Best Practices for Excellent Presentations in the Virtual World
Introduction

It’s a big sign of the times. First, large numbers of routine communications meetings were moved to the web. Now, many companies are rushing to shift even their large, high-stakes, face-to-face communication events – global sales meetings, leadership summits, and user conferences – to virtually delivered formats.

Experience shows that the transition to “virtual” is not a “natural” one for most presenters. Very few people come naturally prepared with the presentation delivery skills required to powerfully engage a virtual audience and deliver a clear, credible, and compelling message in a virtual venue.

When high-stakes business presentations must be delivered online, a presenter’s lack of virtual communication skills becomes evident almost immediately. Even great ideas can get lost in a faceless drone, and audience attention spans can quickly evaporate.

The issue is not just learning how to operate the great technology; it’s learning how to communicate well as a presenter using it.

Even good presenters can have a learning curve. Many presenters who are very effective with live audiences struggle to be as good as they want to be when they must present virtually. It could be nerves. It might be unfamiliarity with the virtual environment and its special demands on the presenter. Maybe it’s just because they can’t see the audience and are disoriented. In any case, it’s a more difficult medium to master than it appears to be.

The multitasking menace is ever present. The virtual presenter’s challenge is made worse because virtual audience members are so easily distracted, with huge opportunities to multitask right at their fingertips. When the speaker loses the audience’s attention, Amazon, Google News, and email are waiting right there to consume the focus of the faceless crowd.

Virtual communication is a great thing, but not a sure thing. Despite its promise and potential to reach more people on a global scale with less cost and travel time, a virtual business presentation also raises a very real business ROI question:

What good is a virtual presentation if it’s not able to keep people’s attention?

We believe the new business communication superstars will be those individuals and teams who master the art and science of successfully engaging, motivating, and even inspiring virtual audiences.
The masterful virtual presenter possesses two demonstrable skill sets. These are (1) the skills to create and communicate clear, concise, credible, and compelling presentations to a dispersed and mostly unseen audience, and (2) the capabilities to keep his or her audience members as attentive and engaged as if they were all in the same room with the presenter.

Virtual presentation quality expectations are being continually raised by internal and external audiences. The quality-focused virtual presentation strategies and tactics that you’ll find in this whitepaper can help enormously, but it takes more than just reading about them to succeed at using them.

To present virtually on par with the best, most presenters require a process of experienced coaching, structured practice, and developmental feedback to master this surprisingly challenging new medium.

There is good news. Our coaching and training experience indicates that these are very learnable skills. The even better news is that the personal and corporate competitive advantages gained should far exceed the effort you put into mastering these skills, especially when the stakes are high.

Please call on us whenever we can help improve your communication results in any setting – face-to-face or virtual.

Best regards,

Your Mandel Communications
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Before You Begin

This whitepaper addresses those virtual communication situations where you will be doing most, if not all, of the talking.

If you have had to sit through many virtual presentations or webinars, you know they can be excellent or terrible, interesting or deadly, and everything in between.

A virtual presentation, because it is devoid of so many of the social clues available in a face-to-face presentation, puts quite a burden on the speaker, as you may already know from personal experience.

The information contained in this whitepaper can help ease that burden enormously and increase your odds of success substantially.

As you get started exploring these Best Practices, keep some key considerations in mind:

- **Speaker’s Role** – The success of a virtual presentation is directly linked to the speaker’s ability to keep an unseen audience attentive and actively engaged throughout the session.

- **Best Uses for Virtual Presentations** – A virtual presentation is most effective for delivering information, analysis, ideas, or recommendations to a distributed internal and/or external audience.

  When a virtual session’s objectives require a free-flowing give and take between the speaker and the virtual audience, that outcome demands broader communication skills, such as the skills we teach in Mandel’s “Working the Virtual Room” workshop.

- **Audience Size** – The audience for a virtual presentation event can range from the equivalent of a conference room to a group that could fill a large auditorium. Neither is easy.

- **Audience “Tune-Out” Risk** – When a virtual presentation does not keep the audience members riveted on what is said and what is displayed on their screens, they have a strong tendency to disengage and multitask or just daydream.

