



SpeakerNet News

P R E S E N T S

Is Twitter a Presenter's Nightmare or a Dream Come True?

A teleseminar with Cliff Atkinson


Interviewed by Rebecca Morgan, CSP, CMC

Contents of this report:

- Synopsis of the teleseminar from the SpeakerNet News Web site, with an overview of the program contents and background information for Cliff Atkinson.
- Edited transcript of the teleseminar interview. The verbatim transcript has been edited to improve readability and to provide a list of additional resources.

SpeakerNet News

1440 Newport Ave. San Jose, CA 95125 408.998.7977
editor@speakernetnews.com • www.speakernetnews.com



Is Twitter a Presenter's Nightmare or a Dream Come True?

with Cliff Atkinson

Armed with laptops and smartphones, audiences are no longer sitting quietly while speakers are talking—instead, they're using Twitter and other tools to create a backchannel where they chat with one another, make comments about your presentation, and broadcast their thoughts to people all over the world.



If audiences are happy, the backchannel can spread your ideas far and wide, create buzz about your ideas, and keep a conversation going long after you leave the podium. But if audiences are unhappy, the backchannel can criticize your ideas and delivery, disrupt your talk, and even derail your presentation completely. So is the backchannel yet another thing to fear when you give your next presentation? Or a great opportunity to really know what your audience is thinking?

Cliff Atkinson, author of *The Backchannel: How Audiences are Using Twitter and Social Media and Changing Presentations Forever*, shares his research and ideas for making the backchannel work for you.

You will learn:

- How audiences are changing the power dynamic of presentations
- Why you need a Twitter account and how to use it
- How to make your presentation Twitter-friendly
- How to avoid backchannel disasters
- How to extend your message further than previously possible
- How to use Twitter feedback to adjust or fine-tune your ideas

About Cliff Atkinson:

Cliff Atkinson designed the presentations that helped persuade a jury to award a \$253 million verdict to the plaintiff in the nation's first Vioxx trial in 2005, which Fortune magazine called "frighteningly powerful." His bestselling book *Beyond Bullet Points* (Microsoft Press, 2007) was named a Best Book of 2007 by the editors of Amazon.com, and it expands on a communications approach he has taught at many of the country's top law firms, government agencies, business schools, and corporations, including Sony, Toyota, Nestle, Nokia, Nationwide, Deloitte, Amgen, Bristol-Myers Squibb, Intel, Microsoft and the United Nations International Criminal Tribunal. Cliff's latest book explores the growing impact of social media on presentations in *The Backchannel: How Audiences are Using Twitter and Social Media and Changing Presentations Forever* (New Riders, 2009).

www.backchannelbook.com

SpeakerNet News Teleseminar
“Is Twitter a Presenter’s Nightmare or a Dream Come True?”
with Cliff Atkinson
Interviewed by Rebecca Morgan, CSP, CMC

REBECCA: Let me introduce our guest expert today, Cliff Atkinson.

A recent SpeakerNet News topic of the month generated a lot of discussion about the impact of audiences using Twitter during presentations. So we have asked Cliff to discuss the concepts of his latest book, called *The Backchannel: How Audiences Are Using Twitter and Social Media and Changing Presentations Forever*.

Cliff, thanks for being with us today.

CLIFF: Hey! Thanks for having me.

REBECCA: I know it will be a lively discussion because a lot of people have concerns about this. So let’s first define what you mean by backchannel. I’m sure it’s a new concept for some of our listeners.

CLIFF: Absolutely. Back in the good old days of presentations, a speaker was able to stand up on the stage and share our wisdom and our effectiveness and our ideas, and for the audience to sit quietly in their chairs to receive our ideas. And once in a while we might ask some Q & A or involve people in exercises, but essentially the model itself is set up to let the speaker have the stage. If an audience member had questions pop into their mind, maybe they would write those down on a piece of paper or maybe afterwards, if they had some comments, they might tell other people in the hallway.

So all that is dramatically changing these days. It’s a big shift in presentations when the audience takes their laptops or their smartphones, their

iPhones, into a meeting; and while the presenter is talking, people in the audience are now writing their thoughts and comments into Twitter. And when they write something they click “Send” or “Publish” and it goes to all of their followers around the world. And so some of the dynamics that are happening now with that shift in the way people are using Twitter is that people are giving their real-time feedback about a presenter. And as we will talk about, I’m sure today, it really is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it can help you to reach a much broader audience because the backchannel is now promoting your ideas to a larger group of people than otherwise you could before. But on the other side, some backchannel confrontations have happened when there have been misunderstandings between presenters and audiences.

REBECCA: It’s interesting, because just this last weekend a handful of colleagues and I attended a multi-day seminar and we were not tweeting, but IM-ing and texting each other throughout. If the presenter or his staff had been privy to what we were complaining about, perhaps they could have done something about it. There was very little opportunity to ask questions. So I could see how presenters really need to know how to manage this backchannel in a way that is useful, rather than in a way that is detrimental.

CLIFF: Absolutely. A keynote presenter was presenting last fall at a conference. He was one of two keynote speakers. The first keynote speaker delivered his presentation. He was a big hit. He did lots of interactive exercises, very entertaining and educational. The second presenter, the next day, started giving his talk and using what would look like a traditional PowerPoint format. He put

his slides up and started giving his presentation. What started to happen then is people in the audience were complaining. First they started saying, “This guy is leaving his first slide up there a long time.” They started critiquing his PowerPoint slides, “Hey, this guy is using yellow font on a white background!?”

Then as these comments started going out, people were saying, “Yeah, this topic is off-track with what we expected. We wanted some really cutting-edge sort of social media content, and this guy is talking about flyers and emailing, and this is really outdated content.”

What happened then is things started to spiral, and a negative comment begat another negative comment, and pretty soon somebody tweeted, “We need a t-shirt that says, ‘I survived the keynote disaster of 2009.’”

Before you knew it, the next tweet went out and somebody had linked to the Web site called CafePress that makes custom t-shirts, and they had made a t-shirt that said exactly that.

The presenter was up there the entire time and had no idea that this was happening, and afterwards I’m sure learned a lesson about the need to really know your audience and to really have the best possible presentation to make sure a positive message will go out via Twitter from his audience.

REBECCA: That’s a great example. I know we’re going to talk about avoiding such disasters and what we can learn from that backchannel information, but let’s start at the basics. I’m sure a bunch of listeners are saying, “Why do I need to have a Twitter account? Why should I bother? It just seems like a endless stream of what people had for lunch, and who cares?”