

Keeping People Engaged and Making Them Excited to Attend Your Video Conference

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What Are Video Conferences and Video Chats?

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In short, video conferencing and video chatting are the practices of connecting two or more people using video cameras and sound in real time. Video conferencing is the professional version, while chatting is more social and often used for connecting with friends and families.

In a video conference, the people connecting usually have an existing relationship: they might be a client talking with a customer, an instructor teaching a student, or company team members in disparate locations. Sometimes, video conferences are planned and require registrations. Other times they are more spontaneous. Some companies use high-end setups in specially equipped conference rooms with big televisions, multiple microphones, and many cameras on closed circuit systems. Others use webcams, computer mics, and mobile devices that only require internet access.

People often expect a higher quality product when attending a video conference than they do when participating in a video chat. Many companies advertise hardware and software to use for video conferencing. Prices and features vary widely depending on quality and features.

Video chats are often social in nature and typically require much less equipment. People use apps and online video chat services to meet people with common interests. Sometimes these meetings are between people who have no previous relationship, other than they both happen to use the same app. Some danger of video chatting can come into play since it is a connection between strangers. When choosing a video chat platform or app, consider the privacy protection it offers.

Families and friends often video chat to keep in touch. In fact, many kids today don't know a time when it wasn't possible to video chat with someone. Some social media sites such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook even allow live video streaming. Don't expect high quality, though: most video chatting happens on laptops and mobile devices without special cameras and microphones.

Finally, video calling seems to combine both video conferencing and video chatting. It's more of a technical term than anything else.

Types of Video Conferencing

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Video conferencing is an extremely broad term, and can include meetings that happen via video, webinars to disseminate information, large scale events or presentations, and social events. Each type has unique video conferencing needs. Types of video conferences include:

- **Meetings:** Getting people together using video chat to discuss a topic and collaborate. Active participation is often important.
- **Webinars:** Presenting content to a group of viewers. Active participation is not always important, but you'll want to be able to have limited interaction through something like a chat function.
- **Presentations:** One person or group of people distributing content to another group of people with little or no collaboration or interaction.
- **Social Broadcasting:** Using existing social media channels to distribute video and other media.

The rise in video conferencing seemed to go along with the fall in some company profits during the most recent recession. Many organizations wanted to save money by connecting people via video instead of sending people to other offices via planes, trains, and automobiles. According to the Global Business Travel Association (GBTA), business travel plummeted in late 2008 and for about 18 months thereafter, but is currently rebounding. In 2015, companies spent about \$1.2 trillion USD on global travel and about \$1.3 trillion in 2016. During the recession, some companies were able to help their bottom line using video conferencing. A July 2008 article in the *New York Times* stated that in an attempt to cut costs, consulting firm Accenture installed 13 video conference rooms in offices around the world, eliminating 240 international trips and 120 domestic trips in just one month.

"I'm trying to help convince people about the impact video can have in business," says Derek Pando, Senior Product Marketing Manager for Zoom and self-proclaimed video evangelist. Pando says that in the past, people would rather talk or text, but that is changing. "It's easier to build relationships and build a better understanding using video than communicating in other ways."

Reducing overall costs for companies is just one driving force for the increase in the usage of video conferencing. Pando says there are three others:

- The cost of cameras is decreasing as every laptop and mobile device now comes with one.
- The access to high bandwidth internet is increasing, so video conferencing is more reliable.
- People are getting more comfortable communicating by video.

When setting up a meeting using video conferencing, it's important to remember that some people might resent not physically being in the same place. Cost-cutting might have changed their routine so they are not able to travel anymore, making them feel isolated from their team. It's important to keep these biases in mind when planning and conducting a meeting.

“A video is as close to a physical face-to-face interaction as you can get,” Pando says, adding that people can see reactions like surprise and worry and deal with them accordingly.

Meetings via video have changed with technology. Once, video meetings were mainly about connecting people using an audio and video link; the key was being able to hear and see each other. Today, however, meetings via video are also about collaboration and active participation. People want to interact with each other and exchange ideas.

Basics of Video Conferencing

No matter what specific type of video conference you're doing, there are some basic things to keep in mind. They will help you decide what type of technology you need to make it all work.

