

Small Nonprofit Reaches Large Audience with Web Tools

National Environmental Education Foundation makes impact on millions with just 28 people.

Executive Summary

Customer Name:

National Environmental Education Foundation

Industry:

Nonprofit

Location:

Washington, D.C.

Number of Employees:

28

Challenge:

- Educate executives, teachers, and healthcare professionals nationwide on environmental issues and programs
- Reach large audience with small staff and limited travel budget
- Find new ways to teach sustainability

Solution:

- Web tools enable staff of 28 to reach audience of millions
- Online seminars combine multiple audiences and targeted messages in single event
- Interactive features make online meetings more dynamic and productive

Results:

- Established virtual roundtable with major corporations, representing nearly 4 million employees
- Extended reach beyond local audiences, delivering message throughout United States
- Reduced carbon footprint, saved money and time by avoiding travel

Challenge

Since 1990, the National Environmental Education Foundation (NEEF) has had one mission: to promote environmental literacy nationwide. “We advocate stewardship and encourage people to take care of the places where they live, work, and play,” says Diane Wood, president of NEEF. The Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit promotes environmental education curricula, research, and programming to schools, businesses, and professional communities. Working with corporations, healthcare providers, regional community groups, federal agencies, and environmental organizations throughout the country, it has a broad reach. Still, with a staff of only 28, its mission can seem challenging.

“We’re not large, and we don’t have a lot of money, but we have an ambitious mandate,” says Wood. “We’re tasked with educating the entire public, but we can’t do it person-by-person. Instead, we leverage trusted professionals like teachers, healthcare workers, land managers, business leaders, and meteorologists. We reach out to them with objective, science-based environmental information, and they disseminate it to their networks.”

In the past, NEEF interacted with these professionals by hosting meetings in Washington D.C. However, this approach meant that the agency had to pay for the travel of all participants to attend. NEEF staff also attended major conferences all over the country. Often Wood traveled to meet with potential donors to share the NEEF story. “It would take three days to visit one company,” she says. “We simply couldn’t reach that many people. We wanted to have a larger impact.”

To make matters worse, 2009 was a year in which the financial downturn prompted a number of cutbacks, including travel. The same was true for partner organizations. Wood and her staff needed an inexpensive yet effective way to reach key educational partners. They immediately looked to the web. “We knew we needed to use the web to reach a broader audience, but our website lacked the interaction we required,” says Wood. “We needed a better way to interact via the Internet.”

Solution

NEEF staff sought flexible online seminar tools that could be deployed on a wide range of computer systems. The team also needed a system that would work anywhere they had an Internet connection. Finally, NEEF did not want to host the service or store large video and audio files on its own servers. The nonprofit found its solution in Cisco WebEx™ technology.

NEEF employees began using Cisco WebEx® online meeting tools in March 2009 and learned the basics through self-guided online training sessions in just a few weeks. A month later they held their first web-based event: a roundtable with representatives from more than 70 corporations and nonprofits. “We wanted to speak with corporations about what they were doing to engage employees about the environment,” says Wood. “Plus, we realized that corporations are probably more familiar with web-based conferences than just about any other group. They made the perfect audience for our first online event.”

At the event, sustainability experts from multinational corporations as well as environmental scientists spoke about how companies can engage their employees around environmental sustainability. Members of the press also attended to hear the results of a NEEF survey that polled 1300 companies to discover how they were spreading the word about sustainability within their organizations. “For the first time ever, we were able to combine multiple audiences and messages in a single event,” says Wood. “And we were able to connect with the corporate community in a professional, efficient way. The response was tremendous. There was an immediate interest in follow-up web conferences.”

NEEF has also used Cisco® WebEx meeting tools to share curricula and teaching tips with educators during National Environmental Education Week. Every year during the week leading up to Earth Day, schools across the country teach students about the environment. NEEF chooses a theme for the week and then distributes educational materials about the topic. “This year our theme was water and energy,” says Wood. “We needed to explain how we use water and energy to produce products, and how we need energy to clean and move that water. But there wasn’t an existing curriculum for the topic. So we developed one with our partners and used WebEx technology to present it to teachers.”

Through the online seminar, NEEF was able to reach educators from around the country, who otherwise would not have been able to teach this complex topic. “With WebEx solutions, we’re able to make our meetings engaging and dynamic,” says Wood. “We share our computer desktops, show videos, and chat with individuals who have questions during a presentation. We can even record the presentation and make it available to those who weren’t able to attend the live online meeting. Our attendees love it, and it makes us much more effective.”

“We have a small staff and a tight budget, but with WebEx technology, we can dream big and act big. We can reach millions. This technology has been revolutionary for us.”

— Diane Wood, president, National Environmental Education Foundation

Results

Through WebEx online meeting tools, NEEF has expanded its reach tremendously. “We regularly have 20 major companies meeting virtually to share experiences on how they engage their employees in sustainability,” says Wood. “If we total up the number of employees these corporations reach, it comes to four million. With WebEx online meetings, our 28-person organization is able to feel like we’re changing the behavior of four million people. That’s something we couldn’t even dream of four years ago.”

NEEF is not just reaching more people; it is also reaching new groups of people. “The head of our National Public Lands Day program was at the Association of Partners for Public Lands workshop to talk about building and maintaining partnerships,” says Wood. “There were about 75 attendees at the workshop, but we broadcast the presentation online via WebEx online seminar tools. We had 150 online participants. It immediately expanded our audience to people from small local groups that simply can’t afford to fly staff to seminars.”

The organization has also been able to further reduce its carbon footprint. “We try to be as sustainable as we can,” says Wood. “With WebEx online meeting tools, we’ve been able to reduce our carbon footprint significantly. I travel less to meet with corporations, and people don’t have to come to us. We also encourage corporations to use online meeting tools to reduce their own carbon footprints.”

Next Steps

NEEF plans to continue using WebEx technology in new ways to expand its programs and reach. This usage includes conducting web conferences for broadcast meteorologists and holding online seminars to teach small organizations how to write effective grants. NEEF will even begin using WebEx technology to conduct supplemental board meetings. “We have a small staff and a tight budget,” says Wood. “But with WebEx technology, we can dream big and act big. We can reach millions. This technology has been revolutionary for us.”

For More Information

To find out more about Cisco WebEx solutions, go to <http://www.cisco.com/web/products/webex/index.html>.

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