Webinars as an effective marketing and sales tool in internet marketing

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Abstract

Research on the subject of webinars for marketing and sales is scarce. This study helps to add to the current understanding and makes analytical generalizations. The main research question investigates how webinars constitute an effective marketing and sales tool in internet marketing for Dutch organizations. Sub questions considering content, cues and experience help answer the main research question. Qualitative research was applied and a multi-case content analysis was carried out. Four marketeers were interviewed in the pre-analysis. A semi-structured interview was utilized for the data collection, involving 16 marketing experts working at marketing offices, large organizations and freelance marketing experts. Results were analyzed with the aid of a coding scheme (Burnard, 1991) and a second coder. Based on the data, the kind of content suited for marketing and sales webinars is found to be either rather complex, or simpler content made more substantive by the context. This manifests itself in knowledge sharing and demonstrations, useful for marketing and sales. Technical capabilities and a webinar's aims are of prime importance for the determination of the use of cues. It is important that these cues stimulate interactivity, personalization and engagement. An organizer's experience plays a major role in aspects concerning presentation, content and techniques. Enlisting the assistance of a moderator(s), multiple presenters as well adequate preparation is often preferred for an effective webinar.

Keywords: Webinars, marketing, sales, Media Naturalness Hypothesis, Media Richness Theory, Social Presence Theory

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Introduction

Webinars fall under the category social media. A "hot item" these days is the use of social media as a marketing tool. The purpose of this study is to gain knowledge about the use of webinars for marketing and sales purposes in internet marketing for Dutch organizations.

The complexity of the internet is one reason why the application of webinars is not as yet conducted in most Dutch organizations (Lee-Kelley, Gilbert & Mannicom, 2003), even though there are numerous examples of companies successfully applying it in the United States. Handley, Linn, Tilton and Pulizzi (2011) conclude that webinars are in the top five of most used marketing tools, 46% of companies in the United States utilize it. Amazon, Adobe, Goldman Sachs and the U.S. Commercial Service are a few examples of companies in the United States already using webinars as a successful means to advertise. Successful companies are generating more leads, more brand awareness, loyalty and an expanded database (Handley et al., 2011).

This study explores the limitations that prevent Dutch companies from applying webinars and uncovers the right link between the use of a webinar and product/service type. There is very little research on the topic, despite the fact that webinars are frequently used for marketing and sales purposes in the United States. It is thus not strange to hear, that best practices concerning the use of webinars for marketing and sales are unknown to many professionals in the field. The few studies incorporating the subject portray a positive picture of the numerous advantages and possibilities (Casserly, 2010; Rholl, 2002). This study also aims to raise awareness of the possibilities or best practices relating to webinars.

1.1 Definitions

Definition webinar: A webinar is an assembly of two words, namely "web", which stands for "world wide web" and seminar (Lande, 2011). Bai and Chen (2010) explain that a webinar is a type of internet marketing, using multiple means to communicate such as video and audio (Bekkering & Shim, 2006), PowerPoint slides and sideline chats. The live broadcasting allows the webinar to be interactive, people can ask questions (van den Heuvel

& Devasagayam, n.d.) and participate in sharing information. Recording these sessions, as well as viewing them on demand is possible.

Definition marketing: In this study, marketing is defined as a company using resources to maintain, strengthen and commercialize a profitable long-term relationship with customers. Marketing is competitive and interaction with customers is of vital importance (Grönroos, 1989) to understand their wishes (Merrill, 1996).

Definition sales: Sales influence the customer to buy the company's product. The company is the focus, not the customer (Merrill, 1996). It is also about talking to the individual, personalization.

2. Literature review

Research on the topic of webinars as a marketing and sales tool in internet marketing is almost non-existent. Related topic areas are reviewed as a means to help conduct this exploratory study. Internet marketing, online conferencing technologies and the focus in facilitating a webinar are discussed, while media theories explain the links with webinars. Indications for this research are given last.

2.1 Internet marketing

The internet has some distinct advantages for marketing and sales. Long (1997) and Hawn (1996) mention reaching large audiences, as well as the possibility of personalized promotion (as cited in Kiang, Raghu & Huei-Min Shang, 2000) which is important in sales (Merrill, 1996). Consequently, complex content such as mortgages are especially suited to personalized internet marketing (Kiang et al., 2000). Moreover, Peterson, Balasubramanian and Bronnenberg (1997) mention that internet marketing improves communication by its interactivity (Godfrey, 2009). It can therefore be said that internet marketing has several advantages for marketing and sales. The question is how to exploit these in a personalized, interactive way, reaching large audiences.

2.2 Online conferencing technologies

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) through online conferencing technologies is gaining popularity. These interactive media capable of marketing and personalized sales reach people all over the world in a timely and cost-effective manner. Audio conferencing, video conferencing, web conferencing and webinars are all examples of this technology.

The trade-off between audio- and video conferencing is made by several researchers. Daly-Jones, Monk and Watt (1998) state that video conferencing gives better results than audio conferencing. The Media Richness theory (MRT) explains this by qualifying video as a "richer" medium than audio since video has more cues (Daft & Lengel, 1984). Rich media tools cause little ambiguity and uncertainty and give a positive task and/or behavioral outcome (Zhang, Lowry, Zhou & Fu, 2007). The Social Presence theory (SPT) also corresponds with Daly-Jones et al.'s (1998) statement and says that more verbal and non-verbal cues present in video conferencing, increase the willingness to communicate (William & Rice, 1983 as cited in Westmeyer, DiCioccio & Rubin, 1998).

