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Videoconferencing

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I have been asked to give a talk on videoconferences, and while I am more than happy to do this, I can only tell you what we do in Illinois. Please remember that what you do in your own states and agencies will vary. My perspective is from a State Library in the Midwest. Our abilities will not be the same as yours. I plan to tell you three things:

1. How conferences are organized in Illinois.
2. Personal experiences
3. Do's and don'ts of videoconferences as we have experienced them in Illinois

How Conferences Are Organized

The Illinois State Library has been doing videoconferences since 1992. Our teleconferencing is not solely limited to government information. As a matter of fact, we have only done one dedicated solely to government information, mainly GPO Access, though documents have been included in other videos dealing with reference work.

The videoconferences have covered a variety of subjects. Past conference titles have included "Promoting Libraries: Telling Your Story to the Media and Public," "The Road Less Traveled: The Americans with Disabilities Act," "First Step in Digitizing," "Back to Basics: Kids and Reading," and "Grants and Grantmanship: How to Design a Successful Grant Application."

The Illinois State Library has sponsored over 35 videoconferences since 1992. The idea is to get the information out to the library community statewide. The best way to do that seemed to be the use of teleconferencing. We found this to be a very beneficial and cost effective way of reaching many members of our library community.

All of the money is provided by the State Library. Funds are budgeted to produce four to six conferences a year, and, due to the success statewide, there has been no problem getting funds for the conferences.

There is one thing that is most important to realize before the library can sponsor a conference or allow them to be shown at various locations throughout the state. There can be no cost to the user. The entire cost is fronted by the State Library.

The conferences are shown in locations throughout the state. We also have taped them for posterity, and the videos can be borrowed through interlibrary loan. The conferences happen because the State Library has the cooperation of the Illinois Information Services agency. This agency tapes the video footage and runs the show when it is live.

Most of our conferences have taped and live footage. This can prove to be a challenge but it seems to work best.

The person at the Illinois State Library who organizes and coordinates the conferences, and thus keeps all of the statistics and contact information, is Jill Heffernan. Jill is the administrative assistant in the Library Development section of the library. I have included her e-mail and phone number on the handout so you can contact her with any questions you may have that go beyond my scope today.

Library Development is primarily responsible for videoconferencing at the State Library. They are in charge of organizing the conferences, coming up with the ideas and carrying them through. More importantly, the money comes out of their budget.

Now to get the statistics out of the way. I have been given information on 27 of the videoconferences sponsored by the State Library. Please be aware that this information is not completely current, it is just used to give you some idea of the costs involved. The average cost of sponsoring a conference has been around \$2,256.00, with the highest price paid of \$3,585.69 and the lowest being \$1,562.50. The average cost per viewer has been \$6.30 (about the price of a movie in Springfield), the high being \$13.98 and the low being \$2.37.

The average number of attendees is 412. The lowest number attending was 135 (that was early on in the records) and the most so far has been 903. The average number of downlink sites is 27, with the most being 32 sites. I will get to that just a little bit later.

This is basically how it works. Development checks the calendar and chooses the dates. Right now their goal is to do six a year, three in the spring and three in the fall. They do not do them in the summer because they feel they will lose the school librarians, and the goal is to reach as many librarians in the state as possible.

Next they contact the "satellite guys" over in the Illinois Information Services office. They confirm the dates with them and then move on to publicity. I am not very good at this next part and if you have any real "technical" questions, I would contact Jill, but here goes. They choose their downlink sites. The sites must have a satellite that is KU Band capable and they must do it free of charge to the State Library as well as the attendees. The only thing I know about KU Band capable is that is the width of the broadcast signal. To find out more please ask your own technical specialist.

Jill then sets about getting the sites for registration and typing up the form. Every library in the state gets information about the conference. The list covers about 4,000 people, including some 20-30 people outside of Illinois who have asked to be put on the mailing list. The information is also put out on our Web site at <www.library.sos.state.il>.

us/>. I have included that on the handout as well.

People are asked to mail, e-mail or fax their confirmation. The downlink sites have a code that is given to them by Development. The code number is also a way to know when a site is calling in with a valid question. We know it is from a registered site and where that site is.

Some people receive the conference through cable access channels or can receive the videotape through interlibrary loan. The list of conference titles can also be found on our Web page.

The final process is an evaluation form. Jill compiles the information including any suggestions for future programs or topic areas.