The key to any video conference is making it easy to use. If people are confused, they will not want to participate. Some video conferencing apps and software require users to download something before they can take part in a video conference. If this is necessary with the software you use to video conference, make sure you give your participants plenty of time to complete the download and ensure the software works with their set up. Also, many companies and agencies do not allow individual users to download software to their work computers, so they will either need permission from their technology departments or someone to install the software for them.

Consider if there are specific technical requirements a user must have in order to participate in your video conference. Not all providers have a mobile app, so a user will need a computer to take part. No matter what provider or service you use, make sure there is ample time to test it before the big day. Keeping people waiting during technical difficulties is no fun and damages your credibility. “I can't emphasize enough quality and reliability,” Zoom's Pando explains. “When you're communicating with someone over technology and it freezes, it's the same as interrupting you; you feel the same emotional reaction.”

Technical Requirements to Consider

- **Is there enough capacity to handle the number of people expected to attend or watch?** Waiting on end for a video or stream to load is torture, and also comes off as unprofessional.

- **Who will handle technical support?** If it's your company IT person, how will people contact him or her? Also, make sure that person knows calls or emails might be coming. Some conferencing providers include technical support as part of their product and paying for that service might be worth it to you.
- **Will it be recorded?** Some people might not be able to attend a video conference at its scheduled time. Some apps allow recording and replay of the entire event. If this is an important feature, you might want to make sure a recording is possible. Also, think about how you will make this recording available to people after the live portion is complete and how you will get that information out to everyone. Will you house it on your company's web site, YouTube, or somewhere else?
- **What kind of interactivity will you need?** If people will need to share screens or mark up a project, it's important to make sure your platform has that capability. If you want participants to be able to chat with each other and ask questions, ensure it has that functionality as well.
- **Can it accept more than one video source?** Some platforms are only designed to have one person presenting to a group of people. If your conference needs more than one video and audio source, make sure the software can handle it.

Pando says one mistake companies make is choosing a provider that does not work across different devices and operating systems. The app must work on a PC, Mac, iPhone, Android, iPad, other tablets, and more. If you're trying to get a lot of people together who have different technology and one person cannot join the meeting because of it, there will be problems. "It's just going to create another barrier to communication," Pando explains. "Making sure it works across different devices and platforms is critical." Also, double-check that it works on all internet browsers.

Before you pick a video conferencing platform or product to use, see what it looks like while in use. (Many apps have ways to log in as different people to see what it looks like to a user versus an administrator.) Make sure it is intuitive and does not use jargon and technical terms. If a brand new user wouldn't understand it, it's too technical and should be revised. Assume your viewers have no technical skills. One video conferencing provider even touts the fact that it uses circles instead of squares on its interface because a circle is said to encourage collaboration.

Considerations Before the Video Conference

Many video conferences are much like any other business or social function; they take planning. It doesn't do anyone any good if nobody shows up to a great event. Scheduling and registration can be the key to success.

“The best time of day [for a video conference] is when you can get everyone together you need to talk to,” Pando advises. “We have experimented with different times, and we haven’t found the silver bullet yet. Really think about your audience and experiment. Every audience is going to be different.”

Once you know who you want to attend your video conference, you’ll need to figure out if and how they will register. Some companies, especially those working on government grants, need to report data on a scheduled basis and knowing exactly who attended a session is crucial. If it’s a meeting between colleagues, it might not be as important for attendees to register. Decide in advance what data you want to collect. Are names and emails enough or would collecting zip codes or cities also be beneficial?

Some conferencing software handles registrations automatically. You add invitees and information about the video conference, and the software coordinates the rest - it even handles the email bounce-backs that usually occur when people leave companies or change email addresses. Software that automates this task can save lots of time and headaches. These same services also automatically send out reminders about the event so the people who have registered, or even those who have not yet replied, can remember to attend. If people need to log into a specific web site or remember a password or pass code, sending a reminder is important.

While you’re thinking about registration requirements, also think about the follow-up. Even if you don’t require advanced registration, it’s sometimes good to follow up with attendees and either offer them additional information or supply a feedback survey. Either way, having a solution that handles that task automatically can save lots of time and energy. The follow-up phase is also a good time to provide a link to a recorded version of the video conference.

