The Latest Techniques in Audience Response/Polling Systems: Texting, Tweeting and the World-Wide Web

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Transform Your Programs Using Audience Response Units

Abstract

Personal response systems, classroom performance systems, voting keypads, audience polling systems, clickers, student responders... whatever one chooses to call them, Audience Response Systems are finding their way into all manner of seminars, classrooms, and lectures. An audience response system allows a presenter to pose questions to audience members, who can then respond using remote control-like handheld devices. These systems can introduce active learning into a continuing legal education (CLE) seminar, while increasing learner engagement, interaction, and participation.

This paper describes the typical audience response system, discusses the growing emphasis on learner engagement, and then provides numerous tips and suggestions for effectively incorporating this technology into live CLE programs.

Table of Contents

Abstract ............................................................. 2
Table of Contents............................................... 2
What is an Audience Response System? .......... 3
Why the Focus on Learner Engagement? ........ 3
Top 10 Reasons to Use Audience Response Systems for CLE Programs ......................... 4
Top 10 Practical Tips for Using Audience Response Systems ............................................. 7
Top 5 Things That Can Go Wrong (and How to Avoid Them)........................................... 11
How to Get Started: Requirements, Options, and Costs .................................................. 12
Conclusion ....................................................... 14
For Further Reading.......................................... 14
Appendix A: Sample Questions.................... 15
Appendix B: Audience Response System Vendors and Websites..................................... 16
What is an Audience Response System?

Audience response refers to a type of group session interaction in which the audience members have the opportunity to respond to questions posed by the presenter. An Audience Response System refers to technology designed to facilitate this type of interaction.

Audience response can be elicited in all types of group presentation sessions—including for remote audiences through the use of telephone-based or online polling. This paper focuses on audience response systems for co-located audiences, which generally consist of a receiver (infrared or radio-frequency), individual response devices (often referred to as “clickers”), and some form of presentation software (often integrated with the presentation program Microsoft PowerPoint).

The key feature of an audience response system is that it allows audience members to anonymously respond to questions asked in a live seminar, and to have those responses received and recorded in real time on the presenter’s computer. The results can then be instantly displayed, allowing both the audience and presenter to know the distribution of responses. Everyone has an opportunity to contribute, but in a way that respects individual privacy. Seeing the representativeness of the possible responses is a powerful way to obtain formative feedback on learning and presenting, to build mutual awareness within a group, and to initiate discussion—all of which can contribute positively to the learning environment.

An audience response system can usually collect responses on either an anonymous or an individually identifiable basis. Aggregate results can be displayed for the benefit of the audience, or can simply be collected for later analysis.

Why the Focus on Learner Engagement?

People learn more effectively through an active learning process, and yet educators continue to rely on the “talking head” style of presentation. The traditional lecture, long viewed as an efficient means of disseminating information to a large group, has been a mainstay of CLE seminars. As the audience tends to simply passively absorb information in such a setting, this presentation style’s effectiveness is being called into question.
“Introducing an audience response system into a traditional seminar is a relatively easy way to actively engage the audience, without dramatically deviating from the lecture-style to which both CLE presenters and attendees have grown accustomed.”

**Top 10 Reasons to Use Audience Response Systems for CLE Programs**

An audience response system can be employed in different ways and at different stages of a presentation in order to achieve a variety of different results. At the outset of a presentation, for example, the presenter can use the system to discover more about the audience’s background knowledge and preconceptions. This assists the presenter in making the presentation more appropriate to the audience’s specific learning needs.

At any stage of a presentation, a presenter can ask a spontaneous question to obtain feedback from the audience. The questions can relate to a variety of issues, including topics to be emphasized (e.g. “Would you like me to talk about the history of the legislative change, or move right into the application?”), pace or depth of the discussion (e.g. “There is a lot of interest in this topic—should we continue the discussion or move on to our next topic?”), and seminar conditions (e.g. “Can everyone hear me without the microphone?”). Instead of waiting until the post-program feedback, a presenter has an opportunity to address issues before it is too late.

