

Presenting Ourselves on the Screen

Before March 2020, most of us had probably never heard of video platforms such as 'Zoom' or 'Google Meet'. Nowadays we are using them daily, but do we need new skills to handle them well, or at least some form of etiquette to get more benefit from them?

As more and more churches and organisations move to online meetings, conferences, training events, and presentations, the 'on screen' skills needed are still new to so many of us. Certain established skills such as a booming voice projection, how one stands next to a flipchart easel, and certain types of body language are simply not applicable in the virtual world.

Inflections in voice and use of images would still apply, but the intimacy of a camera and a microphone close by means that new skills and techniques need to be mastered if a presentation (or any communication of value) is to be effective and at the very least, not to be a source of irritation for those watching!

Surely, aren't we teaching Granny to suck eggs?

The whole realm of meeting together has changed so dramatically for us all, that it is understandable we are on a steep learning curve when it comes to dealing with new methods of face-to-face conversations. Indeed, perhaps some guidance offered here may be new to some of us who are already well-experienced in appearing on each other's computer screens.

Are we sitting comfortably? Then let's begin!

There are no rules for how we position ourselves for those watching, but some good practice should help meetings to run more efficiently and add a professional look.

Have the camera at a height that it can be angled ever so slightly down at you. Imagine the camera as being right at your hairline, and have it tilted down towards your eyes.

You also don't want to be too close to the camera, or you end up with a distorted face. Conversely, if you are too far away, it will be difficult for attendees to see or hear you properly. Your head should ideally be just below the top of the screen and the head and shoulders combined are well-centred

Look into the camera when talking, instead of looking at yourself. Direct eye contact into the camera while speaking gives attendees the impression you are looking at them rather than off to the side (which is what happens when you are looking at yourself on the screen instead of into the camera).

It's behind you!

Over the last year, it has been quite amusing for many of us to see all kinds of distracting things going on behind the backs of those on screen. Whilst we can all enjoy a child

wandering into shot, or a pet cat leaping onto someone's desk, we know that it can also be a real nuisance, especially if we are amid some important, decision-making!

Our environments can also be a distraction to those watching. If possible, we should have as 'boring' a background as we can find, so that those watching take more interest in us and what we're saying than in our 'backdrop'. Even special scenes that can be superimposed can have drawbacks. The person in front can sometimes appear to vanish or lose parts of their anatomy! Quality varies, so if the superimposed back scene helps obscure a 'busy' background and offers no visual disappearances, then, by all means, let's use it.

Let there be light!

Are we well lit? Having light behind us, such as a window in the daytime, is a big no-no! We would just be seen as imposing silhouettes. We should aim to have the light angled directly, not from below, or all from one side – we don't want those 'horror film' shadows! Although we don't want to be blinded by the light, it is worth knowing that the more the subject is lit, the better the picture quality will be. As a video image darkens, it becomes increasingly 'grainy' (known in TV terminology as 'noise') and colours can deteriorate into insipid hues.

Look away now!

Before we deal with our voices, for the sake of our eyesight, let's not be transfixed with our screens. We need to protect our eyes by giving them small and frequent rests. Every so often, we should look away from the screen. We mustn't make a big point of doing so – some might think we are being bad-mannered! Just glancing away now and again, particularly if we are thinking of something, works well. A visual guide to these tips can be found in the video [Keeping Up Appearances](#).

There's no need to raise your voice!

Conducting meetings and conversations online requires a different approach to the way we use our voice. There are some major differences in the way we need to speak – some more obvious than others. The most obvious is the lack of a need to project our voices.

It is best to speak at a level that equates with that of speaking in a one-to-one conversation with someone just a few feet away. Roughly, that would equate to the same distance as we would normally be seated from our screens. By all means, we may "lift" our voices, but not to any great extent.

Once again, with feeling!

What we say in the course of conversations and meetings is important, but how we say things can be equally important. The nuance in our voices conveys much. For example, let's use a famous piece of scripture. We all know the familiar words from Jesus in Matthew chapter 7: *'Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.'* If, for example, we put a wee bit of stress on the word 'will', it would help to emphasise the promise that Jesus makes – that of giving us a response in

each case. (the video clip, [Adding Value to Voice](#) demonstrates this) The extra 'feeling' brought to the passage helps to lift a certain (and possibly refreshing) meaning from it.

Let us also look at how we may ask questions. Our voices may go up at the end of a question, or they may come down. The former can increase tension; the latter can decrease it. Let's ask this question: *'What do you mean by that exactly?'* If we say it with an upward inflection on 'exactly', we may sound confrontational and any stressful situation could be made even more stressful. However, if we say it with a downward inflection on the same word, it becomes far less confrontational and conveys a message of genuinely wanting to understand the person's thinking, rather than conveying any sort of incredulity!

All in all, it's about good courtesy and a touch of professionalism. Yes, we have new ways of working, but leaving technical issues to one side, the above is just plain, common sense.