EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS IN A VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT

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GETTING YOUR MESSAGE ACROSS, VIRTUALLY

How to successfully communicate your message in a virtual environment

Against the background of the global COVID-19 pandemic, all communicators understand the need for clear, concise, consistent communications. This is critical with all audiences, be it employees, customers, partners, or third parties. There is a need to keep people informed, to reassure, to mitigate and to ensure audiences understand the plan and are able to keep a level head.

But getting the message across in the traditional way is being disrupted as much as our everyday lives. Many companies are already encouraging workers to stay home, significantly impacting team collaboration and communication. Restrictions on travel are stopping team meetings from taking place. And fears of contagion have seen the cancellation, postponement or virtualisation of annual events and conferences.

In this environment, a large number of companies are turning to virtual solutions to communicate with their audiences.

But producing a perfect virtual event or meeting – and ensuring that your audience receives and understands the intended message – is quite simply not the same as producing a perfect face-to-face session.

The following document is a practical guide to help deliver the most polished and engaging experience when it comes to presenting virtually, so that you can be sure your message gets through.

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1. CREATE
THE RIGHT MESSAGE & TONE

YOUR STAFF, CUSTOMERS AND PARTNERS ARE ALL CURRENTLY WORRIED, CONCERNED, CONFUSED.

- Getting the tone of your message right is incredibly important.

- Virtual meetings are not the same as in-person meetings: attention spans are shorter, distractions abound and people simply don't stay on virtual platforms for hours at a time.

- In a virtual environment, it's more critical then ever for your messaging to be succinct, easily digestible, audience-centric, engaging and presented in a compelling, compassionate and considerate manner.

- This is even more so the case in times where health concerns are top of mind.

1. COMMUNICATE
THE RIGHT MESSAGE & TONE

General rules

THINK ABOUT THE MESSAGE AND THE TONE

- Develop your speaking notes and messaging in the context of the current COVID-19 outbreak and how people are feeling emotionally. Check for appropriate language and sensitivity to global teams and colleagues.
- Reduce the narrative to only the most essential information so that the core message gets across. Communicate the most important points within the first 5-10 minutes, before you lose peoples' attention spans.
- Make sure your conclusion repeats the most important message you wanted to convey.

TIMING IS EVERYTHING

- People don't sit in virtual meetings for hours.
- Try to plan your session for no more than 30-45 minutes maximum.
- Do not include 'surround-sound' content and narratives. In the virtual environment your audience's attention span is much shorter. Get to the point and only include the most important elements.

IF POSSIBLE, PRESENTERS PHYSICALLY PRESENT

If you have numerous presenters, trying to 'dial' in speakers separately will result in a disjointed and unconvincing presentation. Getting at least a couple of presenters in the room together will greatly ease the natural flow of conversation and ensure a more authentic and digestible experience for the audience.

That said, given the COVID-19 environment, this might not be possible. In this instance, limit the number of presenters to 2-3 speakers. One person should clearly facilitate and host to make the message as easy to understand as possible.

LEARN FROM THE EVENING NEWS

Think about the dynamics of the presentation and narrative. Having a call host or moderator will keep the content compelling and fresh. A good tip is to think of a virtual meeting as a live TV news broadcast. Different voices and perspectives can boost the content and get the message across more effectively, as long as you're not jumping around too much. Think 3-4 minutes per person as a winning formula.

In contrast to the evening news, however, avoid video content as a presentation support, given its propensity to lag in virtual formats.

IN COMMUNICATIONS, REPETITION IS KEY

During the virtual meeting, underscore the most important messages with very clear visual cues, and repeat them for clarity at the end.

But that's not the only place to get the message across. When inviting people to attend, be clear on the topic and what is going to be communicated. Then follow up with a short recap that highlights the main takeaway.

2. PRESENTATION TIPS

Body language is powerful and can make the difference between a good presentation and an exceptional one. But video conferencing and virtual meetings put a barrier in the way of this.

So here are recommendations to overcome that.

LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION

Body Language

SPEAKERS ONLY HAVE THREE TOOLS – THEIR FACE, THEIR HANDS AND THEIR VOICE. USE THEM.

Face

- Appear friendly, expressive and engaged, maintain a small smile and gently raised eyebrows which will open and widen eyes.
- Make sure facial expressions match the presentation content.
- Speakers are on screen the whole time so must not look bored.