Web conferencing is another online conferencing technology that includes the possibility of adding webcams of all participants to the video conversation (Lande, 2011). Adding more webcams to the conversation bears a greater resemblance to face-to-face communication (Bekkering & Shim, 2006). The MRT qualifies this as rich, while the media naturalness hypothesis (MNH), states that seeing all participants simultaneously does not resemble "natural communication", by this referring to communication in real life situations. In 2002, Rholl found that companies are increasingly using web conferencing technology to present webinars. He argues that "Web conferencing is one of the best tools for communicating powerful messages to targeted audiences" (p.44). Whether or not it is better to integrate multiple webcams to the message remains unclear.

The online conferencing technology of webinars closely resembles web conferencing, but webinars engage audiences primarily via interactivity through polling and questions (Godfrey, 2009). This surplus of interactivity is what distinguishes webinars from other online conferencing technologies and what makes communication "richer" and more "natural" according to the MNH and the MRT. The MNH explains natural communication as being more satisfying. Natural communication in online conferencing technologies such as webinars is the most important aspect in CMC, alongside live broadcasting and the ability to convey

speech and facial expressions (Kock, 2005). Webinars depend on interactivity as the most important component to make for rich and natural communication.

2.3 The focus in facilitating a webinar

The facilitation aspects afforded by a webinar present certain challenges in relation to content and cues. The organizer and the audience's experience with webinars also play a role in this respect.

The first focus in facilitating a webinar is to know how to present content and which cues to use. The location of participants is unknown and distractions might be a threat (Riddle, 2010, as cited in Lande, 2011), so keeping pace and not exceeding the 60-90 minutes time-limit is important. This will cause high physical awareness, (Kock, 2005) thereby removing distractions (Riddle, 2010, as cited in Lande, 2011). When facilitating a webinar, it is also important to take account of inconsistencies about a webinar's cues. The MRT and MNH do not make clear what the suitable amount of interactivity for webinars is. MRT pleads for cues matching the content, saying that the more complex the content, the more richness the medium requires. MNH argues that avoiding the likelihood of any communication ambiguity is simply reached by natural communication delivering unambiguous and moderately complex content. The lack of rich face-to-face communication in a webinar is consequently a problem for the MRT when handling complex content, while the MNH might solve this with other cues (Zhang et al., 2007). Burkes, Aytes, Chidambaram and Johnson (1999) add that any shortcomings of the medium are relatively important. People surmount such obstacles when medium experience increases. A presenter's scales are important in presenting content, but inconsistencies remain about which cues to use and the role that experience plays.

The MNH, MRT and SPT describe criteria related to the number of cues used for different kinds of content. The MRT states that the number of cues should depend on the complexity of the message. The MNH on the other hand, argues that fewer cues might also bring advantages such as fewer disruptions, leading people to choose for a leaner medium for complex content too (Kock, 1998; Kock, 2001). The SPT explains that a high degree of social presence, the feeling that a person is delivering the message, is to be preferred with live broadcasting (Westmeyer et al., 1998). Webinars use live broadcasting and just using audio and video for this, enhances the effect of social presence (Zhang et al., 2007). All these

theories present a differing ideal number of cues and differences also appear when considering the 'fit' between cues and content.

2.4 Indications for this research

MRT and MNH give the most complete explanation on the subject of webinars for marketing and sales. Of those two theories, MNH seems the most applicable to the subject. It explains CMC in particular and to a certain extent resembles MRT and social theories (Kock, 2005). Internet marketing offers personalization and interactivity. Online conferencing technologies such as webinars offer this, in addition to live broadcasting, audio and video. These cues as well as the presenter's skills are important in facilitating a webinar.

Media theories are neither uniform as to the suitable content for a webinar nor about which cues to use. The role that experience plays also remains unknown. Consequently, a webinar's effectiveness cannot be defined. Organizers' experiences with webinars are the only knowledge on webinars to date. This study aims to provide the first scientific insights into this field, making a valuable contribution within the area of internet marketing and serving as a starting point for further research. This study will use the following conceptual model, using mainly MRT and MNH perspectives.
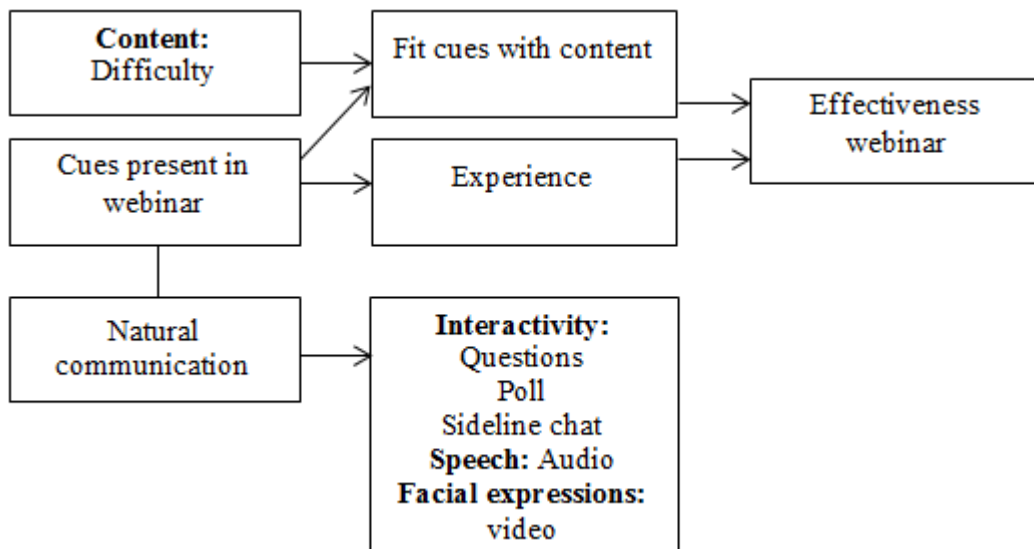

Figure 1. Conceptual model of research on the use of webinars for marketing and sales.

