

10 Essentials for Looking and Doing Your Best in Video Conference Calls

With so many of us in the legal and resolution industries now working from home offices I thought this would be the perfect time to help you put your best face forward on all the video conference calls and ODR hearings that you'll be conducting.

Here are some quick tips to help you make the most of your video conferences, mediations and arbitrations, and prepare you for your close up.

1. Light the way

Lights and angles are just as important for video calls as they are for professional photo shoots. You may not be particularly interested in the way you look when you Skype with a co-worker you've known for years, but when you to talk to a client or new colleague the situation is completely different.

If you think of yourself as a half-way decent smartphone photographer, then you know all about the importance of lighting. It makes the difference between a great image or a bad one, and it's easier to figure out than you think. How we light our face affects our appearance on camera — dark and dull won't make the best impression. The best lighting setup will use a combination of natural and artificial lighting.

As a general rule, avoid fluorescent lights, which can cast unflattering shadows. Avoid overhead lights, too, as they can create dark under eye shadows. For enhanced lighting, use natural or soft light sources.

Place your primary light source behind your camera. This way, the light and the camera point in the same direction. You could also use two light sources behind the camera, one on the right side, one on the left.

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Natural Light for Backlighting

Do your best to allow natural light into the space you will be using. This will create the foundation for a natural looking image versus one that is obviously artificially lit. Just make sure the natural light is not shining directly towards the camera, or at your face where it may make you squint.

Fill in with Soft Side Lighting

You will need a few lamps and soft white light bulbs. These are your basic bulbs that have a white finish on the glass.

Set one lamp to the left, and another one to the right of your laptop or pc. This, along with your supplemental natural light will usually do the trick to maintain even lighting. Placing the lamps a good distance from your face will help to avoid a shiny spot on your forehead.

Adjust your Webcam Brightness and Contrast

By adjusting the image settings for your webcam, you will be able to fine-tune brightness, exposure and contrast. You can do this within the software that came with your webcam. If you're using a built-in camera, you may need additional webcam settings software to control these settings.

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2. Choose a neutral background

Location is everything, even when it comes to a video conference call or meeting. Think of choosing the right location as the equivalent of giving a firm handshake when you meet someone in person. It sets the tone and gives an overall first impression. There are three basic principles to remember.

The background of your video conference will say a lot about you to the other person. It's best to keep it neutral, uncluttered, and professional. It will be the first impression that the person gets, and you want them pay attention to you — not anything or anyone else.

Whether you are at home or in a formal office, make sure your background is uncluttered and professional. Less is more. In other words, you may be fond of all those family pictures hanging on the wall but the person on the other side of the camera may find them distracting. The same goes for anything that can make you look unprofessional -- clutter, clothes, piles of boxes, and food and beverages.

Sit at your desk and take a selfie or a screenshot of what others see in your background. Remove objects on your desk or on your wall that may detract from your company's brand. Consider designating one wall as your company wall. Invest in the color and image of that wall and keep it consistent, even if your clients know you're a solo operation, they don't need to be reminded that you're working from home.

Places with a lot of foot traffic, or where your children (and pets!) can easily come and interrupt you are not ideal locations for video conferencing. Even if you're able to quickly recover from interruption, you risk derailing the conversation or losing your audience entirely.

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Location: Make sure it's as quiet as possible.

Yes, you should try to avoid the obvious ones like barking dogs and blaring TVs, but even if you think you're somewhere quiet, it's amazing how many unpredictable noises can pop up. While we've learned to tune out most of this background noise in person, they can still derail a video conference call. Maybe it's an air conditioning unit turning on, the buzzing of a fan close to your microphone, a washing machine beeping, a cell phone ringing, or the sound of text messages coming through.

Echo can also be a huge distraction. If you really like a certain room, but need to eliminate sound reverberation, adding some furniture, fabric curtains, and carpet (or other sound dampening materials) may help to absorb some of the echoes. Echo may also come from the interference caused by input and output devices such as a microphone and a speaker that are too close together. Be sure to test the sound way ahead of your webcam appearance!

Location: Find an Appropriate Camera Angle

As for the angle, the camera should be placed at your eye level. If you are using a laptop, place something beneath it to raise it until your eyes are at the same level as the camera lens. The angle of your camera can have a significant impact on the way you look online. We recommend having an external webcam because it gives you more control over the position and angle. If you are using a built-in camera, you can always adjust your position in relation to it.

The camera should capture your face and part of your upper body, with the camera being aligned with your eyes. When talking, you should always look at the camera (not the screen), so it feels like you're having eye contact with the other person.