- **Interaction** – To create interaction, a virtual presenter needs a creative, well-prepared audience interaction plan and a structured and engaging Q&A process.

Engagement cannot be left to chance. While interactions between the audience and the presenter may or may not be appropriate during a specific virtual presentation, audience “engagement” is vital to your success.

Excellent virtual presentations require all the communication talent you can bring from the stand-up presentation world, plus more. In the following pages, we explore the “more.”
Winning Virtual Presentation Content

It All Starts with the Story

All too often, the process of creating virtual presentation content begins with someone opening PowerPoint®, followed by a mental mind-dump where every thought in the speaker’s head ends up on a series of text-heavy, bullet-point-driven slides. Any “story” that might have existed is often totally obscured by dense data, lack of listener focus, and the rambling flow of visually uninspiring slides. It’s highly likely that you have been the victim of such creations.

A much more engaging and high-impact approach is to first create a written, listener-centric content flow, or “Blueprint™” as we call it, of the story you want to tell. Then, based on that structure and its well-crafted, comprehensible flow, create the speaker notes required to flesh out and tell that story. Finally, create the slides to support the story and your virtual presentation.

This process will help you create an easy-to-follow, compelling, and story-driven virtual presentation that will set you apart from the typical virtual presentation that invites (and sometimes even requires) multi-tasking just to sit through it.

Specifically, here’s how to create a winning virtual presentation:

- **Be audience-centric.** It really isn’t your story you’re trying to tell; it’s your audience’s story. The people in your audience must be able to see themselves in it. You will need to do your homework and get to know their world. Beyond basic demographics, you’ll want to discover their “care-about” (their needs, attitudes, and desires) as they relate to your virtual presentation subject matter. When you speak in the context of their care-about, you will have a much easier time keeping your participants engaged and tracking with you.

  One of the hardest skills to learn is content sacrifice. That is the discipline to not tell everything you know about your subject. You should never give your listeners more information than they actually need, so you have to resist the often strong temptation to include too much. Pick every point you make and every fact you share based on a specific and important audience “care-about.” If you cannot verbalize that connection, create a way to make your point have value for your audience, or consider not including it at all.

- **Use a proven storytelling framework.** One of the secrets that master communicators use to efficiently create results—achieving communications is the application of a proven storytelling framework. The Mandel Blueprint® excels as a highly effective framework for creating compelling virtual presentation content. It supports many other critical communication applications as well, from preparing for high-stakes stand-up presentations, conversations, and meetings to planning important voicemails and emails. Whenever achieving your business goals depends on how well you plan and tell your story, the Mandel Blueprint is your best friend.

- **Add planned interactions and color spots.** Once you’ve finished outlining your overall virtual presentation story, plan “color spots” that will help your audience stay engaged and remember your critical points and information. One particularly effective virtual presentation technique is to involve your audience in a meaningful interaction with you, which could include use of the
technology’s interaction tools, as well as polls, surveys, and annotation tools. You should average at least one planned interaction, including Q&A, every 5 to 8 minutes. Other effective virtual presentation color spots include inserting memorable stories and examples, video clips, relevant quotes and references, and “aha” producing analogies.

A Good Picture Is Worth at Least a Thousand Words

How many virtual presentations or webinars have you sat through where the slides were so dense with text that the presentation felt like a group reading exercise? This approach negates the value of the virtual presenter and quickly puts the audience to sleep.

If you use word-for-word, text-driven slides in a face-to-face presentation, your listeners will be asking themselves, “Why am I sitting here? They should have just sent me the slides!” In a virtual presentation, where you can’t see your audience members and they can’t see you, slides like that are the kiss of death and all but guarantee that your audience is going to check out.

- **Think in pictures.** Move beyond traditional bullet-point-driven slide templates. Sketch your vision for each slide on a blank piece of paper – a crude sketch is all that’s needed. Then recreate that vision in PowerPoint®. Sites like iStockphoto.com are great sources for high-quality, inexpensive pictures and graphics to help you make your point using few words on the slide, if any. For high-stakes virtual presentations, you may want to engage a graphic artist to ensure a professional look and feel.