2.5 Pre-analysis and research questions

Best practices concerning the use of webinars for marketing and sales are still unknown to literature. Eglene (2000) and Mold and Gregory (2003) state that doing research on new topics is best commenced by doing exploratory research, using open-ended questions. Four people were questioned for the purpose of gaining this preliminary sense (Rubin & Babbie, 2010).

In the Netherlands, it is mainly financial institutions such as banks as well as publishers of financial newspapers that make use of marketing and sales webinars. The majority of people still perceive webinars as too complex, which also results in experiencing technical problems according to one respondent in the pre-analysis. Adding it to the online marketing strategy is thus not possible. Many of another respondent's customers though, prefer webinars over face-to-face meetings for the complex services they use because of its ease of use. He concludes however that the fact that the target group regularly works online probably plays a role in this preference. Agreeing with these findings, respondents in the pre-analysis show great confidence in the future potential of webinars and its further exploitation.

In conclusion, literature, practical experience and experts assume that webinars have a promising future as a marketing and sales tool. Conducting exploratory research in the field is necessary for adding new insights to the current scant knowledge. As a result, analytic generalizations will be made (Yin, 2009). The following research questions underpin the aims of this study:

Main research question:

"How can webinars be effectively incorporated as online marketing and sales tools in the existing range of marketing tools in Dutch organizations?"

Sub questions:

- ➢ SQ1: What is suitable content for marketing and sales webinars?
- ➢ SQ2: What cues should marketing and sales webinars use?

> ➤ SQ3: What role does experience play in the perceived effectiveness of a webinar?

3. Method

This section deals with the methodology used to conduct this research. The research- and sample design will be explored, followed by the means used to collect and analyze the data. Ethical consideration and the reliability and validity will be discussed last of all.

3.1 Research design

Qualitative research in the form of a case study was carried out to understand the contemporary phenomenon of webinars for marketing and sales and to hear about diverse opinions and experiences (Yin, 2009). Conducting individual semi-structured interviews with stakeholders is a common approach to gaining understanding about best practices and was performed here (Eglene, 2000; Barriball & While, 1994; Mold & Gregory, 2003). Sufficient knowledge is absent in the Netherlands, so conducting a focus group or using a survey was not a proper option (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000). An embedded approach was taken in order to investigate the main unit, "webinar", and the fit with the subunits "content" and "cues". Direct replication through a multi-case design was chosen over a single-case design because of its more robust and powerful evidence.

Gerring (2005, p. 29) argues that: "a small number of cases that are closely related to one another" are best included in a case study. Direct replication of the semi-structured interview into three cases was done (Yin, 2009). The first case consisted of marketing experts working at successful Dutch marketing offices. The second case applied to marketing experts working at large organizations. The last one consisted of freelance marketing experts. They were chosen for their clear but different views on the use of webinars for marketing and sales. A marketing expert working at a large organization might take the company's goal as a focus, while a freelancer might take more interest in best practices. The objective was to ascertain the similarity of results, so as to contribute to analytic generalization (Leonard-Barton, 1990; Yin, 2009).

3.2 Sample

Convenience sampling was conducted for the purpose of empirically investigating this new topic (Voss, Tsikriktsis & Frohlich, 2002). With only a few stakeholders on the subject, random sampling was impossible. Moreover, Seawright and Gerring (2008, p. 295) argue that: "…choosing a very small sample in a completely random fashion" will lead to very serious problems.

The number of respondents needed in a case study and/or interview is unequivocal. Too large a sample is detrimental, since saturation of information from respondents is conceivable (Leonard-Barton, 1990). Sixteen respondents were interviewed in this case study research, at this point saturation was reached. In conclusion, the sample consisted of three cases of five or six knowledgeable stakeholders in the marketing field (Yin, 2009). These were six marketing experts working at successful Dutch marketing offices, five at large organizations and five freelancers.

3.3 Data collection

Data collection took place in a face-to-face setting (13) or by Skype (video) call (three) in case the respondent had little time. As advised by MRT and MNH, the richest and most natural medium was always chosen. All the interviews were done in a quiet location to avoid distractions. The interviews were recorded and during the session brief notes were taken (Opdenakker, 2006) Data collection took 12 weeks.

The conceptual model (figure 1) served as a main guideline for designing the interview questions. Starting easy and ending difficult is the key to a proper interview (University of Groningen, 2003). To ascertain the equivalence of the meaning of words, a definition of "webinar" was provided (question one) (Barriball & While, 1994). This is an easy way to start, along with the "critical incident technique" (questions two and three), which is a reliable measure of memory in semi-structured interviews according to Smith (1992) (as cited in Barriball & While, 1994) and Gremler (2004). Opinions and behaviors were considered more difficult and attended to next (RUG, 2003).

Silences were an important part of the interview, as well as summarizing what the respondents had just said. This showed the capability to listen to what is being said. Signs of approval were also made.

3.4 Data analysis

The qualitative data were analyzed by hand, as well as with the aid of the program "Atlas ti". All recordings of the interviews along with the notes taken were written down. Data analysis was charted according to Burnard's (1991) often cited 14-step coding scheme. This included the approach of "open coding", using the content of all interviews in the realization of the analysis categories (Boeije, 2005). Words relevant to the topic mentioned by respondents during the interviews determined these categories.

Moreover, a second qualified coder, a Master of Science graduate, looked at 10% of the transcripts to determine analysis categories separately (Julien & Duggan, 2000). These were compared with those of the first coder and a collating coding scheme was agreed upon (Burnard, 1991). After three rounds, reliability reached 0.79.

