

How to Produce a Stellar Town Hall

There are too many distractions these days to wing it in your all-hands meeting. From a CEO rap to Oprah Winfrey-style talk show formats, smart communicators are jazzing up such gatherings.



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How to Produce a Stellar Town Hall

Introduction

Two decades ago, a product from the medical technology company Integra LifeSciences was crucial in aiding the recovery of a severely burned girl, and the company frequently used her story in presentations.

The New Jersey-based firm recently brought her and the doctor who performed her surgery to the Integra corporate headquarters to address a town hall meeting, says Gianna Sabella, Director of Corporate Communications.

Several employees were brought to tears as they learned how Integra helped the doctor treat the badly injured girl and improve her quality of life, according to Sabella. Today the woman is married, has a little boy, and is pregnant with her second child.

"This was without a doubt the most moving presentation in the four years that I've managed Integra's town halls," Sabella says.

Talk about inspiration. Whether or not you have stories this moving, there's never an excuse for producing a town hall that puts your audience to sleep—whether they're attending in person or online. In an era of handheld distractions, it's more important than ever to engage your workforce.

"You're taking an hour of your employees' time and want to make those town halls worthwhile and valuable—you want them to have impact," says Jocelyn Sims, internal communications manager at Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago.

"Town halls are an opportunity to build on messaging, share important news, rally the troops and create a collective sense of purpose. We want to do everything we can to have employees leave those town halls feeling inspired, informed and engaged."

Unlike a quick email, the cost of a meeting—good or bad—can be steep. When one company planned an all-hands meeting for several hundred call center employees, a leader calculated how much it cost to bring them in for an hour-long meeting, says consultant Alison Davis of Davis & Company. The price tag was high when one considered the wages of replacement workers to staff the phones during the meeting.

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The lesson, she says, is this: "We need to make these meetings good." Don't waste that precious time.

"If people are sleeping through it, it's hard to imagine they understand the information," adds Bill Accola, vice president of customer success at MediaPlatform. "You want to present the information in a dynamic and interesting way that people are comfortable with."

This guide presents a range of pointers—before, during and after your meeting—to make it a success instead of a snooze.

Planning and Preparation

Plan, plan, plan—and involve local leads.

When General Cable holds a webcast for its global salaried employees, it plans extensively.

"It is necessary to identify your target audience, who the messengers are, the purpose for the meeting, the channel and the desired outcome," says Gina L. Ritter, director of communications and marketing.

The plan establishes webcast leads at every facility—typically an HR manager and an IT partner—and sets the dates, times and requirements. The leads participate in the planning and are armed with a detailed logistics checklist, Ritter says. Pre-invitations are sent out five to seven days before an event so they can save the date, followed by calendar invitations with login and password information.

Among other advance work, Ritter advises, "Prepare a detailed timeline and playbook, which includes all details in one place."

Make it a show.

Does your town hall have to be numbingly staid, with all the suits taking turns droning from the lectern in front? Of course not. Instead, treat your all-employee meeting as an event, like the best of Oprah Winfrey's hugely popular TV shows, Davis says.

Get creative, says Shel Holtz of Holtz Communication + Technology. He recalls a town hall in which the chief executive and his admin delivered the earnings report in rap. In another, top leaders did a routine from "The Blues Brothers."



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"You've got to entertain them if you're going to get their attention," Holtz says.

The Chicago Fed has featured one-on-one interviews in town halls, among them one in which the previous first vice president interviewed the new first vice president, Sims says.

"It provided an engaging way to learn about her and allowed for some informal banter and natural conversation," she says. "The result was a dynamic interaction that was way more interesting than a podium presentation."

Another Chicago Fed town hall—titled "Unplugged and Uncensored"—brought the entire executive committee on stage to field questions and discuss the bank's challenges and opportunities. This approach enabled transparency, bringing top leadership face to face with employees.

Others suggest polling the audience or asking people to stand up if they agree with a particular statement.

Sikich—an Illinois firm providing accounting, advisory and technology services—also found that upping the entertainment value is important, says Matthew P. Stout, director of video and photo services. "Having a live broadcast with an entertaining emcee to keep things moving has really been a plus."

