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Communication matters. What are **YOU** saying?

VIRTUAL COMMUNICATION
Mastering the Online Meeting
Practical Tips for Success

Since I first sat in on a web-based meeting several decades ago, I've felt that it is one of the most difficult environments to excel at with respect to communication. It's NOT the same as meeting live humans around a table. There is more to monitor, more that can go wrong, and bad skills are highlighted and have dire consequences. It's (relatively) easy to pull off a web meeting; it's (very) difficult to make it matter and come out with the results you want.

Warning: If your meeting was going to be bad in person, it will be WORSE online!

This guide will help you address the factors you can control, address the skills you need to facilitate a web meeting, and put you on the way to more productive web meetings.

We will address five main topics in this guide:

Getting Ready to Meet
Your Equipment and Setup
Skills to Make You a Star on the Web
Content and Facilitation
Ending Well

Getting Ready to Meet

Webinars start before we ever click Join Meeting... Here's how you can prepare before your call to present and participate like a pro.

1) Establish Outcomes (Objectives)

One bad thing about web meetings – there isn't anyone banging on the door to run you out of the meeting (most meetings I've observed in corporate America only end because there is another meeting in the same room). Figure out why you're meeting and drive the point with a vengeance. When you've met your objective, stop. People will (usually) enjoy the extra time you've given them. In the new world order, perhaps they crave the contact, but for efficiency and business productivity, find and meet your objectives and stop the meeting.

Objectives are different from agendas. Objectives have an outcome; agendas have a topic.

Good objective verbs: decide, gather (ideas), assign, practice, correct/edit

Bad objective verbs: go through, cover, talk about, review, update

RECOMMENDATION: Only have meetings that have defined outcomes.

2) Set up your computer

One of the most annoying aspects of web-based meetings is the inevitable trouble with the technology. Two minutes before the meeting starts is not the time to discover your Internet connection is being consumed by your kids Fortnite addiction or that you have to download and install a client and you don't have Administrator privileges on your computer. Log in early. Click the Test Audio button. If you're hosting, send yourself (or a friend) the meeting invite and make sure the link works. Know what your audience will need to do to get online – you will likely get questions and it's best if you know how to help them.

RECOMMENDATION: Don't go live with a technology you haven't tested.

3) Use video

A key decision is whether the meeting will include faces. There are valid reasons to include video. But sometimes logistics dictate otherwise. Much of the virtual coaching I've done has been with clients in remote parts of the earth. Their bandwidth simply can't handle the video, especially on the upload side (us seeing them). It is made worse through daytime hours as it seems everyone is online streaming. And it seems on every call, someone apologizes about their environment – bad hair day, disruptive cat, the mess, or their scattered mind. There is something appealing about turning off the video, enjoying in my mess, bunny slippers, and a comfy T-Shirt. But those are the exact reasons TO include video in your meetings. It raises accountability. I'm more likely to pay attention.

RECOMMENDATION: Use video if possible and your people won't revolt.

4) Get dressed

I've found that I need to treat my workday like a workday. Get out of the PJs. Set deadlines. Comb the hair. I don't hear (or at least rarely hear) people apologize for their appearance during in-person meetings. Why should that change in the online environment (for a treatise on how and when to feature something, see this article entitled *How to handle blunders and mistakes from the stage*).

RECOMMENDATION: Treat home work like office work.

5) Dedicate a location

This won't work for everyone and every situation. But if you are able, have a location that is dedicated to work. Don't set up in bed or on the couch – those are places to relax. Find a corner table or desk that gives you a destination to work at. A home office is ideal, but not always workable. I saw a picture on Twitter where a man had set up his online office in his closet – no distractions and plenty of noise-absorbing cloth. Personally, I'd go stir crazy locked in a closet for a three-hour web meeting, but it worked for him.

RECOMMENDATION: Commit a space at home for work.