3.5 Ethical consideration

Respondents were informed prior to participation about the purpose of the study, this was inevitable for the purpose of conducting the research. Furthermore, respondents' consent was required and they were given the guarantee to remain anonymous. The public availability of the results was also stressed (Wilson, 2010).

3.6 Reliability and validity

The design of the study impaired several threats to validity. Precautions were taken to undermine bias in the semi-structured interview. Observer bias was ruled out by using a multi-case design (Voss et al., 2002). A biased view was obviated by the design of an interview script to control the researcher's reactions and by submitting the questions to a pilot test (Tellis, 1997).

To rule out bias in data analysis, interviews were recorded and notes were taken during the session. After the session, interviews were written down. Moreover, a second coder independently developed a coding scheme which was collated with that of the first coder (Burnard, 1991).

4. Results and conclusions

This section deals with the outcomes gained through interviews. This chapter is divided according to three sub chapters, each posing sub questions regarding content, cues and the role of experience. The outcomes will provide a reference frame, explaining the characteristics of effective marketing and sales webinars, reaching a conclusion at the end of each paragraph.

4.1 Suitable content for marketing and sales webinars

The first sub questions considered a webinar´s content, which respondents repeatedly mentioned as a premise for success. In this instance, the bilateral definition of content encompasses both the complexity and manifestation of the content.

Fairly complex products and services suit webinars best according to the majority: "*…it has to be a more complex story, including the need for responses from the audience… when it is more complex, it suits webinars*". Single, fairly complex subjects, such as software or a financial product, were often described as a webinar's focus. Simpler products are made more substantive by the context: "*...you could tell a story about any product, for example a camera or garden furniture. The required context is what you need to think about, because that is obviously needed for every product*". Context adds more weight to simpler products.

Respondents mentioned three manifestations of webinar content: knowledge sharing, software demonstrations and promotion. The majority of respondents claimed that webinars mostly rely on knowledge sharing, due to the rather high complexity of their content: "*When content is complex or you do not know how it works, then sharing knowledge is particularly important*". Knowledge sharing satisfies audiences: "*you are giving them extra knowledge and they are also positive about the form*". Webinars as a medium evoke positive responses. Furthermore, appropriate content is relevant and interesting. It often concerns "hot" topics, such as financial updates, or substantive subjects concerning marketing. Secondly, many respondents said a webinar's characteristics lend themselves to (software) demonstrations, preferably including some background information. Demonstrations please audiences, as they can see the product and ask questions at the same time: "*Sharing your screen, if you ask me, is essential for sales…in that way you can show things and explain them*". Respondents said webinars have more sales advantages: "*People feel personally spoken to and at the same time reaching large audiences is possible*". Webinars are based on a personal approach and in

principle anyone with internet accessibility can be reached. Nonetheless, respondents stressed promotion as not being the primary focus during webinars, but rather the audience's interest. Approaching people afterwards for sales purposes is to be preferred, but respondents often advised that permission should be sought beforehand, to avoid negative impressions: "*You just know that not everyone wants to receive a call, the best way to find out is to just ask it in the evaluation form*". Many respondents claimed webinars to be ideal for customer relationships and contacting (potential) customers, the so called lead generation.

You involve your customer or potential customer in your story. With that, you naturally create a bond, which results in them more easily contacting us or offering to plan a first meeting with us. So especially for sales, leads, webinars are very important.

Often, audiences must sign up a priori, filling the database for lead generation. Webinars can also improve image. Some respondents mentioned the importance of showing expertise: "*...to show them you have knowledge, spreading thought leadership*", others emphasized brand awareness: "*It is a good way to give people a face, or a company a face*".

It is clear that suitable content for marketing and sales webinars encompasses rather complex products and services. Complexity may be found in the subject or in the context of the subject. In fact, any content could fit a webinar provided its appearance is interesting and relevant to audiences. A webinar's content best manifests itself in knowledge sharing and demonstrations, bearing in mind the audience's interest on both accounts. Promotion is suited for manifestation alongside the webinar. These manifestations relate to the marking- and sales field, as image is improved as well as customer relationship and lead generation. A webinar's content lends itself to a greater variety of subjects than had perhaps initially been envisaged.

4.2 Appropriate cues in marketing and sales webinars

The level of interactivity contributes towards a successful webinar. Asking, answering and receiving questions, sharing images and content stimulates interactivity in webinars. Several characteristics of the medium help to accomplish this.

A characteristic of a webinar is that respondents engage in a conversation with their audience by asking and answering questions. Creating expectations stimulates audiences to ask questions and served this purpose: "*You have to be clear on that, if you provide the opportunity for questions in between the session or at the end*". Communicating this in advance by e-mail and/or during the webinar is necessary. Secondly, providing verbal feedback on questions is a stimulus as well: "*You organize it, and then people think: 'Oh, questions are actually posed', and then they might be keener to ask a question*". Personally targeting the questioner is asserted to be preferred, strengthening a webinar's personalized approach. Thirdly, posing relevant questions directly throughout the webinar is to be preferred. A Q&A at the end of a webinar or a Q&A sent by e-mail should deal with other relevant or extra questions. Finally, successfully applying polls stimulates interactivity. Nearly all respondents used this tool to learn more about their audience: "*...so that you can ask the audience questions too, that is nice*". A poll is easily accessible for both parties and easier to structure than an open question. Moreover, the almost immediate visual representation of the answer is considered an advantage: "*...I think a poll is visually better and you can immediately show what people think of something*". Special attention however, is devoted to delivering feedback on the poll's results, as well as utilizing a sufficient number of polls to prevent audiences from feeling interrogated. Summarizing the above, it is clear that asking and answering questions improves interactivity.

