

Ten Tips to Tune Up Your Teleconferences

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published on BNET.com 4/09/2007

Getting through an in-person meeting is challenging enough, but it's even more difficult to bring together colleagues who are dialing in or participating via videoconference. The basic keys to a good remote meeting are the same as those for any meeting: have a goal, only invite the necessary people, encourage participation from everyone. But the limitations of technology, the loss of eye contact and other face-to-face cues, and the ability for participants to tune out often leave virtual meetings feeling lackluster. These suggestions can help you bring your remote meetings back to life.

Before the Meeting:

Know Your Gear

If you're using videoconferencing technology, spend some time learning how it works before your meeting. Use the pre-sets to program camera angles into your remote control so you won't be distracted by camera duty during the meeting. Knowing that they're on camera (or could be at any moment) keeps people engaged in the conversation, so aim for group shots rather than close-ups. If two people will be doing most of the talking, ask them to sit next to each other so the camera isn't constantly moving back and forth.

Provide Access and Materials

Every time you send out an invitation to a virtual meeting, include any necessary directions and access codes, so everyone will know how to log in. Agendas and visual aids such as slides should also be sent in advance. If you're using an application that requires a download, suggest that attendees download it ahead of time so that technical issues don't delay the start of the meeting. And when you have participants in different time zones, be sure to specify the time in each zone, for example, "2 p.m. EST (11 a.m. PST)."

Check Ahead for Contentious Issues

Remote meetings are even more time-constrained than in-person meetings because people are often in different time zones or countries. It's also harder to read the group sentiment, and easier for people to misunderstand each other. That means you'll want to know in advance about disputed topics that could derail the conversation. If you think there might be any such issues, try calling or emailing people in advance so you can get a sense of what to expect.

Assign Homework

One way to get people thinking about your meeting topic in advance — and ensure their participation — is to have everyone bring two ideas or challenges related to the issue at hand. Include this request when you send out your meeting agenda. Once the meeting is convened, an easy way to get a conversation started is to have people read the ideas that they've prepared.

Hold a Conversation Warm-up

Sometimes remote participants who don't speak English as a first language have trouble following the nuances or expressions in a conversation. Consider starting the meeting five minutes early so that non-native English speakers can practice speaking beforehand. You can talk about anything you like — the weather, sports, recent vacations — just get them speaking and listening to English.

During the Meeting:

Take Attendance

With a remote meeting, it can be hard to know when people are present and ready to begin. Start with a roll call for all sites, which will also help acquaint everyone with how loudly and clearly they need to speak. As people introduce themselves, make a seating chart or list of names, so that you know exactly who's present. When you want to ask questions or solicit opinions, your list will make it easier to remember who you haven't heard from in a while so you can call on those people specifically.

Roll Out the Virtual Whiteboard

If your topic requires extensive feedback or complex decision-making, consider using Web-based tools such as collaborative online whiteboards or instant message chatrooms to supplement your conference call. This offers an easy way for people to contribute answers and opinions without worrying about whether they're talking at the same time or cutting each other off. It also provides a record of who has spoken and when, which makes it harder for co-workers to hide behind silence on the phone.

Ban the "Mute" Button

On a conference call, it can be very easy to lose participants to their own environments. If you start hearing monosyllabic answers ("um," "yeah," "no," "sure"), it's a sure sign that email, instant messages, or other immediate tasks are creating distractions for those calling in from another location. Though it's typical to reduce microphone noise by asking participants to mute their lines when they're not speaking, try asking everyone to stay off of mute. With the sound of tapping keyboards or rustling paper to give them away, people will be less likely to multitask.

Change up the Format

To increase participation, try alternating between a free-for-all discussion, where it's easy for people to tune out, and requiring attendees to vote on a decision and follow up with a sentence or two about their position on the matter.

Plant Frequent Reminders

In-person meetings often have a paper- or white board-based agenda that's easy for coworkers to refer to. Even if you sent out an electronic agenda in advance, take time out from the conversation periodically to remind your colleagues what's been covered and what remains to be discussed.

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