How to Run the Best Conference Calls & Webinars

- Team Meetings
- Remote Presentations
- Training Sessions
- And more...
7 Tips for Effective Teleconferencing & Webinars
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The 7 Quick Tips series for Consultants, Coaches and Trainers is taken directly from actual questions asked by participants in an Elite Consultant Mentor Program and the responses given to them. These are quick hits, not in-depth explorations, and every one of them will help you grow your business.

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Tip #1 – Advantages v. Disadvantages of “Virtual” Forums

I’ve participated in teleconferences and found it difficult to stay focused because there is no visual contact between the parties; many participants don’t pay attention because they multi-task. These problems seem to multiply during Webinars. Doesn’t this make teleconferences or Webinars less productive?

While all of the issues raised may be valid, the many advantages associated with virtual meetings outweigh the disadvantages. In addition there are techniques that will enable you to eliminate or minimize the negatives.

First, some definitions: A teleconference is a virtual meeting conducted by telephone or Internet, and may include visual aids that are distributed via email, shown via screen sharing, or mailed in advance. A Webinar is a virtual meeting conducted via the Internet, and typically includes the use of on-line visuals and tools. Some Webinars are designed to be interactive, and others to be primarily “listen only” events. When using the term “Webinar” we are referring to the more interactive variety; when using the term “virtual meeting” we are referring to either a teleconference or Webinar. A five-year study of the pros-and-cons associated with virtual meetings has yielded the following summarized results:

Pros:
- Since no meeting room, food or travel are necessary, the costs associated with planning, running or attending a virtual meeting are lower than the costs associated with live meetings
- For similar reasons, it takes less time to plan or attend a virtual meeting
- The simpler logistics frequently enable people to schedule virtual meetings with less lead-time
- The simpler logistics minimize the impact on work schedules, thus minimizing lost opportunities that might have otherwise occurred
- Given the cost and time advantages, it is easier to schedule more frequent virtual meetings
- Given the cost, time and logistic advantages, a broader audience can more easily be included in virtual meetings – this might involve people from other locations, regions or countries, or even customers

Cons:
- The lack of visual contact promotes miscommunication and lowers attention spans
- The lack of visual contact can make it more difficult to engage participants
- Participants find it easy to multi-task, further promoting miscommunication and potentially compromising productivity
- The ability to include a wider range of participants can result in miscommunication due to language-barrier issues, either due to regional accents or differences in primary language
- Technology failures or issues can compromise quality and results
Tip #2 – Preparation Nuances

As a meeting leader, what can I do to enhance the productivity and overall quality of teleconferences or Webinars?

Like all meetings, one key to success is proper preparation. While the standard rules of meeting management – i.e., design the meeting, create and distribute an agenda, start on time, etc. – apply, there are a few nuances associated with planning a virtual meeting.

- Virtual meetings require a strong leader who prepares and executes.

- Plan in advance for your virtual meetings to be more interactive than a typical live meeting. Depending upon the virtual meeting’s purpose, balance your “talk / listen” ratio between 40/60 and 60/40. A talk/listen ratio of 40/60 is most appropriate for a problem solving meeting; a 50/50 ratio might be best for a team or staff meeting, and 60/40 for a training session.

- Meeting leaders often think of their agenda in terms of “speaking points.” However, when crafting a virtual meeting agenda it is best to place an equal amount of emphasis on the questions you will pose to participants. As we’ll explain later, make strategic use of open- and closed-ended questions to promote or more closely manage responses.

- Create an agenda for yourself and a simplified copy that can be emailed to participants in advance. Include the questions you plan to ask on your personal copy.

- The ideal maximum duration for a virtual meeting is sixty-to-ninety minutes. Plan your agenda accordingly.

- Take extra care to create and use simple visuals, as overly intricate or ambiguous visual aids tend to distract participants. Minimize slide transitions if using a Power Point presentation, and shy away from multiple-release slides that will require you to click several times per page; keep handout documents (which might be mailed or distributed electronically in advance) concise as well.

- Create a “role call form” and leave space for making notes during the meeting that reflect comments made by individual participants. This will enable you to listen more intently and allow you to make strategic use of the noted information during the session.

- Encourage participants (in advance) to dial-in early.
Tip #3—Communication Awareness

It is sometimes difficult to hear certain people during conference calls; some also speak over one another and others have side-bar conversation with colleagues or seem reluctant to participate. As a meeting leader, what can I do to enhance the quality of communication during teleconferences or Webinars?