Voice

- Modulate the voice. If it's flat the listener will be bored.
- Modulation shows confidence and makes the presentation interesting.
- Think about pitch, pace, pause and tone.

Hands

- Do not be afraid to use hands. While people think this might be distracting on video, it's actually beneficial. Talking with hands helps convey enthusiasm and animation and can also help focus thoughts and speech better.
- When not gesturing, simply let hands rest in the lap or on the table.
- Make sure speakers do not cross arms – this conveys being closed off or bored.
- Ensure hands or arms aren't blocking the speaker's face.

LEAN IN SLIGHTLY

In a video conference, leaning back will send the message that speakers are not interested. So lean in slightly, but sit up tall and keep shoulders back.

DON'T USE NOTES

Using notes will take eyes away from the camera. If a few prompts are needed, stick them next to the camera.

A SPECIAL CALL OUT ON EYE CONTACT

It's hard to know where to look during a video conference. Try to put participants as close to the camera as possible.

When in listener mode, participants should look at the video feed of the person who's talking so it feels like you are making eye contact with them.

When in speaker mode, make sure to look up and toward the camera. Avoid looking down at notes or shifting the gaze around the room.

PLEASE GO ON MUTE

If not talking, go on mute

BE ATTENTIVE

DO NOT MULTITASK during a virtual meeting.

- Close all other applications
- Put phones away
- Do not drink or eat

Presenters are on screen the whole time so need to remain focused and visually interested in the discussion – even when not speaking.

WARDROBE

Busy, bold patterns and noisy jewelry can be distracting. Blocks of white can wash people out. Encourage simple clothes that are not too bright, too dark or blend into the background.

Many organisations have high tech video conference rooms where the image can be displayed on a large screen, so make sure the team thinks about details like stains, creases and sweat marks.

DO NOT SWING ON YOUR CHAIR

To ensure stability, shift the sitting position to the front of the chair and put feet flat on the floor hip width apart and lean forward slightly.

3. REHEARSE

Rehearse, rehearse and rehearse some more.

It's critical that your virtual meeting is as professional as possible – and like anything, that takes practice.

FLEISHMANHILLARD

THE OPPORTUNITY

BEFORE SCRIPTING:

- Decide how you want to deal with questions.
- Will you invite participants to ask questions throughout?
- Will you have a question section at the end?
- Will you encourage them to use the interactive question tool?

Make sure the person opening the call explains any functions that will or won't be in use and what to do if they are experiencing technical difficulties. e.g. If you are experiencing technical difficulties, please use the messaging feature and have a producer on hand to help.

FILL THE DEAD AIR VISUALLY

During tech rehearsals are there moments when there is a blank screen?
Think through having extra slides on hand e.g. one for screen sharing, or one for technical difficulties.

Please stand by.
Screen sharing
in progress

GENERAL PRESENTATION REHEARSAL RULES STILL APPLY, BUT YOU WILL NEED TO ADD IN ADDITIONAL TECHNICAL REHEARSALS.

- **Scripting Session** Run a group session to decide on who is presenting what sections, go over key messages in each section. Presenters should then write their scripts.
- **Rehearsal #1** Where you stop and start throughout to get the key points right.
- **Rehearsal #2** Chapters – stops after each 'chapter' to give feedback and, if necessary, re-start the chapter to get it right.
- **Rehearsal #3** Practice in the virtual environment. All the way through timed – all feedback at the end.
- **Rehearsal #4** Q&A practice so you're ready to answer any questions your audience might have.
- **Rehearsal #5** Dress rehearsal in virtual environment, set up how it will be for the actual presentation. All the way through timed, focus on team chemistry, choreography and body language.

Don't forget you can often record virtual meetings so if helpful you can record rehearsals and play back parts to help the team improve.

4. THE TECH

It is worth the presenters getting to know the tech and what can be achieved with it. There are some very effective interactive tools that can give presentations another dimension.

4. THE TECH
GETTING PREPARED

Don't let the technology trip you up

HOW TOS

It is worth presenters spending time familiarizing themselves with features and tools.

INTERACTIVE FEATURES

- There are many different features for potential use, including chat, Q&A, polls or whiteboarding.
- Decide in advance which ones work best. Some of these could be quite engaging – like using polls.
- Enabling a Q&A messenger is a good idea so participants can flag if there are any technical difficulties.

