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# Staying Professional in Virtual Meetings

By EILENE ZIMMERMAN

**Q.** *Virtual meetings have become a staple of business life, whether conducted by phone or video. What are the biggest differences between a virtual meeting and one that is face-to-face?*

**A.** Teleconferences and videoconferences offer a relatively inexpensive way to meet with colleagues from around the country or the world, but they also present special challenges.

When you aren't in the same room with other people, you lose important nonverbal cues that register unease, confusion, agreement or disagreement. That makes it easier to miscommunicate, says Sean O'Brien, senior vice president for strategy and communications at PGI, which provides technology platforms for virtual meetings.

Participants in virtual meetings often feel a lowered sense of accountability, Mr. O'Brien says. "In face-to-face meetings people really show up, not just physically but also mentally. They come to the meeting prepared and actively participate," he says. In virtual meetings — including the telepresence variety, where images are highly realistic — that's often not the case.

**Q.** *During a teleconference, no one can see you, so it's common for attendees to hit the mute button and do other things while listening. Should you?*

**A.** People sometimes do things in a virtual meeting that they'd never do in person, like checking sports scores or having side conversations. "I've seen people at a videoconference grooming themselves on camera," says Laura Stack, C.E.O. of the Productivity Pro, a management consulting firm, and author of "SuperCompetent: The Six Keys to Perform at Your Productive Best."

But if you are at a virtual meeting only to listen, some multitasking is fine, says Bob Preston, chief collaboration officer at Polycom, a telepresence, video and voice communications company in Pleasanton, Calif.

Generally, though, it's better not to do other things while you're in a virtual meeting, because you could miss important information. "If you keep asking to have questions repeated or for clarification of what's being said, you are essentially announcing to everyone: 'I'm not really paying attention' and risk looking very unprofessional," Ms. Stack says.

And use the mute button to block background noise. Mr. Preston recalled a teleconference in which someone was eating a bag of potato chips. "You could hear it rustling during the meeting, and finally someone said: 'Whoever is eating the potato chips, could you please mute?' That's embarrassing."

The mute button is also important if you use a headset. "I've had meetings where someone went into the bathroom and forgot their headset was on," Mr. O'Brien says.

**Q.** *Often in teleconferences and videoconferences, there is a slight voice delay, causing people to talk over one another. How can you make sure you are heard without being rude?*

**A.** If you want to cut into the discussion during a teleconference, you need to prompt the group first, so say something like "Excuse me" or "Question" and then wait a couple of seconds before continuing, says Mr. Preston.

In a videoconference, the speaker will be the biggest image on your screen, but there is usually a smaller window where you can see everyone else, so prompt the group by raising your hand, or by raising your hand and saying, "I have a point I'd like to make," says Stephen Epstein, chief marketing officer at Avistar Communications, a video communications software company.

**Q.** *What should you wear — and avoid wearing — to a videoconference?*

**A.** Avoid stripes. They don't transmit well on camera and can be mistaken for movement, causing the camera to keep refreshing itself, says Susan Colaric, director of instructional technology at Saint Leo University in Florida. Stay away from large, shiny jewelry, too, because it picks up glare.

"Wear solid colors with noticeable accents and dress for your audience," she says. "For instance, in academia, ties are rare, but in law firms, they aren't."

**Q.** *If you are a presenter at a virtual meeting, how should your presentation differ from that in a face-to-face meeting?*

**A.** Virtual presentations should be shorter because it's easier to lose people's attention. Mr. Preston suggests pausing periodically to check in with your audience. "If you notice people tuning out, looking around or fidgeting, address them," he advises. For example, he suggests, say: "Debbie, you look a little puzzled. Can I clarify?"

**Q.** *What's the best way to stand out in a virtual meeting?*

**A.** Be prepared and actively engaged, asking questions and offering opinions and answers. Especially in teleconferences, there is a tendency to wait for someone else to speak first, says Ms. Stack. "Don't worry about being the first one," she says.

Look into the camera when you speak and use the same kind of body language and facial expressions as in a face-to-face meeting, Mr. O'Brien says. "Sometimes in virtual meetings there is a lot of passive engagement, where people hit the mute button and disappear," he says. "That's definitely not the way to stand out."

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