MEDIANET

A Presentation Skills Company

Picture Yourself on TV
Skills for Effective Virtual Conferencing

Undoubtedly, technology is driving communication. With likes of *Zoom, Microsoft Teams*, *WebEx*, *GoToMeeting*, *Skype*, *FaceTime*, and a host of others, the power of a personal computer or any mobile device enables nearly immediate virtual conferencing for groups or individuals to communicate from remote locations. The terms video conferencing, web conferencing, and virtual conferencing are basically synonymous. Regardless of the terms, combining the power of television with the intimacy of face-to-face communication, this internet-based conferencing provides a medium that can bridge distance and time at a fraction of the cost.

THE POWER OF TELEVISION AND FACE-TO-FACE

Today's workforce grew up on television and the internet. Our society welcomes information that is delivered in a highly produced, action-driven medium. We thrive on visual images and we have become highly critical of those writing, producing, and performing for TV, or even those using YouTube, Facebook, and other web platforms.

Consider the evening news. In the past, newscasters were very formal. They were dressed in business suits, followed scripts closely, and over-enunciated. In the past several years, television news personalities have become less formal. Clothing choices are more relaxed, dialogue is interspersed with messages read from teleprompters, and language is more conversational. The advent of *YouTube* has completely altered the landscape of immediate visual communication to bring the concept of television to the desktop.

In many ways, we have simply become more comfortable with the media, whether we are watching the screen or talking into the lens of the family video camera or trying to go viral on YouTube or just spending the day in endless Zoom meetings. Nonetheless, we still have extremely high expectations for the emotional response and entertainment effect that the medium delivers.

The power of television-like communication is used in business most often as a "store and forward" medium, rather than real-time. We have all been asked to view recordings in the workplace for training, informational, or motivational reasons. Television has its place in business, but it can't compete when a situation requires a face-to-face, interactive encounter. With its real-time intimacy and natural interaction, the face-to-face meeting is the essence of interpersonal communication.

Regardless of the differences between face-to-face encounters and video communications, we still continue to develop systems that allow us to converse, communicate, and collaborate in the *seeing and hearing* manner of live interchange. The world of virtual conferencing, the most recent communication channel, promises to be the *ideal* method for interaction.

THE IDEAL COMMUNICATION CHANNEL

If a medium could harness the best of both television and face-to-face communication, this *Ideal Communication Channel* would be:

- **Produced**
- **Action-driven**
- **Visual**
- **Talent-based**
- **Real-time**
- **Natural**
- **Intimate**
- **Interactive**

Even at this stage of development, virtual conferencing possesses many of these attributes and comes close to being the *Ideal Communication Channel.* It is definitely *action-driven* and *highly visual*. Virtual conferencing happens in *real-time* (give or take a second where transmission speed is limited), and it's *intimate* and *interactive*.

As far as being *produced* and *talent-based*, virtual conferencing requires its users to develop a specific skill-set to make them more effective in using this medium. Acquiring these "media" skills will put you on the fast track for decision making, problem solving, and getting noticed. You can't escape the need to become a video communicator and screen-to-screen collaborator.

SIMPLY PRODUCE A SIMPLE PRODUCTION

Virtual conferencing users can incorporate many of traditional television's powerful elements. The effectiveness of TV stems from its ability to tap our emotions. The medium leaves little to our imagination as images, graphics, voices, and music provide every detail of the stories it encodes. You can enhance the visual effectiveness of virtual conferencing through your setting, screenplay, and special effects.

Control the Setting

One of your first decisions in setting up virtual conferencing is the layout of the room where you will conduct the conference. Whether you are using personal or group conferencing, pay attention to the position of the equipment in relation to the seating and doorways.

In a group set-up, the camera and **codec** (the <u>com</u>pressing/<u>dec</u>ompressing or the <u>co</u>ding/<u>dec</u>oding) unit usually sits *on top of the monitor* to allow for the most meaningful eye contact between the sites. Be aware of line-of-sight issues regarding eye contact between you, the camera lens and the monitor(s) displaying the other site.

Make sure the distance between the **equipment** and seats allows for a complete group shot as well as appropriate close-up views of the individuals. Remember that the camera is usually *above* the screen. If your camera lens is too close, as with a webcam, it will appear, to those *viewing,* that you are looking *down* toward the floor as you look back at them. Set the camera back far enough so that when you watch others through the video connection it still looks like you are making direct eye contact with them.

The system's **microphone** should be an equal distance between all participants and if possible, positioned on a separate table to eliminate noises from shuffling and vibrations. Doorways should allow people to enter and exit the room with minimal distraction in front of the camera. With a desktop, a headset mic is best to avoid feedback through the computer speakers. If multiple computers are connected in the same room, use only one computer for sound as multiple speakers will cause feedback or echo issues.

For an individual virtual conference, **Backdrops or Virtual Backgrounds** allow you to manipulate the audience's perception of you and your environment. The backdrops you see on television are chosen to provide details in the story being told. They are used to create an effect. This approach may be overkill for the business world, but remember that your image is everything and understanding the power of the visual medium can give you an edge. For best results, choose a virtual background that is least distracted (avoid animations or out-of-context locations (like the beach for a business meeting).

