

2-1-2001

Classes on the Internet: A "How to" Guide

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Recommended Citation

Klotzbach-Shimomura, K., O'Neill, B., & Huntzinger, G. (2001). Classes on the Internet: A "How to" Guide. *The Journal of Extension*, 39(1), Article 14. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol39/iss1/14>

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February 2001 // Volume 39 // Number 1 // Tools of the Trade // 1TOT3



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Classes on the Internet: A "How to" Guide

Abstract

Presenting PowerPoint slides on the Internet let Extension educators reach a widespread and time-stressed audience 24/7. This article explains the software needed, gives some pointers on developing such a presentation, and describes some examples from Rutgers Cooperative Extension.

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Have you ever spent a lot of time researching a class and preparing PowerPoint slides only to have a relatively small class attendance? Perhaps you've wondered about other ways to share information with clientele and have them benefit from all your hard work. The good news is that, thanks to the Internet and improved communications technology, it is now possible to "teach" classes, using PowerPoint slides, on the Internet.

This article describes how several faculty members at Rutgers Cooperative Extension (RCE) have done this and provides suggestions for others who decide to disseminate information in a similar manner. You can find several existing programs on the RCE presentations Web site at <http://www.rce.rutgers.edu/presentations>.

The Software You'll Need

To get started, you will need to have access to RealPresenter™ software by RealNetworks. RealPresenter™ is available as RealPresenter™ Basic G2, which is free, and the more robust RealPresenter™ G2 Plus which sells for \$69.95. You can learn more about these products by visiting the RealNetworks Web site at <http://www.realnetworks.com>.

You'll need RealPlayer® by RealNetworks to view RealPresenter™ presentations. RealPlayer® is available for free at <http://www.real.com>. It is important to review the minimum system requirements before installing either RealPresenter™ or RealPlayer®.

RealPresenter™ works with Windows 95, 98, NT 4.0, and 2000. RealPresenter™ installs itself as a PowerPoint plugin and supports PowerPoint versions 97 and 2000. RealPresenter™ will appear as an item on the PowerPoint menu bar. A desktop icon will also be created during the installation for direct access to RealPresenter™ where you can manage your presentations and modify the program settings.

Developing Your Presentation

The process of developing a presentation is fairly straightforward.

Keep It Short

First, you need to create a PowerPoint slide show of 10 to 20 slides. With approximately 1 minute of narrative per slide, this will result in a 10- to 20-minute presentation, which is probably the maximum that computer users will want to sit through. Fewer slides and more narration are another approach, but the key concept is to keep the presentation short and to the point. If you have a longer presentation you developed as a public class session, you can delete slides to create an abbreviated online version.

Don't put too much information on a slide. The more text, the smaller the point size necessary to make it all fit on the slide, and the more difficult it will be to read on the screen.

Animate It

Once you have developed your PowerPoint slides, you can animate them for increased viewer interest. RealPresenter™ supports animations (e.g., spiral, fly from bottom, vertical blinds) but does not support animation timing. You must manually advance through the animations when recording your RealPresenter™ presentation.

To add animation, place a slide in slide view in PowerPoint, and click on the "Custom Animation" button under "Slide Show." From there, a dialogue box will open with tabs for "Order & Timing" and "Effects." Click on "Effects," select the slide object to be animated, and then select the desired effect. The "Order & Timing" tab allows you to change the sequence in which slide objects appear. When you have animated all slide objects, including images, click "OK" on the dialogue box to confirm the slide settings. A small icon below the bottom left corner of the slide, in slide sorter view, will indicate that custom animation is present.

Write Your Narrative

Next, you need to develop a narrative your slides. An easy way to do this is to print the slides and write a narrative that matches the content of each slide. Try to keep the narration to 1 minute or less per slide. Your speaker notes are a good starting point for developing the narration. Don't read the text on the slide--expand upon it.

Practice your narration to see how it flows and how long it runs before you do the RealPresenter™ recordings. Once you have completed the recordings, RealPresenter™ packages up the entire presentation in a form that is ready to be distributed over the Web. RCE uses RealNetworks RealServer software to distribute the presentations through our Web site.

Try Incentives

To evaluate the long-term effectiveness of classes on the Internet, try using incentives. Simply offer an Extension publication or a printed copy of the slide presentation. (Note: to protect authors' intellectual property rights, viewers cannot print the slides directly from the Internet.) In the process, you'll need to ask learners to provide their name and mailing address. You'll then have their mailing address for sending a follow-up evaluation form to assess behavioral change.

Some Examples from RCE

We designed a separate Web page for each presentation. The Web page contains the presentation title, a brief description of the presentation, the name and title of the author, the length of the presentation, links to view the presentation, a list of additional resources (e.g., books, journal articles, and Extension fact sheets), and links to additional online sources of information. There are actually two links to the same presentation. Your type of Internet connection determines the link you select. One link is for modem connections and the other is for LAN connections. RealServer and RealPlayer® optimize the transmission of the presentation for the speed of your Internet connection.

The first presentation we developed for the online format was *Healing Herbs: Safety and Effectiveness*, an instructional program designed to provide information about herbal remedies. The program provides a brief overview of the history of herbal remedies, 10 commonly used herbs, and the current regulatory dilemma revolving around herbal remedies. The quality, safety, and effectiveness of herbal remedies are discussed, as well as cautions and interactions with some prescription drugs. An evaluation form is included for viewers to complete and return to the author via e-mail. Viewers also have the option and information available to purchase the curriculum.

Subsequent online presentations include: *Investing With Small Dollar Amounts*, *What Everyone Needs to Know About Finances*, *Secrets of The Millionaire Next Door*, and *Last-Minute Financial*

Catch-Up Strategies for Baby Boomers. These, too, contain an optional form to collect evaluation data from learners and information about purchasing the curricula. Plans are underway to include additional presentations in a variety of subject matter areas, as well as PowerPoint slides and abstracts from research poster sessions.

Conclusion

Extension educators are in the information dissemination business, and our business environment is changing. The world is moving at a fast pace, and consumers are demanding access to products and services all day, every day. In other words, today's learners want "education on demand."

Placing PowerPoint presentations on the Internet is an effective way to reach time-stressed learners and provide 24/7 access to Extension information. Not only does it help learners whose busy lives or employment preclude class attendance, but it also enables Extension educators to reach a widespread audience for whom county, state, and national boundaries are irrelevant.

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