

Virtual Communication

June 19th, 2020

GPB's Guide to Online Spoken Communication

Effective and persuasive spoken communication is a primary requirement in most job roles. Sometimes we also have to deal with the added complications posed by online or telephone contact, especially during the current Coronavirus-driven restrictions. You might need to prepare for an online interview, meeting, presentation, AGM, webinar, or some other major event requiring persuasive communication.

GPB is a specialist spoken and written communication advisor which focuses on helping people to be '*at their best, even in the toughest situations*'. We were 'ahead of the curve', pioneering Virtual Learning alongside Hewlett Packard c. 20 years ago. Unsurprisingly, there's recently been an upsurge of interest in improving Virtual Communication skills. GPB is well-placed to help with this.



This is an example of a good 'deskie' set-up, for online interactive spoken communication

Honing online communication skills is more critical now than ever. At GPB we've been able to continue our own on-going advisory and coaching work online. Supporting the delivery of critical communication events and personal development, with individuals and groups. Here, we advise on communicating online, covering some key factors to consider. Much of which may seem obvious, but it's surprising how often we simply don't do the obvious things.

You will typically have two fundamental goals: firstly, to have an audience understand, remember and be persuaded by your message and, secondly, to have them form an accurate, positive impression of your true personality. You will want to appear logical, credible and likeable, to be at your most persuasive – and to stand out from the (very average) crowd.

You can achieve these two goals by harnessing strong Content (what you say) along with good Vocal and Visual delivery (how you say it and how you look, while saying it) whilst still also projecting your own true character.

Our experience and professional advice will help you optimise your online persuasiveness. This guide is a starting point for those of you preparing to carry out an important piece of communication. If you would like to discuss any aspects of this advice in more detail, do get in touch.

Our Top Five Tips

- **Prepare and practice for the 'virtual world' logistics of online communication**
- **Prepare strong content (what you say), including establishing your key message(s)**
- **Rehearse and review your Vocal and Visual delivery – how you will sound and look online**
- **Be alert for Vocal and Visual clues and prompts from your audience, wherever possible**
- **Rehearse and use GPB's question-handling technique: Listen-Pause-Answer-Bridge**

These five tips are explored further in our guide, below.

1. Prepare and practice for the different 'virtual world' logistics of online communication

Virtual communication, via electronic cameras and microphones, is very different from the old 'normal' – i.e. real-world, face-to-face contact in a shared space. Cultural norms have changed to match the nature of our 'new normal', and we recommend you spend time ensuring your devices are set up to allow you to meet those new norms and leverage them.

Before any online communication, make sure you are familiar with the software platform which will be used (e.g. GoTo, Lifesize, Meet.Google, Microsoft Teams, Skype, WebEx, Zoom, etc.). The organiser (unless that's you!) should make this information clear to you in their invitation. Identify in advance what sound, vision and other settings you can adjust. These platforms have slightly varying flexibility and user control panels. Check whether you can use audience polling and chat facilities. Check links or sign-in credentials you've been sent in advance. It's amazing how often incorrect details are shared, in error.

Consider the size of the expected audience and the level of interaction possible. Is a colleague needed, to act as event 'producer', i.e. to help with technical support on the day, including handling questions/polls?

Are you a lap-top or a PC user - a 'lappie', or a 'deskie'? Laptops with built-in cameras have built-in problems that need addressing. The camera lens should be in line with your face, rather than tilted upwards at you (and into your nostrils!). If your camera is built-in, the whole device may need to be safely raised. Perhaps using a high table, some large books, or a 'repurposed jewellery box' (see image, below). 'Surface' type laptops (with a leaning 'leg') also have their own issues. For these, you will need an extra book or similar under the support, to adjust the screen and camera angle and maybe Blu Tack.

Test your camera and audio devices before the event: speakers, headphones, microphone, etc. Set up your camera and its angle so your head, shoulders and the top half of your torso are clearly visible to your online audience. This should also ensure that any hand gestures you make can be seen.