In many cases, virtual meeting participants are unaware of how their sidebar conversations, background noise in their workspace or other behaviors impact others. Some meeting leaders should also be aware of “little” things they might do that can make a “big” difference in the quality of communication and overall virtual experience.

Here are a few guidelines to consider or to share with participants at the outset of each teleconference that will raise everyone’s communication awareness level:

- In many cases, the meeting leader’s appropriate level of enthusiasm brings out the best in others. Voice tone matters – as the virtual meeting leader try to vary tone and inflection; consciously work to avoid a monotone delivery and use specific imagery when referring to visuals (i.e., let’s look at slide #X).

- Posture counts! Your voice tone will be strongest if you sit up-right and lean forward. This posture promotes attentiveness as well.

- Assign a scribe or minutes-taker. It is difficult to do too many things at once – when people attempt to multi-task their ability to listen and comprehend is compromised. As the meeting leader, your goal is to maximize your focus on the discussion and on individual voice tone, attitude, etc.

- Suggest that people avoid using the “Hold” button, as many organizational telephone systems are programmed to play loud music or a company commercial during hold periods – either of which is disruptive to the teleconference or Webinar; ask participants to simply place their hand-set or head-set on their desk if they need to excuse themselves for short periods of time.

- Mute buttons are often selected in an attempt to block-out background noise. This can create a problem if the participant who has selected mute is asked a question, as they often fumble to disengage the mute button or forget they have selected mute and attempt to respond to questions even though others can’t hear them. This diminishes the experience for all. Suggest that people avoid using mute during interactive virtual meetings. If background noise is an issue, ask if they can find a more suitable place from which to participate.

- It is important for all participants and meeting leaders to properly use head-sets and hand-sets – this means placing the head-set boom or the hand-set mouth piece directly in front of the mouth; some have estimated that moving either device to chin-level (as opposed to mouth level) can impact what others hear by as much as 33% - 40%.
- Pace can make a difference in people’s perception – a rule of thumb for the meeting leader is to keep the pace “relatively” brisk when speaking (relative based on participants’ familiarity with one another, the number of different accents represented or the complexity of material).

- Be aware of “line lag.” Though only a second-or-two might be involved, it takes an extra beat for sound to travel and for others to realize a comment or question has been directed their way. While the leader’s pace when speaking should be relatively brisk, he or she should allow others an extra few seconds response time before restating or confirming their presence.

- If people are participating in small groups via speaker-phone, remind them that their private whispers, paper shuffling or side-bar conversations can be heard by everyone and that these are disruptive; ask for their cooperation.

- Recognize that most people can listen at a rate that outpaces the average rate of speech. This means that the longer any one person speaks, the greater the chance that others’ ability to listen will diminish and their minds will begin to wander. The best solution is for the meeting leader to keep the virtual session interactive by using prepared questions (see Tip #2, “Preparation Nuances”) to engage participants and keep them involved. As participants respond, the meeting leader can maximize his or her ability to listen by taking notes on the role-call form referred to in Tip #2.
Tip #4—Running the Teleconference or Webinar

As the meeting leader what can I do to run a teleconferences or Webinar efficiently and effectively?

Following general meeting management guidelines is a good start. However, there are some unique practices and techniques that have proven themselves useful in the virtual setting:

- Print your personal agenda and use the hard copy as much as possible during the virtual meeting – your goal is to maximize your ability to listen and pay close attention to participants’ voice tone and energy level, which means keyboarding, or other activities, should be minimized.

- The meeting leader should get on-line early and greet participants as they arrive. This practice often serves as the first step in engaging the audience. If your teleconference is conducted on a regular basis, participants will learn that you are typically on early and will be more likely to dial in on time.

- Start on time.

- Begin with a statement of purpose and identify ground-rules with respect to cell phones, a disconnect plan, how you’d like to handle questions, etc.

- If people dial-in late, offer a brief welcome but continue with the meeting’s discussion; don’t feel compelled to bring late-comers up to speed on everything that has been discussed, as it diminishes the experience for other participants. If the late-comer feels uncomfortable it isn’t your fault – this approach might encourage them to dial in on time for future sessions.

- Use your personal agenda throughout the virtual meeting, and keep the discussion on point – this is easier if a copy of the agenda has been distributed in advance (see Tip #2). Should someone raise a non-agenda issue or topic, use a “parking lot” or table the issue for a future meeting or an individual discussion.

- Promote an appropriate level of interaction by asking questions.

- Take notes on the role call sheet each time a participant answers a question, shares information or offers suggestions. The act of taking notes promotes better listening on your part.
Tip #5—Engaging Your Audience

As the meeting leader how can I encourage more enthusiastic participation?