Audio, chat and e-mail enable audiences to ask questions. Many respondents regarded receiving questions as very valuable: "*it is very informative to see the kind of questions people have. You get to know your customer so much better*". The amount and kind of questions asked are factors that contribute towards a webinar's effectiveness. Usually, the audience's possibility of asking audio questions is inactivated, although some said that enabling it adds to interactivity, but with groups larger than ten it causes chaos. Moreover, audiences' suffer from technical limitations which inhibit participation through audio: "*...it is often difficult, because someone does not have a headset, the telephone line falters, name all the challenges...*". Good audio quality is generally considered a precondition for an effective webinar. Open or closed chats are normally used to ask questions. Closed chats allow for filtering questions, useful with confidential subjects: "*someone might tell about their personal [financial] situation...just to say, you do not really want that out in the open*". Moreover, it prevents inconvenience by possibly unanswered questions. Open chats stimulate interactivity under certain conditions: "*live chat, and then directly answering questions works really well*

for stimulating interactivity". In situations like these, having a moderator at one's disposal is useful. Software limitations and a webinar's aims were other main influencers of the decision for an open or closed chat. Sideline chats are often inactivated, as they are said to be irrelevant and "*distract more than they really add*" to the content. E-mail also serves the purpose of asking questions, but mainly before or after the webinar, or as a replacement for a closed chat: "*Those customers [companies] are more reserved. They primarily want an information update and maybe they have a question, but not necessarily*".

Many respondents mentioned that using merely audio in a webinar is inadequate: "*Webinars are efficient when you can add a visual element*". Visual elements, such as a webcam, videos or pictures are essential. Opinions were divided concerning the use of a webcam. Many stressed a preference to use it, as this creates a personalized and dynamic experience: "*because then you realize, there is personal contact*". Others argued that: "*a webcam is possible, but not necessary. It should add value, because it can also distract*", so allowing a webcam is justified, as long as distractions from the content are not an issue. Moreover, technical limitations such as software, hardware and the internet connection often influence the decision whether or not to use a webcam: "*I know that when you have a live image of the presenter it makes it so much more dynamic, but we did not choose for it because of, well, technical issues*". Respondents never mentioned the use of the audience's webcam as being relevant. Respondents hampered by technical limitations, often added the use of a photographic image of the presenter(s) to add a sense of personal contact: "*even if it is only a picture, it adds value. If you do not see anyone, it is not a person*". The same technical problems affect videos. Respondents mentioned the importance of this visual aspect in explaining products, though videos should merely serve as a support.

There are multiple ways of sharing content. The majority used PowerPoint to share presentations in their webinars. PowerPoint presentations should be kept simple to engage audiences: "*not full of texts you read out loud, but preferably with simple diagrams or images which tell a story*". The presenter, texts and images support each other. Whiteboards that share content during a webinar were not utilized. The concept often seemed misunderstood: "*someone is standing, writing on a whiteboard and all you can think is, his handwriting is too small*". Occasionally, audiences received relevant articles afterwards, evoking positive responses: "*I have attended that webinar, it was about this subject and this is what I "gained" from it, almost like a reward for participation*". Moreover, recordings of webinars often made available subsequently on websites, exploit passive marketing. However, the lack of live

interactivity is considered as a somewhat negative point. Finally, audiences were sometimes requested to share content as well: "*give us your URL and we will assess your website. A lot of people like that*". This was always in line with the topic and shared through chat or e-mail. Sharing content is a way to engage audiences: "*…think about how to make sure, that people who attended your webinar will stay engaged…you have to make sure that it is a continuous flow of information leading to your goal. Someone has to buy something or become a fan*". By sharing content, audiences are veered into engaging in a company's product or service.

The cues used in marketing and sales webinars should stimulate interactivity to keep audiences engaged. Technical capabilities and a webinar's marketing and/or sales goals often influence the decision which cues to use. Polls, chat and e-mail are usually used to stimulate interactivity. From a marketing perspective, questions are useful to learn more about the audience. Furthermore, good sound and image quality is a precondition for an effective webinar. At the same time, engagement is also enhanced by visual elements, such as a webcam. This creates a personalized experience, important for marketing and sales. Avoiding distractions from the content is of primary importance, so showing a picture of the presenter could be an alternative. Videos and PowerPoint serve as good support to explain content. Sharing content improves interactivity and makes the audience more engaged with the product or service, as it enhances relevance. Webinars are effective for marketing and sales when cues are used to enhance engagement and interactivity.

4.3 The role of experience in the perceived effectiveness of a webinar

An organizer's experience with webinars plays a role in relation to content and cues. It helps to overcome any shortcomings of the medium. Respondents mentioned the ability to attend webinars from any location, never including face-to-face communication. This makes it more difficult for organizers to engage audiences. In addition, distance makes problems harder to solve. The presenter(s), assistance and communication before- and after the webinar can solve these issues.

All respondents agreed on the importance of the presenter in making or breaking a webinar: "*Everything stands or falls with a presenter, because as interesting as it can be, if you present information in a dull way, people will drop out*". Good presenters engage an audience and make them want to continue with the webinar. An adept presenter has skills, such as: "*a clear and energetic voice, intonation and correct volume*". Additionally,

respondents mentioned the importance of keeping pace and not exceeding the time limit. Experience and training were said to help improve these skills. Multiple presenters may also enhance effectiveness by making it dynamic and easy for the audience and presenter alike.

It is always nicer when you have two speakers…if you would have to listen 45 minutes to one presenter, that is more boring than listening to two presenters…someone with just another view on the subject. It is also a way of making it brisker or more interactive.

Interactivity is considered important, as is matching the number of presenters to the versatility of the subject. On the other hand, a single presenter makes synchronization easier: "*One is preferred, since you really have to respond to each other*". Often, the decision for the number of presenters is based on the presenter's experience and the content involved.

