# LOOKING GOOD: AN AMATEUR'S GUIDE TO ZOOM SUCCESS

## How to maintain high professional standards when interacting via video.

BY KATHLEEN M. PETERSON, POWERHOUSE CONSULTING INC.



I am taking liberties with Zoom's brand name, as it appears that the masses use the word Zoom as a noun, referring to video meetings in general. This is true even when using Teams, Skype, Webex, etc., and so it shall be here.

We have all spent an enormous amount of time in Zoom meetings over the past year and have accomplished an amazing amount of work. There are, however, many indicators that it may be time to examine our personal, professional and organizational approach to "looking good" when using a Zoom interface at work. (This article focuses on meetings rather than training, though many of these tips apply to all video interactions.)

I find that preparing for video interactions requires even more from us in areas in which we are unfamiliar. Like many, I have arrived at this place in time after doing business for the most part in person... without having to step back and appreciate the value of human interaction. For example, something as simple as arriving early and sitting around the conference table getting to know one another is a key relationship builder. The mere energy of a human encounter, at least for me, has been taken for granted. AND OH, HOW I MISS IT! However, we have adapted, and I think accepted, that this is part of a new "journey."

I have concluded that, when it comes to video interactions, some people are examples and others are warnings! So, I put together a sort of "amateur's guide" to successful video interactions. Since we must keep our professional standards high, I have a few takeaways from what feels like a million Zoom hours.

### Preparation... Professionally Speaking

Let's first acknowledge that when it comes to "professionally" speaking, preparation is the key to success, whether it be a report, a meeting, a presentation or a speech. Lack of preparation is the number one cause of missteps and outright presentation failures. Video interactions are professional speaking engagements as much as they are meetings. As a business leader, it is important to treat all encounters as if they are on broadcast TV.

It is critical to prepare for the call by having your files open and at the ready; close everything else. Send any necessary documents along with the invite. When dealing with external clients or prospects, have your introduction ready. You don't want to fumble at the start.

#### PREPARING YOUR "STUDIO"

Today we have new categories to consider: lighting, background, tidiness. Previously, we met in whatever conference room was available. Lighting and background were certainly not on the habitat checklist!

When preparing for Zoom from your home office, realize that your fellow attendees will notice both you and your background. Let's face it, we're all very likely being judged on how we look and how our environment looks.

#### THE RIGHT LIGHTING

Lighting is noticed primarily when it is bad. When you set up with a window behind you, you become a silhouette in a frame. It is really hard to adjust light as the time of day and sunbeams impact the intensity of the light. I keep a couple of pads of easel-size post-it note paper that I can stick over an offending glare.

The best purchase I made for "zooming" has been my selfie lamp. It is a ring lamp with multiple levels of lighting that casts a flattering glow upon your face when set up properly. Lighting from the sides is best; overhead lighting alone can cast an unflattering glow.

#### BACKGROUND... TIDY UP

Yes, we are often judged by our looks and

by our background. Baskets of laundry and messy piles of who knows what don't "show" well. It is important to tidy up what is in the camera's view. My *home* office is nowhere near the tidy level of my *office* office. When working from home, I have had to consider doing somewhat of a makeover. My "stage" was full of all manner of "projects." This was a bit overwhelming since the area is also my craft/art space. So, I made my second favorite Zoom purchase… a "decorative" screen/room divider. Simply unfold it behind you, and presto, an attractive background appears without a total rework of your home office.

### VIRTUAL BACKGROUNDS

Most people do not have the proper studio environment to make virtual backgrounds work. They wind up looking like the Wizard of Oz with a head floating in some kind of image. This is simply a distraction. Don't bother applying a virtual background unless it is stable and you won't float around in it!

### CHECKING YOUR TOOLS

Technical glitches can create delays and distractions. It is critical to check your video and audio before the meeting begins. Study the interface being used and get familiar with the features: every link, click and function. Know the role of the host, how to share content, how to pass off control, how to adjust the view, etc. Try to learn as much as possible about the interface before you have to be on the call.

From a transmission perspective, it is often best to use a headset. When you use computer audio, the PC microphone often echoes and is of poor quality. Use your judgment; keep in mind that you're being judged, whether consciously or unconsciously, by others. If your microphone is of poor quality, your contributions may be tarnished by the transmission rather than by content.



## Interactions

First things first… show up to the meeting on time or before, particularly if you are the host. Be there five to 10 minutes early to let early comers enter; have a chat like you might have live in a conference room.

### PRESENTATION IS EVERYTHING

When the camera rolls, begin with a smile and retain a demeanor of enthusiasm, energy and positivity. While you might be tempted to look at yourself, focus on the screen. Watch the colors and patterns of your clothing. I was once on a call with a presenter that had on a wild, teal blue Hawaiian shirt. He was standing in front of a futon covered in a dark blue floral pattern with three really weird, very colorful paintings on the wall. It was nearly impossible to pay attention to him; the patterns and colors were simply too much. There is a reason you don't see this kind of setting on any TV talk or news show. Remember that soft patterns and colors minimize distractions.

> "Nothing tastes as good as looking good feels."
>
> —*TONY ROBBINS*

I think that the most frequently used phrase of 2020 was, "You're on MUTE." Mute is the exact right feature to use for a large Zoom gathering. Background noises, sirens, barking dogs, whiny cats and crying kiddos become silent. While babies and toddlers were a common presence in the early pandemic days, the tolerance for lack of childcare has waned. Remote workers now largely have been returning their offspring to daycare. Always pay attention to UNMUTING when you want to speak.

### CAMERA ANGLE MATTERS

Camera angles are best straight on and a bit above you; according to the experts, this is the most flattering angle. I never cease to be amazed at the number of people that have the camera angle looking right up their nose. This is not very flattering.

Resist the urge to use the screen as a mirror. Do not groom yourself on the video. Your image is a transmission, not a mirror. When you pucker up to apply lipstick, it is like the rest of the attendees are standing inside your mirror. No grooming, hair combing, nail cutting or polish applying during the meeting!

Once your video is on, leave it on despite your discomfort in seeing yourself. And don't blame non-video on computer issues. One time having device problems is reasonable, but at every meeting, it is suspicious. It is also helpful to monitor your face. I've seen some people get too close to the screen and begin moving their nose around like a mouse sniffing. This is unbelievably distracting and really makes the person look like there is something off in their environment. Keep your face in a poised and interested manner (as hard as that may sometimes be).

Sit still! Avoid the distraction of constantly moving your chair, rocking back and forth, shaking your head incessantly, etc.

### CHEWING AND CHOMPING

Never, ever, ever chew gum during a Zoom session! As with watching someone eating, the experience can be an unpleasant one. (If, for some reason, eating is necessary, turn off the video until finished.)

## Our Future Will Be a Hybrid of In-Person and Virtual

I have recently been on the road again, and it feels FANTASTIC to have in-person meetings. I believe that our future will be a hybrid of in-person and virtual meetings. We must manage our interactions carefully and do our best to look our best when Zoom is the room in which we meet.



*Kathleen M. Peterson is the Chief Vision Officer of PowerHouse Consulting, a call center and telecommunications consulting firm. (www.powerhouse1.com)*
**@PowerHouse603**