

VIRTUAL PRESENTATION MASTERY

TIPS FROM THE COACH TO
SOME OF THE WORLD'S
BEST SPEAKERS—AND ME



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Talking to the Camera

Do you think like a TV presenter? For virtual presentations, there is much we can learn from them. These presenters need to be natural and authentic, but their presentation style to camera is always a heightened reality. To achieve this, you need to focus on interacting with the camera as though it is your audience—and this is the case whether you're talking to one person or a thousand.

If you want virtual presentation mastery when talking to camera, you need to engage, inform, and entertain. If you're not that bothered, then stick to dull and uninteresting.

A TV presenter is trained to look right at the camera, never allowing his or her eyes to move away from that lens. You must aim to do similarly with a couple of caveats which I'll come to shortly. The key thing to remember is that the camera represents the eyes of your audience. When you want to make eye contact, look into the lens. If you try to make eye contact with the participants on your computer screen—although to you it makes sense—to them it feels like you are looking beneath their eyes. Instead, focus on the camera. I promise it will give you real star charisma, and your audience will feel like you are making eye contact.

The problem with this technique is that, for the presenter, it feels phony. The faces of your audience members are beneath the camera on your screen, so talking to camera seems disconnected, arrogant even. When you talk to someone face to face, you don't spend your time looking into the distance above their head.

So, how do we manage this? First, we are allowed a little leeway as you will see. Although it feels *like* TV presenting, it is not TV presenting.

One little tip is to attach a photo to the camera of someone who gets you—with whom you feel totally at ease and in whose company you are most yourself. Now, talk to the photo as though it's that person. Failing that, draw a smiley face on a sticky, and put that up behind your camera. This will remind you to keep looking at the lens.

How to read body language when presenting to the camera.

Position the audience video feed just beneath your camera. Then toggle the window to a smaller size than usual. We want to have audience faces as close to the camera as we can. That way when you look at their faces, it will still seem as though you are talking directly to them.

Now, while you're presenting, it will look to the audience as though you're making eye contact, while you, the presenter, can still read their reactions.

Where you position yourself on camera matters.

Aim to face the camera. I know it seems obvious, but I have seen people presenting with their screens arranged in such a way that the faces of their participants are to the side, which gives the impression that they are looking away from the camera and are more interested in their wallpaper than the audiences. Have your eyes level with the camera. Try not to look down at the camera (the voice of God) or up at the camera (I am your servant.) Neither is a good look. Instead, you and the camera (the viewer) should be on the same level.

Looking down at camera, the presenter can come across as having a God complex.

While looking up, presenters can appear subservient.

Aim for eyes level with the camera.

Varying the distance between you and the camera is a good thing. Film directors will juggle between three distances, or frames, for a shot. Long shot (landscape, whole body, or bodies); mid-shot (waist up); and close-up (face.) Close-ups will be used to land a moment. However, for close-ups to work and provide emphasis, not every shot should be a close-up. Despite what some soap opera directors might think, not every shot in a show is vital. You need to vary it.

I prefer mid-shot as this gives my arms and body a chance to get involved. Then occasionally, when I need to make an important point, I move my head towards the camera for a close-up or switch the scene on my Ecamm and zoom in with the camera. It's a personal choice.

The main don'ts are:

- Don't go in too close. It can be scary.
- Don't move too far away from camera. Your head could look like a pea.
- Don't look down at the camera. (God complex.)
- Don't look up. (Subservient.)

Keep it on the level.

Years ago, TV presenters—particularly those communicating serious subject matter—were often very stilted, as though someone had stuck something rather sharp up their bottom. They were experts and didn't need to perform. In those days in the UK, we only had two or three TV channels to choose from, and so, actually, a lack of presentation style didn't matter as there was nothing else you could watch.

Gradually, as competition increased, producers realised viewers liked a more energetic style of delivery. Now, watch the History Channel. An archaeologist will almost literally bounce around the site, face animated, body and hands alive, sharing enthusiasm. The thing is, they must put in energy, or they risk viewers switching to another channel. There are literally hundreds of programmes you could be watching instead. A bit like your audience, watching you on a device on which there are thousands of alternatives to viewing your presentation.

A huge mistake I see being made again and again is that the presenter's energy to camera is far too low. The reasons for this are numerous: the presenter isn't getting any energy back from the audience; it's awkward talking to a camera; and presenters feel inhibited.

All of these factors mean that businesspeople presenting to camera are usually much less than their real selves. They are diminished. People often push back saying that "perform" isn't natural; isn't authentic. And yet somehow that diminished version of them is? The result is monotone, dull, and stilted delivery. For the audience, it appears that the presenter is hiding something, doesn't really care, or would rather not be presenting. Very rarely are any of these things useful.