Your Equipment and Setup

If you're going to stream video, there are some very practical aspects to make it better. Let's look at the equipment and setup needed to pull off a good webinar. Most of these are minor expenses (some are free). But if you're going to be excellent in the web presentation space, you'll need to get this right to have maximum impact.

1) Camera

Webcams are not usually super high quality. They may advertise as "HD" or "1080P", but they generate much lower quality than virtually any other camera you could use. Plus, the streaming services are going to display MUCH less than what the camera can produce (not many of us have the bandwidth to stream 20 simultaneous HD videos – hence Zoom/WebEx/Google throttles these down to slow-moving grainy images). Your phone is almost assuredly a better camera than your webcam. Which may mean that using your phone is your best solution. Almost every web platform has a corresponding phone App. If you need your phone during the meeting (to text other participants?!) then perhaps your iPad/tablet is an option to run the web portion.

RECOMMENDATION: Use the video equipment you already have.

2) Camera position

Position the camera at an angle that is kind to you (no one likes what the camera does, but at least don't make it worse). Ideally when you talk, you want to be talking directly to the camera, but if you're also taking notes or reading from documents on your computer screen, the angle might be a bit off. It's best if your eyes "look through the camera" not away from it. You might not be gazing into the lens, but at least are looking towards it. I've found that when I'm just an idle participant (not taking notes or actively presenting), I watch the faces of the folks on the call (like I'd do in person). It makes sense to put the window with their online faces near the camera. If I'm taking notes, I try to position that window where it will seem like I'm looking at my audience. I've found that on a coaching call, I typically have four or more windows open (the web app, my notes, the coaching plan/schedule, and at least one reference doc on the subject at hand). I position them to allow me full use and make ample use of screen sizing and Alt-Tab window switching. A large monitor is an advantage (I have a very large one and another smaller "document" monitor). For whatever reason, it appears harder (or maybe just weirder) to pull away from the computer to engage the audience in the web environment than it is in person, so positioning the camera to make me seem engaged is key.

RECOMMENDATION: Put the camera close to where you will be looking.

3) Lighting

The best way to improve your video is better lighting. You (the subject) should be lit from the front, with soft indirect light, if possible. Using only an overhead light leaves shadows on your face. The worst thing you can do is sit in front of a window. The camera will adjust to the brightness of the backdrop and your face will just be a dark shadow. It's hard for me to react to you when I can't see you. A window allowing light

on your face is a better way to position yourself (and use another light or two to take away remaining shadows). I use a light that sits on top of my monitor to light my face. It adjusts color temperature and intensity, but it's a little harsh. It does avoid my audience seeing bags under my eyes.

RECOMMENDATION: Light your face. Don't sit in front of a window.

4) Mic

Most of us don't have studio, broadcast-quality microphones. Again, your phone is probably the best mic you own, but only if you use it correctly. Speakerphones are notoriously bad at picking up background noises, although they usually get the job done if they're close enough. Office speakers (I call them Polycoms, but that's a brand name) are usually worse. They're designed to pick up varying degrees of sound anywhere in the room and are horrible with any background noise (for example, two people speaking at the same time). They also are using increased gain to make a distant speaker audible, which then modulates poorly when a closer speaker speaks up (shouldn't be as big of a problem anymore – we're all in separate places). Probably the worst mic you can use is the one on your laptop. It's just not in a good spot and is of marginal quality. A headset is a great choice, but many people don't like the way they look. But a nice USB headset can be obtained for under $50. For slightly more, you can get a studio grade USB mic. Placement is key – read the directions. Mics are designed for different purposes. Some are meant to be used mere inches from the mouth. Others can pick up across a room. The mic on your web cam is probably pretty good in that two- to four-foot range. That's what it's designed for. Just because a mic is more expensive/higher quality does NOT mean that it will sound better on a web call.

Your setup may be at fault if you sound like you're in a well. Set up sound absorption (curtains, blankets, carpets) and avoid a small room with blank walls and hard floor.

