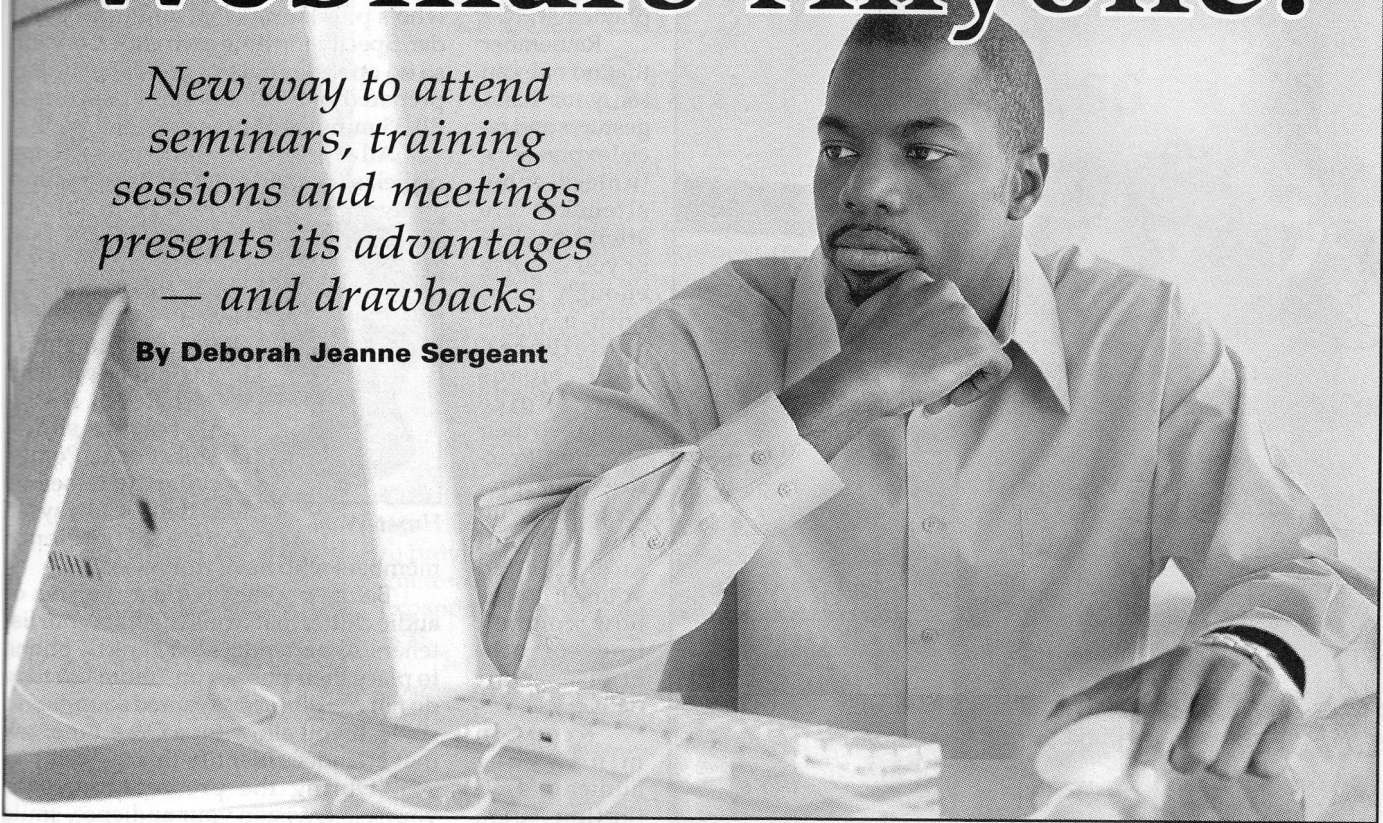# Webinars Anyone?

New way to attend seminars, training sessions and meetings presents its advantages — and drawbacks

By Deborah Jeanne Sergeant

As business owners continue to examine the budget for ways of trimming fat, scaling back on training may seem tempting. But if staff training lags behind the competition's level of training, it can hurt your company.

To scale back on training costs, consider offering webinars instead of sending your people out for training.

Webinars, according to the Wikipedia, are used to conduct live meetings, training or presentations via the Internet. In a Web conference, each participant sits at his or her own computer and is connected to other participants via the Internet. Usually you don't see the participants except for the presenter and the slide presentation that's shown. And usually you may not be able to ask questions, unless you're set up to do so.

Webinars have become popular for many great reasons.

They're convenient. No one has to leave the office (and consultants and home-based workers can catch them at home). They save money on travel expenses and lunches out.

"You can get up to 10 people to gather around a screen, instead of having to pay for each person to go," said T.T. "Mitch" Mitchell, owner of T.T. Mitchell Consulting in Liverpool, which produces webinars.

Because of the cutting-edge technology used, you're more likely to provide employees with the latest information. If you have any consultants or employees working remotely, you can keep them in the loop without requiring them to travel.

