

## **9 Video and Audio Conferencing Mistakes That Could Cause a Meeting Meltdown**

**By Dianna Booher**

You can do almost anything in a video or audio conference that you can do in person—lecture, discuss, create visuals, display graphics, demonstrate things. You simply have to do them a little differently. The setting and equipment require that you give more forethought and planning to the “how.” Prevent a meeting meltdown during your next video or audio conference by avoiding these common mishaps.

### **Mistake #1: Failing to Generate Audience Involvement**

Prepare audience-involvement questions. To encourage discussion, prepare questions to stimulate thought and response and to move the group toward accomplishing the purpose. When discussion careens out of control, guide with focused questions.

Plan change-of-pace activities. For an idea of frequency, watch television network news broadcasts and count how many times there’s a change of visuals during coverage of one single news broadcast. Plan your own presentation accordingly. Consider adding interactive surveys, discussion questions, site breakout activities, interviews with experts, reports, video clips, or imbedded internet links to keep the participants’ interest. Remember that they will be comparing your broadcast to what they see daily on major television networks.

### **Mistake #2: Dressing Without Success**

Avoid patterned fabrics such as large prints, dots, plaids, and stripes, all of which may “dance” on the screen. Camera lenses also have difficulty balancing certain extreme colors such as black and white. And occasionally, red “bleeds.” For shirts and blouses, prefer pastels rather than white. Medium-dark colors at the center of the spectrum package you best: royal blue, purple, burgundy, navy, green, or charcoal gray. Avoid scarves, ruffles, complex-pattern ties, or fabrics that rustle or jewelry that clanks when you move.

### **Mistake #3: Being Anonymous**

Introduce yourself and other participants both audibly and visually. Also include support staff or technicians and their roles in the meeting or broadcast. Then have other sites introduce their participants, support staff, and observers along with their roles. You may find it helpful to appoint a chairperson at each site to handle the introductions and administrative tasks. You can display a photo and even a short bio line.

Ask all participants to identify themselves each time they speak because in large groups it is easy to lose the thread of a conversation when several voices may sound alike. For example, “This is Kevin in Miami. I have a question for the New Orleans site . . .” helps to orient everyone quickly. The only exception from these repeated identifications is the primary presenter or host.

## **Mistake #4: Going Groundless—Without Rules**

Review any guidelines or ground rules that will increase productivity. For example, encourage those who will be speaking for longer periods—such as during your question-and-answer period or during other planned interactivity—to say when they have finished with their remarks so that others know this quickly. Again, to avoid confusion, remind participants to identify themselves and their site when they speak.

## **Mistake #5: Leading with the Top of Your Head**

If you've been the lone ranger at a remote site, you understand the feeling of staring into a sea of heads when others have forgotten you're on the planet. Don't forget you are supposed to be "connecting" with another group rather than staring face down at your notes, leaving other sites staring at the top of your head. If there are multiple cameras, check the TV monitor to make sure that you are facing the camera that is currently online. And make sure that you are completely within the camera's field of vision as you speak.

## **Mistake #6: Forgetting the Ever-Present Camera and the Open, Sensitive Mic**

Be careful that you are not inadvertently calling attention to your movement, shuffling papers, strumming fingers, swiveling chair, coughing fits, sighs and harrumphs, tapping pen, water glass, or snacks. Several water glass clanks on a hard table can sound like a hailstorm at another site. Also, give attention to posture. Just because you cannot see your audience during a broadcast does not mean that they cannot see you. Avoid unconscious mannerisms such as rubbing your eyes, tossing your hair back, flipping your tie, or twirling a pencil.

Because microphones are very sensitive, it is a good idea to mute the audio at any time that you are not speaking to eliminate all extraneous noise: air conditioners coming on and off, background conversations, projector noise, rustling paper, pencil tapping, coughing, or throat clearing.

Be careful about sudden moves toward the camera. Extending your hands, flailing your arms, shifting your weight, crossing your legs—such movements look aggressive and even make your hands or arms look much larger as they plunge forward. The camera greatly exaggerates wide, sweeping gestures and pointing fingers and may make you look hysterical rather than authoritative.

## **Mistake #7: Accentuating the Negative**

Be aware that gestures and facial expressions are exaggerated on camera. A scowl may seem overly harsh and disapproving. To lighten up your facial expressions, think how you appear when you are slightly amused. That is, raise your eyebrows slightly and keep your gaze and chin turned slightly upward. Caress the camera with your eyes to show sincerity and warmth. Or try to visualize the camera as a colleague sitting directly in front of you, nodding or raising an eyebrow at everything you say.

## **Mistake #8: Lapsing into a Monotone**

Be extra mindful of vocal variety. Vary your speech patterns and voice—fast and slow rate of speaking, high and low pitch, loud and soft volume, inflection, emphasis, and intonation. While important during in-person presentations, vocal variety becomes crucial in video or audio conferencing. A monotonous presentation online puts people to sleep.

## **Mistake #9: Waxing Eloquent—Or Not**

Break long monologues into shorter chunks. Unlike face-to-face conversations, where others can signal with body language that they want the floor, participants grow even more impatient because they feel helplessly trapped listening to a monologue without opportunity for comment or question. Such reminders particularly serve a purpose when some systems allow only one speaker at a time. With those systems, others literally cannot interrupt.

Consider people as participants, not passive viewers. Plan some early interaction so that they feel a part of the group from the beginning. In general, virtual presentations should be shorter than traditional ones because it is more difficult to hold participants' attention.

Video and audio conferencing increases productivity, saves travel time and money, and contributes to a team-building culture. Use the equipment and adapt your presentation and speaking style to take full advantage of the medium.

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*For more tips on effective meetings, see Communicate with Confidence: How to Say It Right the First Time and Every Time (McGraw-Hill) by Dianna Booher.*