RECOMMENDATION: Buy and test a decent microphone.

5) Background

Your setup/backdrop is important as well. Just like a live presentation, we want the focus to be on YOU, not the environment. Distractions are an even bigger problem online. Remove those bags of candy, stacks of papers, head scratchers (if you haven't discovered those, you are missing out!), and piles of books. Avoid places where people will be walking in the background or animals (domestic or wild) will frequent the picture. As we move our work world home, we may need to free up one wall to be just a nice plain backdrop. There's nothing inherently wrong with your collection of soda pop cans or pictures of your daughter playing softball, but I don't know that it helps you make a sale or keeps your students engaged. Just get them out of the picture (my desk is a mess, but you can't see it from my webcam). Frame yourself in the center of the screen and make yourself bigger rather than smaller. Ideally, I want to see your facial expressions and not just a silhouette of you.

Some tools (notably Microsoft ones: Skype, Teams) allow you to blur the background. This is essentially what portrait photographers do. It's a great way to keep focus on you and not the stack of papers on your printer behind you. Zoom lets you drop in any

picture as a background. It's novel, but the technology to cut you out of the background isn't perfect unless you're in front of a green screen (which you can build very cheaply if you choose to do so). You need to contrast with your backdrop for it to work effectively. And rather than putting yourself in outer space or at Disneyland, just pick a neutral backdrop that doesn't distract.

RECOMMENDATION: Don't allow distracting backgrounds

6) Side Conversations

If you have someone walk in your office/room and wish to talk with them apart from the webinar, mute yourself. Mute both audio AND video. If your audience sees your mouth moving but does not hear you, they'll speak to you and remind you to unmute yourself. If they don't see you, they'll assume you've stepped away. Definitely don't invite another person into view (unless they're part of the organization and conversation). The participants won't be able to see anything else.

RECOMMENDATION: Don't conduct side conversation on air.

7) Ambient (background) noise

Ambient noise is always an issue. When a mic hears a noise, it was designed to pick it up and broadcast it. That goes for my voice, but it also applies to dogs barking, sneezes, AC units, the construction truck outside my house, and the hum of my computer. I had a meeting host tell me to mute myself because the crow off my porch was coming in louder than I was – I transitioned back indoors. My home office is next to the laundry room. In our new world order, I've had to alter the family's wash schedule so that the rumble of the dryer and slosh of the washer are not during web calls. Even with heavy doors and insulated walls, the sound is distracting. When you're not speaking, it's not a bad idea to mute your mic. But this leads to the inevitable forgetfulness, where ten other people chime in, "*You're on mute!*" If you're using your phone, you can mute independent of the app, but then people will just think you have a bad connection when they don't hear you.

Feedback is also an issue. If you're running two computers (one to present from and one to read from), then you need to mute one entirely. Most applications have figured out how to separate the sound from speakers from your voice, but it still can be a problem if there is an echo or another sound interfering.

RECOMMENDATION: Limit background noise

8) Audio delay

Another problem with duplexing (two-way) audio is the slight delay. This causes people to "step on" each other, which leads to a pause, which leads to a "*Go ahead, Fred*" which leads to a "*No, you go ahead John*" (because Fred was raised Southern), which leads to Susie stepping in and neither Fred or John getting their thoughts out. This problem will never completely go away because of the technology, but it can be helped by not speaking small words like "*uh huh*" or "*that's right*". Use the video

channel to nod when you need to show approval. Otherwise you interrupt the audio and likely delay everyone's participation.

RECOMMENDATION: Buy and test a decent microphone.

9) Tool setup

Do you want your attendees to be able to share their screen? Chat with everyone? Share video? Get into a the "room" before the host shows up? Do you want to be able to mute them without their consent? There are valid reasons for all of these, but they need to be set up in your tool settings (each tool is a little different) and this is best done BEFORE people begin arriving.

RECOMMENDATION: Plan and test before you open your hosting application.