The lighting source (whether it's natural daylight or artificial) should be on your face, rather than behind you, to allow greatest visibility of your facial expressions. Also check that the background your audience will see is appropriate. What will your camera show them? A blank wall, a tidy room, a bookcase, a dishevelled bed, dirty laundry? Every potential scenario projects its own backstory.

Let's give everyone a few more minutes	Who just joined the call?	I will circle back on that	Can everyone hear me?	No, we can't see your screen yet
Sorry, I was on mute by mistake	Let's take this one offline!	Are we waiting for anyone else to join?	Is _____ on the call?	Were you trying to say something?
Is that the background from _____?	Can anyone who's not speaking go on mute?	WORK FROM HOME MEETINGS BINGO @thrive	Sorry, I have to jump to another meeting	You cut out on that last part
Is everyone hearing an echo?	I have a hard stop at _____	I'll restart my laptop and be back	_____, you're on mute	Apologies, my last call went over
_____, can you schedule a follow-up?	Didn't mean to cut you off. Go ahead!	Let's try without the video	I'm having connection issues again	Didn't catch that. Can you repeat?

Join the session early. The organiser should normally create a virtual waiting room where you will be 'parked'. While you wait, you should be able to carry out a final check on your camera angle and other device settings - including screen sharing options, if you plan to use any pre-prepared documents. If you do use screen sharing, remember that your image will shrink and move to the edge of your and the audience's screens. At this point, you will effectively become a voice-over artist, with limited visual impact beyond the aids you are now sharing on-screen. Minimise your reliance on sharing such visual aids.

Be aware that potential delays 'on the line' may mean that you need to wait for slightly longer pauses in the online conversation in order to take your 'turn'. This can help you avoid interrupting or talking over people

too much. It is less of an issue if you are delivering a speech or presentation. When NOT speaking, it is advisable to turn your microphone off (i.e. to 'mute'). But do remember when it is off!

Technical difficulties can affect anyone at the most unhelpful moments. So try to establish a Plan B. For instance, do you have telephone contact numbers, if a phone call is the only way to conduct or complete the event? This may not suit all types of interaction. Think about what alternative back-up could you use?



A nice view up the nostrils, or back-lighting? Neither, thanks – and do try to make eye-contact

2. Prepare strong content (what you say), including establishing what your key message(s) are

Your content requires preparation. Establish your Key Message(s), i.e. the main priority things you want to communicate and want your audience to remember later. There should be no more than THREE of these. Your Key, Key Message is the most important one. Here's a recent example of three key messages, delivered consistently in all communication:



Resist the urge to cover too many points. Your audience won't remember them all anyway. So stick to the essentials. Expand on these if time allows. Once you have identified your key messages, work out what examples and other evidence you need, to support each of them. Always bear in mind how much time is available/scheduled.

The best way to appear confident and competent is to actually be both of these things. You can achieve this by preparing well and practicing until you are one delivery short of perfect.

The words you choose to communicate with should:

- Be clear, to ensure your key messages will be easily understood
- Support your Vocal and Visual delivery: e.g. use energetic words
- Suit your personality. Don't pretend to 'be somebody else'. It's not advisable to adopt a false style – since this risks seeming insincere and untrustworthy.