Some marketing and sales webinars require the assistance of a moderator or script. Respondents mentioned moderators as being particularly useful when inexperienced presenters and organizers are involved. Moderators help to avoid multitasking, something which increases with group size: "*Moderators can make sure that you can really focus on the content and do not have to deal with technical issues*". They deal with aspects concerning technique and/or answer and filter questions, in which case they need to be content experts: "*it has to be someone with content knowledge, so he can decide on the aptness of the question*". These questions might be passed to the presenter who answers them live or they can be personally answered by the moderator. Most respondents regarded preparation as an important element to improve a webinar, especially when inexperienced presenters are involved. A well-prepared webinar contains a script: "*What is often underestimated is a script. Preparation is just necessary, if you want a really good webinar. It is all written down, preferably answers to [fictitious] questions, but this is sometimes not entirely done. And also questions, you know*". Some respondents though, stated that they would leave it up to the presenter and his/her experience decide on the presence of a script and the amount of details included.

Reaching out to the audience before- and after the webinar impacts its effectiveness. Many respondents mentioned the importance of promoting the webinar as this determines participation and decreases the costs per participant. Social media and e-mail campaigns are

primary channels for promotion: "*...we mostly send e-mails to acquaintances and through social media we obviously also try to attract people, but we do not spend a lot of money on it*". A webinar's easy accessibility makes it essential to send reminders, assuring maximum attendance: "*we send them a confirmation and on the day itself another e-mail with time and log-in details*". Attendance is often considered a measure for a webinar's effectiveness. Furthermore, according to respondents' experiences, drop-outs and irrelevant questions will inevitably occur if the creating of expectations is omitted: "*Expectations concerning the webinar's content level and required interactivity will help keep audiences engaged*". Providing information in advance and/or during the webinar serves this purpose. Finally, all respondents found evaluation valuable. They ask specific questions "*...what did they think of the subject and the presenter, do they want to know more, do they want to get in touch with us and whether or not they are going to attend the next webinar*". Organizers learn from evaluations as they get feedback and can ask for input. Communication from organizers helps both parties to get the most out of webinars.

An organizer's experience plays a role in the perceived effectiveness of a marketing and sales webinar. Experience with presenting, the content and technique are important in this matter for improving appearance. Experience is usually gained through practice and evaluation. The more experienced a presenter is, the better his skills and ability to engage audiences, which is essential for all marketing and sales. If the presenter is inexperienced or multi-faceted subjects are dealt with, the participation of multiple presenters is advised in order to improve the webinar. A moderator assists the presenter with the content and therefore his experience/knowledge with the content and technique is essential. Preparation, including producing a script, increases the effectiveness of a webinar. Experience in facilitating showed that adequate promotion and creating expectations equally assure maximum participation, which is better for marketing- and sales efforts. Experience in facilitating and appearance are both aspects that determine the perceived effectiveness of a marketing and sales webinar.

5. Discussion

Results showed that content, cues and an organizer's experience are at least among the keys to an effective marketing and sales webinar. These main findings will be interpreted, compared to similar studies and theories, and alternative explanations will be considered, resulting in a

revised conceptual model. Finally, the limitations of this study and implications for future research will be given.

5.1 Interpretation of the results: suitable content

Webinars are able to approach large audiences in a personalized manner. This is tied in with internet marketing (Long, 1997; Hawn, 1996 as cited in Kiang et al., 2000) and makes it valuable to sales (Merrill, 1996), as webinars do not take account of either the reach of audiences or the degree of personalization like many other media do. Fairly complex content was found to suit webinars, making it applicable for sharing knowledge through content marketing and software demonstrations. On the other hand, simpler products suit the use of webinars when made more substantive by the context. This is not mentioned in similar studies, but it implies that simpler content can also attract people's interest and engagement. It is always necessary to bear in mind the audiences' interest and this is important for all marketing and sales webinars. It is the reason why a sales pitch does not suit a webinar. One minor remark is that respondents often thought simpler content to be suitable as well, while their own experience indicated the use of fairly complex content for the most part. These results only partly confirm Kiang et al.'s (2000) statement that complex products especially suit personalized internet marketing. Provided that much thought is given to the content itself, a wide range of products and services are suitable for a webinar.

5.2 Interpretation of the results: cues evoking interaction

A prerequisite of effective marketing and sales webinars is interactivity and the many ways of stimulating this distinguishes a webinar from various other internet marketing tools. Asking and receiving questions, particularly through chat, e-mail and polls (directed at audiences) were found to be of primary importance (Godfrey, 2009). A webinar is personal and educational for audiences and organizers alike as it is a direct and easy accessible way to communicate. Organizers gain more knowledge about their (potential) customers if interactivity is consciously built-in and, though not mentioned in similar studies, this seems a significant advantage for marketing and sales webinars.

