UF | UNIVERSITY *of* FLORIDA

IFAS Extension

Ten Tips for Organizing a Videoconference at Multiple Sites Using the Polycom® System[1]

Michael G. Andreu and Melissa H. Friedman[2]

Frequently, extension events or symposia are planned within the university system that are relevant to an audience statewide; however, travel costs and time may limit the number of participants. One way to overcome this challenge is to make the event available via Polycom® at multiple sites.

The Polycom® system is a videoconferencing tool that facilitates the sharing of audio and video content among sites. It allows communication between the speaker and the audience, where the audience can hear and see presentations in real-time, ask questions or make comments, and the presenter can also see and hear the audience. The Polycom® system is currently available at 16 IFAS Research and Education Centers (RECs) and 29 County Extension Offices throughout the state. Though perhaps not as intimate as meetings where speakers and the audience are in the same room, this system is a good alternative and extends the potential audience statewide. For example, at a recent extension program we used the Polycom® system for a videoconference that resulted in approximately 50 attendees at the REC and 70 attendees at remote sites, thus more than doubling our audience.

The Polycom® system requires one site to act as the central hub or *bridge*; a bridge is a unit with the technical equipment that allows multiple sites to link together through one location. McCarty Hall on the Gainesville campus commonly provides the bridge, but other sites may also have this capability.

If you are planning to conduct a distance meeting, symposium, or conference through the University of Florida and would like to include multiple sites, use the guidelines in this document to help get you started on the right track.

1. Select a Date

Select a set of dates (approximately 3) at least 5 months in advance that will potentially work for your event. Doing this will allow ample time to make all of the necessary arrangements that go along with a distance event such as reserving bridge space with Gainesville, planning, and troubleshooting.

The use of trade names in this publication is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. UF/IFAS does not guarantee or warranty the products named, and references to them in this publication does not signify our approval to the exclusion of other products of suitable composition.

2. Determine Your Point of Origin and Broadcast Sites

While many locations are listed as having Polycom® systems, not all sites have equal capabilities and capacities. A list of potential sites with Polycom® systems can be found at: http://video.ifas.ufl.edu/contacts.htm .

If you are originating the meeting from a site other than Gainesville, make sure the site is properly equipped to host the speakers and presentations. At a minimum this planning checklist includes up-to-date technology (Polycom® system); a computer to run presentations; a camera that can see both the presenter and content (anything projected on screen); proper lighting for this kind of event; microphones for the speaker and attendees to communicate between sites; and a sound system to assist with the communication. Non-technological considerations include adequate seating and parking for your specific event.

3. How Many Sites Can I Choose?

If you are going to broadcast your event using the bridge in Gainesville, be aware that a maximum of 16 sites can be linked at the same time. If your site has the capability of bridging, a range of 3 to 12 sites may be connected simultaneously depending on the unit. To find out about a sites ability to bridge, ask the local IT person at that site.

4. Reserve Bridge Space from Gainesville

Upon determining where you are broadcasting to and from, you will need to reserve bridge space. If you plan to use Gainesville as your host site you will need to fill out a request form located at the following URL: http://icsde.ifas.ufl.edu/pdf/vcrequestform.pdf . If you use a host site other than Gainesville but would still like Gainesville to provide the bridge, you will need to fill out the online form at: http://oak.at.ufl.edu/~video/phpService/ request_main.php. In order to fill out the form completely you will need the name of the contact person, phone number, E-mail address and Internet

protocol (IP) address for each site. You can obtain most of this information from the following Web site: http://video.ifas.ufl.edu/contacts.htm , but make sure the information is current before submitting. Note: reserving bridge space does not reserve a room at the remote sites you selected.

