



How to Be Your Best Virtual Self

By Mairi Mallon

Editor's note: Mairi Mallon, aka @reinsurancegirl, has some advice on looking good in this new working environment. The public relations and social media specialist has some top tips for our readers on how to come across professionally—both online and on a webcam in this new working from home (WFH) world

When this is published, many of you will be in various different stages of lockdown or self-isolation in different parts of the world.

We are lucky that we work in such a robust financial sector. The re/insurance sector seems to be weathering the storm—and our global companies and their workforces seem to have adjusted to working from home, with most of us grateful just to have a job during these tumultuous times.

I will leave the personal toll this pandemic has taken on all of us to one side—a lot could and should be written about what people have gone through and the bravery of those on the front line. What I am going to focus on instead is helping you get it right when you are communicating virtually.

GET WITH YOUR ONLINE PRESENCE

There will be no conferences, dinners, awards, lunches, drinks—you name it—for a long time. There are two reasons this won't happen for a while. Firstly, it is bad form for the industry to be seen with a glass of champagne in hand while people are dying and economies around the globe are crashing. Secondly, it will be dangerous out there for some time. Would your company like to be known as the host of a dinner where five executives get seriously sick, hospitalized and, god forbid, die? After all, many men over 55—the very demographic of most of our leaders—have been felled by the disease.



ONLINE AUDIT

We are now communicating with each other virtually—and will be doing so for the foreseeable future. Now is the time to do an audit about how you look online. The first step? Google yourself. This is what everyone will do to you when they hear about you, see you on the same Zoom/Teams/Skype/GoToMeeting, listed as a speaker on a webinar, or find you on a delegate list at a virtual conference. If you don't appear, you have a lot of work to do.

LINKEDIN

The first thing that may come up is your LinkedIn profile. If you do not have a LinkedIn profile, now is the time to get one. This is not some new-fangled idiocy thought up by the kids in the office, but a well-established professional platform that is

widely used in the insurance market—especially now. How else could you, at the moment, reach thousands of contacts with the click of a button? You will need: a picture (one that looks like you now), and a job title that says what you do. If your title is obscure—e.g., chief imagineer—perhaps you need to explain what you actually do, the company you work for, linked to the right page on LinkedIn. Remember to fill in the “about” section with all the key words you might be searched for, add in your experience, education and interests, and start growing your network. It will take about an hour. You can then start by adding in your colleagues and move on to your closest work contacts. Then every time you meet someone online, add them to your network. It is better than any Rolodex (note to young ones—this is what we used to use to keep our contacts in when dinosaurs roamed the earth).

THE TWITTERVERSE

And while you are at it, why not set up Twitter and Instagram? And if you have Facebook, make it look professional enough to be viewed by work colleagues.

Try to see if you can make your profile—the words about you and pictures—similar to your LinkedIn in order to give your “brand” continuity. If you work in a large corporation, it is likely they will have training and guidelines you can use. If not, do what a millennial would do—Google “how to ...” and watch a YouTube video if you are struggling.

UNDER THE SPOTLIGHT

If you are not increasingly on video calls every working day, you will be in the minority of us working folks. Many executives are going on webinars or virtual roundtables from their home offices or kitchen tables. These new working practices call for a new etiquette and mindset. Filming yourself is new to most of us—speaking on camera and doing it well normally takes a lot of skill and training—but now we are now expected to do it naturally and look great.

First thing to do is to set the stage. This is not a frivolous thing, but simply think about what is behind you. Is lying in your bed a good corporate image? Is a kitchen counter filled with empty bottles of wine a good thing? I have a friend who works in film who has a dedicated area in his lounge for video calls. It looks amazing—there is a bookcase, a great chair, flowers, a plant and a picture. It does not look staged, but boy it is—and it gives out exactly the right image for him. I’ve taken a leaf from this book and now have an armchair which has a nice backdrop in my living room for external calls.

LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION ...

Think about lighting and angle, which is so easy to fix. Put your video on your phone and walk around your house until you find good lighting. Usually it will be natural light coming through in

front of you. Try different angles for your face on video too—if you are of a certain age, a camera that is at eye level or higher works better. No one wants to see up your nose, trust me.

I also check that I look OK. I have a jacket on the back of my chair, a hairbrush on my desk and a lipstick in my drawer. While I won’t do full stage makeup, I like to not look like I’ve been stranded on a desert island for months.

People will put up with bad camera quality, but not bad sound. If your internet is not great, buy a booster, and if your microphone is not the best, go online and buy a mic as it will transform your calls.

And finally, pay attention. Look at your camera—yes it feels odd—not at the people on the screen, or yourself. And watch your body language—everyone can see you checking your phone or emails on the other screen. Don’t wander off. Be courteous and at least look like you are listening as this will not go unnoticed.

PLAN AND MANAGE

Have a meeting agenda and a chair. With multiple people online, getting the most out of a meeting can be hard without rigorous planning. Make sure there is a purpose to the meeting, that the agenda is followed, and try to ensure that everyone can have their say. Think about what you want to say—if it is an important meeting make sure you have thought about the items at hand and have something worthwhile and interesting to say. Pay attention to people who would not normally offer input in a room as they may be happier to talk online, and their voice is important.

TAKE TIME TO SHOOT THE BREEZE

I’ve been adding in an extra 15 minutes to each call to be able to talk about how the other person is. Many people are isolated, frightened and/or overwhelmed. It is socially normal now to spend a few minutes at the start of a call talking about how we feel.

And finally, be adaptable and kind. As we all work through the new normal, many people will miss the nuances of other’s actions and we may not know about personal hardships that others are going through behind the scenes.

Stay safe and if I don’t see you online, see you on the other side ... ■



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