

Connecting through the Camera & Keyboard

Use these success strategies to manage meetings in the virtual world.

By Kate Zabriskie

As the world finds itself adopting virtual meetings, many people struggle to translate the in-person experience to an online format. Luckily, there are some tried and true actions you can take to have your online gatherings running like clockwork.

1. Know What You Want to Accomplish

Just as it's important to have a game plan for an in-person meeting, it's essential that you have a goal for any online get-together. Are you informing, gathering information, looking for opinion, making a decision, or something else? If you don't know, your meeting isn't going to feel as tight as it could, and you won't look as put together as you might have if you'd done some thinking in advance.

Once you know the goal, it should inform the meeting's length, number of attendees, and desired level of interaction. For example, if you're discussing your telecommuting rules, you're probably not seeking opinion but instead providing information and perhaps answering questions. Given the one-way nature of the bulk of that gathering, you can probably accommodate far more people than you could if your goal were to elicit opinion and seek input.

2. Communicate Your Expectations

People will be more willing to do what you ask if you model the behavior you want. If you want them to type something in the chat box, you should type as they are typing. If you want them to share their cameras, have a slide outlining your request as people join the meeting. If you want them to raise their hands to answer a question, raise your hand when you ask it. The more deliberate, direct, and specific you are in your instructions and actions, the better.

3. Share a Roadmap

Just as an in-person meeting can benefit from an agenda, virtual meetings need a roadmap or itinerary. In the virtual world it's helpful to show the agenda several times during the meeting and point out where you are on the schedule. An agenda check refocuses people who may have drifted off and gives them an easy onramp back to the meeting. Furthermore, acknowledging where you are in the process gives people a sense of movement (or lack of movement, for that matter) and helps the group stay on task.

4. Recognize Technology Diversity

When it comes to technology, the virtual world is not equal. In a typical meeting, some participants will have equipment and bandwidth worthy of a Hollywood production, while others will appear to have a dial-up line reminiscent of the previous century.

Thus, it's important to think about what could go wrong and how to troubleshoot potential problems before they occur. For example:

- **Will you record and post the meeting** for people who have difficulty joining?
- **Do you have a dial-in number** for those attendees who can't get VoIP (voice-over-internet-protocol) technology to work correctly?
- **Will you send slides in advance** for people who have difficulty logging in altogether and must rely solely on a PDF (portable document format)?

The more you prepare for problems, the easier they are to deal with should they arise.

5. Arrive Early & Start on Time

If at all possible, it's a good idea to arrive to your virtual meeting well in advance of your participants. The time you have in the virtual room before it fills will give you an opportunity to troubleshoot your technology, get comfortable in your seat, and welcome early birds as they enter the room.

Your early arrival also avoids having participants wait in a "lobby." In principle, the lobby is a neat concept. But in practice, it can work against you. If participants arrive to a lobby, they'll likely work on other tasks as they wait for you, and you'll have to work harder to get the full attention they were initially prepared to give you.

6. Accept that You're Competing for Attention

Nothing says multitasking opportunity like a web-based meeting. Even the most interesting person competes with a participant's inbox, text messages, and just about any other distraction. You must double or even triple your efforts to keep virtual attendees involved.



Putting yourself on camera and asking participants to appear on camera is only the first step. Next, you have to think about ways to keep people’s eyes on the screen or the handout and their hands busy about every two minutes. Two minutes? Yes! People want to be engaged. If they don’t engage with you, they will engage with something else.

7. Add Variety

The longer your meeting, the more important it is for you to add variety. If you are surveying people, for example, consider asking a poll question that uses fingers held up to the screen, another that uses the system’s polling function, one that requires people to stamp a shape on a Likert scale displayed on a slide, and another that requires attendees to type a number in the chat box. The idea is to avoid becoming predictable. Slide, slide, poll; slide, slide, poll; slide, slide, poll equals BORING.

8. Balance Conversation

In any meeting, in-person or virtual, people will participate at various levels. A good meeting facilitator will take action to add balance. For instance, “I’m going to throw this next question to the people I see in the second row on my screen. That’s Jane, Josh, and Juan.” In that example, nobody is individually put on the spot. However, those three participants know that at least one of them is on deck to speak next.

In addition to calling on different people, you should also consider directing people to different channels. “If you would like to answer in the chat box, do that. If you would prefer to open your microphone, go ahead. If you would like to send a message just to me, send a private chat.” The variety of avenues offered in that example will accommodate people who like to talk, those who prefer to write, and others who are less comfortable speaking up in public.

9. Consider Creating a Production Team

It takes time to master a virtual meeting program, and even the pros can find it difficult to wear half a dozen hats at once. If you’re running a large meeting or are new to the process, consider assembling a team. For example, designate someone to troubleshoot tech problems for attendees, assign a chat monitor to bring to your attention anything that you don’t see right away, and so forth.

10. Limit Your Time & Use it Wisely

No adult wants to sit for more than two hours at a time, and this is especially true in the virtual world. If you plan to move a six-hour meeting online and leave the agenda essentially as is, think again.

For meetings that are essentially information-sharing exercises, consider limiting yourself to one-hour blocks. For interactive conversations, you should be able to get away with two hours at a time.

Rarely, if ever, should you schedule more than four hours a day. And those four hours should include a generous break if possible. If you need more hours to accomplish everything you need to, consider running smaller meetings with fewer people, spreading a long meeting over several days, or sharing video recordings instead of bringing people together.

11. Find Role Models & Seek Advice

Paying attention to what you like and don’t that others do in their meetings will help you grow. Asking for feedback from your attendees will further accelerate the process. 

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