



# The Art of Video Conferencing



35 Top Tips

Working from home, away from colleagues and the day to day bustle of the office can be tough. So how do we best prepare for those inevitable video conference calls, especially when calling from home?

## Here are my 35 Top Tips to ace those video calls:

### Before the call

- 1. Look presentable.** When working from home it's tempting to think that the Sunday 'just got out of bed' look is fine. It's not. As you're at home it is acceptable to opt for a slightly dressed-down look - but even if you're just talking internally to colleagues, dressing well will make you feel good. Wear something with clean lines, that's not too fussy. Ideally, we want to listen to what you have to say and not be distracted by your outfit.
- 2. Set up your work space.** Wherever you're going to be working from, make sure you tidy up the space. Even if you currently have to work from your bedroom, make the bed and find a corner of the room that looks uncluttered. This is not just about what you look like but about how you feel.
- 3. Set up your shot.** Don't sit too close to the camera or your head will look too big. And don't position it too low or you'll end up leaning in too far over the lens. The Nostril Shot is not a good look. Instead, try raising your laptop by placing it on a few books or a shoe box, so that the camera is at eye level. This is a much more flattering position and looks more professional.
- 4. Check the background.** Clearly, we want to avoid dirty laundry, half eaten toast and old cups of tea in the background. We don't want ceiling lights on top of your head either. Also check what's on the walls behind you. Avoid flamboyant oil paintings of yourself or hanging pieces of erotic art. A completely blank wall can look odd. I think it's good that your colleagues can see something of your personality when working from home - but don't feel you have to go overboard. This isn't a Hello magazine shoot.

**5. Get your lighting right.** You might consider investing in a camera light. I bought a small circular one with a stand. In the middle there's a clamp which holds my phone or tablet. It's made the biggest difference and was really worth it. You can buy small desk lights too that can help balance the lighting if the natural light is coming from one side.

**6. Tell others in your home that you're on a call.** You don't want other people photo-bombing your call, post shower, to borrow the hairdryer. Maybe have a system to let people know you're live on air - like a Post-It note on the door.

**7. Wake up your face.** Just before the call, do this exercise. Make a big wide face, then a little scrunched up face. Wide then tight, 3 times. Actors do this before they go on stage. It wakes the eyes up and gets rid of any nerves in the face and eyes. We want our eyes to look alive and ready for the call.

**8. Wake up your mind.** This is the best exercise I know for waking up your mind and getting focused. It's called the Mini Fire Breath. Breathe into your lower stomach for a count of 3 and out for a count of 3. Do this 3 times – but on the last outbreath, when you have no air left in your lungs, hold for 10 seconds; then breathe in one full breath and hold again for another 10 seconds. This takes under a minute and you'll feel wide awake, centred and ready for the day. I do it every morning.

**9. Team dress code.** It's important to look aligned as a team. On an external client call, agree a dress code in advance. It's not great if half of you are in hoodies and the other half are in black-tie.

**10. Keep video calls short.** Video calls are more tiring than face to face meetings, partly because you have to maintain eye contact to the screen far longer than usual. With face to face meetings you can occasionally look away but on a screen this looks like you're not listening or not interested. So try to keep video calls as short as possible. Aim for half the length of a face to face meeting.

**11. Be focused.** If video calls are going to be shorter, then we need to be even more focused. So, (a) know what you want to achieve from the call, (b) prepare what you want to say and (c) think about what the other person or people might be thinking or feeling.

**12. If you're chairing the call.** Have an agenda and send it out in advance.

**13. Have a Plan B.** In the invitation notes for the call add in a back-up phone number, in case the Wifi drops out so the call can continue without video.

**14. Preview your shot.** Open up any app on your device that shows your image before you connect to the call. I always open up a new meeting on Zoom just to test the lighting, angle of the camera and the background. This can be a useful last-minute reminder that you're wearing an old T-shirt when you thought you were wearing business casual.

**15. Food and drink.** Eating in close up doesn't look great, so make sure you've finished your last mouthful of breakfast before the camera goes live. Tea and coffee are fine but try to take a drink and then put the cup down. Repetitive drinking in close up can look distracting.

**16. Be on time.** Logging on is often fiddley and takes longer than we think, so aim to join the call two or three minutes before the start. This gives you a chance for final checks. Make sure that your camera is on and your audio is muted or unmuted as appropriate.