Lighting plays a role. The typical conference room is lit with fluorescent and incandescent lights. These are unflattering and provide little control. If you are creating a virtual conferencing room, rely on professionals to design a lighting system that highlights each seat with quality lighting. If you will be conducting a lot of virtual conferencing from your office, pay attention to how your face is lit and consider aiming a couple of lights (LED lights are best) from angles to each side of you for evenness.

Consider Fashion

When choosing clothing for the camera, you need to consider both technical and personal image issues. From a technical standpoint, avoid white since it washes out the picture and reflects harshly on the far side. Narrow stripes and houndstooth prints are to be avoided since they tend to "vibrate" on the screen. Large prints and plaids tend to distract from the communication. Your best choice is solid blue (although make sure you don't become camouflaged by your background!) since it evokes credibility and authority. Lavender and yellow are also good choices, although avoid light pink since it tends to transmit as

white. Pastels are better choices than bright whites. The goal is to avoid any physical distractions.

Pay attention to the other group or groups involved in the conference. Do the cultures of their institutions dictate certain styles of dress? Will they be offended or confused by your choice of clothing? The best rule for all parties is to adapt toward an agreed upon middle-ground.

WRITE A "SCREENPLAY"

Like face-to-face meetings, virtual conferences require a bit of advance planning and a shared set of assumptions as to who does what and what *rules* are followed.

An agenda is crucial and should be shared in advance with both parties so that the participants can be prepared for the discussion and tasks at hand. The agenda should note any presentations and video that will be shared and which site will be responsible for the delivery.

In addition, if "data" conferencing is going to be used (sharing a screen containing a document or presentation), make sure that both sites are equipped and prepared to use the technology. You don't want to waste valuable meeting time leading your associates through a technology training session trying to share some content.

With larger groups, decide who will be facilitating the meeting and who at your site will be taking responsibility for the equipment and any media used. If you divide these responsibilities in advance, the meeting will run more smoothly, and if any troubleshooting is necessary, it can be addressed quickly. The good news: with the latest advancements in virtual conferencing equipment, one person can easily manage the technology through a simple remote, with a few touches of the button!

Because virtual conferencing technology is still evolving, so is the etiquette that governs its effectiveness. A simple hand wave at the start and finish of the session has emerged as the universal symbol for both "welcome" and "signing off."

Understand the Limitations

Before you begin, make sure that first-time users understand that there may be a slight delay in the audio transmission. In most cases, the bandwidth is sufficient that delays will not happen. But, even with the most sophisticated equipment, glitches can happen. Voices can be out of synch, images can get blurry, and yes, the connection could be lost completely by one or more people in the conference.

Have a secondary contact that you can reach by phone should you get disconnected. The rest of the group will wait for you join the virtual conference again. The good news is that we have all seen this happen and have likely had it happen to us, so we do understand.

Virtual conference users also need to be prepared for interruptions from phone calls and e-mail and thus should develop their approach and response accordingly.

At the start, be sure that everyone at each site is introduced. In a group setting, if someone leaves or enters *during* the conference and the camera setting or other media do not make this apparent to the other side, be sure to let the other side know that the number of people in the room has changed. In a face-to-face meeting everyone would be aware of people leaving or entering, so try to treat the virtual conference the same as a live meeting. Finally, when it's time to sign off, remember to smile, say good-bye, and disconnect.

In group settings, your equipment may allow the camera to *pan and zoom*, giving you a unique ability to change the perspective on the meeting. With a little practice (or a system that can program preset camera positions), you can bring the camera in close when you want to make a strong point or pan the room for individual reactions.

Some systems allow you to control the camera in your room as well as that at the far site. You may be able to pan around the far site room, or zoom in on individuals as they speak, and pull back to view a group reaction. But most systems do this automatically, so you should be aware as to how the system you are using functions.

Virtual conferencing systems allow you to "share your desktop" to incorporate an electronic presentation, video, or other data to support the meeting. There are multiple ways to share your screen, so become familiar with the options in advance of your meeting. The power of these tools can be diminished when you begin fumbling with the technology. No matter how simple the equipment is to operate, take the time for a technical run-through.

A TALENT-BASED MEDIUM REQUIRES TALENT

The people embracing virtual conferencing are developing a unique set of skills that are setting them apart as communicators. The skill-set goes beyond the ability to write well and speak comfortably in public. The technology is quick, interactive, and intimate. It requires that you constantly assess *what* you're saying, and *how* you are saying it, while seamlessly using the technology. But this is similar to delivering a presentation in a face-to-face small group meeting.

Your Voice

Think of virtual conferencing as a simple conversation. Try not to be conscious of the technology. Relax and breathe normally. Speak as naturally as possible, enunciate clearly and be careful to pronounce every syllable. For us, vocal fidelity far outweighs video fidelity. That is, if video fidelity is poor, we can still make some sense of the blurry

image. Yet, a garbled sounding voice or even a slightly unrecognizable phrase is nearly impossible to decipher. Thus, we rely on clarity of voice more than quality of image.