5. Contact Your Sites

It is **your responsibility to contact all chosen sites to reserve a room for your event** whether bridging from Gainesville or not. When contacting potential sites, be sure to ask to speak with the designated videoconference coordinator responsible for scheduling these types of events. A partial list of contacts can be found at: http://icsde.ifas.ufl.edu/coordinators.html . Inform the coordinator about the specifics of your program such as date, time, presentations and estimated duration, number of speakers/presentations, and estimated attendance. Ensure that the room is large enough to accommodate your event as capacities vary by site (range from 10 to greater than 100). Finally, inquire about the room setting as it may or may not work for your particular needs; for example, you may want your audience to be able to take notes at a desk or view samples on a table, but you may have designated a preferred site that only has the ability to set up chairs.

6. Content Sharing Compatibility

If you are planning to share content (PowerPoint® presentations, video footage) at your event in addition to viewing the speaker, make sure that all sites selected are technologically compatible. This step is critical as some sites do not have content-sharing capabilities. For example, County Extension Offices are on a different network than IFAS and firewalls may challenge the sharing of content. We recommend doing a "test" at least 2 weeks in advance, where all the sites link together simultaneously and share the exact content to be used during your event. This test will confirm that everything is in working order. Should content sharing issues arise, the local IT person can suggest solutions. The idea is to troubleshoot these issues before the event to avoid a poor quality broadcast and negative experience for the attendees.

7. Inform the Director

Despite the fact that you have been in contact with the local videoconference coordinator, you should, as a common courtesy, contact the local Director of each site and inform him/her of your event that is taking place in his/her "backyard." This builds goodwill and may even garner you more support and a wider audience for your event.

8. Coordinating the Event

It may be necessary to have a designated person to assist with onsite logistics such as signage, handouts, and refreshments. It is in your best interest to identify this person as early in the planning process as possible. Consider asking a professor or extension agent specializing in the field of your events content if he/she is willing to help with your program. If you need guidance, ask the Director at each location to suggest an appropriate person.

Points of discussion may include:

A. Will registrations be handled through one central location or at each site?

B. How to pay for copies of handouts or do they need to be mailed ahead of time?

C. How to arrange (purchase and setup) and pay for food and drinks? (University and County fiscal policies may vary and are strict.)

D. How will money be handled if you are charging a fee for the event?

E. How will material such as continuing education credits or evaluation sheets be returned to you?

F. What signs and advertising will be necessary to direct attendees to the event?

G. Will someone be available to answer questions and troubleshoot problems that may arise for the duration of the event? We strongly recommend that someone is available at all times.

9. Tips for Presenters

While the Polycom® is a very useful tool, the image quality can be improved by taking some of the following steps:

A. Inform speakers ahead of time that clothes with certain colors and patterns may be distorted. The following URL has additional details: http://icsde.ifas.ufl.edu/presenter.html .

B. Suggestions for formatting PowerPoint® presentations (e.g., font and colors) can be found at: http://icsde.ifas.ufl.edu/ppt/ PPdesign2005_files/v3_document.htm.

C. Urge presenters to compress images in order to keep PowerPoint® presentation files as small as possible. Large presentations can cause the system to crash.

D. Due to lag time during presentations, instruct presenters to pace themselves through a slideshow. A good rule of thumb is at least 10 seconds per slide.

E. To make your event appear more professional consider using a background screen behind the speaker as opposed to having a bare wall. Be careful to inform your speakers of the background color so that they will wear contrasting colored clothing.

F. Check the lighting on the speaker. You may want to consider supplemental lighting to enhance the image quality.

G. At the end of a presentation, rather than asking, are there any questions, ask for questions site by site to avoid confusion. Try using a strategic approach and have a specific time allotted for questions and answers.

10. Staying Organized

It is evident that there are many details to keep track of when coordinating even a small event. One way to stay organized is to create a spreadsheet with

all the vital information you will need throughout the planning process. Consider including the following in your spreadsheet and arranging them by site:

- videoconference coordinator: name, phone, E-mail and IP address

- designated onsite help: name, phone and E-mail

- room capacity: track during pre-registration to avoid overbooking

- room location: directions to site, building name and room number

We hope these tips provide you with a better idea of what to expect when planning a videoconference and will assist you through this process for a successful extension event.