Summarizing our technology: the video should be well lit and free from distractions. The audio should be clear and free from distractions. Don't allow the technology to get in the way of the communication. It's hard enough. Use top-level, professional skills and have something worth sharing.

Skills to Make You a Star on the Web

We've subtly started talking about skills. No technology in the world can make up for bad content or bad skills. Just because people "met" does not mean we met objectives or had a good reason to meet.

1) Avoid Distractions

Side conversations are the norm. Private chat is available in most online tools (Zoom, WebEx, Teams, etc.). I don't trust myself to remember to select the right person, so I prefer to use another channel. It's not uncommon for a web participant to have Skype, text, and email going to other participants during a call. This is all well and good, but it does divide our attention. None of us multitasks well. None of us. You need to work hard to engage folks. Which is another reason why I'm pro-video. It's at least proof that you're in the room and not asleep.

2) Participate non-verbally

This can only be done if video is enabled, but it's a great way to both stay engaged yourself and to give needed feedback to the audience. Instead of breaking in and interrupting the audio flow, when it makes sense just respond with a nod or a thumbs up. For example, if someone is unsure if they're being heard, they might ask directly if their audio is clear. Instead of 20 people breaking in with "Oh sure!", head nods can get the same message. Same thing for a good idea you agree with. At a table in a live setting, we might all murmur and say, "*That's right*," but it's going to be hard to hear that in a web environment. Just nod vigorously and let them continue.

3) S.T.O.P.

Skills are important in person. They may be even more important remotely. The skills we teach in our workshops translate perfectly to the web environment with one exception. The two biggies are: S.T.O.P.ing and going big. S.T.O.P. is the acronym (Single Thought, One Person) we teach for creating pauses and eliminating non-words.

Non-words are (sadly) normal. They seem to be even worse on the web as people search for words and any sort of feedback. Pausing is still important. Sounding confident still goes a long way. As Aristotle put it, "*The impression created by the speaker as he utters the speech is the single greatest power of persuasion.*" Your delivery skills create that impression (and here, your skills at using the platform also contribute to that impression). Sentences that are separated are easier to listen to. This is *especially* true when language is an issue. With bandwidth causing syllables to drop in and out and quality to change by the second, clarity is of the utmost importance on the web. Learn to give distinct, short sentences.

This has one negative side effect, especially with rude audiences. When you STOP, some people butt in. That's where good video presence goes a long way. Stay engaged. Show with facial expressions that you're still engaged in speaking. Hold your place with a hand motion, perhaps. And, if necessary, hold your ground.

4) Go Big (or go home – wait, you already ARE at home!)

You need to express. More. More than that even. Video takes an interesting three-dimensional object (you!) and compresses it into two dimensions visually with limited field of view. And it mutes the sound, puts on filters and compressors, and makes you generally much less appealing than you are in person. In order to combat this, you still need to gesture, smile, and change your voice. Gestures done well will modulate your voice. Moving your hands with no purpose is just distracting. Pushing a facial express beyond what you think is needed is engaging and moves an audience to attentiveness and reaction. Staring blankly off camera makes me want to do the same.

Just like our live workshops, this is something that takes practice and usually video review to convince yourself that you aren't as interesting as you feel (or as loud; or soft; or smiling; or dynamic). One of the things we would advocate is using the record feature of your online meeting tool simply so that you can review what you sound like. You're not a good judge of yourself. Find an interested third party that can help you become better. Like most (all?) skills in life, you can get better with coaching and practice. Doing it more (which we can expect you to do) is not practice. Get better!

We aren't relegated to a boring life of incessant web calls and meaningless video chats. Use skills, logistics, and human decency to create messages that are interesting and productive.

5) Talk to the camera

In our live workshops, we rigorously teach speakers to speak only to a set of eyes. That's impossible over the web. But your audience's eyes are represented by the camera you're using. As much as possible, speak directly into the camera. This is affected by camera angles and window positions as discussed above, but it's best to give the audience the impression you are talking directly to them.