A presentation that is tailored to the audience will have a greater impact than a generic lecture. It also allows the presenter to emphasize the points the audience is most interested in hearing. A presenter may have certain assumptions about the audience members, their experiences, or their interests. Asking a few quick questions at the beginning of a topic allows the presenter to confirm these assumptions before proceeding.

Questions asked about the audience at the beginning of a presentation also help to establish mutual awareness of the seminar group. This not only provides helpful context for the presenter, it also conveys a sense of context for the rest of the audience. This can be useful in
building a base level of trust among the participants that can have a positive impact on discussion levels and on the overall atmosphere.

During a presentation, having the participants respond to questions means they are no longer mere passive recipients of information. The more active a participant is in the learning activity, the more likely that participant is to retain the material. Active processing and attentiveness can occur before, during, and after a question:

- **In Anticipation of a Question.** When a question is anticipated, participants may pay greater attention to the material being presented in order to improve their chances of choosing the best possible answer.

- **When Asked a Question.** Once a question is asked, participants naturally become more curious about the outcome. In addition, participants must actively process the information with which they have been presented in order to formulate a response.

- **After a Question Has Been Asked.** Finally, once a participant commits to an answer, he or she is likely to show greater interest in the outcome and, in particular, how his or her answer compares to what other people have answered.

Even the physical nature of pressing buttons on a device adds a degree of activity to what might otherwise be a purely passive session. Audience response technology is more than a novelty, but the newness of it can create an additional impact. Even when the novelty has worn off, the interactivity component remains.

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**10 Ways to Use an Audience Response System**

1. **Know Your Audience.** Discover more about the audience members' knowledge and preconceptions to ensure the presentation best reflects their specific learning needs.

2. **Create Mutual Awareness.** Gather and display aggregate background and demographic information to provide a sense of context for the presenter and the rest of the audience.

3. **Improve Attentiveness and Knowledge Retention.** Ask questions to keep the audience involved. The more participants pay attention, the more participants will absorb.

4. **Foster a Fun and Interactive Environment.** Leverage the novelty aspect, but also embrace the new level of participation this technology affords. Allowing the audience members to “click in” automatically makes them an active part of the session.

5. **Solicit Opinions on Sensitive Topics.** Take advantage of the ability to ask questions anonymously to get honest opinions on challenging questions or experiences involving ethical dilemmas and conduct.
Audience response is not just about participants interacting with the system; it is about participants interacting with each other. Visually displaying a distribution of responses can be a powerful catalyst for group discussion. Graphing the audience members’ responses to a question clearly and dramatically highlights differences in opinion; as participants try to rationalize these conflicting responses, they are more likely to question or to defend their choices (or the choices of others). This can lead to a spontaneous and unstructured discussion that can serve to expand on key learning points, to open participants’ minds to new perspectives, and to resolve confusion.

This is particularly useful when dealing with potentially sensitive topics. Because voting can be done anonymously, participants can express their true choices without feeling pressure to explain or justify them. Asking for a “show of hands” may work for certain types of questions, but crowd psychology may skew the results. Audience response technology can be used to ask more personal questions about people’s opinions and experiences. The anonymity feature allows even very shy participants to become involved.

Asking questions, of course, is a classic means of assessment. This technology can easily be used at the end of a topic to test the content knowledge of participants. Because questions are automatically marked, instant feedback is possible. Based on the answers specifically chosen, the presenter can tailor feedback to address the most common errors or misconceptions.

While assessment-type questions are often done anonymously and for learning purposes only, it is possible to assign response units to particular individuals to collect data on an individually identifiable basis. In courses where grades or certificates are
issued, these questions can be used as a formal means of assessment. Performance on questions can be measured and tracked, and data can be stored in a database on the presenter’s computer. Reports can later be generated, and data can be analyzed.

Finally, an audience response system can be used to get feedback at the end of the session. The advantage of using the technology for this purpose is that it allows anonymous results to be captured electronically right at the end of a session, while the presentation is still fresh in the minds of the participants. While this won’t necessarily replace questionnaires and surveys in full (valuable feedback often comes in the form of written comments), it can be useful for obtaining data for certain types of questions. Results can be electronically gathered, stored, and analyzed with ease.