Of course, webinars do have a few drawbacks. Employees may feel less connected with their colleagues. Unless a phone-in, chat option or follow-up e-mail response is available, their questions may remain unanswered. It's also

Mitchell

easier for employees to zone out or do something else instead of learning from their webinar. Since they could slack off at a "live" seminar to a certain extent, it's tough to blame the technology.
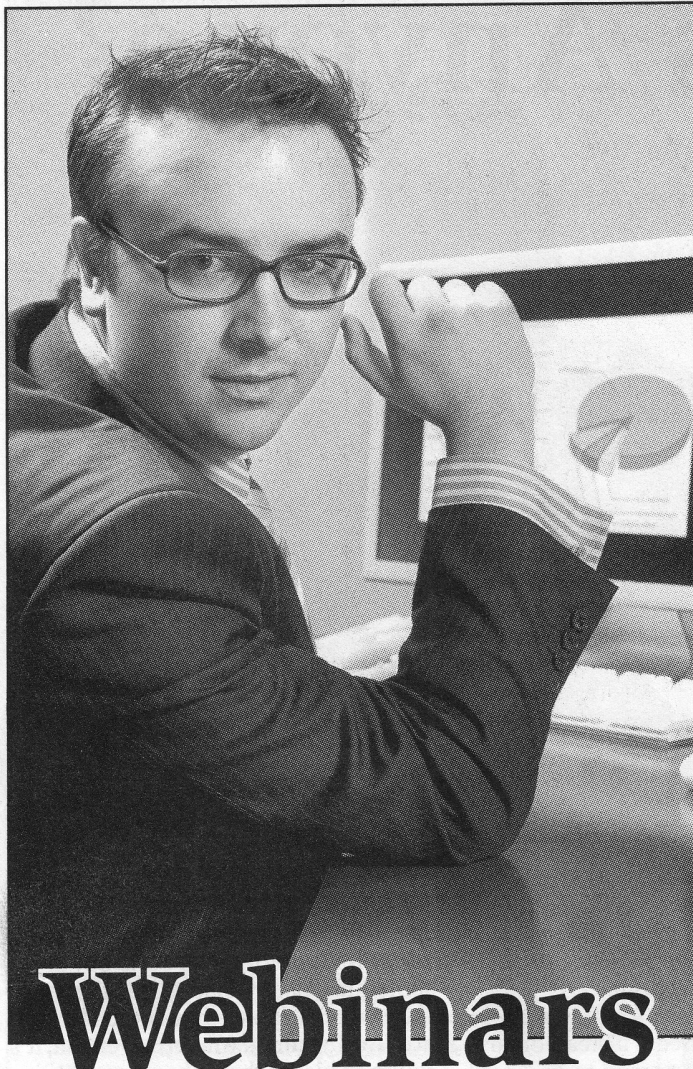
As you select a webinar provider, ask about the technology needed on your end and the software used so that you can allow employees to share documents. It's not as complicated as it may seem.

"If people understand computers are on the Internet a lot, it's a matter of downloading the software," said Renee Scherer, owner of Presentations Plus in Liverpool, which facilitates webinars.

But you do have to do some legwork in advance.

"A lot of people think it doesn't take a lot of preparation up front," Mitchell said. "Whether it's a webinar or a live presentation, it takes as much time and probably more because you have to work out the technical issues."

Once you settle on a provider, do a dry run both at your office and at one or two of your remote locations (if this

Webinars

the tech support number and your cell phone handy.

Remember that no one can see your hand gestures and facial expressions (unless some attendees are attending live or you're gutsy enough to go with a video conference). That means your voice must keep their attention. Practice your presentation with this in mind and record yourself to see how compelling—or otherwise—your delivery is.

Keep in mind your audience's attention span. Jill Hurst-Wahl, owner of Hurst Associates, Ltd. in Syracuse and professor of practice at the Syracuse University School of Information Studies, spoke at the 2009 New York Library Association Annual Conference about webinars. She believes that most audiences attending webinar presentations have a shifting attention span of about 7 to 20 minutes, likely because of the brisk pace of today's media.

"[The] average length of a YouTube video is 2.7 minutes," she said.

The ubiquitous accessibility of media likely also contributes to this phenomenon. Compared with the rapid fire of other media, your Power Point slides accompanied by a solo delivery will seem dull.

Especially for long webinars, tap other experts to join the presentation. Not only will their input add value to the webinar, but variety and interest to the audience. (Plus, you won't risk going hoarse talking for an hour!)

Share information so you know who's presenting what and in what order. Specify the time each expert will fill so no one goes over or discovers he has prepared only 10 minutes of speech to fill 35 minutes of presentation time.

All experts should bring a hard copy of their slides and notes in case they have

Hurst-Wahl

technical problems and are unable to see the presentation on screen. It also pays to save a PDF file of the slides ready to e-mail to any attendees who for whatever reason can't see the slides. Despite Power Point's popularity, it seems like there's always a couple of audience members who have trouble.

Before you begin, clear the area of audio clutter that would distract your listeners. Ask attendees listening by phone to place their phones on "mute" so they do not contribute unwanted sounds and static. If you allow for a Q&A time, ask that attendees identify themselves.

"During the presentation, pace yourself, envision your audience, smile and anticipate questions and answer them," said Hurst-Wahl.

Introduce the next speaker before you finish speaking, and if it's a panel discussion, each person should identify himself before speaking (after the initial introductions, a simple, "This is Jim…" should do).

Although attendee input may bring up important points, try to stay on topic and reserve the rabbit trails for another time.

One of the cardinal rules of moderating a webinar is sticking with the schedule. If Q&A time is limited to 15 minutes, the moderator must enforce it for everyone's sake. Although it's tempting to think that going over the allotted time is okay if you're distributing valuable information, your participants may have pressing deadlines and grow to resent webinars that drag on and on.

So what does all this convenience cost? Webinar environments can range from free (you'll have to put up with ads) to $99 per month, depending upon the size of your group.

is an issue) to work out any bugs in the setup.

Ask moderators at each location to arrive 15 minutes in advance of the start time so they can help anyone struggling to log on and so they can welcome all the attendees.

If your moderators have never led a webinar before, ask your provider to brief them on how to best facilitate the webinar.

Some companies hosting webinars like to purposefully start them two or three minutes late so stragglers won't miss anything.

If you're providing the material, don't count on needing as much as when presenting live. Usually, fewer people ask questions when attending webinars. Just in case you have problems, keep