

Communicating effectively in a virtual world

Learn the tactics that skilled communicators depend on to ensure virtual meetings are purposeful, engaging and focussed.

Why is this important to you and your customers?

Communicating through video platforms is helping organisations stay connected and keep businesses running.

However, as we are increasing the number of meetings we attend on-line and the number of hours each day staring at the screen, we need to make sure that our virtual communications are purposeful, engaging and perceived as an effective use of time.

Here are some tips that may help you engage your customers.

01

Have a clear purpose (and communicate it)

Consider for a moment what proportion of on-line meetings you attend are actually productive and efficient. Many recent studies show we are attending more on-line meetings and spending more of our day in them, yet many remote workers perceive a large proportion to be a waste of time. If you are arranging a meeting, be clear on the purpose and communicate it to your participants. If you are attending a meeting and you are not clear on the purpose – ask the organiser!

02

Consider if a video call is really the best option

If you cannot articulate the reason why a meeting is necessary, then consider a different option. Many people now feel a tendency to treat video as the default for all virtual communication. In some cases, shared document platforms with detailed comments can reduce the need to meet. If the purpose of your meeting is simply to share information; consider replacing calls with recorded video messages. It will save your, and your colleagues' time.

03

Provide focus and predictability to your virtual communications

For virtual meetings, always have an agenda and a clear structure. People generally prefer predictability over uncertainty when entering new situations so make it clear what is going to happen and what is expected of those involved. Frequently signpost what you are going to do and how you are going to do it.

04

Only invite those that are absolutely necessary and say no to meetings that aren't of value

How many should you invite to your meeting? The fewer the better! This may sound obvious, but it is much easier to invite – and very easy to accept meetings in a virtual world. It is common for people to invite others for fear of upsetting them by leaving them out. We also readily accept meetings for fear of missing out. Carefully consider what is the role each participant in the meeting and if their presence will help achieve the purpose.

05

Focus energy on your own body language

Studies have shown that being on a video call requires more focus than a face-to-face chat. Video chats mean we need to work harder to process non-verbal cues like facial expressions, the tone and pitch of the voice, and body language; paying more attention to these consumes a lot of energy. Additionally, interpreting body language is highly subjective and we can frequently mis-read the cues. Place your energy on your own facial expressions and body language. If you are unsure about how people are feeling – ask them!

06

Carefully consider your camera set up and the messages you want to send

Video calls are much more common; yet we still see many examples of people who pay little attention to their visual framing and background. People draw conclusions based on very little information, so give some consideration to what they will be seeing on camera. You cannot control how everybody sets themselves up for your meeting; but you can control how engaged you look and the energy you display. Check your own camera set up ideally before a meeting begins and remove anything that may become a distraction.

A word of caution! Constantly staring at our own image during a video call can be mentally tiring and can act as a stressor as we critically check how we look and how we are behaving on camera. Once you have checked that your composition sends the right messages, consider using the 'hide self view' which means that you cannot see yourself, but others still can.

07

Be prepared for the Low Reactor

When we say low reacting, it can mean several things. It could simply be that people turn their camera off and we cannot see their reactions to our ideas. Or by Huthwaite definition – it is someone who is low on verbally reacting with either support or disagreement to your ideas or suggestions. This may happen because there are different social pressures when talking to someone remotely. When we put forward our ideas, opinions or suggestions, we tend to seek approval. Even if someone verbalises disagreement with what we say, at least we know. When we don't hear support or disagreement it can make us feel really uncomfortable, but we don't always know that this is what is happening. Be prepared that people react differently in a virtual world and you may not get the reaction you seek – or any reaction at all. If you are unsure as to how people think about your ideas or suggestions – ask them!

08

Don't fear the silence

Similar to low reaction; silence in video calls can feel really uncomfortable. Silence in real-life conversation is important and creates a natural rhythm. But in a video call, silence can make you anxious. One study showed that even a delay as small as 1-2 seconds made people perceive the person talking as less friendly or focused. Expect that silence will happen and that this is a normal part of everyday conversation. If you ask somebody a question, give them time to think. If you need a quiet moment to think for yourself, let others know that is what you are doing.

09

Break down complex messages

Keeping people's focus and attention in meetings is a key challenge. If you have complex or important messages to deliver, break them down into smaller, shorter chunks and summarise the key points frequently. Change activity frequently (every 5 minutes is a useful guide). Send any reading beforehand and use visual aids to support your messages. A word of caution, many of the presentation slides we see used in virtual meetings are densely populated with text while the presenter is simultaneously talking. Our brains are only capable of focusing on one thing at a time and messages can easily be lost as the audience shifts focus between the visuals and what the presenter is saying. Try replacing busy slides with short bullet points to support what you are saying. A useful guide is to consider showing slides with a maximum of 5 bullet points and with no more than 5 words per bullet. Graphics are even better.

10

Get your point across

Whether you are running, or participating in a meeting with larger groups, getting your point across or your contributions heard can be a challenge. Extroverted members of the group may dominate the conversation; people's attention starts to wander and poor connections are among the reasons why this may be an issue. Draw focus and attention to your contribution by using what we call 'behaviour labelling'. This is announcing the behaviour you are about to use before you use it. For example, stating that 'I have an important point to make' or 'Can I ask a question?' has the effect of slowing the conversation down and focusses attention on what is about to be said. Try it in your next meeting and see what happens.

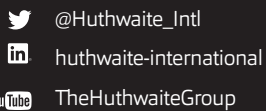
What next?

If you would like an informal discussion with us about how you might approach a sales or negotiation skills improvement programme in your business, please get in touch.

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