Change the room arrangement.

Most rooms are set up auditorium-style, which immediately sets the mood: Anywhere you sit, you're staring at the back of somebody's head at a distant speaker. It's easy to shake things up just by changing the arrangement, Davis says. Seat your people at tables, or make the presentation like theater-in-the-round.

"That will, right away, as soon as they walk into the room, change their expectations about how it's going to go," Davis says.

Rehearse.

Run-throughs are essential to get the presenter comfortable with the information and convey it in the best possible manner, Accola says. Often when you rehearse, you discover a punchier way to say something or a clearer way to convey a thought or idea.

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"Make sure that you map out the different points that are going to be discussed," he says. "Stick to that map, and work on the plan you've developed to keep things going, and keep on track to make sure people stay engaged and interested."

Tighten your topics.

At a typical meeting, a leader presents about five topics and offers 15 facts about each one, Davis says. "You get a lot of information that is going into short-term memory and has nothing to stick to and goes flying out again," she says.

Don't try to communicate everything you've wanted to say for the past year. Choose one big idea and maybe a couple of supplemental points.

"You have to deliver it succinctly and clearly to the audience," Accola says. "You don't want to get wrapped up in the minutiae."

Bring in a guest speaker.

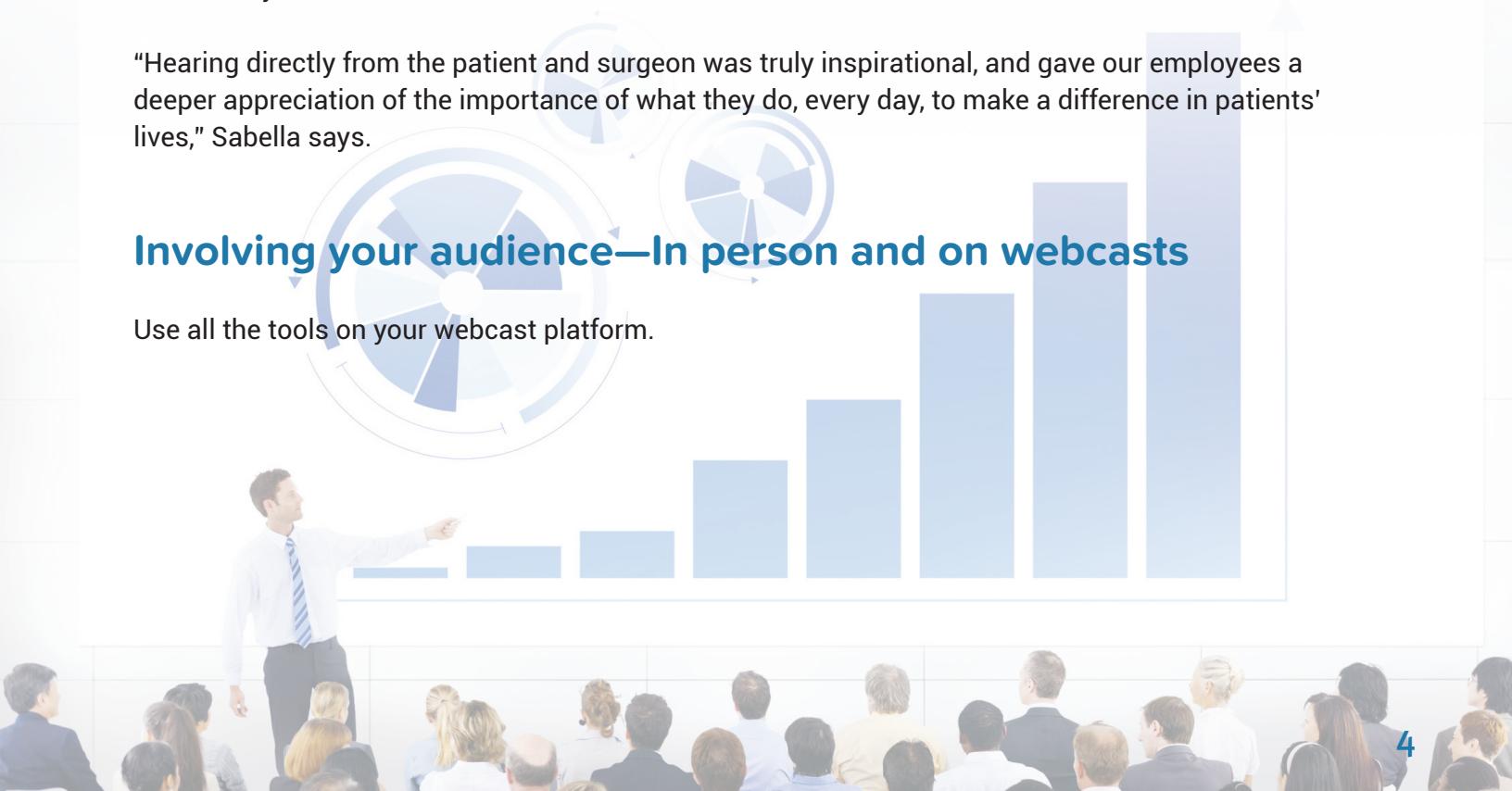
Integra's decision to bring in the patient and her surgeon reminded employees of the importance of what they were doing. When you're not in direct contact with customers, it's sometimes difficult to see the broader impact of your efforts, Sabella says.