We’ve talked a lot about technology and requirements for video conference participants. There are also many considerations for the content providers:

- **Do they have the technology they need to participate?** Make sure their computer, webcam, and microphone fit the specifications of your video conferencing system.
- **What time works best for them?** Sufficient time before the presentation is often necessary to allow a presenter to prepare adequately. Scheduling something right before a video conference or first thing in the morning might be too much for a presenter.
- **Will they be involved in any of the follow-ups?** Find out if they want to hear feedback from the people who watched or participated and if they will be available to answer any questions from attendees.

What to Look for When Picking a Video Conferencing Provider

When Googling “video conferencing,” dozens of providers appear in the search results. Some are well-known companies and others are not; some offer free services while others have fees involved. A search for “video chatting” yields quite different results, but since we’re talking mostly about professional usage, we’ll focus on what services providers offer for video conferencing.

The first thing to consider when picking a video conferencing provider is cost. Many sites offer free video conferencing services without bells and whistles. Some are ad-supported, and others rely on selling additional services for a fee. Some companies will come into a business and build a special video conferencing room. These setups usually involve multiple video screens, microphones, and speakers, and are obviously more expensive than web-based video conferencing services.

Before buying all of the additional services, determine if you really need them. Also, consider how much you will be using video conferencing. A pay-per-event plan might be better for your company than an annual subscription or monthly fee.

For audio, decide whether or not you need dial-in phone numbers or Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), a technology that uses a broadband internet connection to make voice calls (you might need both). Some platforms offer closed captioning services for situations that might require that feature.

No Matter What Solution You Use, Make Sure Your Setup Includes:

- At least one camera
- A quality microphone
- Speakers or headphones if you need to hear from the participant(s)

Then you must consider the collaboration features. In the past, video conferences were just a group of people talking with either another person or collection of people. Today, however, providers advertise all kinds of features that allow people to work together on things.

Popular collaboration features include:

- **Screen sharing:** This allows the person you are talking to see your computer screen. Remember, that means everything on your screen, so if you don’t want someone seeing your background picture, remove it. Screen sharing is important if you’re working on something visual that requires feedback or if you’re sharing a slide presentation.

- **Breakout rooms:** This has multiple meanings. For some higher-end video conferencing providers, a breakout room is another physical room with a separate audio/video setup that allows people to leave the larger discussion for a smaller one. In a completely virtual video conference where people are using their own computers or devices, a breakout room is a separate video conference that moves people out of a main meeting and into a meeting of their own. This can be handy for smaller group discussions or scenarios. Pando says breakout rooms are one of the company's most widely-used features.
- **Whiteboarding:** Almost every physical conference room has a big white board where people can use dry-erase markers to jot down ideas. The same feature is available in a virtual environment.
- **Attention indicators:** This feature can show a host if a participant is not focusing on the video conference screen and is instead doing something else.
- **Chat features:** Some providers allow participants to chat with each other - and often with a moderator - during a video conference.
- **Interaction with presenters:** This feature can be a high priority for webinars. It allows participants to ask a presenter questions via text or to virtually raise their hand so a presenter can call on them to ask a question using voice or video.
- **Mute features:** Most conference calls and video chats begin with a presenter asking everyone to mute their phones or microphones. Having a feature where a presenter or moderator can mute everyone can come in handy.

Other types of features can be lumped together because they are all interrelated and involve marketing, registration, and follow-up. Some providers have robust marketing features that allow pretty emails with logos and cool designs, while others are more basic. Decide what works best for you and pick a provider that offers it.

Expert Advice:

Derek Pando, Senior Product Marketing Manager for Zoom, says: "I wish people would know they have a real chance to create real connections using video. Video can take a lot of pain out of misunderstandings. The more we can do to help people understand us, the more effective you will be with your goal."

Consider who will be fixing problems as they arise because there will inevitably be technical issues along the way. Does the service you're looking at have a technical support department? If it does, test it out to see the response time. Nobody benefits if it takes forever to get a reply to a request for technical support. Then, decide who will handle technical support during the video conference. People will also likely misplace the login, PIN, or something else. Who will answer their calls or emails?