**17. Turn down the brightness on the screen.** It's important to save our eyes as much as we can if we are doing lots of video calling. Turning the brightness down on your screen helps reduce tiredness in your eyes.

**18. Have the power cable plugged in.** There's nothing worse than seeing 1% on the battery and making a dash for the cable only to see it cut off mid presentation.

**19. Log in with your full name.** Many people login with an email address so we have an initial and surname or even a mixture of the two. Make it easy for the chair to call you by your name. Think of it as a networking event badge.

## During the call

**20. If you're chairing the call.** Welcome everyone by name. This makes them feel valued. Tell them the purpose and length of the call, and actively bring in as many people as possible, so no one dominates.

**21. Keep your energy up.** I reckon we all need an extra 10% of energy when giving a speech or a presentation to 'hold' the audience – but I think that video calls need an extra 20%. We must be disciplined to keep our energy levels up. Other people's mental focus won't be as sharp as it would be face to face because there are the obvious distractions at home: the kids, the dog, the courier delivery or the boredom that leads to another chocolate biscuit ...

**22. Be aware of the time of day.** Some people might be in different time zones, so don't sit with your evening tippie when speaking with someone who's just woken up. Be aware of other people's energy levels at different times of day.

**23. Keep your thoughts and answers clear.** Try using The Headline Sandwich. This is where you start with your main point, explain your reasoning, and then repeat to your main point again at the end.

**24. Hand the ball back.** This works particularly well at the end of The Headline Sandwich. 'Handing the ball back' makes it clear to the Chair that you've finished. This also stops everyone speaking at the same time and helps create a sense of natural flow.

**25. Be human in an inhuman medium.** Speak as kindly and naturally as possible. The most important thing here is that we don't feel we have to shout at the screen. Try to use our own voice and everyday words.

**26. Look into the camera lens.** It's natural to look at the screen to read the faces and body language of other people but if, occasionally, you look directly into the camera lens it will have huge impact. Try to lift your eyes to the camera at the end of a main thought to give it emphasis.

**27. The Inner Twinkle.** Because we are holding eye contact with the screen, both when speaking and listening, we need to keep a little twinkle in the eyes most of the time (where appropriate, of course). If we don't do this, we can sometimes look angry, bored or disinterested. I'm not talking about a toothpaste commercial cheesy smile, I'm just talking about a little inner twinkle in the eyes.

**28. The Louis Theroux look.** If someone says something that you violently disagree with, try the 'Louise Theroux' look. He raises his eyebrows, as if to say, 'That's really interesting', but he never shows signs of disapproval. It's a useful look on video when having a difficult conversation because a look of disapproval in close up usually looks far more aggressive than in an actual face to face meeting.

**29. Facial touching.** Try not to touch your face too often. It doesn't look great. It might also be sensible to have a handkerchief to hand - sneezing in close up on video is not a great career move.

**30. Give yourself a break from the screen during the call.** One of the simplest ways is to have an old-fashioned pen and paper in front of you, so you can look down and write notes. Even if you're actually writing your shopping list, it will seem as if you're paying attention. If you glance off to the side, it can look like you're checking your mobile.

**31. Ending the call.** I'm not sure that we actually want to 'wave' goodbye at the end of the call. It's better to end it as you would on a phone call, say 'goodbye' and hang up. But on video calls, because you want to end the call cleanly, work out where the 'End Call' button is in advance so you can hit the button quickly. You could simply close the laptop, of course. You don't want the last image to be a close up of your worried face or armpit as you try desperately to end the call.

## After the call

**32. Follow up.** Send a quick follow up email confirming any agreed action points, while the information is fresh in your mind.

**33. Get up, walk about.** Because of the rigid photo-booth nature of video calls, it's important to get up and move about after a call. If you're working from home, or even put on the radio and dance it out. It'll get your natural endorphins flowing. But if dancing is a step too far, make sure you do some stretches or get some fresh air.

**34. Give your eyes a rest.** As you'll have been looking at your screen for a while, try this eye exercise several times a day. Rub your palms together, close your eyes, then place your warm palms gently over your closed eye lids and breathe slowly for one minute to relax the eyes.

**35. Make your next call a phone call.** Try to alternate video calls and phone calls. This gives your eyes a break but will help to vary your day and keep you more present.



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