The presentation highlighted the importance of every employee in bringing Integra's products to market, she says.

"Hearing directly from the patient and surgeon was truly inspirational, and gave our employees a deeper appreciation of the importance of what they do, every day, to make a difference in patients' lives," Sabella says.

Involving your audience—In person and on webcasts

Use all the tools on your webcast platform.



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People these days are comfortable watching video and interacting with their computers. With web-casting you can expand the audience so people don't all have to fly to your headquarters in Fairbanks, Alaska.

You can convey information and get people to interact. "Get the audience actually participating and contributing," Accola says.

Check it out: polls, chats, white boards. There are all kinds of ways to make the meeting interactive for those watching online.

Davis suggests that you tell your staff: "We're going to start with a poll. Give us your feedback on this particular topic, and then we're going to start talking about it."

Ask your online audience for ideas—and call out names.

Group chat applications help you to convey questions from a web audience to a speaker: A moderator fields the question and then reads it in the meeting.

Then, Accola says, your speaker or panelists can heighten the sense of audience involvement by mentioning the person who posed the question: "Hey, Bob in Cincinnati asked this question."

"That lets other audience members know that people are paying attention to them," Accola says. "They are being heard, and their interactions are being registered."

Feature employees.

The Chicago Fed sometimes calls on employees to share their experiences in town halls, whether it's about their volunteer efforts or collaborative projects, says Sims. "Having people other than the 'usual suspects' presenting can ensure multiple perspectives and experiences are being shared," she says. This goes a long way toward creating a sense of collective purpose.

On a similar note, the Fed has incorporated short videos that feature employees, as when it launched an internal enrichment program that featured employees answering the question, "What do you do at the Fed?"

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This educated employees about the work the Fed does and showcased the variety of roles in the organization. "It helped personalize the program for employees and kick off the initiative in a memorable way," Sims says.

Have your speaker ask questions.

At one chemical company Davis worked with, they had a dynamic, genuine-seeming chief executive.

He was frustrated, however. The corporate communications department would hold town halls for headquarters employees in the ballroom of a hotel, and when the event was over, everyone sat on their hands.

So, in addition to changing the room and limiting the main topic presentation to 20 minutes, the CEO invited a discussion.

No matter how great you think your chief executive's talk was, when the moderator says, "Any questions?" people often clam up. Reacting to this, some communicators or executives plant questions, but that's likely to draw queries that sound rehearsed or sycophantic.

"The problem with asking, 'Are there any questions?' is it makes everyone nervous," Davis says. "People don't want to raise their hand in front of big groups of people; they don't want to ask anything that's challenging. They don't want to appear ignorant: 'Did I miss something, and I'm asking a dumb question?'"