Like a modern TV presenter, you have to perform a bit. The only limits to this being: It depends on your audience, keep it conversational, and be you.

One final point: Having coached thousands of presenters, I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of people I've asked to present with *less* energy.

There are big differences between TV and a presentation.

Virtual platforms are interactive. TV is passive.

Your virtual participants know they are not watching TV, so they don't expect the professionalism they see on TV. You will check faces, and that's okay. We need to see body language. It's a big part of how we communicate.

So, when your audience members are speaking to you, it's fine to look at them. The audience knows you are also producing the show, so they understand that some of the time your focus will move briefly to ensure the tech works. When your eyes drift briefly from the camera, they're fine with that.

You'll need to establish your own presentation brand.

We all have our business brand. This is a mix of marketing, deliberate branding, company values, etc. etc. Then, you have your business presentation brand. For instance, BBC news, Fox, pop radio news, and TED each have clear brand styles.

So, is there a brand or style that you want to get across? For instance, when working with a large, quite funky media company, I coached one of the senior directors. He was aware that, after an earlier career in finance, his presentation brand was a little old fashioned. He wanted to be himself but also reflect the company brand. In his words, "Go a bit funky."

Finding your presentation brand will actually make it easier for you to communicate. It gives you clarity of intent. Your brand should be a crossroads—where your personal values and your business values meet, and where the personality of the business and your personality meet.

Sweet spot—your own presentation brand.

If you're the leader of a cool marketing company, but you are most comfortable wearing a sensible suit and tie, unless your personality matches the business brand, outsiders will see a mismatch. There will be a disconnect between the business and the business leader.

Or, and this is more common, I'm working with a cool tech company or creative agency, and on comes one of their leaders—usually looking pretty trendy. Then they present, and what we get is dull, stilted delivery, where they invariably read out their slides—no personality and with PowerPoint that looks like they've been lifted from the "How to present insurance for

undertakers” handbook.

If you want to have a clear disconnect with your company brand, then that’s your choice, but it’s usually best practice to at least reflect the ethos of your organisation (unless it’s rubbish, in which case, should you be working for them? But hey, that’s a whole other book.)

Advanced presenting to camera.

Once you’re comfortable presenting to camera, you can now start to vary it a bit and move you and your virtual presentation brand up to the next level.

One of the advantages of virtual presenting is that, as opposed to face-to-face, you really can look into the eyes of every single one of your audience members. However, you don’t need to do this all the time.

Less is more. Move your audience videos onto a raised second screen and adjust your eye line so that you look at their faces, giving you an insight into how they are feeling. Now, whenever you want to land a point or make a real connection, look into the camera. When you are thinking, or talking reflectively, you can look away from the lens towards the second screen and read your audience’s facial expressions, then focus your attention back to the lens when it’s something important.

I’ve set out an example here of what that might look like. Imagine this is a strategy presentation.

If you’re looking away from the camera:

YOU: “I was reflecting the other day on how hard it is to come up with a sensible strategy for next year. It’s always hard to predict the future. Now, it’s close to impossible.”

If you’re looking into the camera:

YOU: “However, now more than at any time, we need a strategy. And we need to put real focus and attention into designing that future strategy.”

If you're looking away from the camera:

YOU: "Now, quite reasonably you could say, 'Well, why? And will I be here in six months?'"

If you're looking into the camera:

YOU: "But the only way you're going to be here in eighteen months is if we have a clear strategy that we understand and believe in that works. And that's what today is about."

Can you see how varying the amount of time we look into the camera gives these moments much greater impact? Now our presentation is more reflective of real time, face-to-face communication. Yes, it's theatrical, but it works. You are your demonstrated behaviour. What we see is what we believe you to be. A great example of this in action is Ethan Hawkes' TED Talk, "Give Yourself Permission to be Creative." He's looking into the camera less than fifty percent of the time, and it really works.

HERMAN'S ACTION PLAN

- Are your eyes level with the camera. Raise or lower your camera to find the right level.
- What's your presentation brand? If your business was a radio or TV station, which one would be the best fit? Radio 4, Capital, CNN, BBC1, Kids TV? Now change your energy and style a little to match the brand. Get feedback from colleagues. What's working or not working with the new style? Could they adopt any of your learnings?
- Try looking more into the camera. How does it feel? Practice more and see if you start to find it a little easier. Film yourself looking into camera and then looking away. What differences do you notice? Which version would you like to see if you were the audience?
- On-board this feedback and put it into action.
- Remember, nothing will improve unless you make changes. Go for small and incremental changes rather than big and bold. That way, if you make a mistake, you haven't done any damage.