The key to success is engagement, which must be done proactively and, preferably, just before, during and after the teleconference:

- As noted earlier, the meeting leader should get on-line early and greet participants as they arrive. This practice often serves as the first step in engaging the audience. If you can, ask questions that refer to subjects that are NOT on the meeting’s agenda – the goal is to connect with the individuals, to make them feel comfortable and promote their active participation in the virtual meeting.

- During the meeting, seek opportunities to promote the virtual medium – in other words, if the use of a teleconference enables you to include people from the branch office, you might make a positive comment about it; or, if the use of a teleconference enable you to schedule a meeting at the last minute, make a positive statement about how convenient it is. Avoid making negative comments about lack of visual contact or multitasking, distractions, etc.

- Direct questions to individuals and avoid questions that are directed to the entire group, such as, “Are there any questions?”

Please note that while these types of questions are common and acceptable in a live meeting, they are less effective in a virtual meeting. The reason for this is simple – the visual contact in a live meeting allows the meeting leader and the participants to easily see who has a question. This, of course, is not the case in a virtual meeting and if the leader simply asks, “Any questions, anyone?” then no one knows who should ask their question first. The most common result of this confusion is that no one says anything – thus diminishing the overall experience.

To avoid this problem, it is best for the meeting leader to direct questions to specific individuals. While this might seem impolite or aggressive, we have learned over the past ten years that participants prefer this approach! Some feel proud to be consulted, while others simply prefer to be drawn into the conversation. This approach keeps people on their toes and is especially appreciated by introverts who might not speak-up at all if left to do so voluntarily.

Further, there is no need to put people on the spot when directing questions their way. All that needs to be done is for the leader to use a person’s name before asking the question. For example, the meeting leader might phrase a question as follows, “Mike, I’d like to get your perspective on XYZ... can you tell us a bit about how you’ve used XYZ effectively...?”
• Sometimes you will catch a participant off-guard with a direct question. Don’t embarrass anyone who has drifted... simply move on to another participant. You will most likely find that people will pay closer attention after getting caught in a day dream; in fact, the practice of asking “directed” questions tend to be a self-policing activity that promotes more focused attention on the part of attendees.

• Make a notation on the role-call sheet (see Tip #2) each time you pose a question to each participant. It is best to select participants randomly rather than in a set order, as people will quickly pick-up on the order and pay less attention once they’ve been called upon.

• Pay close attention to participant’s voice tone and level of attentiveness. If you notice waning attention spans, the best course of action is to vary the information flow. You might consider assigning the group a short (2 to 3 minutes) written exercise. At the end, ask each individual to share a portion of what they’ve written. Use these notes to occasionally refer back to a comment made or an answer given by a participant – this will further engage those individuals and also promote more active participation from the group.
Tip #6—Ending Your Session

At the end of many teleconferences I’ve noticed participants simply hang-up the phone without participating in a formal wrap-up. As the meeting leader, what are the most effective ways to end a virtual meeting?

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The meeting leader must be aware of the time and should begin a formal wrap-up a few minutes prior to the meeting’s scheduled conclusion.

- End with the beginning – i.e., restate the meeting’s purpose and begin to draw conclusions
- Use shorter statements and closed-ended questions
- Clearly assign tasks, responsibilities and next steps to individuals and get their agreement with respect to understanding and ownership — who will do what... where... and when?
- Debrief the session by seeking input from participants. You give participants one-to-two minutes to write-down a brief summary of “take-aways,” did-wells and do-betters and then ask for a brief summary from each, or you might randomly pose final questions to each participant relative to their assessment of the session and understanding of next steps.

In doing so, try to start with the most senior executive (the boss) so that others have the advantage of knowing the boss’ position or opinion on issues before they go out on a limb. This will promote a more honest exchange and leave people with a better feeling – a good practice for getting active participation in upcoming sessions.

- Acknowledge good participation and thank the group
Tip #7 – Follow-up

As the meeting leader, what are the most effective ways to promote productive outcomes or hold people accountable for completing agreed-upon or assigned tasks?

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The best follow-up practices that apply to all meetings also apply to virtual meetings:

- Distribute minutes or a meeting recap.
- Do whatever you said you’d do...
- Proactively contact participants who were most involved during the session to reaffirm the value of their input, to gather input for upcoming sessions and to promote ongoing participation.
- Proactively contact participants who were assigned or volunteered to complete tasks – measure progress or offer support; send the implied message that you care and that the tasks are important by sending a progress report to all participants prior to the next meeting.
- Begin preparing the next meeting.

“You are what you do... not what you say you will do!”