The Media Richness Theory (MRT) (Daft & Lengel, 1984) argues that complex content needs more cues. Enabling the audiences' webcams (Lande, 2012) was not regarded

as adding anything to the content which is contrary to the above theory in favor of face-to-face communication (Bekkering & Shim, 2006). This however, coincides with the Media Naturalness Hypothesis (MNH), resembling communication in real-life. Many respondents were not in favor of using the presenter's webcam, since it may distract from complex content. Daly-Jones et al.'s (1998) statement, favoring video conferencing over audio conferencing, is not therefore borne out in this case. MNH (Kock, 1998; Kock, 2001) offers an explanation for this, stating that the absence of a webcam could be seen as an advantage, as it results in fewer distractions from the content. Moreover, other cues of the medium can compensate for the absence of a webcam (Zhang et al., 2007), such as visual elements like videos and images (Daly-Jones et al., 1998), which were deemed essential for content support. When arguing in favor of a webcam, respondents did not mention ambiguity or uncertainty concerning the content (Zhang et al., 2007) as being important, but emphasized that a webcam makes a webinar more personal and lively. A webcam creates a sense of social presence and serves the above two purposes (Westmeyer et al., 1998; Zhang et al., 2007). The results explaining webcam use are in line with MNH and SPT, but not explicitly with MRT. On the other hand, these results may implicitly coincide with MRT when interpreting the respondent's request for personal and lively webinars as having to do with keeping the focus on complex content. However, as interest was earlier proven to be most important in maintaining engagement, this alternative explanation is rejected. There is general and clear consensus according to Social Presence Theory (SPT) and MNH that a webcam tends to make a webinar livelier and more personal.

In line with the SPT, MRT and MNH, enabling the audiences' audio was occasionally preferred as it stimulates receiving questions (William & Rice, 1983 as cited in Westmeyer et al., 1998). Nonetheless, more often than not respondents rejected this idea due to technical limitations. Similar studies fail to mention technical capabilities as an essential part of a webinar's effectiveness, while respondents frequently mentioned audio quality as well as webcam, video and internet quality to be a proviso for effectively conveying cues and interactivity. The link with SPT, MRT and MNH cannot therefore be fully proven, as technical limitations are involved. Techniques will have to improve in order to solve the respondent's audio problems.

Sharing content alongside the webinar is important, but a topic not yet covered in similar studies, possibly because it is somewhat beyond their scope. A webinar´s live broadcasting matches the SPT, MRT and MNH, unlike webinar recordings. They are not live,

therefore not like natural communication, nor interactive in real time. Recordings were considered less effective than live webinars by respondents, confirming the MRT (Kock, 2005) and MNH. On the other hand, making them available provides passive income and constitutes an easy element of the marketing mix. Though literature does not provide support, sharing content with audiences such as articles can be regarded as beneficial for marketing and sales, as it maintains engagement with a company´s product/service for a longer period.

5.3 Interpretation of the results: an organizer's experience

An organizer's experience proved to be the third key to an effective webinar, though related topic areas only partly explain this. One of the organizer's tasks is to decide on the possible assistance of presenter(s) and moderator(s) and which cues to use for stimulating interactivity. Respondents recognized that audiences are subject to distractions, since the location of participants is unknown (Riddle, 2010 as cited in Lande, 2011). A presenter's skills are very important in this respect and help maintain involvement with the content (Riddle, 2010, as cited in Lande, 2011) by keeping pace and not exceeding the time limit (Kock, 2005). Respondents elaborate further on essential skills, specifically mentioning greater presentation qualities that develop through experience and training, including evaluation and preparation, which help to surmount many obstacles caused by the medium's characteristics (Burkes et al., 1999). Respondents offer more solutions for an effective webinar, such as multiple presenters and moderators for assistance with content and technique. This subject has not yet been covered by similar studies, but involving presenters and moderators was found to improve a webinar's effectiveness and appearance significantly. Adequate communication in advance assures maximum participation and interactivity and in this way enhances effectiveness too. Results showed that organizers should certainly take account of these solutions and their skills to improve appearance and effectiveness.

The research conducted adds significant and promising knowledge to the field of marketing and sales webinars. Based on the results of this study, the conceptual model (figure 1) was revised (figure 2). Using this model to design marketing and sales webinars should have a great impact on their effectiveness for organizers.
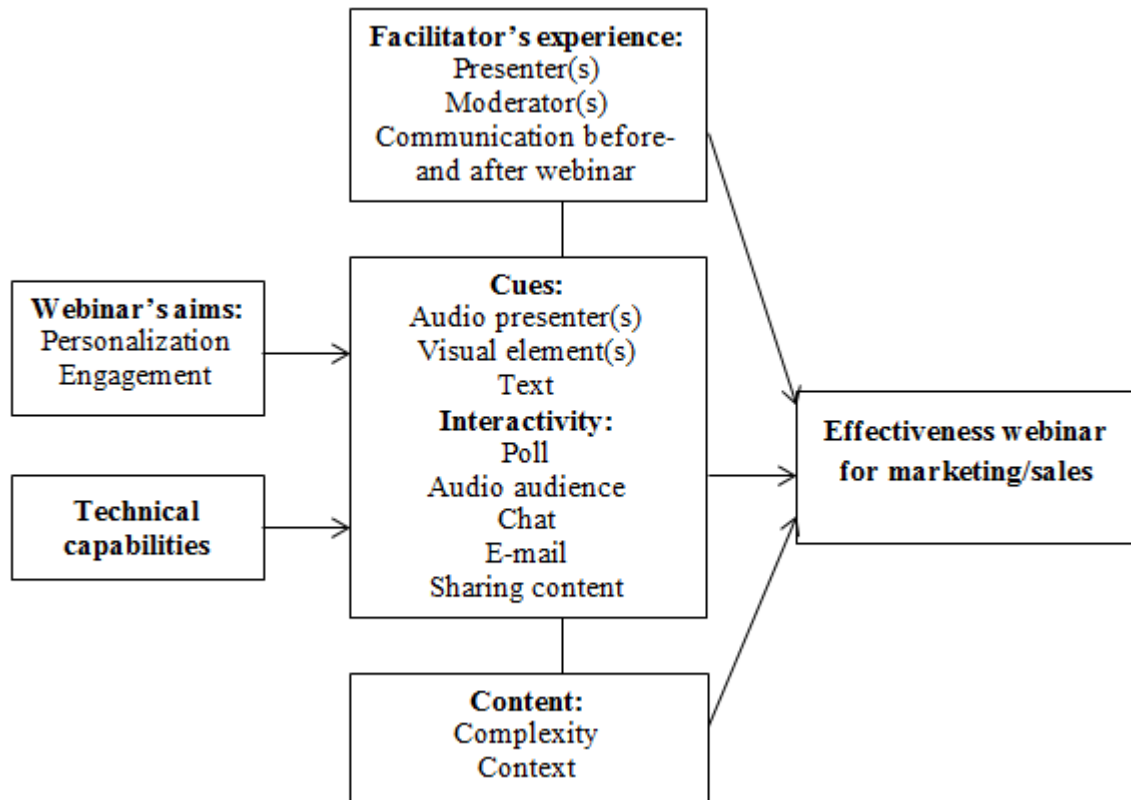

Figure 2. Revised conceptual model for research on the use of webinars for marketing and sales.