3. Rehearse and review your Vocal and Visual delivery – how you will sound and look, online

(a) Vocal delivery – how you will sound, online

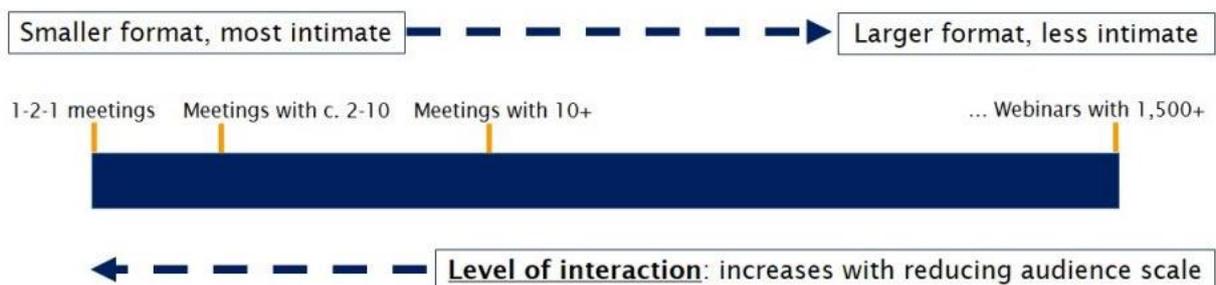
The human voice can be a subtle and powerful tool for persuasion. Yet people sometimes seem bland and uninspiring when communicating/presenting, if they have not prepared thoroughly. Learn to listen to your voice (and to those of others). Use yours to illustrate and support your personality and key messages (see above) just as you would do in normal conversation.

Modulate your Vocal Pitch (the degree to which your voice goes up and down when you speak) and your loudness, accordingly, as though this were a 'normal' conversation. Practice so that you sound natural. Take vocal (and visual) recordings on your phone and review these, as appropriate. This may feel awkward at first, but it will help you to understand (and improve) how you sound to other people – and how you look.

Everyone gets nervous from time to time. One result of nervousness is production of extra Adrenaline in the body, which alters our perception of time. Time distortion levels are proportional to the amount of extra Adrenalin produced. It is, therefore, best to speak at a steady pace and not to rush. Make your pauses last longer than feels natural, both when making statements or answering questions. The best way to reduce nervousness is to 'get your head right'. Prepare your content thoroughly (see above) and rehearse delivering it, until you are one rehearsal away from being perfect. You will exude confidence.

Virtual Communication: degree of intimacy is inversely related to scale of audience

Scale shown is NOT proportional



(b) Visual delivery – how you will look, online

The visual impression you make has two key elements: face and head ('neck up') and body ('neck down'). Your attire and grooming should, of course, also suitably support the event, your role and status.

Facial expression and head movement (neck up)

- Ensure your mind is right so that smiles are *genuine* (using the muscles around the mouth AND eyes (i.e. 'Duchenne'³, rather than mouth-only), and consistent with your words (the Content) and voice. This demonstrates a high level of credibility, confidence and comfort. Some people worry that smiling will make them seem frivolous. But failing to do so risks appearing severe and humourless
- It is important to exhibit a *variety* of facial expression: a range of smiles, thoughtfulness, interest, etc. Just as most of us do, entirely naturally, during face-to-face communication
- Nods can signal attentiveness, engagement and, sometimes, agreement. They vary in scale/pace
- Your vertical eye movement variation will probably not exceed a c. 15 - 25° angle to the horizontal, although this will depend upon your computer and desk set-up
- Eye Contact: online contact exhibits significant differences in this area to real world communication norms; where Europeans maintain eye-to-eye contact for c. 50-80% of the time. Online constraints reduce our ability and our willingness to maintain those levels. They also reduce the size of our eye movement range, and the need for much meaningful sideways, or peripheral eye movement.

According to the Harvard Business Review⁴, recent research shows we spend a large proportion of our online time gazing at the image of our own face on the screen. This should be avoided as far as possible, except where a brief, deliberate self-check is required.

Remember that the framing you see on screen may not exactly match what your audience sees. When not staring at our own image, we might be looking at the images of our audience's faces. But beware! We are 'faced' with a dichotomy, and an apparent contradiction, when we're online:

"To look me in the eye, you must not look me in the eye".

Although it may feel unnatural (and need practice) we recommend you try to think of your camera lens as an electronic eyeball. Aim to make 'eye' contact with it for up to 50% of the time. Your audience will then gain the impression you are looking into their eyes, as you would be doing if you were in the same room with them. When, instead, you look at the image of their eyes on your screen, you appear to them to be looking away. Your eye movement should mostly be restricted to a short vertical line which runs from your camera lens (at the top of your screen), through the screen itself, to any notes in front of you.