Our videoconferences have reached over 11,000 people, with an average audience of around 412 people. We have been contacted by many people outside of Illinois, including people from Texas, Colorado, California, Virginia, Michigan, Missouri and Florida. Lest you think we are limited to the people of the United States, we have heard from people in Ireland, Australia, Canada, South Africa and the Virgin Islands.

We have already done two conferences this year. Our first one was entitled "Metadata." Our second "Partnerships for the Future: Librarians and Vendors Working Together" was in March with our next conference, the "4th Annual Trustee Satellite Videoconference: Legal Issues dealing with Library Trustees" on April 24. There are four more in the process of being planned this year.

Personal Experiences

As you probably know, a great deal of work goes into what some might call a little two hour videoconference. It may look easy but believe me it is not. I don't have any statistics to back up what I am about to say, but it takes an average of 10-12 hours of work for every half-hour on tape. Depending on how you work it or what your conference entails, you may have a great deal of writing to do or if you have more of a "live" format, you will need to have conference calls, and plenty of time for electronic mail.

What I am going to do now is talk about planning and implementing a videoconference. I will share my own experiences as well as those of two other members of the Illinois State Library staff who have planned these conferences. They are Anne Craig, head of our new Digital Imaging Program at the State Library who recently completed a conference on Metadata, and Barbara Alexander, network consultant at the State Library. Some of you may know Barb, as she was the Federal documents librarian at Illinois State University before joining us at the State Library. Barb has been heavily involved in the most recent conferences sponsored by the library.

Let's start with me since I know me best. In 1995, I was called by my supervisor to help brainstorm some ideas for a videoconference on technology. I have a background in local theater and tend to be somewhat of a goofball at work. Perhaps these are the qualifications necessary to begin a career with teleconferencing, I don't know.

Anyway, three of us sat around and came up with some ideas. What resulted was "The Technology Game" videoconference. We came up with a game show idea and based it on Jeopardy! Our host was Dick Dos, and we had three contestants. We bullied three other members of the staff to be the contestants, and the game begins.

We came up with questions and answers, some correct, some not, some funny we hoped, and some probably not. When the question was answered, we cut away to the two "geeks" who took the question and answered it in greater detail. It covered the basics; it was 1995, after all. After the script was approved, we went to the studio to film it.

We had it all: TelePrompTers, lights, cameras, microphones, the highest quality of sets and props. The podiums were made out of plastic with little hotel clerk bells. We were warned not to hit them too hard as they may fall over, and, let me just say, one did. One woman hit the bell with great force and saw it go falling through the plastic down to the ground. Needless to say a cut was necessary. The other blooper that needed a cut dealt with Dick Dos and the answer of hard disk drive.

The filming of little two to three minute segments took all day long. The geeks had the look of being in a lab, this was done with some special effects from the studio guys. One word of advice: stay on the good side of these guys. They can make ya or break ya.

You can come up with an idea, and they can come up with better ones. They have the wizardry and know-how to improve on what you already have written and can be helpful in lending a prop or two.

I was not involved with another conference until 1996 when we had a our re-inspection. Since we had personnel coming from GPO (Sheila), it seemed the perfect opportunity to do a conference on government information and to use her knowledge for a videoconference. So we combined the geeks from the "Technology Game" and, after some brainstorming, with a superhero character we called "GPO Man."

He could help a floundering librarian answer a Federal question in a single bound. GPO Access was his greatest tool, and at the time, GPO Access was new. We cooked up some scenarios for GPO Man to come and rescue the information specialist. We had Dorothy Gale from Kansas seeking information on Bob Dole. We had a Russian spy ask for CIA documents, and a CIA agent getting some help from the Economic Report of the President.

When the librarian gave a cry for help, she called for GPO Man who came zooming in. I will now show you a clip or two from the videoconference including the stunningly attractive GPO Man. Needless to say, our GPO Man was not too thrilled with his costume but at least he doesn't wear tights!

After the somewhat amusing skit humor, we had a question and answer session. When you have a Q&A, it is necessary to come up with questions on your own in case nobody calls in. As you know, you can talk to a whole room and not have anybody ask any questions. It's bad enough when this happens in a room full of people but when this happens in a videoconference, you have dead air, which nobody likes. I recommend that you have a few members of your staff that are not "on camera" to call in with questions you have previously

written up and hope that this sparks questions for those watching.

Our GPO conference seemed to be quite popular and one response told us GPO Man was dreamy. OK, it was John Shuler, but it was funny nonetheless. The filming and script writing took up a great deal of time. Once again, it takes a great deal of work to pull off a two-hour show. The first hour of the conference was prerecorded at the State Library over two evenings. The second hour was a live panel discussion with the documents coordinator, Jim Edstrom, as moderator.