6) Use big gestures, voice, and animation

Just because you aren't in the same room does not mean that you can't express and emphasize your points through gestures, vocal variety, and being more animated. Even for live presenters, this is one of the hardest skills to master. But there are so

many benefits for the presenter who can learn to be more animated. The most obvious is the natural change in voice that big gestures, facial expressions, and animation bring about (don't believe me? Find the YouTube video of your favorite animated movie voiceover by searching "behind the scenes voiceover <movie name>" e.g. Toy Story.)

7) Ask good questions

In Ferris Bueller's Day Off, Ben Stein plays the role of the boring economic teacher. He drones on in a monotone voice and asks terrible questions. *"Anyone?   Anyone?" "Raised or lowered? Raised? Did it work? Anyone know the effects?"* This doesn't work live, and it SURE doesn't work over the web. When you want a response, ask questions that demand responses. A good way to do this is to start with the Magic Word of Questions: What…? (or maybe How…?) If you really want others to chime in, avoid any question that could be answered with a Yes or No (we call them binary questions). If you need to know if your sound is working, *"Nod (or thumbs up) if you can hear me"* works fine and doesn't take more time than it should.

8) Embrace the Pause

Pausing is one of the hardest skills to do well. It feels like forever. If it's hard in person, it's REALLY hard over the web. There just isn't enough visual feedback and your eye contact doesn't have the same power it does live to get a response from your audience. A student commented: *"I've always used your advice when asking questions and paused while they gathered their thoughts. I got over what used to feel awkward a long time ago. But pausing in person is way easier because you can 'read the room.' But in an online view of a headshot only, those pauses seemed eternal. I didn't know if they were gathering their thoughts or watching Netflix on another screen."*

Content and Facilitation

We've been talking about your setup, environment, and behavior, but what about the actual content you share? Is it just as simple as doing what you'd do live? In a word: no.

1) Enlist help

Much more than in a live setting, webinars take increased attention by the host and/or teacher. Where you could see with a glance in a live audience that there was a question, it's more difficult to monitor in a web setting. This underlies the importance of needing a sidekick dedicated just to run the administrative aspects of the webinar. This person can: check for questions in the chat; help people having technical difficulties get up and running; take notes of what is being discussed; monitor the attendees' video stream; monitor time. The sidekick needs to have a direct line to the presenter – text can work. But it's also quite possible that a more conversational tone can be achieved, and just break in with an interruption ("Fred, we've got a question here in chat…"). The presenter has enough going on. Having a sidekick is a great way to ensure webinar success.

With the uptick in web-based meetings, there's been an uptick in poor behavior on the web. Google "Zoom Bomb" to understand that public meetings are risky. Having

someone else who can mute attendees, take control when they need to, and kick people off if needed is a wonderful asset to have.

2) Start Strong

It seems that web meetings suffer from rolling starts more than live meetings. Have something to talk about (preferably related to the meeting content) for those that show up on time. Please don't highlight those that are missing or punish those that did show up on time with, "We'll wait just a few more minutes for the other to get here." If there is someone who MUST be there, have your assistant contact them offline and come back quickly with an update.

3) Mix it up

This is not unique to webinars, but it's probably more important than in a live setting. Strive to have something in the audience's experience change frequently. I hate to put a metric on it, but every five minutes is probably a good target. Things you can change: who is speaking; what is on the screen (share a screen); audience participation, including questions; and the style of material (story, fact, explanation).

4) Know your audience and their needs

Again, just like live meetings, knowing who is in the audience and what they want might be the most important thing to start with. People always want results; people always need a roadmap or direction on how to get them. Meetings are not the place for only data dumps or information overload – find the meaning to your audience and you'll never go wrong.