**Top 10 Practical Tips for Using Audience Response Systems**

An audience response system can be used for a variety of different purposes, making it a potent and versatile tool. Deciding to use audience response systems in CLE seminars is only one piece of the puzzle. To effectively incorporate the technology into live programs, there are a number of practical steps that ought to be taken.

First, not every CLE program will be ideal for this sort of technology. While the majority of CLE sessions could benefit from the interactivity that an audience response system provides, it is still important to consider the subject matter, the audience, the venue, and the presenter to ensure that any given presentation will be appropriate for such an approach.

Incorporating an audience response system into a CLE program takes more than a fitting presentation, and it isn’t enough to obtain the necessary components and simply make them available to presenters. Individual presenters will need to be sold on their use. Fortunately, every presenter wants an engaged audience. To spark presenters’ interest in using the technology, educate them about the benefits of such a system. Share success stories from other programs and encourage presenters who have used the technology to act as champions for their use. The word of mouth
generated once a few presenters successfully incorporate the system into their programs can be a powerful marketing tool for the technology. For first-time audience response users, be prepared to give specific suggestions as to how questions might be integrated into their particular sessions.

Even if presenters see the benefit of using the technology, it will be a challenge to get them on board if the technology seems overly difficult to use. Audience response systems tend to be quite user-friendly, but it is important for presenters to be comfortable with using them. Especially at the early stages, provide as much information, assistance and training as presenters desire.

Once a presenter has shown interest in using the technology, the next step is to choose the right question style or styles. (A few sample questions have been included in Appendix A.) Depending on the specific audience response system, there can be a variety of question types from which to choose. Some of the most common types include true/false, multiple choice, numeric entry, rating scale, and group response. Each of these question styles would be used for a different kind of question:

- **Yes or No.** This style of question requires a simple positive or negative response to a statement or situation. Use this question type for classic “true/false” assessment questions, to see how many people “agree or disagree” with a viewpoint or have had a certain experience, or even to vote “guilty or not guilty”.

- **Multiple Choice.** Multiple choice questions incorporate a question stem, followed by alternative choices from which a participant will choose the best answer. The question may include “none of the above” or “all of the above” as

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**10 Tips for Incorporating an Audience Response System into a Live CLE Program**

1. **Ensure Audience Response Fits with the Presentation.** Consider the subject matter, the audience, the venue and the presenter to ensure the presentation is right for this approach.

2. **Sell Presenters on Using Audience Response.** Market the use of the system to presenters as a way to increase interactivity and to get the audience more engaged in the presentation.

3. **Make Audience Response Easy to Use.** Provide tips to presenters, assist with slide creation, and provide any necessary training so that presenters feel comfortable using the system.

4. **Choose the Right Style of Question.** Different question styles may be possible (yes/no, multiple choice, numeric response, rating scale, group response, etc.); choose ones that match the session objectives.

5. **Keep Questions and Answers Reasonably Simple.** People read and process at different rates. The simpler the style and wording of a question—and the fewer and less complex the answers—the better. Participants will be put off questions that are confusing—the session should be fun!
possible responses. Multiple choice questions tend to be the most popular, as they allow the same types of questions as “yes or no” but with greater flexibility and more options.

- **Numeric Entry.** This style of question requires a participant to enter a specific numeric value. For example, numeric entry might be appropriate if asking how many years a person has been in practice, or how many cases of a certain nature a person has tried.

- **Rating Scale.** This question type can be used to allow a participant to offer an opinion by rating a statement on a Likert-type scale of 1 to “n” (where “n” is usually a number between 5 and 10). For example, “on a scale of 1 to 7 (where 1 is strongly disagree and 7 is strongly agree), how would you rate...?”

- **Group Response.** Where a small group activity or discussion would help to stimulate learning, participants can be assigned to small groups and provided a single response unit per group. Learning is fostered as participants come to a consensus on a group answer. This type of question can also be used in a game environment—friendly competition among groups encourages attentiveness among participants.

