

Online Event Disasters: What We Did to Avoid, Prevent & Recover

You may have read our earlier paper: “10 Nightmares that Can & Do Happen in Live Online Events ... & How to Avoid Their Ruining Your Event!” The “nightmares” below are even worse!

As we've said before and it's oh so true: Knowing what the potential nightmares and disasters can be is the best way to prepare for and avoid them. Here are more examples that we hope will benefit you.



1. Speaker Forgot:

Hard to believe (as we're super thorough in communications, coordination and directions) but we had an event years ago featuring a professional, who was high level in his field, where he simply didn't show up. There were two other speakers on the panel and we moved him to last while staff called him. Couldn't reach him. We had to go live with the event and were counting on him showing up a few minutes late. He didn't. We called again. He said he had forgotten and was tied up. This was after lots of planning, coordination and a pre-event practice session with speakers.

Even though there were two other speakers, his presence was very important to the success of this program. So much so that, while Moderator for the event, Marcia turned the reigns to a (well-qualified) colleague and stepped away to speak with the man. When he repeated that he was tied up she very diplomatically let him know that the program was underway, his role as an expert was very important to the audience, we had publicized the event widely

and it was too late to make other arrangements. He said he could work it out and joined the event five minutes later.

Marcia was committed to his keeping his commitment ... and persuasive in her approach. Had there been a family emergency or true crisis at work, of course we would have understood. That wasn't the case. Nor was it a fear of public speaking. It seemed to be the case of disorganization and forgetfulness. The responsibility rested on him ... just as our responsibility was to our audience – who had paid to attend the event plus the future audiences to whom we would be promoting the event recordings.

The story had a happy ending and, in the end, he was gracious about it and his participation made a valuable difference in the program.

2. Speaker Off-Course

A Webinar was planned for a nationwide audience featuring a major national figure in his field. As always, we coordinated plenty in advance and thoroughly on all aspects of the event. He gave us two choices of topics (from past presentations) that he could present on. We discussed them with him in the pre-event coordination session -- that we almost always do before our online events ... unless a speaker has plenty of experience presenting online, using the type of technology we use, will be using equipment (computer/phone/mic) that he/she knows to be of good quality for online events and will be airing from a location known to be good for this purpose using this equipment.

We chose from the two topics, discussed the slides that he would be using, looked at some of the slides from his screen, and agreed on the specific timing, format and flow of the program. The format was to include introductions by Marcia followed by a 20 minute

presentation by the speaker on a popular topic, with that followed by a 40 minute interview of the speaker.

The event was begun as planned. Marcia introduced the speaker and started the process of switching to his screen so that the audience could see his slides. He casually responded that he had no slides – with no explanation and as if he didn't know what she was talking about!

His response made it appear that we hadn't planned the program well, to include visuals and to be communicating in advance with the speaker. However, rather than embarrass him she moved on and left her introductory slide in place, as if in a Webcast. She then turned the program to the speaker for his 20 minute address. He spoke ... on generalities about his organization, not on the planned topic ... for a total of 5 minutes, then stopped. Hard to believe but that was sum and total of his presentation!

Again there was the risk of our appearing disorganized. However, rather than embarrass him she quickly kicked into gear thinking up questions on the scheduled subject and turned it into a 15 minute interview. His planned topic had been promoted widely and audience members came to hear it ... and hear it they did, albeit not in the way we expected.

He was also supposed to have a second set of rolling slides that would run during part two of the program, which didn't happen either. But, after completing the impromptu interview Marcia moved on to the 40 minute interview on other topics, as were mapped out in advance and shared with the speaker so he would be prepared.

Both interviews were informative and went well ... but the program could have been a mess if the Moderator hadn't been super quick on her feet, exercised great judgment under pressure and handled the program smoothly and with finesse.

3. Event Access Blocked

In 2011 we hosted a three-day Virtual Conference. The sessions were open to the public, except for two that were geared to specific target audiences and accessible only through use of a password. The topics were sensitive and the remarks of speakers were to be candid, hence they wanted the session to not be open to the public.

As part of our back-up plan in the case of a power outage or Internet loss (neither of which were likely but could have happened), we assigned someone at a different location to be on as a co-host. The technology was set to give them controls in the event that our office connection was cut-off. If there was a problem they would keep the event connected and make due until Marcia, as the Host/Moderator, returned.

As it turned out, when we went to log back in after the lunch break the system wouldn't recognize us and allow access. The co-host was already in and Marcia (who was to introduce and moderate the panel) couldn't gain access. The co-host was a Board member and located in another state. We made contact with him, and his associate, by phone since we had no access to the online control panel.

A number of methods were tried to get back into the event and we finally did so, but the situation was far less than "ideal" and there was a brief delay in the program. Some participants also had difficulty gaining access (due to the added requirement of a password) and some left in the process. Fortunately, the recording came out in good shape so those who missed could still have access. Immediately following the half-day session we emailed all who had registered to let them know what happened, that the issue was resolved and that the replay was available.

