



Videoconferencing Etiquette

General Rules

- * Always test your system prior to a videoconference. Set up a test call with the far site a few days before the actual conference.**
- * Ensure all equipment is turned on and ready to accept the incoming call at least 15 minutes prior to the scheduled commencement time.**
- * Appoint a meeting facilitator. Just like a "live" meeting, a videoconference meeting can go out of control unless somebody takes the job of traffic cop. The facilitator can also take responsibility for muting and un-muting the microphone and adjusting the camera. For collaborative computing (data conferencing), it is especially important that everyone knows who has control of the presentation.**
- * Introduce all of the participants at your location; encourage the other site to do the same.**
- * Assume you are always on camera, even when you are not speaking.**
- * Because the entire room is not usually visible to the other locations, it is good form to announce who is entering or leaving the room.**
- * Be aware of what is being transmitted to the remote locations. Use the local window or second monitor as a guide to what is being transmitted to the far end.**
- * Don't get so wrapped up involving the remote audience that you ignore the local one!**
- * Avoid wearing plaids, stripes or prints as they may interfere with contrast levels and transmission compression.**
- * Remote sites are able to control the camera at your site. You may not want this feature to be used by other sites. Establish protocol for this feature early in your conference.**
- * Have an agenda. Like any other meeting, a videoconference takes less time when there is a clear agenda. Encourage all participants to be concise so the meeting stays on schedule.**

- * Allow the on-screen site to finish speaking before answering. Multiple sites speaking at once can cause delays in the switching.**
- * Try to use complete sentences and avoid one-word answers. It is very helpful if before each person speaks, they announce their name and the location they are participating from. For example, if I wanted to speak during a videoconference I would precede my comments by stating, "This is John Smith in Calgary,". When you precede your comments with that simple statement each time a new person begins to speak, the video has a chance to catch up with who is desirous of speaking and everyone can see who is talking.**
- * Pause from time to time to allow for questions.**
- * Try to be within the camera's field of vision when speaking.**
- * Speak in your normal tone, there is no need to yell in to the microphone.**
- * Use the same manner in a videoconference that you would a face to face meeting, make sure you relax and act naturally.**
- * To make the most of technology, create an atmosphere that promotes interaction. Involve people from every site by asking direct questions. Don't make your presentation a TV show; make it a genuine meeting. The more employees enjoy videoconferences, the more likely they will be to schedule more of them in place of expensive travel.**
- * Notify a technician immediately if you have problems.**

Let's Dig a Bit Deeper...

Videoconferencing, by its nature, is a social activity. As with any social activity, there are acceptable as well as expected behaviors that accompany it. Some of these behaviors are the result of culture or the environment whereas some may be said to reflect "common sense". Of course, there is also a range of definition as to what is "acceptable", "unacceptable", "desirable" and/or "expected" based on individual interpretation and temperament. Finally, when compared to other well-established social activities that combine people with technology (e.g., talking on the telephone, watching a movie in a public theatre, driving a car), videoconferencing has not been around as long or had as much exposure. This combination of conditions results in the fact that videoconferencing "etiquette" is certainly not "carved in stone". However, there are some basic behaviors that will improve your own videoconferencing experience as well as that of the people you are conferencing with:

Testing, testing, 1, 2, 3...

Perhaps the most overlooked experience-enhancing behavior in a videoconference is simply to pay some attention to how others will be seeing and hearing you. In videoconferencing, much of the experience at one end is affected by conditions at the other. The PinP window, or second monitor that allows you to view yourself, lets you see how you appear to the remote end — whether or not you are completely viewable on camera, if there are distractions in the background, whether you are looking straight forward at the remote caller and not "gazing down from above" or "peering up from below". Even if this window is not going to be kept up during the call, it's a good idea to preview your image in the window and adjust accordingly prior to the call. Unfortunately, this doesn't work for adjusting audio since your local audio is almost always suppressed from "feeding back" to you in local mode or even most test modes. In this case, testing and adjusting with a live call before a meeting begins or taking a few minutes to test and adjust at the start of a call is strongly recommended. Once a call is in progress, many people seem to tolerate poor audio or video conditions, not wanting to interrupt the conversational flow or simply because they figure it must be something "at their end". A short audio/video "rehearsal" is well worth the time spent as it contributes to making the technology as transparent as possible and enables comfortable, effective and rich communication.

Leaving well enough alone...

Once adjustments have been made at each end to produce optimal call conditions, perhaps the most important advice is to converse naturally and make as few additional adjustments as possible. True, some adjustments may be necessary in response to environmental changes (lights are turned on/off, background noise increases). However, unnecessary "twiddling" of audio or video can have very distracting results.

Are you still with me?

Once your camera and incoming view window have been correctly positioned so that "eye contact" has been established between you and the remote site, you should remain focused in that direction. Shifts in attention such as looking out a window, looking at other applications on the computer screen, "multi-tasking" with other work in your office, have the same effect as not looking someone in the eye when talking to them in person. It's important to realize that videoconferencing is much more like an in person exchange than a telephone call — body language and facial expression count!

Talking out of turn...

As with any in-person meeting, stray noises and side conversations within a videoconference distract from the primary conversation. This can complicate point-to-point meetings and becomes even more noticeable in multi-point meetings. It seems to be easier for participants to forget that they are truly part of a group conversation since the meeting room is virtual rather than physical. Side conversations at remote sites seem to spring up more readily than they would if everyone were in the same actual room. The microphones and speakers necessary for sending/receiving audio complicate matters further in that they do not differentiate between relevant and irrelevant sounds. They will readily pick up any conversation that is taking place near them and send it along. They

will also just as happily pick up and transmit a sneeze with as much sound quality as a well-intentioned remark. In a multi-point conference, muting your local audio by default and unmuting only when you want to speak is almost always a good idea.

We're all in this together!

A final subtle but very important point of video etiquette is that, when you are in a videoconference enabled meeting, though participants are located in physically different places, it is truly a "real" meeting! At first pass, this means things like "you should be on time", "you should pay attention", "you should make sure everyone has the same information going into the meeting", "you should bring enough materials for everyone". In the case of a multipoint meeting, these considerations are more complicated in delivery but compounded in importance. For example, if hard copy materials will be used in the meeting, they should be sent to all locations ahead of time (not unlike preparing for a teleconference). If printouts will be made from electronic material presented during the meeting, you should be sure that all sites have the capability to print the materials. If particular local objects or room locations will be shown during a meeting, care should be taken ahead of time to ensure that camera views of these are available for remote participants.

Can I have some of that too?

A couple of other considerations are a little less obvious but really do make a difference, particularly in multi-point meetings when groups of people have been brought together at each of the participating sites. The first is that information which is specific to each local site (e.g., where the restrooms are, where to find a phone) may need to be distributed to those that are at the local site but isn't relevant to remote sites. Distribution of this information should be handled locally via pre-meeting communication, local handouts, or prior to the start of the meeting with local audio muted. In addition to this, if amenities differ from site to site, care should be taken to minimize group exposure to the differences in amenities. (In other words, if bagels and coffee are available at one site but not at another, it would be most polite to eat off camera!) Better yet, care should be taken to ensure that amenities are equal. Remember, it really is one meeting!