The Nine Rules of Videoconference Connecting

You might think a videoconference is just like a conference call, only on steroids, but it’s not. It’s a completely unique medium—different from face-to-face communication, television and telephones—with its own requirements for success. Videoconference suites are effective and efficient, and hugely expensive. How can you make sure you’re connecting in a way that lives up to, and takes full advantage of, the investment? There are meeting and communication fundamentals to retool and medium-specific guidelines to learn—nine rules in all—that can help you connect in ways thought long gone to budget cuts, teammate scatter and conference call apathy.

#1. Build community. Videoconferences offer renewed opportunity for people spread across the planet to foster relationships, build trust, share experiences, and develop camaraderie. Start with building community as your intention. Begin with welcomes and reinforce commonality among the participants. Use good manners liberally. Demonstrate good listening skills, too: acknowledge what was said, in brief, before advancing the conversation. Introduce everyone who’s attending, and if they’re just getting to know one another, add context within your remarks, like “Chris, as head of operations, you…” or “Sheila, as the project’s lead engineer, you…” Find ways to encourage dialogue within and between presentations. And with longer-term projects, celebrate accomplishments and milestones by taking time to recount some of the toughest and most exciting moments to date.

#2. Warm up. The close-up view of others in a videoconference mimics real proximity, which creates the expectation of closer connections. Being within 18 inches is considered intimate distance, so in a real way, most videoconference suites put participants into personal space. You’ll come across as a cold fish unless you warm up your tone, content and style.

#3. Don’t just sit there. First and foremost, sit up straight and slightly forward in the chair. Try sitting on the end of your jacket to keep your shirt collar from sinking into it as you gesture. Adjust the chair height so that you can gesture easily—usually speakers sit with the table slightly above waist level. Position your feet (one planted forward, one back on your toes) when you’re speaking: you’ll sit straight, breathe more deeply, and move more naturally.

#4. Look good. This is a visual medium, and like it or not, appearance matters. So pay attention to the little things, they’re important. Make sure your eyes are visible, even through glasses, and that your hair doesn’t cover your face. Avoid stripes, and choose colors that complement your features and contrast with your skin tone. Soften your eyes and smile broadly. Most women look their best in light eye and lip makeup that highlights their features. Men should wear crisp shirt collars and jackets. (A tie wouldn’t hurt, either.) Check your viewers’ visual field and manage it if you can. For example, if pictures, signs or other attendees are behind you, try to arrange the seating and the view that’s least distracting when you’re on camera.

#5. Watch what you say. Speak slowly and distinctly through your first few sentences because other participants will be checking you out visually at first. To create the energy that happens when people come together physically, use a slightly louder and friendlier tone in the first and last five minutes. (This is the vocal equivalent of a hearty welcome, or standing up to signal it’s time to part.) When you’re speaking about something others may react to emotionally—difficult news, a sensitive subject—speak slowly, articulate your intentions clearly, and use carefully chosen feeling words to help convey your meaning accurately.
This is communication congruence. Since you’re limited to sitting, find ways to make your voice work harder for you by varying your volume, pace and intonation. Achieving congruence takes practice: observe effective, expressive speakers; then experiment with recording your voice so that your tone is consistent with your meaning.

#6. Watch what you don’t say. You’ll be visible to others whether you’re speaking or not, so take care to watch your body language and facial expressions when you’re simply listening. View yourself on video to know your facial expressions at rest, when you’re sharing information, making an important point, or arguing a position. You may have to get rid of bad habits, like frowning when you’re listening, or grimacing through bad news, so that you don’t send a confusing message. Do the same with gestures until you’re comfortable using your hands, shoulders and torso to help others accurately experience your meaning. The opposite is true, too: some very expressive people get in the way of their message with too much movement.

#7. Relax. A videoconference isn’t television, but it may feel like that to many. The minute they know the camera is on, some people get stage fright—without the stage. Add the stress of an important presentation and you run the risk of leaving the wrong impression. So relax. You’re not held to the same standards as professional newscasters and actors. Loosen up physically—your head, shoulders, arms, hands, face and tongue. Soften your eyes. Breathe deeply for a few minutes before you begin. Use any tension you still have to pack positive conviction into your point of view.

#8. Stop joking. When you’re feeling nervous, humor is tricky. Either everything’s funny (and you’ll giggle uncontrollably like a kid in church) or nothing’s funny. It helps to prepare a little humor to interject when you need it, and to know it’s not going to backfire. Don’t work on jokes, just situational humor that everyone can relate to, like “Did you all hear about Dan’s latest adventure with his kids, their sandbox, and his laptop?”

#9. Watch the clock. Be forewarned: no one we know can keep all of this together well for more than 60 minutes at a time—the optimal length of any virtual meeting. Plus, consider allowing time for casual conversation before and after the agenda, and build in time for reactions and discussions. That means the optimal 60-minute videoconference should include about 35-40 minutes of planned content, max.