Your eye movements will mostly be restricted to a straight line running from the camera lens down to your desk. When not looking at the camera lens, your eyes will mainly look at the screen (particularly if you are screen-sharing with your audience), or at your notes. You will rarely look to either side. You might occasionally look at the images of your audience for their visual feedback cues (expressions and gestures, as explained below). But you should avoid looking at your own image and the images of their eyes. Look away only when you are thinking and reflecting. Or wish to appear as though you are.

Advice on other non-verbal communication (or 'Body Language' - neck down)

- Posture - when sitting, push your bottom to the back of your chair, for comfort and stability.
- Use your hands naturally, to emphasise key points and to add helpful expression to your words. Don't keep them clasped tightly together but do, instead, find a natural resting position for them, when they are not in use. Avoid rude gestures, including direct finger-pointing
- When online, gestures should be delivered where they can be seen by the camera. This will typically be in a cuboid-shaped space located just in front of your torso (not with your hands stretched out towards the camera) between your chin and the bottom and sides of your image on screen
- Ensure the camera, and therefore your audience, can see your hand gestures. You may briefly re-check this in your own on-screen image:



An epic fail! Any natural hand gestures will probably be invisible. It's a nice view of the ceiling; less so the face and body, though.

4. Be alert for Vocal and Visual clues and prompts from your audience

Effective communication is a two-way process, using back-channels. Information from an audience travels back to you in the form of visual and/or audible feedback signals.

Visual feedback includes nods, smiles, yawning, frowns and gestures from listeners. Audible signals include non-verbal noises such as "uh-huh", "yup", "mmm". You should pay attention, look out for all of this useful feedback and use it to your advantage.

This feedback can be either positive or negative. In both cases, noticing it is pivotal to the effectiveness of the speaker, who must keep vigilant for the information, interpret it and respond accordingly. Checking for this behavioural feedback from the audience is one good reason for SOMETIMES not looking directly into the camera lens.

5. Handle the audience's tough questions well, using GPB's tried and tested sequence

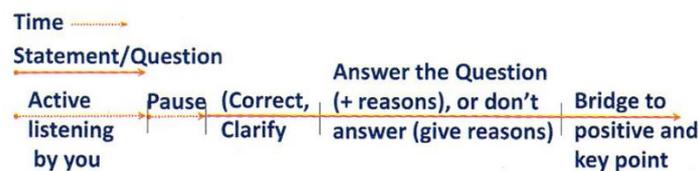
A large part of an audience's interaction with you in online events may come in the form of them asking questions. The larger the event format, the more this is true (see 'inverse relationship' diagram, above).

- Answer all reasonable, relevant questions. Give positive responses to negatively-worded questions
- Give short answers, backed by good examples. Use max. one example for each point you make
- Understand the differences between open and closed questions and answer appropriately
- Ask relevant questions, where possible, to engage the audience. This may require 'polling' in larger format online settings, or the support of a 'producer' in medium-sized settings.

The way you answer questions can be a decision-level criterion for your audience. Potentially more important than your content, in dictating whether you will persuade them – or not! Many online interactions involve answering a series of questions. These are designed to find out information and more about you: how much you know, how committed you are, etc. As long as you have prepared for this fact, they should hold no fears. In fact, you should view this as a distinctly positive aspect of the event. In the case of some events, you may also be asked to complete a task during the online session.



Handling tough questions: the sequence



Other key question tips:

- Good Answers earn credits, spend these on Bridging
- Don't know / do know / will find out / ask a colleague
- Can't say / can say
- Is the question reasonable? Yes = answer, no = block



GPB recommends a methodology for handling questions well. The basis of which is that every question represents a potential opportunity for you to successfully restate one of your Key Messages. In order to take up these opportunities, however, you must first (unlike most 'media-trained' politicians) attempt to answer the question. That is IF it is a reasonable question for an audience member to ask you (e.g. relevant to you and your message, and not intrusively personal, or wildly esoteric, for instance).