If the camera is in much lower than your eyes, it will make your body and face look much more prominent. Also, you'll have to look down to make eye contact, which brings a whole superiority/inferiority dynamic to the video call.

Positioning the camera much higher can give you similar issues. To make sure you look better on video calls, just put your camera on eye level.

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3. Dress your best

Even if only your face and shoulders are in the frame, you should dress professionally from head to toe. Avoid patterns, stripes and plaids. Don't wear a hat. Put flattering, solid colors near your face and make sure to check your teeth, hair and makeup. Avoid jewelry that may be distracting or make disruptive sounds every time you move. There are four best practices to keep in mind when you are considering what to wear during a video conference:

- Pattern: no stripes, checks, polka dots or other patterns or noticeable textures.
- Color: try to wear neutral tones, as bright colors, metallics, and fluorescents may not translate well on camera.
- Contrast: make sure there's some definition between your face, your background and your clothing.
- Shape: make sure it fits well of course, but more importantly, check how it looks with your lighting setup.

4. Keep your notes nearby

If you need to look at some notes during your call, jot them down on a piece of paper and tape them next to your camera. This will help you stay on track in case you get nervous. Memorize as many points as possible and keep a notepad and pen handy to make some notes with as little visual disruption as possible. I find it easiest to have my notes on my iPad just in front of my laptop. The other participants can't see it and I can read my bulleted notes without having to move my whole head downward and losing eye contact for too long. Which brings us to number 5.

5. Maintain good eye contact

You're sure to look like a novice if you don't look directly into the camera or at least at the face of the person. Resist looking at yourself in the small frame in the corner of your screen. Look directly into the camera or at the face of the person you're interacting with. Resist looking at yourself in the small frame at the corner of your video call screen and avoid distractions elsewhere in the room. As a reminder to maintain eye contact, it may help to put something above your webcam – like a sticker or colored note, for example.

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6. Sit up Straight

Make sure your total upper body — not just your face — is visible in the camera area. To provide you with some comfort, keep in mind the caller on the other side only sees you from the waist up. Also, fidgeting or moving around too much will definitely distract the person you're talking to. So, if you want the focus to be on you and on what you have to say, try keeping yourself centered in the image without moving a lot.

7. Get the best audio visual

If you do a lot of video conferences, consider investing in an external webcam with high definition capabilities. Depending on your surroundings, you may want to use a headset or earbuds during your call. However, a video chat without headphones looks more natural. Poor audio quality can quickly reduce the effectiveness of a video call, often leading to miscommunication. First, be articulate. Make sure you speak clearly and slowly.

8. Don't forget to be yourself

We're well past video conferencing being solely used for quarterly board meetings with our executive team — it has transformed into a daily way of communicating face to face. Just like texting, talking on the phone or walking over to your colleague's desk and chatting in person, the video conferencing experience is about what's being discussed. So don't fret when it comes to getting on camera — just be yourself!

9. Use common courtesy

Because video collaboration is just like an in-person interaction, it is important to use the same courtesy you would use if you were in the same room. This includes paying attention to the speaker, minimizing multitasking and refraining from interrupting. Though this may seem obvious, good manners can take you far when building business relationships.

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10. Do a Dry Run Video Call to Test Your Setup

Prior to the video conference, test your video meeting setup to make sure everything is ready to go.

Testing: Microphone

The microphone can be easy to forget until you're on the call being told "we can't hear you," which get your video conference off to a rocky start. Get one of your friends to help you test the audio by completing a dry run of the video conference between two different computers or devices to make sure everything is in working order.

Testing: Sound, Feedback and Background Noise

While you're doing your dry run, ask your friend to listen for background noise including any buzzing or hissing. Decide if you will use headphones or not, and if not, make sure that your friend doesn't hear feedback from your speakers when they are speaking on the call. On that note, you may want to confirm your speaker volume before getting on the call.

You might remember the humorous video of the children who interrupted their dad, Robert Kelly, during his live interview with the BBC News. If you have animals or children running around in the house, close your office door and let your family know you are on a conference call. This will help avoid unpleasant or embarrassing situations.

If for some reason something should go technically or situationally wrong, it is always ok to acknowledge it. Challenges may unexpectedly arise as they did with Professor Kelly, but all you need to do is address the issue, acknowledge it briefly, and keep the audience focused on the message you're trying to deliver.

Even if you feel nervous about video conferencing, remember that practice makes perfect. Once you get the hang of being in front of the camera, you will have mastered yet another invaluable business skill. So, if something doesn't go quite right the first time, keep at it. It will definitely get better!

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