5.4 Limitations and directions for further research

There are certain limitations to this study, such as its exploratory nature in the first instance. Exploratory research is necessary to investigate new topics, but makes it difficult to generalize from a sample to a population (Eglene, 2000; Mold & Gregory, 2003) which is preferred in all research. The semi-structured interview results in question are only partially standardized, yet they are most suited for research on best practices (Eglene, 2000; Barriball & While, 1994; Mold & Gregory, 2003). Moreover, the sample could not be chosen randomly (Seawright & Gerring, 2008, p. 295) which is more reliable when generalizing from a sample to a population. In exploratory research though, this is not desirable (Voss, Tsikriktsis & Frohlich, 2002). The chosen methodology for this exploratory study provides valuable

insights into the field of marketing and sales webinars. In future research, however, a methodology allowing generalizations should be chosen wherever possible.

Secondly, the composition of the sample is subject to modification. Knowledgeable stakeholders were only interviewed in the Netherlands and not in the USA, where marketeers are way in advance of any country in their knowledge on marketing and sales webinars. The scope of this research project and barriers involved such as language influenced the decision to focus on the Netherlands. On the other hand, American differences in experiences and culture may result in the outcomes being less applicable to Dutch marketeers. Nevertheless, involving American stakeholders in the sample could prove a useful direction for future research. Since knowledge is widespread in the United States, research could then also involve methodologies that make generalization from a sample to a population possible.

Thirdly, there are other knowledgeable parties such as organizing parties who could not be interviewed as they did not fit the sample of marketeers at different institutions. Although valuable knowledge could be gained from them, in this case it did not fit the multi-case design which is important for collecting more robust and powerful evidence (Gerring, 2005, p. 29). Nonetheless, it is an important recommendation for future studies.

One last recommendation for future research is to test the revised conceptual model to see if it holds up and/or refine it. This study has uncovered much new knowledge that could not be interpreted in the light of previous research or theories. Therefore, future research on the subject should involve the role of multiple presenters, moderators and communication before- and after the webinar. This would be a valuable contribution within the field. It should also serve to investigate the effectiveness of simpler products made more substantive by the context in webinars. In this way, marketing and sales webinars can be assured of an effective design.

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Appendix A: Interview questions

1. Could you tell me what it is you exactly understand under the term webinar?

(Provide own definition after answer: A webinar or online seminar is a kind of internet marketing. Multiple ways to communicate can be used, such as video, audio, PowerPoint, sideline chats and whiteboards. Because of the live broadcasting it is interactive. People can ask questions and share information.)

2. Is there a certain negative memory concerning a webinar that you can recall?
3. In there a certain positive memory concerning a webinar that you can recall?

4. Which characteristics of products and services make them suited for a webinar?

5. How can interaction best be stimulated in a webinar?

6. What technical possibilities (*cues*) are preferably used in an effective webinar?

7. What influence does the presenter have on a webinar?

8. Why are webinars suited for marketing and sales?
9. Why are webinars not suited for marketing and sales?

Appendix B: Dutch summary

Onderzoek op het gebied van webinars voor marketing en sales is schaars. Dit onderzoek draagt bij aan het huidige begrip te vergroten en analytische generalisaties mogelijk te maken. De onderzoeksvraag betreft de manier waarop webinars een effectief marketing en sales tool zijn voor internet marketing bij Nederlandse organisaties. Deelvragen die gaan over de inhoud, technische mogelijkheden van het medium en ervaring dragen bij aan het beantwoorden van de hoofdvraag. Kwalitatief onderzoek is toegepast en een multi-case content analyse is uitgevoerd. Vier marketeers zijn geïnterviewd in de pre-analyse. Een semigestructureerd interview is gebruikt voor de dataverzameling, waarbij 16 marketeers zijn betrokken die werken bij marketing bureaus, grote organisaties of als freelance marketing experts. Resultaten zijn geanalyseerd aan de hand van een coderingsschema (Burnard, 1991) en een tweede codeur. Gebaseerd op de data, is het soort inhoud geschikt voor een marketing en sales webinar óf wel redelijk complex, óf een meer eenvoudige inhoud dat door de context meer inhoudelijk wordt gemaakt. Dit uit zichzelf in het delen van kennis en demonstraties, bruikbaar voor marketing en sales. Technische mogelijkheden en de doelen van een webinar bepaalden voornamelijk het gebruik van de technische mogelijkheden van het medium. Het is belangrijk dat deze technische mogelijkheden interactiviteit, het persoonlijk maken en betrokkenheid stimuleren. De ervaring van een presentator met presenteren, inhoud en techniek spelen een significante rol. Assistentie door moderator(s), meerdere presentators en voorbereiding is in de meeste gevallen belangrijk voor het houden van een effectief webinar.

Steekwoorden: Webinars, marketing, sales, Media Naturalness Hypothesis, Media Richness Theory, Social Presence Theory