Practice following the GPB technique for Handling Tough Questions (and see diagram, below):

- Actively listen to each question, especially ones with multiple parts
- If it does come in several parts, write each part down to ensure that you answer them all
- Pause before answering, even if you have previously prepared an answer. This gives an impression of thoughtfulness and also allows you to check you have selected the BEST possible answer available, rather than just the first one that came to mind
- If there are any errors or inaccuracies in a question, or you're unsure you've heard it right, correct the errors or clarify you have understood the question fully. You could paraphrase it, to do this
- Then answer the question, giving evidence, reasons or an example. Don't over-answer. Know where to stop
- Or don't answer it, but give good reasons why you can't / won't
- If you are asked something you don't know the answer to, don't waffle or invent an answer
- You should still respond with something relevant that you do know, if you can. We call this technique 'I can't tell you THAT, but I can tell you THIS...' It involves sharing relevant adjacent information
- Having answered the question, then Bridge to your Key Message or some other positive information.

During your event: Online Communication (the context)

Most of the following considerations apply to regular communication (by which we mean direct, face-to-face, and taking place in the physical world) as well as to online and telephone communication. Some aspects need adjustment or recalibration for optimal online effectiveness. This advice is a starting point, to get you thinking in the right way about the opportunity which online communication represents. You should carry out further research into any of these areas, wherever you think this would be of help.



This is the view your audience might then get of you: a genuine smile, head (at eye level), shoulders and some hand gestures (this would be better with a wider and lower angle).

Because there are additional considerations in play specific to online communication (as outlined below) it can create significant incremental Cognitive Strain¹. We need to work harder² to process non-verbal cues from our audience, for instance: their facial expressions and other body language (plus tone and pitch of voice, etc.) as a result of the necessary mediation of electronic devices. Therefore, online interaction can feel more tiring than its face-to-face equivalent, reducing our normal capacity to respond well spontaneously and to maintain optimal attention and energy levels. This cognitive load can be reduced with some judicious preparation. Consider the following factors before and during your event.



A 'repurposed jewellery box' (above) used as a plinth – but do be careful with all cables and devices.

And remember that the online medium poses the same challenges for everyone. But those who think and prepare the most thoroughly to suit the conditions can gain a distinct advantage. If the outcome is important to you, it's worth preparing well for. If it's NOT important, ask yourself why you're doing it.



Conclude positively (the 'Recency Effect') – end on a high!

First impressions are important; but so are final impressions. Make sure you conclude the event on a positive note. This could include thanking the audience for their time and interest (a courtesy), or restating your commitment to your purpose.

This is also the point at which you might helpfully restate your Key Messages, if time allows – or else just your one Key, Key Message. These might be the very last words your audience will hear from you and, if you make them memorable ones, they could have an important influence on their opinion of you.

To Summarise...

As is so often the case, a simple cliché encompasses the main principle in play, and acts as a warning to us all:

To fail to Prepare is to prepare to Fail

Online (and telephone) communication events present extra issues and obstacles, in addition to all the natural pressures of the normal communication process. But if you prepare well in advance, rehearse thoroughly, and plan to try and address the above factors, you will gain greater control – and put yourself in a position of comparative advantage. Good luck!



Selected references:

- Daniel Kahneman, Nobel Prize Winner in Economic Sciences (in 'Thinking, Fast and Slow', 2012) Professor Emeritus of Psychology and Public Affairs, at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School.
- Gianpiero Petriglieri, Associate Professor at Insead – Workplace Sustainable Learning and Development (in BBC.com – 'The reason Zoom calls drain your energy', 22nd April 2020); and Andrew Franklin, Assistant Professor of Cyberpsychology at Virginia's Norfolk State University (National Geographic, April 24, 2020).
- Named for French neurologist Guillaume-Benjamin-Amand Duchenne (de Boulogne)
- 'How to Combat Zoom Fatigue', by Liz Fosslien and Mollie West Duffy (Harvard Business Review, April 29, 2020)