



## **ASQ Section 1108 Lunchtime Webinars by Norval Johnston**

### **Senior Member, Blue Ridge Section Committee Chair**

#### **New Ways to Network**

After several years of declining participation at their monthly section events, ASQ Blue Ridge Section 1108, a section of about 100 members located in a rural area of Virginia, needed to improve their section member engagement. A Voice of the Customer (VOC) survey of section members conducted in 2015 found that traditional monthly dinner meetings were not as popular as they had been ten years ago and were perceived as not having as much value. Many of the section members were too busy after regular work hours with other commitments – working longer hours at the office, tending to family needs, etc. – to attend the evening events.

With a focus on delivering member value, the section's leadership team started evaluating alternative ways to reach the members who were unavailable after work hours. One of the ideas was to offer webinars as a different approach to reaching out and educating section members. After considerable debate among the leadership team members, the section finally decided to offer free webinars during the lunch hour on a trial basis.

Pursuing webinars required a new set of tools and methods to be developed to effectively communicate and to successfully deliver the information. The first tool needed was the right software platform to provide a positive online experience. Section 1108 obtained access to a 25-seat, online meeting account, donated by a local area company. The second challenge was determining how to structure the webinars, i.e., format, time allotted, and how to handle a large number of people dialed in from a number of different locations. This was accomplished by reviewing webinars from other professional groups to benchmark and learn any best practices that could be applied.

Section 1108 offered its very first lunchtime webinar in January 2016, and had 13 attendees. The section continued to provide one webinar a month until August 2016, when two webinars were given. Over the course of a year, a gradually increasing number of attendees came online for the webinars, and 25 seats eventually became insufficient. By the end of 2016, larger numbers of attendees were participating in the virtual events, not just from Section 1108, but also from the surrounding ASQ sections in Virginia, from other states, and from outside of the United States.

It became very clear that Section 1108 needed to increase the number of available online seats from 25 to at least 50 seats, due to the level of growth and interest. So, in November 2016, the section invested in its own 50-seat online meeting account, while expanding the number of online offerings to three webinars each month.

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Through the use of electronic post-event surveys, the section has been actively seeking ways to continually improve the webinar experience. This has generated changes in the following:

- Handling all virtual event registrations through Eventbrite
- Conducting short preparation sessions, one-on-one, with the presenters (if needed) before the event dates to resolve any potential online issues ahead of time
- Recording webinars (with speaker permission) and uploading the recordings to the section's YouTube channel for the participants to review at a later time
- Having a copy of the presenter's slides available to share after the webinar, if possible
- Improving the vetting of online presenters, based on attendee feedback
- Obtaining timely feedback on completed webinars to help improve future webinars
- Sending attendees a certificate of completion within a short period of time
- Adding an overview about Section 1108 and a review of upcoming webinars at the start of each online event
- Using the chat window for questions during, and at the end of, each webinar (instead of having open phone lines)
- Formatting slides to be more applicable for the 30 to 45 minute virtual environment

These improvements have led to the results shown on the graph on the next page. Section 1108 has been able to reach out and engage members who would normally be dormant, as well as help other local and regional ASQ sections deliver value to their members through collaborative activities. What had started out as an experiment to increase member value, grew into a new and different way of communicating valuable learning opportunities to a greater number of ASQ section members.

Even though online events have worked very well and are a better fit for member needs in rural Virginia, Section 1108 still offers plant tours and face-to-face events on a less frequent basis, as additional opportunities to learn new ideas and to network with other professionals. In the 2015 VOC survey of section members, networking opportunities was the #2 perceived benefit of having an ASQ membership (behind learning opportunities) for local section members.

What does the future hold for the section's virtual events? Due to the very positive feedback from online attendees, Section 1108 plans to offer its first interactive, online problem-solving workshop in the fall of 2017, as well as a virtual quality roundtable of subject matter experts on ISO 9001:2015 to help those who may have questions about implementation of the new standard. As long as virtual events maintain their high level of interest and deliver value to ASQ members, Section 1108 will continue to provide these learning opportunities into the future.



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