So change the dynamic. A leader or presenter can say, "I'm going to share some thoughts on our customer service initiative, and then I'm going to ask you about it."

Then call on the crowd for their thoughts.

Another option is to start by getting a discussion going among the crowd. If you've set up those tables, it's easy to get them talking to their neighbor. In a ballroom-type setting, have them pull chairs in a circle.



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Tell them they are going to have a conversation for two or three minutes and say, "Then we'd like to hear from some of you about this topic."

Present to a live audience—even when it's a webcast.

Even if you're doing a webcast, present to a live audience.

"Most people, particularly executives, are more comfortable speaking to an audience," Stout says. Doing a prerecorded presentation was easier on him, but not on the presenters, and feedback indicated that it felt stiff and not live.

"There's something about the 'live' aspect of the webcast that people latch onto," Stout says. "It's real, and it's happening now, and they're a part of it, even though they're not in the room."

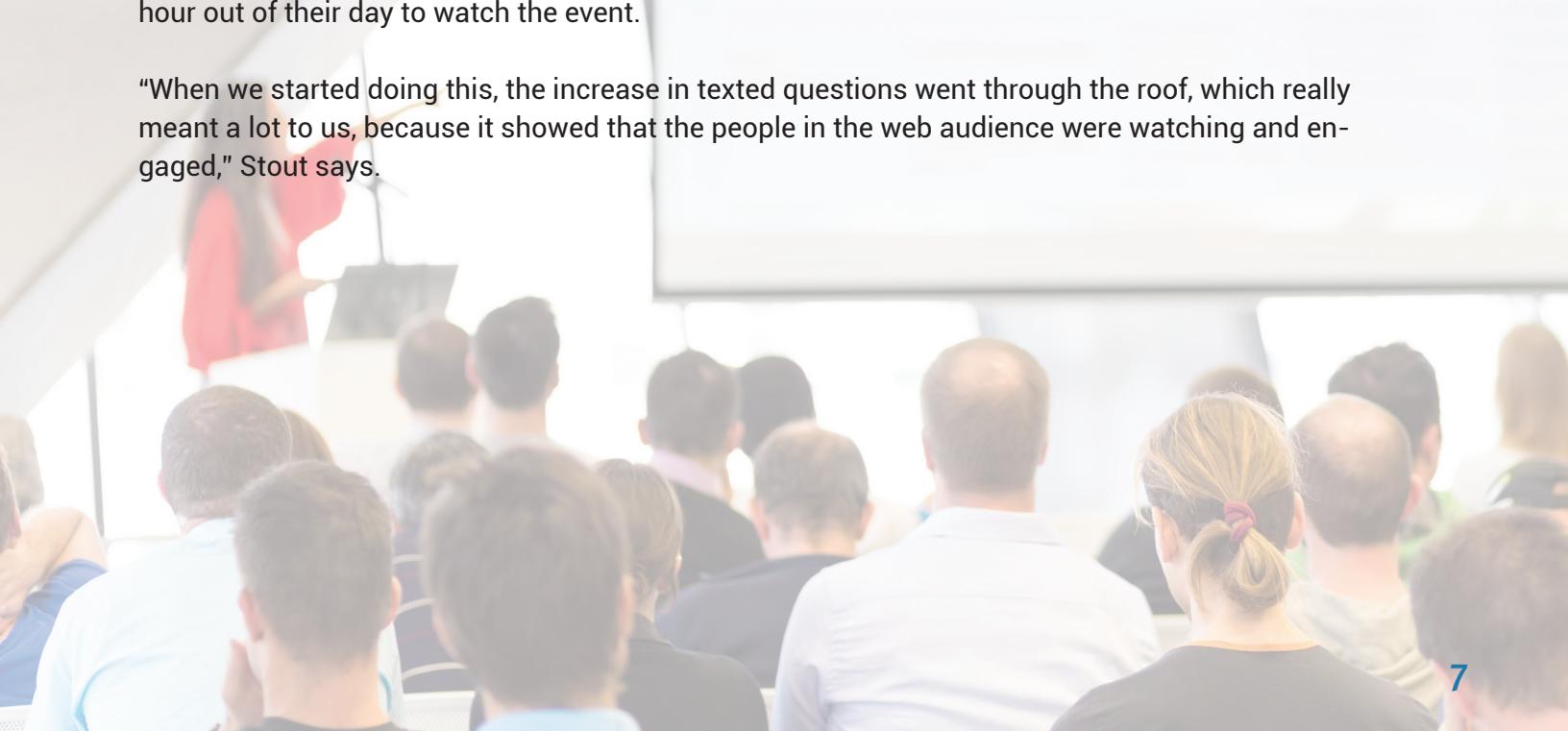
Offer prizes for questions.

