The Virtual Speaker:
7 Tips for Adapting Presentation Skills to the Virtual World

By Gina Sauer

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Now that we're all appearing via laptop, rather than in conference rooms or from behind podiums, professionals in the legal community and other industries are adapting their communication style to the virtual environment. Try these tips the next time you give a virtual presentation, whether during a team meeting, or as part of a more formal webinar.

TIP 1   Stand Up

Sitting during virtual meetings has become the norm, a practicality mandated by working from our kitchen tables. Even managing partners and CEOs are giving formal, firm-wide updates from the comfort of their chairs. Nevertheless, consider standing for your next virtual presentation.

I recently worked with a team leader who was preparing to virtually address employees worldwide. She started out sitting, but found she was tripping over her words and couldn't remember her main points. Then she stood up. Lo and behold, she nailed it. It's an example of Cognitive Priming, says Dr. David Farrar, who is a psychologist and Managing Partner with Koliso.

"Cognitive Priming means setting your brain up for what's coming. When you stand up to present, you put yourself into a mode where your consciousness is saying, now we're serious about delivering and receiving information."

Other good things happen when we stand. Our airways open, making our voices stronger. We're less likely to fidget, slouch, or give in to physical tics like playing with our hair. While standing isn't appropriate or practical for every virtual situation, mix things up and try it for the more formal ones.

TIP 2 — Enunciate More

The best way to be heard is not necessarily to speak more loudly, but to speak more clearly. Laptop audio quality and lag time can make us harder to understand. The casual vibe of some online meetings also causes us to use linguistic reductions like "gonna" and "shoulda," and to drop consonants at the ends of words.

One solution is to slow down. Most public speakers speak faster than they think they do. Nerves naturally make us speed up, particularly during portions of our presentation that we're less comfortable with, and just want to be done with. The other solution is to hit our consonants harder.

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I'm not suggesting taking it to ridiculous levels, just being mindful to speak more crisply than normal. If you feel silly doing that, try recording yourself. You may be surprised to find that what sounds exaggerated inside your own head, is actually about right for your audience.

TIP 3 — Lose the Vocal Tics

Audiences have different expectations for speakers appearing via laptop. While virtual audiences are forgiving of external factors we can't control, like the doorbell ringing in the background, they're more critical of our delivery when we present online. That's because audiences subconsciously equate anything they see on a screen — laptop or otherwise — with watching a television show or movie, which is of course polished and edited.

This means not only that virtual presentations must be well rehearsed, but that vocal tics like "um" and "ah" are magnified, as are qualifiers like "kind of," "sort of," and "like." We throw these in when we speak too fast, to buy time for our brain to catch up with our mouth. It's better to pause for a second and think about what we want to say next than to use these types of fillers.

TIP 4 — Set the Scene

Scene-setting for virtual presentations means not just turning off a noisy fan or moving the laundry basket outside the camera's view but taking stock of the message our background sends. When we speak from home, the audience gets a glimpse into our personal life. This can be a good thing and can build rapport. But make no mistake, the audience is drawing conclusions. "The scene behind you is the first thing people comment on," notes Kari Jensen Thomas, J.D., Manager of Business Development Training and Alumni Engagement at Faegre Drinker. "Ask yourself what the scene says about you and take the time to create the scene you want."

Does your setting make you look: Organized? Creative? Approachable? Credible? Is there anything in the room that makes an unintended social/political statement? Does anything reveal personal or client information? Is there something so unique that people will be pre-occupied with it? I've even heard of executives removing "expensive-looking" objects from the room, to avoid creating assumptions about their salary level!

This begs the question...is it better to just use a virtual background? Most virtual speakers say, only if it's very well-designed, adequately supported by your laptop's technology (no "fuzzy halos"), and thematically appropriate for your presentation

topic. Irena McGrath, Chief Recruitment Officer – Americas with Hogan Lovells and a past NALP President, suggests asking a colleague for feedback on your stock background before you present, to give you confidence before going that route.

TIP 5 — Tag Team

Try working as a team whenever possible during virtual presentations, suggests Genevieve Farrar with Koliso. Her business partner prefers to present from his smart phone, though that makes it difficult for him to also run the technology and read the crowd. So, while he's speaking, she advances slides, shares documents, and expands her laptop screen so she can see all audience members, watch their reactions, and jump in to facilitate questions or offer clarification.

"The art of facilitation is a different entity now," she says. "Sometimes the best way to manage facilitation in a virtual environment is to collaborate."

Working as a team also provides a back-up plan in case of technical difficulties. As Hogan Lovells' McGrath advises, "Having a colleague who is prepared to share their screen if needed or pick up the presentation if the main speaker experiences a glitch makes for more polished delivery."

TIP 6 — Use Signposts

Well-made presentations transition smoothly from section to section. A great tool to accomplish this is the use of signposts — phrases that orient our audience and connect the ideas in our presentation, such as, "Let's turn now to a related topic," "As a side note to that last point," or, "I'm going to digress briefly."

Signposts are critical for making virtual presentations look well-rehearsed, especially in situations like the example above, where someone else is advancing your slides. We've all seen presentations where the cues to advance the deck interrupt the flow of the narrative, or even sound a little rude: "Next slide!"

Maria Hokanson, Executive Vice President of Marketing, U.S. and Canada with International Dairy Queen, suggests a more subtle transition, such as, "Let's shift our focus now from topic X and move onto topic Y, which as you're about to see is also important." This type of signpost not only deftly guides the audience to the next point, but also buys extra time for whomever is advancing your slides to pick up the cue.

TIP 7 — Be Patient With Q&A

Facilitating Q&A is more challenging in a virtual environment. The cues that encourage audience members to ask questions — natural pauses in the conversation or eye contact from the facilitator — are harder to read on screen, making participants hesitant to chime in. Moreover, people are also generally more self-conscious in a virtual environment and feel that if they're going to say something "on screen," it better be really important.

That's why Hokanson makes it a point to ask for questions repeatedly during virtual presentations and gives participants extra time to do so.

"I don't love the silence waiting for questions," she says, "but I remind myself it takes people longer to ask questions in a virtual setting because they probably have to unmute first." If she doesn't hear questions, she gives everyone one last chance to jump in while she recaps what's been covered so far, before moving on.

Q&A during virtual panel discussions, in particular, requires extra forethought, according to McGrath. She recommends anticipating the questions you are likely to get and deciding in advance who will handle various subject matter inquiries to ensure that speakers are not chiming in at the same time.

Impacts on Work Culture

The lessons we're learning about adapting presentation skills to the virtual world will continue to be valuable long after we return to auditoriums and conference rooms. Even after the current health crisis is over, virtual meetings and webinars will be a staple of work culture, so it benefits all of us to develop best practices to effectively communicate and lead in the virtual environment. ■