Starting in February 2020, we began to hear how conferences were going to be canceled because of COVID-19; the first of these announcements came from the Mobile World Congress. Then in March, the pandemic was declared and all conferences fell apart like a house of cards. Many were canceled or postponed until the following year. The ones that had a bit more time for preparations went virtual for their very first time. Similarly, all types of business internal meetings massively became virtual. Easy as it might sound, most people were not ready for this switch from in-person to virtual. How can we present effectively in the virtual world?

A Virtual Conference Made Different

A venerated conference in the tech world is Apple Worldwide Developers Conference. This year WWDC 2020 took place from June 22 to 26, and for the first time it was completely online. Apple orchestrated the event very well, setting a standard to be met by others in the industry.

---

1. https://www.gsma.com/newsroom/press-release/gsma-statement-on-mwc-barcelona-2020/
2. https://www.apple.com/apple-events/june-2020/
The event started with Apple CEO Tim Cook speaking at an empty Steve Jobs Theater in their headquarters. From there onward several Apple executives appeared presenting different sections of the keynote for a total of 1 hour and 48 minutes. They appeared either inside the Apple headquarters building in Cupertino or in other locations, both indoors and outdoors. That gave the event an additional feeling of dynamism so the viewers wouldn’t get bored seeing the same stage background over and over. That pre-recorded video kick-started five days full of technical sessions that allowed developers to learn in depth the innovations announced throughout the keynote.

From information that the media has collected, it felt like attendees liked the arrangements beyond the pre-recorded virtual presentations. Particularly, developers were delighted with the consultation sessions arranged to have one-on-one conversations with the right Apple specialist.

All in all, great production and creative ways to make a virtual conference different made the event a success.

Benefits of Virtual Conferences

Let’s look at the advantages that virtual conferences have over their in-person counterparts:

- Ease of access for those who travel is difficult for. You can attend the conference from anywhere.
- More affordable for attendees. The more renowned conferences cost more than 1000 USD. And either the attendees or their companies have to incur travel costs too.
- More opportunities to speak, as the physical barriers are gone. As a speaker you can give a keynote or a technical session to a conference on another continent, in places you have never been before.
- The production can fix glitches. As you know, technology fails from time to time: presentation software, a demo, or Internet connection. The production team can make sure the video is taken again and edited until they create a flawless final product.

³https://www.wsj.com/articles/apples-virtual-event-gives-hope-for-online-only-conferences-in-covid-19-era-11593553261
How to Be Effective in Virtual Presentations

Speaking in virtual events is similar to speaking in-person in many aspects but is different in other aspects too. Let's first distinguish these differences.

As you can see in Table 12-1, your presentations have to adapt to the virtual world. One of the main aspects is length. You have to speak shorter and give more.

Main Skills to Learn or Improve

Now it's time to identify the skills that we have to improve and the new skills we need to learn.

Videoconferencing Tools

The first names that people have in mind when hearing videoconferencing tools are Skype and Zoom. For both enterprise and all-purpose there are several tools that you could use to build the whole virtual presentation experience: GoToMeeting, Microsoft Teams, Cisco Webex, and others. As most of these services offer a free trial, the best is that you try a few of these tools and see which one fits your need the best.
Once you have chosen a tool, invest time in learning the features beyond the basics. Not only you will discover very useful features such as breakout rooms, polls, marketing tools, integration with other services, but you will also be ready to solve problems yourself when things go out of script. Especially, learn well how to use your videoconferencing tool together with your presentation software.

Fantastic as all these tools are, use as little technology as possible. This will minimize the risks of failure.

Speak in Front of a Camera

This isn’t new as some people already had opportunities to be interviewed for the TV, a video podcast, run YouTube channels, and so on. However, for most people, this was an occasional activity to do. Now speaking in front of a camera is the default.

When you are speaking in an auditorium or meeting room, your eyesight will be moving from different persons in the room, some very close to you, others far. Sometimes you will look at the whole audience without fixing your attention to any person. Now you must look at the camera all the time and make your gestures pointing toward the camera too. If you look outside the camera for just a few seconds, the audience will notice it as a distraction.

This is why it’s very important that the camera is approximately at your eye level.

If possible, stand up while you speak. First of all, you will stand out as most speakers will speak sitting on a couch or a desk chair. After all, speaking while walking is the way you do it for in-person talks, so it should be more natural.

Set Your Own Stage

In face-to-face events, the conference organizer is responsible for the venue: they have rented the room, set up lighting, sound, microphones, decorated the stage, installed whiteboard, flipcharts, and so on. Now from your house you are the one responsible to create a stage that looks professional and reflects your personality and the theme of your talk.

Just think of virtual meetings you have participated in or even screenshots shared on the net in which you saw a grid of all participants’ faces. What you often see is: too dark, the light comes too bright from one side, messy rooms on the background, poor contrast between the speaker’s wear and her background colors, and so on. Certainly the vast majority of people were not prepared to use remote meetings and just did their best to use the tool and get the things done.
How to control the virtual stage? There are two main elements to pay attention: the background and lighting.

**Background.** Here you have two main options: virtual background or real background. Whether you choose one or the other, the most important things that the background needs are

- It looks professional.
- It matches the theme of your message.
- It’s not distracting.

