

Cyber-Seminars: A Virtual Success

You hardly have to leave your office anymore, because the whole world is being piped right to your desktop. I know, because I recently attended my first seminar by Internet.

The seminar, sponsored by the American Gear Manufacturers Association, was called "The Economy and the Gear Market: What Comes Next?" It was presented by Dr. Mike Bradley, professor of economics at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. Dr. Bradley presented slides over the Internet while he spoke to participants via telephone.

Dr. Bradley's presentation, as always, was both interesting and informative. He's the economics professor everyone wishes he had in college. Not only is Dr. Bradley well informed about the gear industry, but also, he's able to explain economics in simple, easy-to-understand language.

Regrettably, there weren't a lot of positive things for Dr. Bradley to say in the middle of a manufacturing recession. But the presentation gave us a better idea of what's been happening and what to expect in the coming months.

Of course, the question everyone wants answered—when will the manufacturing recession be over?—can't be predicted with any certainty. However, history has provided some measure of assurance in this area. According to Dr. Bradley, the average recession since World War II has lasted around 11 months. Although some have lasted considerably longer, we're already more than a year into this manufacturing recession, so hopefully, we don't have to wait much longer for recovery.

While I wasn't terribly encouraged by Dr. Bradley's near-term expectations, I was certainly encouraged by the format and technology of the seminar itself. Dr. Bradley's slides appeared on our computer screen, and he controlled them from his location, flipping through them just as he would in a lecture hall. He was even able to highlight and animate portions of the presentation as he spoke.

Also, participants were able to ask questions, either by typing them into their browsers or, at certain points during the presentation, by speaking them over the phone lines. The phoned-in questions could be heard by all the other participants, just as if they were sitting at a traditional conference.

As a whole, I was very impressed at how the technology provided an experience nearly duplicating that of a live seminar.

This is not to say that the format does not have its drawbacks. It's not the same as being there in person. Much of the interaction that takes place in person can't happen in a virtual setting. Often, at conferences, it's the communication that takes place in the hallways or the hotel lobby that proves the most valuable. The value of that face-to-face contact can't be

replaced altogether.

However, one of the main advantages of the Internet teleconference is its ability to expand the potential audience. According to Joe Franklin, AGMA's executive director, 42 company locations participated in the event. The average number of individuals at each location was 4.9, resulting in more than 200 total attendees. At a typical AGMA marketing committee meeting, somewhere between 50 and 75 people normally attend, Franklin says.

At most technical seminars, just one or two people from any company are able to attend. But with a virtual seminar, there's no airfare or accommodations to worry about, so the price of attending goes way down. Plus, the only time lost at the office is the time for the seminar itself.

Increasing the availability of technical information was one of the founding principles of this magazine. About 18 years ago, when I founded *Gear Technology*, many gear-related technical papers were being presented at conferences around the world, but most of the gear manufacturing community never saw the papers. The fact that a much larger audience is interested in that information is one of the reasons for this magazine's success.

The virtual meeting technology has similar potential. We'll soon see this format used for more comprehensive events, such as AGMA's many technical committee meetings or any number of other seminars and presentations held by other organizations.

According to Franklin, the AGMA plans to make good use of the technology over the next year. I believe that anything that gives us the ability to increase the spread of information—especially information that's of value to our industry—is commendable.

So I congratulate the AGMA for their efforts in this endeavor, and I look forward to future uses of this and similar technologies.



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