5) Avoid subtlety

It's amazing how much our culture tolerates and embraces subtlety. One of the reasons is that many cultures on the planet use that as their primary way of communication (it's called "indirect communication") and our world is more global than ever. But in the business (and especially Western) context, direct communication is key. You do not want your audience wondering what they are supposed to do. I remember once when I was in corporate there was a particularly unwelcome message that needed to go out (about mandating overtime). It was couched with terms like "recommended" and "good idea" and "appreciated". My job role was a bit non-standard and there were reasons to believe that the "recommendation" might not apply, so I finally asked directly. I was told, almost verbatim, *"You'll be fired if you don't work the extra time."* While I wasn't particularly thrilled with the outcome, the clarity of the message was appreciated. This is again not unique to a web-based environment. But because there is so much more difficulty in seeing heads nod and eyes glaze over, clarity is a prime goal in delivering a message over the web.

6) Drop the sarcasm

Sarcasm, by definition, uses irony. Irony requires understanding and context. And that's not something great communicators can rely on, ESPECIALLY when you can't see your audience clearly. Many times, sarcasm is made clear with an eye roll or a

perfected tone. Those things are easy to miss over the web. While it may serve to feed your ego or wit, sarcasm as a communication tool is rife with risk. Don't use it.

7) Share only what needs to be shared

Sharing your entire screen is a dangerous habit. You never know when a spurious reminder, confidential information, or embarrassing email from your kids might be visible. Instead, share the window that has the information your audience needs. Shut down windows and tabs that aren't need just to be safe. Some tools do not show you what your audience is seeing. This may mean you should use another login (perhaps on your tablet) as a participant so you can make sure your audience is seeing what you want them to. If you put a window in front of the shared window, this will frequently mask what the audience is seeing. But they won't see your window, just a big block where it is (unless you're sharing your desktop).

8) Use the tool features

Learn how to use your hosting tool. If you're sharing your screen, know how that works. Consider markup or annotating your cursor, so the audience knows exactly what you're referring to. Consider breakout rooms if it's profitable for your audience to break up into small groups to discuss a topic. Make it clear what they're supposed to do – you can't be in every room so there is a chance you'll lose people if directions aren't clear. Maybe polls, or a whiteboard, or a shared doc, or a third-party app or an inquiry to "raise hand" or use the chat would help your audience. Know how to mute and unmute --- yourself and everyone else. That's a LOT to keep track of! (which is why an assistant is so important.)

Ending Well

Like live meetings, ending is hard. But it doesn't have to be.

1) Don't drag it out

When it's time to end, say goodbye and end the meeting. If it's not clear the meeting is over, then people may hang around to see if they miss something. Some will drop off, which means some will miss whatever is covered. When you meet your objective, it's time to end the meeting.

2) End on time

Again, this is a Western context, but we believe, teach, and practice that meetings and presentations should ALWAYS end on time.

One side effect of COVID-19 is likely to be a broader acceptance for web meetings. They were already present, now they'll be the default.

Differentiate yourself. Learn to give GREAT web-based meetings and presentations.

For more tips on communication, visit us at www.millswyck.com/resources.

To contact us about training yourself or your organization, drop us an email at info@millswyck.com or call us at (919)-386-9238

Click here to investigate personal coaching,

About the Author

As a high-stakes communications expert, Alan motivates individuals and teams to build their confidence and professionalism and trains them to seamlessly handle the unexpected in ANY communications setting.

Alan is an International Keynote Speaker, Coach, Trainer, and Author who has delivered keynotes and training workshops to thousands on the impact of powerful, persuasive communication. He immediately connects with audiences with his high energy, relatable stories, and easy-to-apply, practical strategies. Alan uses a mentorship mindset to coach and lead others. With his engineering background and his analytical personality, he incorporates his passion to discover what truly works into all his materials.

Alan is the Executive Director and Principal Trainer of MillsWyck Communications. He is the author of *Presentation Sin: The Practical Guide to Stop Offending (and Start Impressing) Your Audience.*