Video Conferencing Etiquette and Best Practices

Or

Life Goes On(line)

Much of what we are experiencing during the COVID-19 pandemic will be integrated into our lives on a permanent basis. Online video conferencing applications are great tools that enable those who work at home to virtually meet with collaborators and colleagues and will be part of this new normal. We will all be working and attending meetings remotely more often and a few tips and tricks can help the process go more smoothly.

Check the lighting.

One of the most important things to get right is the lighting. The placement of the light source is key. You don't want light (like a sunny window) behind you, because you become just a silhouette. It's a common mistake because of the way our desks are set up. Consider facing the camera toward the other side of the desk and sitting in the side chair so you're facing the window. Also, don't have a single bright light on one side of your face or everything on the other side will be dark and make you look like a film noir villain.

Again, put the lighting in front of you so your face can be seen clearly. It could be a window or artificial light, as long as you're facing it.

Not too close and not too far.

The other people in the meeting need to see you clearly so they feel they are talking directly to you. Position yourself in the center of the screen so you can be seen from the shoulders to the head. Your shoulders should take up approximately half of the horizontal space on the screen. Anything closer may be overwhelming (think Gigantic Face Syndrome) and anything further will make your face too hard to see.

Keep the camera at eye level.

In person, we like meeting people's eyes. In terms of communication, especially in business, you want that kind of connection, so it's important that your webcam be at eye level. You can have a separate camera, or you can raise the laptop by putting it on a stand, for example. If you're using a separate camera, it should be as close to your screen as possible.

Look at the camera when you're talking. It's normal to watch the computer screen, but by looking at the camera, you will seem to be meeting the eyes of the person you're talking to.

Check the audio.

In a video meeting, you don't just want to be seen, you want to be heard clearly as well. If you're in a quiet room, you can probably use the microphone on your laptop. Otherwise, it's a good idea to use a microphone that's closer to your face. A decent pair of earbuds or headphones that are equipped with a mic should work fine, especially if they enable you to talk at a normal, conversational level.

Most Importantly: MUTE yourself when not actively speaking. Side conversations are distracting, and potentially embarrassing.

Keep your environment simple.

Is it just me, or are you also curious about seeing people in their home environments? I think it's natural but can also be distracting. To minimize this, keep your desk as clutter-free as possible. You don't want it to be completely sterile, but you don't want a pile of stuff on it either. Make sure the background is uncomplicated, like a solid-colored wall, positioned far enough behind you so there aren't any shadows. If someone is looking over your shoulder at family photos, artwork, or your bookshelf, it will divert your attention from the discussion. I've recently seen unmade beds and open kitchen cabinets in the background and realized I wasn't listening to the person anymore because I was being nosey.

Choose clothing wisely.

Most clothing is fine, but there are a couple of fashion choices to avoid. Don't wear pinstripes and checks, which can create distracting patterns on camera. Do not to wear bright white or deep black clothing because most webcams have automatic exposure settings and will adjust to those colors. As a result, wearing a bright white shirt can "stop down" the focus of everything around it, making the image look darker and less clear, while a black shirt can make the surroundings too bright. Wear more neutral colors.

Sit in a comfortable chair and keep body movements to a minimum.

Not too comfortable, because you don't want to fall asleep, but comfortable enough so you can sit and communicate, and people don't wonder what's wrong because you're fidgeting.

If you're someone that talks with your hands, practice keeping them still. Hand movements can distract your audience. Also, keep head movements to a minimum.

Be courteous to other participants.

Be punctual. Don't interrupt other speakers. Wait for an opening in the conversation before putting in your two cents. Cutting other speakers off is rude. Another option is posting pending questions by instant message or the chat function.

Your focus should always be on the person or people at the other end of the video conference. Avoid typing on your keyboard, turn off all sounds on your phone, and choose a room with no or minimal background noise. And absolutely no texting!

Announce your departure.

Be sure to say "goodbye" when you're leaving the video call. That may seem unimportant, as people will likely see your image leave the screen when you hang up, but good etiquette is never a bad idea.

Be yourself and have fun!

Relax and have a good time. Be lively, break the ice with a joke, and make us laugh. It's easy to tune out in a face-to-face meeting, and even easier in a virtual one. Having some fun will help keep people focused and interested in what you have to say.