll call" (who signed in) in the left upper corner, and all of the center and right side of the screen was for slide viewing. No chat box window was open so I would not be distracted should anyone try to ask questions or make comments during my presentation. I also was unable to hear anyone but Suzanne and Janet.

Telephone batteries have only so much life. I gathered four of my cordless phones (all sharing the same line) so I could switch to another as needed (and made sure all were fully charged before we began). I had to make one phone switch about halfway through the program.

> Hint #3: Have extra, charged phones available.

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I also elected to use a headset plugged into the phone for convenience in working with my computer.

Hint #4: Consider investing in a headset.

Everything went smoothly. And it was fun, as well. But not hearing feedback was disconcerting (especially since most of my programs use humor and the laughter fuels my enthusiasm). Janet and Suzanne were very polite and neither said a word (nor did they laugh—hmmm), so at times I thought I was broadcasting into outer darkness. That's weird.

I watched my time very carefully and while they said the timing was not super crucial, I wanted to be done with my part of the program within the prescribed hour and then, if people had questions, we could use whatever time people wished.

Hint #5: Have a clock available.

Following my program, I invited questions and the first four or five statements were "thank you" and "great job" (I needed those; thanks, folks). I got only about three or four actual questions. They came in written form in the "chat" window, but I replied orally since I was still hooked up to do so. Had I tried to respond in the "chat," I would have ended up with my answers and the questions/comments overlapping each other and it would have been very confusing.

Hint #6: Respond to chat questions orally, if possible, and clarify what question you are referring to.

The webinar experience was really a positive one for me. I had been asked if I wanted to do it on a live video feed as well and said "no" because I wanted to be comfortable and I think I would have been self-conscious otherwise.

Hint #7: Think very carefully before agreeing to be on a live video feed during your webinar.

Another element that was of great concern was incoming phone calls. Since I called into the webinar system, I turned off my "call waiting" before dialing the 800 number.

Hint #8: Use a phone without "call waiting" or turn off that service before starting.

I also was worried about the dogs, husband, and houseguests, so I made sure everyone understood that I was not to be disturbed and arranged for the dogs to be locked at least two walls away from me. But if there was an emergency of any type, I wanted to have a way to be contacted, so I put my cell phone (on vibrate) close by to cover that contingency.

Hint #9: Communicate with others in the home so that there will be no disruptions.

Have an emergency contact option. That ended up being very necessary when I did the earlier webinar with Gena when I got knocked off line and had to call her to get back on.

Hint #10: Have an emergency contact option.

So, Fear Not the Webinar—it can be a really interesting and fun experience. For people who do family history but cannot (for whatever reasons) attend seminars and/or genealogy meetings, this provides an alternative that keeps them up to date. For you, the speaker, it allows you to present without the cost and time to travel to another location (not to mention the freedom to wear whatever is comfortable).

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