Sikich's web audiences like the live presentations and the chance to ask questions directly to the management team, Stout says.

Weeks in advance of the meeting, Sikich send out several company-wide emails with a phone number they can use to submit Q&A questions via text, Stout says. The organization encourages questions by offering prizes such as iPads or cash for questions that are used in the Q&A.

Sikich has found that the questions that arrive before the event are just as valuable as those submitted during the event, helping shape the presentation in advance to offer what people are looking for, Stout says. That is incredibly valuable when the company is asking the entire workforce to take an hour out of their day to watch the event.

"When we started doing this, the increase in texted questions went through the roof, which really meant a lot to us, because it showed that the people in the web audience were watching and engaged," Stout says.



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Images and feedback

Use narrative and images—but be careful with prerecorded video.

The human mind relies on stories and images to move a thought from short-term memory into the stuff you'll recall decades later. That's why visuals on a screen are great ways to drive home a message. If the speaker is talking about a dark economic climate, use a visual of a storm cloud, Davis says.

Now that the mind has an image it can retain, it responds to the idea presented more emotionally. In other words, you remember.

Prerecorded video is riskier. Have you ever been at an event where somebody plays a video that rolls on and on as the minutes go by? A meeting requires a major investment in employees' and leaders' time. Your goal is to create a feeling of togetherness, Davis says. Sitting in the dark watching a video might not be the answer.

"Video can be fabulous if it's very emotional, if it's quick, if it's something that could illustrate or brings to light a concept that otherwise would not work," Davis says. Otherwise, avoid it.

Short, funny-but-educational videos have worked well for Sikich, Stout says: "They break up the presentation a bit and add some levity."

Be transparent about changes.

Sikich hosts a biannual "Sikich Snapshots" town hall meeting where leaders provide a "state of the union"-type message, says Stout.

Each Snapshot is presented to a live audience of 150–200 employees at its headquarters in Naperville, Illinois, and the rest of the company watches via webcast. "We typically grow our company through acquisitions, and Snapshots is a great way to communicate the new additions and explain their impact on the company and the additional services they provide," Stout says.



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Make the video available afterward.

Live streaming is great, but make your meeting accessible to people who can't be there, says Holtz.

"What about people who are on a shift in the manufacturing department?" he says. "What about people who are in another country, and it's 2 a.m. when you're holding your town hall?"

It's also a good idea to cut the video into shorter pieces according to topic, he says. This enables people to watch the portions relevant to them.

Gather feedback.

After your presentation, find out what worked and what didn't. At Sikich, the audience is encouraged to fill out a questionnaire after the webcast, Stout says. The feedback has helped the company make the presentation as educational and engaging as possible.

Similarly, the Chicago Fed surveys employees after each town hall, asking specific questions about content, clarity and format, Sims says. There are also open-ended questions so employees can freely offer feedback and ideas for future topics. The Fed then analyzes the responses.

"Our town halls are meant for our employees, so it's imperative that we ask them how we did and what we can do better," Sims says. "While not entirely scientific per se, the open-ended comments and general survey results do allow us to gauge how successful we were."

The Chicago Fed also weighs its effectiveness by tracking the ongoing employee-wide adoption and support of initiatives or messaging conveyed during the town halls.

Try these tips out, and you'll find your messages are more likely to hit home. And you won't see your employees sliding down in the chair to snooze through your meeting.

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