While the technology improves everyday, the current quality of the audio doesn't always transmit the full range of our voices, so be aware that certain consonants may cause problems. For example, the letter "P" can create a popping sound and the letter "S" can cause a hissing sound.

The microphone hears everything! Consider "asides" carefully, especially in group settings. Avoid the rudeness of side conversations and comments under your breath. However, in negotiations, asides can be your ally. Many virtual conferencing systems have a "mute button" on the microphone that allows you to pause the audio transmission temporarily. With agreement up-front that both parties will be using this function to discuss items among themselves, negotiations can proceed more quickly. Just be aware that the video may still be running, allowing the other party to read your expressions and body language. For individual virtual conferencing, you can hide the video. This may be needed if you have to step away for a brief time.

If you are in a situation with a noticeable audio delay, it's important to wait until an individual has completely finished a sentence before replying. Since in normal conversation, we tend to interrupt each other a lot, many experts believe that the patience required by virtual conferencing users may finally teach us to wait for the other person to finish! This more "formal" timing will actually put us in line with the communication styles of our European and Asian partners and could lead to more effective communication overall.

Physical Expression

Facial expressions are critical to the communication process. By reading the faces of the other party, you'll be able to tell if they are confused or supportive, eager or bored, trustworthy or lying. Likewise, your face will communicate information about how you are thinking and feeling. Remember that even though you may not be the person speaking, you are still on camera and therefore are still communicating. Manage the messages you are sending through body language and you will be much more effective.

Eye contact is still a dilemma in virtual conferencing. You can't make direct eye contact with the camera and the person on the screen simultaneously. This problem is most apparent in personal virtual conferencing and close-ups. On a laptop computer, one method is to position the image of the person you are addressing as close to the webcam as possible (right under the camera if you can). This way, it will seem that you are looking directly at the person rather than off to the side. Until the technology is perfected, you must learn to look into the *camera* rather than into the monitor when speaking.

Direct eye contact is not acceptable in all cultures. For example, it's considered appropriate in North America and Western Europe, but is rude in Japan. If you are

conferencing with Japanese colleagues, you can make them feel more comfortable by looking at a spot just below the camera lens or off to the side if the image of the person is on the side of the screen.

Positioning yourself to the camera and your audience has as much to do with your physical presence as it does with your personal image. You must feel comfortable and appear appropriate in everything you say and do. Prepare yourself and your surroundings to present yourself as credible and confident. You'll probably be sitting during your virtual conference, so choose a solid chair that doesn't swivel. If you sit on the back hem of your jacket or shirt, you'll sit up straighter and your clothes won't bunch in front.

When speaking on camera, be aware of how you are *framed.* This limits your expressions and gestures. To stay within the frame, test the camera positions in advance. If your virtual conferencing equipment allows you to pre-set camera positions, you'll be able to change from a wide shot to a close-up with just a touch of a button.

Experience

The more you use virtual conferencing the less you'll notice the medium, and the more comfortable and natural you'll feel. In the beginning, it may seem like the technology is controlling you, but eventually the tables will turn and you will use virtual conferencing with the ease that you currently use your computer or phone. Eventually, you'll become more creative in assembling remote meetings and use virtual conferencing, to its greatest effectiveness… and yours!

NOT QUITE NATURAL

While virtual conferencing comes close to being the *Ideal Communication Channel,* it may never duplicate the natural aspects of face-to-face communication. You still can't fill the coffee cups of the party at the far side. You can't smell their colognes or shake their hands. You can't see the subtle expression in their eyes or hear the faint pronunciation of their whispered words. Virtual conferencing fails to capture an individual's *prana,* as described by an Indian researcher. A person's prana is their life force, or literally, "the breath."

COLLABORATION + COMMUNICATION

Virtual conferencing is certainly changing how we work. As our society becomes more global and more mobile, this technology will allow us to bridge time and distance to work together. When videoconferening was first introduced, Evan Rosen, author of Personal

<u>Videoconferencing</u> used the term c*ollabicator* to identify those "collaborators who use video as well as application sharing and document conferencing." Today, with the ever-present technology, we will all be called upon to "collabicate" more and more.

So, always be prepared to *Picture Yourself on TV*.

NOTE: The information in this handout supports the MediaNet lecture "Picture Yourself on TV."
Additional support for this and other topics can be found in several publications including:
--- *Special Edition Using Microsoft PowerPoint 2007* by Patrice-Ann Rutledge and Tom Mucciolo
  (Copyright 2006, QUE, Pearson Publishing, MediaNet, Inc.).
--- *Purpose, Movement, Color* by Tom and Rich Mucciolo (Copyright 1994, 1999, 2003. MediaNet, Inc.)
--- *Mechanics-Basic Skills* free online tutorial (Copyright 2002, MediaNet, Inc.)
--- *Media-Design Skills* CD (Copyright 2004, MediaNet, Inc.), an interactive design tutorial.
--- *A Guide to Better Teaching* by Leila Jahangiri and Tom Mucciolo
  (Copyright 2012, Rowman & Littlefield).
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