I will also give you a warning that, while you should have a core group who writes your script, leave a person or two to critique your work when it is done. As you probably know, after a while it all seems funny to you and also seems to make sense, when that may not be the case.

The third and final conference I have been involved with was called "Strengthening Your Strategy: Advanced Techniques for Reference on the Web." We wised up a little on this one and went beyond our own resources for assistance. This proved to be one of our most successful videoconferences, due partly to the subject matter. 903 people tuned into this one. We received calls from around the country as well as Ireland and Australia for this one.

The conference dealt with the different types of search engines on the Web and the strengths and weaknesses of each. Anne Craig coordinated with other members of ILLINET, our statewide library network, to come up with scenarios about using different search engines. She posted messages to our statewide reference list-serv to get a fresh perspective from people outside the State Library. Since we are a special library, it was useful to have input from academic and public libraries.

Combining the scripts of different people proved to be a challenge. While the whole burden of writing the script did not fall to us, we had to be sure it was something we could film in one or two evenings and that the scripts would address the questions we were asking. For the most part, it worked out well. We did come up with a problem or two in filming.

For most of the scenes someone who worked at the State Library was the "librarian." Since we were familiar with the space and had done a conference before, it would be a little easier when it came to filming. One of the people we had write a scenario did so and scripted himself as the librarian which was fine, we figured that we wouldn't have to worry about it because he would know it because he had written it. WRONG!

When it came time to film, this person decided that each time he did the scripted search, he would search it in a slightly different manner. It seemed to us, that he did not realize that this was not a real reference interview, but a scripted one with a beginning, middle and end and a point to make. It was very difficult to edit his section into anything usable because he did not repeat himself. Otherwise, it was a relatively painless shoot; we even did a few commercials for search engines like Excite and Yahoo!

This was the last conference I was directly involved in. I have talked to others who have done them recently and now I would just like to share with you some of the do's and don'ts

of videoconferences as we have discovered in our seven years of doing them.

DO

- Use humor
- Rehearse as much as you can
- Get your PowerPoint or whatever presentation you are using to your technical people a few days ahead of the conference
- Be on good terms with your technical people. They make or break you.
- If using a panel discussion, give each member a "moment" to shine.
- Get a good moderator
- The more specific the topic the better the conference
- Screen your phone calls
- Use a change of pace: Nobody wants to see 2 hours of talking heads
- Keep it to two hours. The attention span will wander

DON'T

- Revise or improve your script on a daily basis
- Wait for the Internet to load. Use a canned demo for filming
- Leave things to chance: script as much as you can, but leave a little room for improv
- Leave time for "dead air"
- Wait till the last minute; it will show

A few of the other lessons learned are, no matter how good a public speaker your presenter is, there is a difference between public speaking and on camera speaking. Given the limitations we sometimes encounter, i.e., we are not a Hollywood studio, big movements and wandering around the room are not kosher on camera. Your movements are limited. Remember you are reaching a large group but the camera is the one person to whom you are talking.

If possible, try to get someone experienced. Life is so much easier when you have someone who knows what they are doing. Good organization skills are a must as well.

Remember, there is work to do after the conference. Thank you notes, and in our case, we

send tapes out to the participants. There are follow-ups to do and evaluation forms to assess.

Remember the difference between tape and live broadcasting. With videotape, you can film it more than once and if worst comes to worst, you can edit. This is not possible with live on camera work as any blooper television show can attest.

Believe your would-be speakers if they tell you that they a) aren't any good on camera, b) are shy about being on camera, or c) are not good public speakers.

We have had folks in our tapes who have not felt comfortable on camera and believe me it shows! Once you get through the normal, "oh, not me, I can't!" to the really serious, " NO REALLY!", believe them. Your conference will be better for it.

To the best of your ability, try to get compatible people for a panel discussion. When your panel members clash, your live discussion will pay the price. Sometimes, of course, this cannot be avoided. In the preliminary, try to feel out your panel members as much as possible.

Satellite time is expensive, so use it!

Something is going to go wrong, so **BE PREPARED** and don't let it upset the apple cart.

In conclusion, I would say, get a good group together, have a solid idea and have fun with it. It is a learning process. The Illinois State Library has sponsored many conferences and lessons are learned on each one. Be open and learn. It has been an excellent way to communicate throughout the state and reach thousands of people with technology that is readily available.