- **Put text into “sound bites.”** Text can add value to a visual, but only if composed in short, high-impact, written sound bites. There is no need for complete sentences unless you are showing a quote. The “rule of three” applies to the number of sound bites per slide, and you should almost never have more than five. Don’t forget to use your slide titles to make a statement in the same way that a newspaper headline does.

- **You’re going to need a lot of slides.** As a comparison, a good guideline for the number of slides in a face-to-face (non-virtual) presentation is an average of one graphics-driven slide for every two to three minutes of presentation time. That keeps the audience’s attention on you as the presenter, not on your slides, and avoids a big mistake made by too many stand-up presenters, which is to use their slides as a crutch. When you present virtually, however, that in-the-room-together slide pace will cause your virtual audience members’ attention to wander because your slides are their only source of visual engagement. If you’re going to hold their attention, you need to keep the visual pace of your virtual presentation moving briskly along, make it graphically very interesting, and keep it highly relevant to the audience’s needs. Consequently, you should have some kind of slide movement – a meaningful animation, highlighting, or new slide – every 20 to 45 seconds on average to keep your audience visually engaged.
Create Effective Speaker Notes...Then Use Them Masterfully

A virtual presentation is the wrong place to try to “wing it.” Timing is tight, audience attention spans are short, and the lack of eye contact with the audience makes it almost impossible to assess people’s actual engagement level from moment to moment. The speaker's over-elaboration and/or inability to clearly and concisely make points are two of the key reasons why so many virtual presentations are deadly dull and unsatisfying for both the speaker and the listeners.

- **Create robust speaker notes.** Use this feature in PowerPoint®, or other slide creation software, to create a high-level outline of key talking points for each slide, and then stick closely to your notes during the virtual presentation. Before the virtual presentation, practice, practice, and practice some more. Use descriptive language to help your audience visualize what you are talking about. Be sure to clearly notate all of your animations, and slide transitions so you won’t miss a beat.

- **Take a “less is more” approach.** Focus your content on the “must know” information only. You need to sacrifice all the “nice to know information” and trust that, if your audience wants more detail, they will ask for it in the form of questions. Try to keep your audience's care-abouts as your top priority when creating your notes.

- **Use “presenter view” when you can.** The use of dual computer monitors has become increasingly popular. This is the ideal set up for a virtual presentation as it enables you to use the “presenter view” feature in PowerPoint. On one screen you'll be able to see your speaker notes plus the current slide and the next one. On the other screen you'll see what your audience is seeing.

  If you only have one monitor, you should print your speaker notes out in “Notes Pages” view, and put them in a three-ring binder so they are easy to flip through as you move through your slides.

  Either way, your speaker notes will guide you through your virtual presentation and help you resist the urge to spontaneously over elaborate or go off on an unnecessary tangent.

**Engaging Virtual Presentation Delivery Skills**

**Use Vocal Energy to Engage Your Audience**

When you’re face to face, over 80% of your overall audience impact comes from the visual cues that you give off as you speak – things like body language, gestures, facial expression, and eye contact. By comparison, in a virtual presentation, more than 80% of your personal impact will come from your voice alone, even when your webcam is on. You need to maintain your composure and channel your energy to an audience that you can’t see in order to come across vocally as clear, strong, credible, and compelling.
· **Speak with conviction.** If you don’t sound like you’re interested and having a good time, what chance is there that your audience will feel any different? Let your natural energy come through by varying the volume, tone, and pace of your voice to add authority, interest, and emphasis to your content. Many speakers find they have to consciously amplify their vocal energy during a virtual presentation in order to come across to their audience in an engaging, conversational manner.

· **Don’t race.** Many virtual presentation presenters sound like they are in a mad rush to get their content out. These speakers would benefit from slowing down and pausing more. After you emphasize a key point or bring up a new slide, pause to take a breath, give yourself a moment to think, and allow the audience to process your information. The common habit of using non-words (ums and ahs) and unnecessary filler words (and, so, like, you know, etc.), can make a person sound uncertain and ill at ease when speaking face to face. In a virtual presentation, such words really stand out and sound even worse. These junk words can damage your credibility and make it hard for people to listen to you, so practice replacing them with a new habit – a healthy pause.