Other question styles, such as free-text response, support short answer questions, but these can be awkward. In deciding on a style of question, remember that simpler is usually better. The more straightforward a question type (such as true/false or multiple choice), the less explanation will be required for the audience. While long and convoluted scenarios may be the mainstay of many law school exams, this is not the medium for such questions. People read and process information at different rates; it can be a challenge to give everyone enough time to answer, while keeping the people who respond quickly from becoming bored. This problem can be minimized by keeping the questions short and straightforward. When using multiple choice questions, do not offer too many options. This can make the question harder to read, and can also make the results appear cluttered and difficult to interpret.

### Common Question Styles

- Yes/No (or True/False)
- Multiple Choice
- Numeric Response
- Rating Scale
- Group Response

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### Tips for Effective Slide Design

- **36 point, easy-to-read font**
- **No more than 6 lines of text per slide**
- **Use images, animations, transitions, and sound effects sparingly and only to enhance the message**
- **Keep questions short, clear, and easy to read**
As always, keep in mind general rules of slide design. There are different schools of thought on what is ideal, but a typical rule of thumb is to use at least a 36-point easy-to-read font, with no more than 6 lines of text per slide. Avoid distracting animations, slide transitions, and sound effects. Instead of clichéd clipart, opt for realistic photographs or screen captures that enhance the presentation’s key message. Question slides, in particular, must be clear and legible so the audience can easily read and quickly answer the questions.

Not only should questions be kept relatively short, but it is important to ensure that they are designed with a purpose in mind. In deciding what questions might be appropriate, consider the objectives at each stage of the presentation. For example, is the goal to:

- Establish a rapport with the audience?
- Learn more about the participants?
- Encourage discussion?
- Solicit feedback?
- Assess participant understanding?

Questions designed for assessment should have clear right and wrong answers; questions designed to prompt discussion can be more controversial.

Settling on an appropriate number of questions (given the style and length of presentation) is also critical. Too few may not make the system worthwhile; too many may be overwhelming.

Regardless of the number of questions asked, budget extra time for a presentation using audience response. Asking questions and debriefing the answers can be time-consuming. When questions are successful in generating discussion, this discussion will extend the presentation length. Further, some additional time is
needed for set-up, distributing and collecting the response units, and providing instructions on their use.

Finally, if time permits, consider rehearsing the presentation. While most audience response systems are pretty simple to use, it is important that the presentation go smoothly. Practicing helps to figure out timing and to reveal any possible glitches associated with use of the technology.

**Top 5 Things That Can Go Wrong (and How to Avoid Them)**

It is impossible to anticipate all of the things that might go wrong with a presentation, especially one that incorporates technology. There are, however, certain common problems that may occur in a presentation using an audience response system. These can be grouped into five major categories:

1. **Problems Related to the Presenter.** Sometimes, presenters are reluctant to use audience response systems. Worse yet, they use them but then fail to use them effectively. This can have a detrimental effect on the program, and the perception of the technology generally. **Solution:** Ensure presenters are comfortable with the technology, understand the benefits of using the technology, and incorporate it appropriately into their presentations. Provide adequate information, assistance, and support in the use of the audience response system.

   **To avoid potential pitfalls, ensure:**
   - Presenters are comfortable with audience response;
   - Participants are comfortable with audience response;
   - Questions are appropriate in length, style, and content;
   - Answers are acted on or debriefed appropriately; and
   - Technology is correctly installed and working.

2. **Problems Related to the Participants.** If the audience is apprehensive about using the technology or about the questions asked, the audience response experience can be negative for the participants. **Solution:** Take steps to put the audience at ease by providing appropriate information and instructions. Let participants know where to pick up and turn in the response units, what the response units will be used for, how to register a response, how much time they will have to answer a question, how to change an answer, and whether or not responses are anonymous. An informed audience is more relaxed and more likely to participate, and will have a more enjoyable experience.
3. **Problems with the Questions.** Questions that are too long, overly complicated, or hard to read will only frustrate participants. If too many or too few questions are used, the audience will either be overwhelmed or unimpressed. **Solution:** Draft questions to be simple and straightforward, matching the style of questions to the program objectives. If unsure, get a second opinion on the questions to be used by running them by colleagues.

