

# The Dirty Secret about Doing Business in 2020

By: Robert E. Sumner IV, Member  
Butler Snow LLP  
2020 Three-Star Partner

The sudden and unexpected interruption in global commerce caused by COVID-19 has wreaked havoc on every industry in the United States. No one, with the possible exception of Jeff Bezos, has remained insulated from the ill effects of the quarantine and forced economic shutdown. For a special few who understand a dirty little secret, however, 2020 has provided an unmatched opportunity to stand out and get ahead.

## Enter Zoom

In March of this year, professionals around this country abandoned their offices and business attire for their basements and favorite pair of lounge pants. Thus began a period in which in-person meetings ceased to exist. Businesses resorted to Zoom for video teleconferencing to connect with clients and co-workers. At first, this seemed fun. We could continue to conduct business and remain productive from the comfort of our homes. No one seemed to mind the distractions caused by barking dogs, crying babies, and the beeping of trash trucks reversing direction on the streets. Everyone embraced the Zoom reality — spotty internet connection, camera angle peering from laptop into one's nostrils, and a microphone that was more adept at picking up background noise than a human voice. We all accepted the "COVID look," consisting of uncombed hair, t-shirts, and pajamas. This worked for a while in the judgment-free zone of survival.

## The Secret

During the chaos of the pandemic, however, emerged a small group of people who began setting themselves apart. They looked better, seemed more prepared, and sounded crisper in their Zoom meetings. We started listening a little more closely to what they had to say. These people were the first to learn the secret, which is actually simple: if we are going to conduct business as professionals on Zoom then we need to act and look like professionals on Zoom. And the key to this secret is how to make yourself look and sound like a professional on a computer screen.

Remote meetings are here to stay. Business travel may never return to pre-COVID levels. To put this in perspective, Butler Snow has conducted over 4,300 meetings and logged over 1,400,000 minutes on Zoom since March 13, 2020. Business persons and lawyers alike need to prepare for a new era of appearing on camera on a regular basis. As a litigator who obsesses over appearance and behavior in the courtroom, I have come to realize that a few changes in our approach can have a profound effect on our message. I will focus on four critical components for success in remote presentations: camera, microphone, lighting, and appearance.

## Camera

The camera might be the most important business tool for this new age. If we want to get ahead, we cannot rely on the cut-rate cameras installed in our laptops. We need a camera with high resolution and picture quality. Fortunately, the market is filled with cost-effective options that you can purchase as a stand-alone or add-on for your computers. Equally important is camera angle. As a litigator, I have always paid close attention to camera angle when my client is testifying on video. I have worried that a poor camera position could detract from my witness's credibility or message. Peer reviewed studies have proved that this concern is legitimate. A 2008 article that appeared in the Psychology, Crime & Law journal addresses how camera perspective affected adult observers' perception of testimony by children.<sup>1</sup> The study recognizes that observers perceive the credibility of in-person and video statements differently and concludes that camera position does matter. Interestingly, the results of the study showed that the children were perceived as more credible when the camera was zoomed out versus the close-up or medium camera shots. A takeaway for Zoomers is that the close-up/up-the-nose angle is not optimal, and we should all distance ourselves from the camera. Another important aspect of camera angle is camera height. Anecdotal and scientific evidence has shown that a camera height at eye level or slightly above eye level is optimal. This enables you to make eye contact without looking into your lap or craning your neck. I coach witnesses every day that the most important way to establish credibility with the jury is to make eye-contact. The

same lesson holds true when Zooming. Therefore, it is imperative to make sure that our laptop or camera add-on is on a stand or propped up to give eye level camera height and optimal effectiveness. proved that this concern is legitimate. The same lesson holds true when Zooming. Therefore, it is imperative to make sure that our laptop or camera add-on is on a stand or propped up to give eye level camera height and optimal effectiveness.

## **Microphone**

The microphone is a close second to the camera. I instruct witnesses who testify in court to speak loud enough to be heard and clearly enough to be understood. After all, if you cannot be heard clearly, you might as well not be talking. This also applies to Zoomers. The microphones embedded in our laptops and tablets are rarely production-quality. If you want to make a crystal-clear impression, invest in a stand-alone microphone. There are many affordable choices available that are compact, durable, and simple to use. Test microphones until you find one you like. Then you can forget about how you sound and focus on the message you are trying to convey. Along the same lines, it is imperative that you make certain you have a reliable internet connection. Even the best planned presentation is doomed if the connection is interrupted. To this end, go ahead and pay your provider for an upgrade and test in advance of each meeting to ensure you are operating at full capacity.

## **Lighting**

Lighting is often overlooked, but professionals can easily turn lighting into an advantage over their competition. We have all seen the Zoomer who is sitting in a dark room with a window positioned behind them. This back-lit scenario often leads to a video image revealing little or no details of the Zoomer's face. While this might be a relief for those who just crawled out of bed, it does not cultivate a professional image. The best lighting is natural light, but this is not always available. Therefore, do yourself a favor and purchase a white light. Like the camera, the light should be installed at or above eye level. A good, well-positioned light in conjunction with an appropriate camera angle can take your remote presentation to the next level.

## **Appearance**

It does matter what you wear and how you wear it. If you want to be taken seriously, ditch the ironic t-shirt and don business attire. It also matters how you sit or stand. Slouching at your desk or reclining on a bed does not work if you want to stand out. In fact, I have noticed that Zoomers, particularly those who are presenting webinars, are far more authoritative when they stand. Standing with good posture at a good distance from the camera also allows you to use your hands and body to accentuate your message. It is also important to consider your audience when deciding on your body position. A morning meeting among teammates probably doesn't warrant a standing position. But sit up tall, look alert, and look at the camera. If you are not paying attention in the meeting, how can you expect others to listen when it is your turn to talk? And, finally, you need to present a clear and professional background. A tidy office with tasteful decorations provides a glimpse into your personal space, which can help with making connections. But if your office looks like a yard sale, a virtual background showing a tasteful scene (consider an opaque filter) or solid color will enhance your appearance and not distract from your effectiveness. While it may sound extreme, consider creating a Zoom studio in your home or office. A studio offers users the ability to control the environment and ensure that every Zoom meeting is optimized and free from distractions.

## **Zoom Ahead**

In conclusion, if you want to make a positive impression in your remote meetings you have to recognize the importance of maintaining a production-quality appearance. Studies have shown that over 50% of our message depends not on what we say, but on our appearance and non-verbal communication. Your appearance matters whether you are presenting to a virtual board room, making a remote pitch to investors, or delivering an oral argument to a virtual appellate court. The secret is starting to get out, and you don't want to be left behind. Zoom is here to stay. Embrace it. Do everything you can to make sure that the next audience who sees you in a remote setting remembers you for the right reasons.

<sup>1</sup>Sara Landstrom & Par Anders Granhag, Children's truthful and deceptive testimonies: How camera perspective affects adult observers' perception and assessment, 14 Psychology, Crime & Law No. 5 (October 31, 2008).