· **Keep up an engaging pace.** Don’t race, but don’t go so slowly that your listeners can begin to daydream. Think of some really good radio commentators or podcaster; then figure out what pace would keep your audience engaged with you and your content as effectively as those professionals engage their audiences. You will notice that radio professionals also vary their vocal pacing and add pauses as appropriate to keep their audience members attentive and engaged.

· **Be in command of your body.** Stand or sit forward in an engaged posture with your weight balanced and your feet flat on the floor. Gestures are just as important in a virtual presentation as they are in face-to-face communications. Gestures (even when your audience can’t see them) will add emphasis to your words and provide a healthy outlet for any nervous energy you may experience. While your audience won’t see any of this, they will definitely hear it in your voice. Body posture and movement influence both vocal projection and inflection. The more you involve your hands, arms, and body, the more energized and confident your voice will sound.

**Be Ready for Q&A**

Don’t forget to anticipate, prepare for, and practice answering the questions and objections you’re likely to get from your audience. While that’s great advice for any presentation, Q&A in a virtual presentation environment is especially tricky, since you can’t visually gauge an audience’s nonverbal reactions to your responses. Remember, you’re not fully prepared for Q&A until you’ve practiced how you’ll handle possible questions – particularly the hard ones – out loud and multiple times.

· **Keep responses short and to the point.** You’ll get a follow-up question if you’re too brief, but you’ll have no way of knowing if you’ve over-elaborated and lost your audience’s attention.

· **Prime the Q&A pump.** Have two or three relevant questions ready to suggest and answer yourself just in case your audience is shy and hesitant to speak up. Willingness to ask questions is often a cultural issue. For example, a Dutch audience is likely to jump at the opportunity to ask a question to engage with you, while a Japanese audience might be more reserved as a sign of respect.
• **Have a dedicated Q&A facilitator.** When speaking to a small audience, you may invite spontaneous verbal questions from the audience through virtual presentation tools like the “raise hand” feature. That’s not practical when speaking to a large audience. For larger groups, it’s a good idea to bring in a subject matter expert to act as a Q&A facilitator. The facilitator can respond via text chat in real time to questions submitted through the Q&A panel. This creates a very real sense of interaction for a large virtual presentation audience. With your guidance, the Q&A facilitator also can be on the lookout for pivotal questions from the audience that you would like to answer verbally.

**Sit Locally...Speak Globally**

With both visuals and sound, virtual presentations can enable you to reach a global audience without ever having to leave your office. It’s important to remember that even though you’re sitting locally, you often will have to think and speak from a potentially diverse, global perspective.

• **Be culturally aware.** When you will be speaking to an international audience, learn all you can about their customs, etiquette, behaviors, and expectations. Insert culturally appropriate visuals, language, and examples where you can. Your personal demonstration of cultural sensitivity will go a long way in creating goodwill with your global audience.

• **Be sensitive to time differences.** This is important when both scheduling and delivering your virtual presentation. You may need to deliver your virtual presentation outside of your traditional office hours, which can be challenging if that is naturally a low energy time for you. Be sure to get the rest and nutrition you require to perform at your best for the time of day or night when you must deliver your virtual presentation. Although it may seem trivial, don’t say “good morning” if most of your audience members are located where it’s afternoon or evening. That slip can make you sound globally unaware and awkwardly disconnected from your audience.

• **Use jargon, slang, and colloquialisms very sparingly.** Words and phrases that may work just fine in your locale may sound incomprehensible to a global audience for whom your language is often a second language or is spoken differently from what you’re used to hearing. This is particularly important in a virtual presentation, as the lack of eye contact makes it difficult to assess your audience’s understanding of your content. You can also make your virtual presentation more globally listener friendly by making an effort to enunciate your words clearly and speak at a reasonable pace.
• Practice your virtual presentation with people who understand the culture(s) of your audience. When the stakes are high and you want to be really sure that you are on safe cultural ground, check out your virtual presentation content with someone who knows the cultural nuances well. Better yet, use this person as one of your practice partners and get her or his feedback and advice on both your content and your delivery.