4. **Problems Following the Answers.** Participants may be dissatisfied if the presenter doesn’t appropriately follow up on questions that have been asked. **Solution:** Presenters must consider the questions they are asking and what they intend to do with the results. Assessment questions must be followed up with an explanation of the correct answer, questions asking for opinions or viewpoints should be appropriately debriefed, and questions soliciting feedback from the audience should be acted upon. Inadequately debriefing or prematurely cutting off valuable discussion brought on by an audience response question defeats the purpose of using the technology. Furthermore, if there is no intention of tailoring a presentation in accordance with the audience’s wishes, don’t ask the audience to provide input on what a presentation should cover.

5. **Problems with the Technology.** Using any form of technology creates the potential for technical difficulties. If the technology fails, presenters can become anxious, participants can become impatient, and the program can suffer. **Solution:** If possible, rehearse the presentation at the venue in advance of the live event. (Note: if using a system with an infrared signal, lighting can interfere with the operation of the system.) Ensure that all of the components are working, that the necessary software has been installed, and that the batteries in the response units are charged. Consider how the response units will be distributed to and collected from the participants; it is important to ensure that every participant has a response unit, and that all response units are returned. Finally, have a backup plan in place if the technology fails altogether.

**How to Get Started: Requirements, Options, and Costs**

CLE providers interested in adopting and implementing audience response systems will typically require the following:

- A computer,
- A projector,
- Presentation software,
- Response devices (individual wireless keypads), and
- A receiver (to be attached to the presenter’s computer).
Consider wireless, easy-to-use systems that integrate easily with Microsoft software (or other established presentation platform). In choosing a system, reflect on the range of functionality, the underlying technology, the features of the response devices, and the overall cost:

- **Functionality.** The standard audience response system features vary based on the individual systems but generally include:
  
  - An option for multi-choice responses,
  - The ability to answer anonymously,
  - First to click responses,
  - Confirm receipt options, and
  - The ability to revise an answer.

  There are also optional features available in some systems that may be of interest (albeit unnecessary). Such features can include automated contact information exchange, icebreaker incentive games, automated attendance, LCD screens, built-in microphone for voice communications, and alarms when people ‘walk away’ with clickers. Some systems also incorporate a helpful presenter console to allow for ease of ‘on the fly’ questions.

  It is important to note that some systems have not yet released versions that run on Vista 64 bit technology; ensure the chosen system is compatible with existing hardware.

- **Transmission Technology.** Data is typically transmitted from the response devices to the receiver using either infrared or radio frequency technology. The choice of infrared versus radio frequency will depend on the anticipated group size and budget (infrared is not ideal for large groups, but tends to be more affordable). Internet and cell phone based systems are also available; these systems use the participants’ own laptops, personal devices, or phones as response units. In a CLE environment, consider the impact of having participants using cell phones or other mobile devices during a session, and whether a sufficient number of participants would have access to this technology.

- **Getting Started? Consider:**
  - **Prerequisites**
    - computer, projector
  - **Functionality**
    - standard and optional
  - **Transmission Technology**
    - infrared, radio-frequency, internet, or cell phone
  - **Response Devices**
  - **Cost to buy or rent**

- **Response Devices.** Look for response devices that are wireless, a convenient size, and durable. Systems have a maximum number of devices per responder unit, and there are varying ranges for the wireless response devices which could be a concern.
in larger conference room settings.

- **Cost.** The costs of purchasing a system vary greatly. There is typically a base cost for the receiver units and a price per response keypad. Most systems are scalable in that a minimum number of response keypads can be purchased initially and additional keypads can be added at a later date. If unsure about the use of the technology, consider renting a system for a ‘pilot’ conference to see what the response would be from your market. A number of systems are priced specifically for this option. Pricing can vary quite a bit for rental systems (e.g. $12 per participant per day to as much as $100 per participant per day). Some suppliers recommend a technician on site for rentals.

See Appendix B for a list of audience response system vendors and website information.

**Conclusion**

The dominant activity in many CLE seminars is a prepared verbal and visual presentation, which is not always the most effective way of engaging an audience. Incorporating the use of an audience response system is a relatively simple way to enhance a traditional seminar and to make even a large group session interactive and engaging. Properly implemented, use of an audience response system can revitalize live CLE programs.