All videoconferencing tools allow you to use virtual backgrounds, and additionally you can find many sites that offer free backgrounds.4

When using virtual backgrounds you might notice that when the speakers move, the edges show part of the real background. Even sometimes you appear headless. This occurs because the videoconferencing tool fails to distinguish between you and the real background behind you. In order to mitigate this, a step forward is to mount a green screen5 behind you, which is a technique used in movies. The reason why these screens are green—and not another color—is because that’s a rare color used in people’s clothes.

Some tools like Microsoft Teams can blur your real background, which is an alternative between virtual and real backgrounds.

However, showing a real background gives an even better impression. People want to see the real world behind you and not have the impression you are hiding something. Arrange your background to show your personality: show some artwork, a bookshelf, plants, anything that looks good and shows your ethos.

**Lighting.** The utmost of all principles for lighting is: use sunlight whenever possible. Sunlight is the most natural and most pleasant lighting. But sunlight can be too bright and spoil your video shots, a challenge that photographers often face. Ensure you have good front light, so people will see your face nicely lit, not shady. Don’t be with your back to an open window as you will look dark. The opposite is the best, be behind an area that is lit by the sun frontally, neither laterally nor diagonally. That will give the sense that your face and body are lit in a natural way.

4https://www.tomsguide.com/news/best-free-zoom-backgrounds
5https://www.techsmith.com/blog/how-to-create-a-diy-green-scre/
When sunlight isn’t an option, you need to invest in some lighting sets. There is a world of lighting on its own, which is beyond the scope of this book. The main goal is still making sure your face is lit frontally in a natural way. To achieve this with artificial light, you will need a set of lamps, stands to place them in the right place to point you, and diffusion filters. Thanks to the high demand for this know-how, you will find many resources online\(^6\) to learn and try until you find a lighting set that meets your needs.

**Voice**

When you speak in a virtual event, your voice will be different from how your audience would hear you in a conference room. This is affected by several factors: the microphone, Internet connection, the acoustics of the room you are in, and also how you hear your own voice on the headphones. A key element is the awareness of your own voice, *do you know how your voice sounds?* You might have noticed people speaking either too loud or too quiet as a result of how they hear themselves in their earphones. I strongly recommend you practice with the setup you will use for the virtual event, record yourself with your smartphone, and hear that audio recording. That will help you to adjust your voice.

Your audience will follow you more if you sound dynamic, enthused. You might remember the previous chapter about passion. In virtual events attendees tend to be more distracted but they can’t ignore a speaker who speaks with energy.

Regarding microphones, there are many possibilities: some webcams have incorporated mics, headsets (both wired and wireless), an external microphone on your desk, and so on. If you stand up and move, a wireless lavalier is attached to your jacket. The aim is to have the microphone the closest to your mouth, that is how you’ll get the best sound.

For live events, there is a chance that the connection becomes unstable, so speak slower and emphasize your speech melody. In pre-recorded events you can speak at a faster tempo.

All in all, if you can choose a single piece of advice which will enrich your voice in virtual events is this: speak loud.

---

\(^6\)https://www.techsmith.com/blog/get-perfect-lighting-video/
Interaction in the Virtual World

Speaking in public isn’t a unidirectional communication act, it’s an interaction. One of the main hardships speakers find in virtual presentations is the lack of interaction, not getting feedback from the audience is very hard. Sometimes you might not even know if the people are hearing you and seeing you. Chapter 9 “Interaction” already delved into the challenges of audience interaction, but for the virtual world in particular:

1. Walking around the stage is also a style that will make your presentation more interactive. As most speakers will be sitting and showing only their faces, you will stand out and make your video footage more dynamic. Standing will also give you more room for making hand gestures and showing props. People will see less of PowerPoint, more of a human.

2. Use online interactive polls such as Mentimeter7 and Poll Everywhere.8 They can be integrated with the videoconferencing tools or the presentation software. If you use polls a few times across your talk, you will keep your audience active. At their best, these tools will show the polls’ results with such amazing dataviz that your audience will not help but taking screenshots or capturing a photo of their screens.

Conferences Won’t Be the Same in the Short Term

As you saw from Apple’s example, conference organizers already started to create remote-only experiences. Consumer Technology Association has announced that CES 2021 will be all-digital (see Figure 12-1). CES organizers already predict that some of the virtual world will continue in the years to come: “We plan to return to Las Vegas for CES 2022, combining the best elements of a physical and digital show.”9 So the virtual stage is not a trend but part of the new way companies and event organizers will run the shows in the future.

Some innovations in the event industry are the use of virtual trade shows, with virtual booths in which both exhibitors and attendees can still feel the booth experience: see a demo with the latest technologies, and even sign contracts. Virtual reality booths go a step farther.

7https://www.mentimeter.com/
8https://www.polleverywhere.com/
9https://www.ces.tech/planning-for-ces-2021.aspx
Organizers are also offering one of the main reasons a person would pay the hefty ticket price: asking questions or talking with a renowned speaker. This is arranged in either private or small group virtual meetings.

More and more innovations will come, so if you are also an event organizer, attend virtual events regularly and grasp ideas from the best in the industry.

Figure 12-1. CES 2021 is all-digital

The virtual tech stage is here to stay, so you need to be well prepared for it. It’s time to learn some new skills, try new things. Exciting times ahead.