

Smooth As Silk Video Conferences

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The number of video conferences has risen dramatically since September 11. Restrictions on travel and cost containment policies have mandated that companies choose alternative ways to keep their employees up to speed on changes and new products, especially those in remote or foreign locations. While not as effective as face-to-face communication, video conferencing can be successful with careful planning and good communication skills.

Planning

If you are the host of a video conference, give participants as much advance notice as possible and choose a time convenient for all locations. Two weeks prior to the meeting, send a preliminary agenda to all participants for their review and suggestions. Since timing is an important consideration, assign discussion leaders if necessary and the time for each agenda item, of course, allowing more time for the most important items. Once the final agenda, roles and timing are determined, send a revised agenda to all participants.

Housekeeping

As the host, be sure to begin on time. Be clear about the meeting's objectives and review the agenda and time constraints for each issue to be discussed. Since multiple sites may be involved, give advance notice that you will ask for input from another person. Then, call that person by name and advise people that their comments should be geared to the length of the meeting and to the confines of the agenda. Also, use very specific language. *"I'd now like to turn this over to my counterpart in another office."* *"The next overhead has to do with the sales forecast for second quarter. Notice the month of June."* As the chairperson, request that people identify themselves when asking a question or speaking. Cue your listeners to move onto the next agenda item with a brief summary statement. Then, indicate that you are finished with your comments by dropping your voice. Avoid side bar conversations since they may be picked up by the camera and microphone.

At the end of the conference summarize all key points and assign responsibility for any action items. It is a good idea to allow 75% of the allotted time for discussion and the remaining 25% for facilitating additional questions or comments. Be sure to end the meeting on time.

Maintaining Interest

People have short attention spans at video conferences, particularly when there are multiple sites involved. As the chairperson, gain and hold people's attention quickly with a short personal story or a humorous anecdote. A video conference should not be a data dump. Less is more. The goal is to get people to remember. If attendees are overloaded with information, their retention will be compromised. Three key comments about each agenda item are plenty. Use examples, analogies and personal stories to make your points stand out but keep them short. Since timing is essential to any video conference, all ideas should be expressed as clearly and concisely as possible.

Establishing Credibility

You are the leader of your meeting so people will assess your credibility. They will evaluate not just your comments, but also your appearance, your stature, your body language and your overall speaking style.

Appearance

It is important to consider what you will wear at a video conference. Your attire should not be distracting or cause a glare. Short skirts, plaids, white shirts or blouses, reflective glasses or dangly jewelry may be problematic.

Posture

Posture sends a strong message about your confidence level. Be sure your head is up and not buried in your notes. Sit up straight with your feet under your chair so that your energy comes forward into the table. Maintain strong posture throughout since it is impossible to know the angle shots of the camera. Also, the posture of everyone on a panel or at a table is important.

Eye Contact

Your eyes need to be on your listeners to establish trust. Look at the camera as if it were a live audience. Picture a significant other directly behind the

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camera and, if possible, place the remote window directly under your camera so that your eyes will be drawn down to it. Refrain from reading from your notes. If there are others on a panel or sitting at the table, include them in your eye contact, but remember the larger audience out there in TV land. Avoid darting. The more constant your eye contact, the better. The ideal time for reexamining your notes would be during a slide presentation or when others are sharing ideas. Be sure to keep the local image window of yourself on the screen so that you can constantly assess and adjust your body language.

Gestures and Facial Animation

Smile and look alive. Use your face to show how much you believe in what you are saying. If you are dour and expressionless, your listeners will tune out. While important to show conviction and energize attendees, gestures need to stay within the frame. They need to be smaller and toned down. At all costs, avoid fidgeting or playing with anything that might be picked up by the camera or microphone.

Voice and Pausing

Your best persuasive tool is your voice in a video conference. Remind people to speak more loudly since their voice may be somewhat muted depending on where the microphone is placed. No one wants to strain to hear. Also, make sure your points stand out by pausing at the end of your thoughts. A one, two or three-second pause between ideas will help listeners to remember and to think of their questions. It will also maximize the tone of your voice and minimize those pesky “ums,” “ahs,” “likes,” and “you knows” that chip away at credibility. If you aren’t sure what you want to say next, try a longer pause. It will give you a chance to access the information in the file room of your brain. It will also help you to manage the time delay in transmission or allow others to voice their comments.

With strong eye contact, a confident voice, good posture and meaningful gestures, listeners will perceive you in a positive manner. If you have carefully planned and executed the meeting, they will conclude that the time spent at the video conference was worthwhile. Video conferences are increasing at the rate of 33% each year. As they become more common, people’s expectations will continue to rise. They simply will not tolerate talking

heads, lifeless looking panels, or meetings without clear objectives. They will lose focus when they can’t hear well, when the speaker doesn’t connect with the audience, or when there is choppiness as alternate sites start speaking. Make sure that your next video conference is successful by being attentive to all-important issues.

Impact Communications, Inc. consults with individuals and businesses to improve their face-to-face and over the phone communication skills. It is not what you know but how you communicate it that makes a difference. To reach us, phone (847) 438-4480 or contact our web site, www.ImpactCommunicationsInc.com.