**For Further Reading**

For further information, papers and articles on Audience Response Systems, see:


For a comparison of audience response systems, visit the following websites:


Appendix A: Sample Questions

Demographic question to learn more about the audience

In what size of firm do you work?
1. Under 10 lawyers
2. 10-49 lawyers
3. 50+ lawyers
4. Not a law firm

Opinion question to generate discussion

Experts should review discovery transcripts.
1. True
2. False

Experience question asked for context

What is your experience with automated litigation support software to produce documents?
1. Never used it.
2. A little experience.
3. Use it extensively.

Feedback question on the program

How would you rate this course overall?
1. Excellent
2. Very Good
3. Good
4. Fair
5. Poor

Substantive question to assess knowledge

When does the legislative come into effect?
1. March 1, 2009 25%
2. July 1, 2009 25%
3. January 1, 2010 25%
4. March 1, 2010 25%

Sensitive question asked anonymously

As a lawyer, have you ever had a complaint filed against you?
1. Yes
2. No

50% 50%
# Appendix B: Audience Response System Vendors and Websites

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<th>Website</th>
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<td>*not based in North America</td>
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*Adapted from Dr. Will Thalheimer’s website “Audience Response Learning.org” available online at [http://www.audienceresponselearning.org/list_manufacturers.htm](http://www.audienceresponselearning.org/list_manufacturers.htm)
Presenter Text Polling Notes

- **Explain what’s going on**
  - “Now I’m going to ask for your opinion. You’ll use your phones to respond just like on American Idol. So please take out your cell phones, but remember to leave them on silent.”
  - “You’ll participate by sending a text message. If you don’t know how to do that, just ask your kids! Or have your neighbor help you figure it out.”

- **Address their concerns**
  - “This is a just standard rate text message, so it may be free for you, or up to twenty cents on some carriers if you do not have a text messaging plan.”
  - “The service we are using is serious about privacy. We cannot see your phone numbers, and you’ll never receive follow-up text messages outside this presentation. There’s only one thing worse than email spam – and that’s text message spam because you have to pay to receive it!”

- **Use a demo or practice poll**
  - For example, a Free Text Poll like “Let’s Practice: Text in your first name!”

- **Always test** your polls in your presentation before your event **using the computer that will be projecting your presentation**, especially if that computer is not the one you’re currently using.
Graphics for phone number “223333”

(Most non-education users)
How To Vote via Texting

How do you like my presentation so far?

Text a **CODE** to **22333**

- Amazing: 458456
- Incredibly Amazing: 458471
- It's Alright: 458472

**Tips**
1. Standard texting rates only (worst case US $0.20)
2. We have no access to your phone number
3. Capitalization doesn’t matter, but spaces and spelling do
Graphics for phone number
“37607”
(Most education users)
How To Vote via Texting

How do you like my presentation so far?

Text a CODE to 37607

- Amazing: 458456
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TIPS

1. Standard texting rates only (worst case US $0.20)
2. We have no access to your phone number
3. Capitalization doesn’t matter, but spaces and spelling do
Graphics for web devices and smartphones
How To Vote via PollEv.com

How do you like my presentation so far?

Text a **CODE** to 37607
Submit a **CODE** to [http://PollEv.com](http://PollEv.com)

- Amazing: 458456
- Incredibly Amazing: 458471
- It's Alright: 458471

**TIP**
Capitalization doesn’t matter, but spaces and spelling do
How To Vote via PollEv.com/username

How do you like my presentation so far?

Submit responses at PollEv.com/username

Text a CODE to 37607

Amazing 458456
Incredibly Amazing 458471
It's Alright 458472

TIP Capitalization doesn’t matter, but spaces and spelling do
How To Vote via Twitter

How do you like my presentation so far?

Text a **CODE** to 37607
Tweet @poll and a **CODE**
Submit responses at PollEv.com/username

- **Amazing**: 458456
- **Incredibly Amazing**: 458471
- **It's Alright**: 458476

**TIPS**
1. Capitalization doesn’t matter, but spaces and spelling do
2. Since @poll is the first word, your followers will not receive this tweet