Assuring Virtual Presentation Success

Take Control of Your Environment

• Secure a private office or conference room. You’d be surprised how often virtual presentations are conducted from a cubicle. Cubicle presenters, not wanting to distract their neighbors, speak in hushed tones that sound boring and meek to their virtual audience. Find a private room and tape a sign on the door to prevent interruptions: “Virtual presentation in progress; please do not disturb.” Then, ramp up your energy and enthusiasm and let them loose.

• Set up a presenter-friendly delivery space. Once the virtual presentation starts, you are going to be very busy and literally tethered to the computer. Make sure everything you might need is at hand. Use a headset with high-quality audio, arrange your computer desktop the way you want it, set up your notes for easy reference, and have things like water, tissues, and even cough drops close by.

• Plan for bulletproof backup. Think about what can go wrong from a technology standpoint and proactively prepare for it. Computers can crash, phone and internet connections can be lost, and power can go out. Have your mobile smart device ready with the call-in number already entered, the pass code written down, and the ringer turned off. Have a backup computer, ideally a battery-powered laptop, logged into the virtual meeting room using a different ISP than your primary computer: for example, a wireless ISP if your primary computer is connected through your network. Just like an airline pilot, you should always be calm, cool, and communicative with your audience if something does go wrong.

• To cam or not to cam? Webcams are commonly used in business, particularly for online meetings, where they can be very effective. However, webcams get mixed reviews when used in virtual presentation presenters. Often the audience is actually distracted by the busy presenter who is flipping the pages of his or her notes, advancing and annotating slides, responding to chat, and trying to gesture all at the same time, much like the Wizard of Oz behind his curtain. Busy with all this activity, the presenter’s eyes are rarely directed toward the webcam, and this can be off-putting to audience members because they perceive it as a lack of direct eye contact. A good use of visuals usually helps communicate your message better than a continuing, postage stamp-sized webcam picture of the virtual presentation speaker, unless the speaker’s facial expressions and use of gestures add a great deal to the message. Our advice: Use your webcam if and when it adds to your communication effectiveness online. When in doubt, pump up your use of visuals and use your webcam sparingly. When delivering virtual presentations and webinars, Mandel presenters most often use their webcams only during the presentation opening, Q&A breaks, and at the conclusion.
One more thing about using your webcam. You need to be aware of your camera angle and background. You’ve probably experienced virtual presentations where the presenter is using the webcam on their laptop. The camera is looking up at them at steep angle and the resulting video image is noticeably unflattering. Or the background is cluttered and distracting. Or both. Experienced virtual presenters know the value of using a separate webcam placed on a tripod, stand, or the top of their desktop monitor so it’s level with their eyes or slightly higher. It’s a small investment that has a big impact on how you’ll come across. And the use of small green screens is becoming increasingly popular as more and more virtual meeting platforms add that functionality. It allows you to pick whatever background you want your audience to see.

Eliminate Computer and Phone-Generated Distractions

As a virtual presentation presenter, you’ll have a lot going on all at the same time – following your script and notes in order to speak coherently, advancing slides and animations, conducting surveys and polls, using the highlighter, and the list goes on. While you’re under the pressure of delivering a virtual presentation, seemingly minor or even apparently harmless computer and phone distractions can derail your presentation in ways you can’t imagine until they happen to you. Fortunately, they’re all easy to prevent.

• **Turn off instant messaging, auto email notifications, and calendar reminders.** This is vitally important. You’d be surprised just how much a pop-up can distract a virtual presentation speaker, even if the audience can’t see it. And if you happen to be sharing your desktop with your audience, it can potentially be embarrassing.

• **Clean up your computer desktop.** This is extremely important if you plan on sharing your desktop with your audience. Think about what a sloppy, disorganized-looking desktop may say about you. Make sure your desktop doesn’t contain anything that might be offensive to your audience or make an impression that you don’t want your audience members to have.

• **Turn off call waiting.** The intrusive beep of an incoming call can be just as distracting as a pop-up; plus, it may briefly cut off your voice every time it sounds. You may want to leave a “busy message” to let callers know that you’re currently conducting a virtual presentation and to tell them at what time you’ll be available to take calls again or be free to return their call. This will keep them from making repeated attempts to get through to you.

Practice, Practice, Practice!