How to Create a Good Video Conference or Webinar

Not all webinars and video conferences are created equal. Sometimes, people just need to get together to talk, other meetings are for people to collaborate, and webinars are designed to share content with a group of people in a remote location. We've all been on those long webinars when a presenter with a scratchy microphone and a dog barking in the background talks through a bunch of slides - that's not going to hold anyone's attention. Creating an interesting and attention-keeping webinar takes some work.

"Everyone dreads it going in, so you need to find a way to catch someone's attention," says Melanie Alvarez, Assistant News Director at Cronkite News, the news division of Arizona PBS based at Arizona State University. She also teaches students how to produce good video content. "You need to think about establishing an emotional connection to whatever is on that screen."

Basically, that means make your viewers care, which means thinking like your viewer. Assume the attendee knows nothing about what you're talking about and build from there.

The first thing to consider is time. If you want people to choose to spend some of their time watching your webinar or video conference, let them know what to expect and how long it will last. If you advertise an hour, keep it to an hour. Do a test. Turn on the stopwatch app on your phone and try to talk about one topic for two straight minutes. If you easily did two, try five. You can fit a lot of content into an hour if you plan it correctly. The key word here is plan.

Along with setting a time limit, plan the number of presenters. Trying to fit ten people into an hour can be stressful and will make the entire presentation seem rushed. Once you figure out the number of presenters, have one person coordinate their content. Be sure to put the presenters in the correct order so they build on each other and that their topics don't overlap.

Quick Tip: Don't assume everyone knows what an acronym means. Always spell it out on a first reference, even on a slide.

While a video conference is virtual, meeting etiquette still applies. Think about what you do when you walk into a meeting with people you do not know. You introduce yourself. Do the same in a virtual meeting. If you're presenting a webinar, introduce yourself to everyone and give a sentence or two about why you're presenting and why people should pay attention to you. Taking the time to briefly explain why people should listen or watch you reminds them they made a wise choice about their time and their decision to spend it with you. Ignore them, and they might ignore you.

Quick Tip: Know where the camera is and speak into it. Doing so shows people you're paying attention to them. However, staring at it the whole time can be perceived as creepy.

As with any meeting, don't interrupt speakers while they are talking and if your meeting is with a bunch of people in the same room and a few people on video calls, don't ignore the video people and make them feel like afterthoughts. Make a conscious effort to include them in the conversation and ask their opinions. That will make them feel like they are an important part of the meeting.

Presenting Quality Content

Professional video producers know how to create a good video or panel discussion. Using some of their knowledge can help you present your content in the best possible way.

“Structure really helps people understand. You have to give them framework,” Alvarez explains. That means setting expectations and telling them what you're going to tell them, then tell them, then tell them what you told them. It's a way to make things sink in. Hearing an overview, then the content, then a brief reminder of the content reinforces points. “It

helps people know what to expect,” Alvarez says, adding it can also help people take a break from listening if they know one section does not apply to them and then they will know when to start paying attention again.

The technique also employs the rule of threes, which is the notion that people remember things in groups of threes. Think about a few examples:

- “Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”
- “Government of the people, by the people, for the people.”
- “Friends, Romans, countrymen.”
- “Blood, sweat, and tears.”
- “Location, location, location.”
- “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”
- “Faith, hope, and charity.”
- “Mind, body, spirit.”
- “Stop, look, and listen.”

Your mind remembers those because it remembers the pattern. Add a fourth item, and one often gets lost. The trick works in video, during a live presentation, and even with your kids or significant others.

Video Conference Guidelines: Slides, Slides, Slides

Slides and visuals can be critical to the success of a video conference or webinar. If you have multiple presenters, make their slides look consistent. It is a bit more work for the person coordinating the video conference, but it creates a more polished and cohesive look. Use the same background, font, and style.

Consider your font and background. Red text is extremely hard to read no matter the color of the background. White text on a dark background is painful for the eyes. Dark text on a dark background is just impossible to decipher. Patterned backgrounds are difficult on the eyes, too. Keep it simple. Shadows and text outlines also have no place on a video slide.