4. Meeting Set-up Blocked

Glitches and flukes do occur ... and in another such situation, Marcia was to conduct an on-site training for staff of a large client on how to create their own online meetings. The training involved setting-up an online meeting while in their conference room with the participants watching from start to finish. Marcia went to log in to our account for the meeting set-up and the password was not acknowledged. She called technical support and they took a long time to come on the line so she talked about the process, and the use of online meetings, in the meantime. When the tech rep came on he told her that the password she had was incorrect and they weren't authorized to provide the correct one!

You can imagine how this looked, and felt. But she did what she could do. Rather than making the audience wait for the time it would take to attempt going "further up the chain" to resolve it, she ended up having to teach what could be dealt with in the remaining time absent the demos and rescheduled the session.

As it turned out, in a move contrary to company policy, someone with the online meeting company had changed the password as part of a system change earlier in the day, with no notice (or permission). The company profusely apologized but it gave a bad impression to our client at the time. We explained the situation, after we were able to track down what happened (by talking to multiple company reps), and provided a follow-up training session.

5. Presenter Lost Connection

In 2009 we hosted a Webcast for a client where there were roughly 1,200 live participants. The format of the program was different than the norm by featuring brief introductory remarks by a dignitary followed by nearly two hours of Q&A. The topic involved controversy as well as technical issues. Marcia was the Moderator and nonstop

questions were received from the audience. The presenter then lost Internet connection.

Upon realizing that he was gone Marcia took charge of the program and spoke about related topics that would be of interest to the audience and appreciated by the client. She received word that the client's IT Department was working on the issue. She kept the program going well until he was able to reconnect ... and we edited that part of the program out for purposes of the on-demand replay.

6. Phone/Computer Problems

As noted elsewhere, our practice is to convene with presenters in advance of live events, for multiple coordination reasons, one of which is to test with the computer and/or phone they will be using for the event. On occasion presenters have shown up using a different phone or computer ... resulting in problems with connecting or with audio quality once connected. One panelist came on using a cell phone (which we always advise against) and had terrible audio. As he had no access to another phone or a computer with mic, we ended up having to mute him, skip his remarks and we conveyed a few of his value-added comments that he texted us during the session.

Another speaker changed from planned use of a land line to a cell phone for a major event and arrived late as well, after the event was underway. This forced us to test in front of the live audience and lose time plus have to live with substandard audio, given his travels and lack of an alternative. On occasion problems have occurred when a Mac is used rather than PC. Some speakers also encounter problems with the functionality of their computers, like an inability to show their screen or their slides. In some cases we can make due, or use a "work-around" solution when issues with phone or computer

happen; in others we have to be ready in the event a speaker can't be with us with sufficient audio or connection.

7. Weather Disruptions

Recently we hosted a Webinar for a client. A Tropical Depression sprung up unexpectedly and, just as unexpectedly to weather forecasters, quickly grew into a Tropical Storm. As much as we hated to do so we postponed one event given the storm track. As the storm continued on that track the question arose of whether or not to press on with our second event set for that week.

As it developed, the storm was predicted to arrive the night of the event date. Our event was scheduled for 2:00 PM. Though the timing was closer than we wanted, we were planning to go forward, but to move to an alternative location just in case needed for uninterrupted Internet access. However, our client was concerned and called on the morning of the event to ask if we should postpone. Our instinct was to forge ahead.

The weather was clear and sunny. We felt in good shape with the back-up steps already taken and that postponing on such short notice would leave our target audience (including about 250 registrants) unhappy, even though they no doubt would have understood. Getting participants re-registered and the attendance again strong was another question.

The client was happy to defer to our judgment and the event turned out to be a great success. The predicted bad weather actually never even showed up, that day or night, just light rain and no storms – not the norm for a storm like that but great for area residents.

8. Host Lost Access

Years ago, Marcia was the guest on a program with a nationwide and international audience where serious weather problems

occurred along with a near-disaster. She had been invited by the host to make some remarks to his audience. While he wasn't planning on me doing so, she decided to stay after my part was finished as she was interested in the next part of the program. She had been brought in at the beginning in a speaker mode (technology-wise) where she thereby had added control over the technology.

Good thing! A blizzard was happening, and both the host and his support person (who was in a different location doing the recording and providing audio support) were cut off from the event. He had a large audience for the event, and the program would have ended mid-stream if something weren't done, and immediately.

So, being a person of fast thinking, and also not shy, Marcia decided to jump in and take control of the program. She started by letting people know that an interruption had occurred to the host's line and he would be rejoining as quickly as possible. She then talked a bit more about the subject she had been invited to speak on ... and then (as he was not yet get back) she talked about some of his work, events and other training resources ... things she was confident he would welcome their hearing about.

He finally did make it back on ...and he was thrilled with the actions she had taken on his behalf. He actually could hear some of it though he couldn't speak as he was dealing with his support person and the recording arrangements. What could've been a "disaster" for him turned out to be a successful event.

NOTE: These are examples of what can go wrong ... plus some of the steps we've taken to avert disaster or an otherwise unfortunate outcome. Some further examples, also based on long-time real

world experience, are presented in our paper: **“10 Nightmares that Can & Do Happen in Live Online Events ... & How to Avoid Their Ruining Your Event!”**, including actual “Situations” that we’ve encountered and “Solutions” that we devised.

We hope this report is helpful for planning and managing your future events.



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