Everyone has to practice somewhere, and it often feels like many virtual presentation presenters are practicing in front of their actual audience. It is critical to practice every aspect and every word of your virtual presentation several times before the event. Remember this sage advice from the world of high-performance athletics: Practice like you want to play, because you’ll end up playing just like you practiced.

• **Practice the delivery of the content.** It will take at least three “talk-throughs” to master the pacing of your content and the engaging use of your voice for emphasis and variety. Always practice using your notes. At first it may sound like you’re almost reading them, but that will
quickly change after several practices. With repeated and improving practices, your words become part of your mental muscle memory. Practice sessions are also a great opportunity to check the timing and flow of your virtual presentation.

- **Practice the tools and logistics.** Become thoroughly familiar with all the features and tools you will use during your virtual presentation, which could include interaction tool, polls, surveys, Q&A management, use of a highlighter, whiteboards, and handoffs to other presenters. If you’re using the support services of a virtual presentation producer (strongly recommended for high-stakes virtual presentations), be sure to have your producer join you at practice.

- **Record your practices and practice with a coach.** If you’re preparing for a high-stakes virtual presentation, especially if it’s one of your first virtual presentation deliveries, you will strongly benefit from engaging the services of an expert business virtual-communications coach. At the very least, ask someone you know and trust to attend at least one of your practice sessions virtually and then solicit that person’s feedback. Record your practice sessions so you can coach yourself and have recordings for your coach to review. The combination of recorded practices, coupled with expert feedback and instruction, is a key piece of Mandel’s proven coaching methodology. You don’t really know how you are coming across until you become a listener and a viewer of yourself.

At Mandel Communications, we have a team of virtual communication coaches who are expertly qualified to help you. Our role is to make your every practice better, until the real thing is a smashing success!
Conclusion

All of us are witnessing a huge sea change in how the business world communicates, and it is happening fast.

Virtual presentations and webinars won’t go away, even in the best of economic times. The cost and time savings are just too appealing.

Seize the opportunity. Make this powerful business communications trend work for your career and for your organization’s success by building and keeping your virtual communication skills current, relevant, and sharp.

Please contact us whenever we can help. Sincerely,

Your Mandel Communications
Training & Coaching Team

“Everybody wins when you make it easy for your virtual audience to stay totally engaged with you.”

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About Mandel Communications

When the stakes are high, the quality of what you say and how you say it can make all the difference.

Every day, worldwide, organizations are turning their people's communication skills into a strong competitive advantage through Mandel's training, skills-building practice, and expert feedback.

Call on Mandel Communications whenever your organization needs to:

1. Build the Skills to Improve High-Stakes Presentation Results
   - Sales Presentations
   - Customer Briefings
   - Presenting Ideas at the Executive Level
   - Technical Presentations
   - Executive and Manager Communications

2. Build the Skills to Sell Effectively at Executive Levels

3. Develop Trusted Advisor Relationships

Working with Mandel, you will gain a unique combination of demonstrable benefits:

- **Rapid skill improvements that can make the winning difference.** Mandel-trained professionals, managers, and executives can quickly create content and messaging that are listener-centric, clear, and compelling. Equally important, your communicators' personal “presence” will become increasingly “real,” reassuringly confident, credible, and interactive.

- **Job performance improvements whenever masterful spoken communication skills are a key requirement for business success.** We will precisely tailor all that we do for you to achieve your organization’s unique business goals, and our skills-building processes and tools will concentrate directly on producing your desired on-the-job results.

- **Global skill-building scalability.** To align with our client organizations’ global activities, Mandel has expert trainers and coaches located throughout Europe, AsiaPac, India, and North America, and we build new communication skills in fourteen (14) different languages.

- **Face-to-face and virtual delivery options.** Clients consistently evaluate Mandel’s face-to-face group training workshops and coaching services as world class in all aspects. Equally impressive are our capabilities to use digital delivery media—such as virtual meetings, virtual collaboration platforms, and telepresence—to create outstanding skill-building results for you when face-to-face work is not the best option.

Please contact us whenever a significant improvement in spoken communication results could benefit your business performance. It would be our privilege to discuss these benefits with you.