CONNECT 10 TO 15 MINUTES EARLY

If there are any issues, you want to know about them ahead of time. This is especially true if you are speaking with important audiences like customers or the media.

SHARE THE PRESENTATION DECK

Make sure the presentation is ready to be emailed to participants who are having technical issues.

ENLIST A PRODUCER

- It is very distracting to have to present and be in charge on tech, so appoint a producer who is not on camera.
- This person can move slides along, answer Q&A online messages and deal with technical difficulties as they arise.

EXTERNAL HD CAMERA IS ALWAYS BETTER

This is an absolute MUST for a group setting and generally recommended for the best video quality.

A FEW OBVIOUS BUT IMPORTANT CHECKLIST ACTIONS

- Before the meeting, reboot the device being used.
- Dialing from a fixed line phone is ALWAYS better.
- Make sure you have a backup device (with the necessary fonts loaded).
- Close ALL other applications to limit distractions.
- Use a wired internet connection if possible.
- Keep the presentation device on charge.

5. THE RIGHT ENVIRONMENT

Creating the right visual environment is critical to giving the right impression.

CREATE

General rules

BE AWARE OF THE BACKGROUND

Always consider the room you're presenting from, be it at home or in the office. Think about what is behind you on the wall.

- Is it appropriate?
- Is it a distraction?
- Is it boring?

Can we dress the wall by putting something relevant up? If possible, including a company logo or something that conveys the message can be a great way to boost the communication.

THINK ABOUT WHAT IS IN FRONT

Limit any distractions that could avert eyes away from the camera.

SOUND QUALITY MATTERS

Make sure there are no background noises in the presentation room.

LIGHT IN FRONT, NOT IN BACK

- Light from behind means the presenter's face will be in a shadow.
- In a room with a window, face the window to ensure light falls on the face.
- In a room without a window, place a light in front of the speaker.

LOOK UP, NOT DOWN. CAMERA POSITION IS CRITICAL

- The worst camera position is looking down into the camera.
- Make sure the camera is slightly higher than eye level so speakers are looking up to it.

IF POSSIBLE, SET THE ROOM

- Think about the audience and the message you want to convey.
- For a more informal audience, presenters seated on a sofa with a coffee table might work.
- For a more formal audience, a boardroom or meeting room environment might work better.

6. EFFECTIVE DESIGN

Good presentation design can make all the difference in getting your message across clearly, and this is even more critical in a virtual environment.

Simple guidelines for presentation development can help overcome some of the restrictions in virtual platforms.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

Design guidelines

BORING CONTENT CAN QUICKLY TURN OFF YOUR AUDIENCE

Depending on the platform, your presentation may be the only thing your audience sees on screen while you're talking. Even if you can't access a professional designer, it's relatively easy to produce more interesting slides.

- Use imagery and graphics to bring your content to life as much as possible. Visuals help provide context to your message.
- Avoid all text heavy content.
- Call out key messages with simple consistent themes, e.g., using bold or colors.
- Arrange text in an engaging way. Break it up around visual icons and imagery.

BE CONSISTENT

Ensure you set a style and apply throughout your presentation. Content that looks different slide to slide risks confusing and losing an audience.

- Use a single defined set of fonts throughout.
- Use dividers and breakers for content so the audience knows where they are.
- Set a uniform format for Titles and intros to slides – e.g. capitalizing. Sentence case or not.

FILL THE SCREEN

Use 16 x 9 (widescreen) format not 4 x 3.

ANIMATION AND VIDEO

Animation and video does not always display correctly over web conferencing. Don't rely on animated content to get a message across.

LESS IS MORE

Keep your slides simple and easy to read.

This is true of any effective presentation design, but remember that in some virtual tools, it's not necessarily possible for a viewer to make the presentation full screen so it will be difficult to read text. Additionally video 'in-picture' screens of the presenters may cover over some areas of the presentation.

DESIGN THE HOLDING PAGES

Consider what your audience will see on screen while you transition from one section to the next, or handover to a different presenter.

- Use divider slides effectively.
- Replay a summary of the previous content, a call-to-action, or even ask a question for your audience to consider.

USE MORE SLIDES

Your audience may risk getting bored if you're stuck on one visual / slide for a long time. Try and get the balance between keeping their attention with fresh content and overwhelming with too many changes. A good rule of thumb is to try and design a slide for roughly one minute of talking.