Remember, what might look good on your big computer screen won't look so great on a tiny mobile screen. You never know how people are watching you and what technology they are using to do it.

Here are some example of what to do and what not to do when creating slides for a video conference:

Can you read this clearly?

- It is a dark background with dark text
- The lack of contrast makes it very difficult to read
 - Especially as the text gets smaller
 - And smaller
 - And smaller

This is easier to read

- There is more of a contrast between the background and the text color
- **To make it even easier to read, make the font stronger**
- **Make the font bigger if you can**

Red text is difficult

- For some reason, it hurts the eyes
- Only use it for **emphasis**

Shadows

- Using a shadow makes it difficult to read on a smaller screen

White text on black

It hurts the eyes over time

Can you read this easily with this background?

- Even if the text is white, it is difficult to read
- Same if it is **BOLD**
- **Bigger does not help**
- **Avoid these types of patterned backgrounds**

Remember, people may be watching on mobile devices or tablets. The screen is already small enough and sometimes seeing a face during the conference is a problem. Viewing a slide or other content on a mobile device can be next to impossible. Do not put too much content on a slide.

Pick just enough content

- You do not need an entire paragraph or lengthy explanation on your slide. A simple bullet point list is enough. Do not make the eye and the ear compete for your attention. If this slide came up during a webinar, you would read the entire thing and ignore everything the presenter is saying.
 - It would be even worse if there were subpoints in a smaller font.
 - People think by reducing the font size, they can fit more on a slide.
 - Reducing the number of slides is not always the best idea because if the font size is too small, nobody can read it so it has no real purpose.
 - If nobody is reading your slides? Why do them?

It's important to keep the eye and the ear from competing. When the two compete, the eye wins and people stop listening. So, make the two work together.

Melanie Alvarez, Assistant News Director at Cronkite News, the news division of Arizona PBS based at Arizona State University shares her advice: “We have a mantra of *see it, say it*, when I teach news producing. Give people time to read and hear it at the same time.” She adds that it's crucial to know when to say when and not to put too much text on the screen.

In a visual presentation, use your slides to reinforce the points you make, and not to explain everything about the points you're making. Also, don't read your slides to your viewers. “When you get trapped with reading what is on the screen, you lose interest,” Alvarez says.



Expert Tips for Handling Slides:

- Something should change on the screen every seven seconds. That's the average attention span. “Usually in webinars, the visual does not change as fast as the attention span fades,” Alvarez explains.
- Use bullet points, not complete sentences. “Life happens in bullet points.”
- Remember the Four Cs of good writing: clear, concise, conversational, catchy.

- Do not read to viewers and make sure you provide something extra. “Give me added value beyond a training manual.”

Collaboration and Interaction During a Video Conference

No matter how engaging you are, it gets monotonous to listen to someone talk. During the video conference, build-in time for interaction with the participants. This could mean making time for questions throughout the presentation and not just at the end. Sometimes, a question can sidetrack things, but chances are if one person is not understanding something, at least one other person might be confused as well. Taking the time to explain a concept could determine if someone pays attention for the rest of the video conference or not.

Quick Tip: Plug in your laptop. If the battery dies, the video conference dies, too.

Also, make sure you speak clearly into the microphone. It sounds simple, but some microphones are not multi-directional, so if you're not speaking into it, it is not picking up the sound. If people can't hear or understand you, they won't learn from you.

Video Conferencing Presenter Tips: Looks Do Matter

When planning a video conference, make sure you pick a proper place to present with appropriate background. If you're going to be on camera, give some thought to how you frame your background. Avoid backgrounds that are busy and could take attention away from you or your content.

What to Wear:

- **Avoid busy clothing:** Cameras do not like small patterns. It creates a moiré effect, which looks a bit like the pattern is dancing on the screen.
- **Choose solid colors:** However, avoid black or white.
- **Dress Professionally:** That does not mean a suit, but could mean something other than a college T-shirt.

Overall, it's about being and looking the part. If you want collaboration, look and act like it.

Pitfalls to Avoid When Creating a Video Conference

Paying attention to the little things can make a huge difference before, during, and after a video conference.

- **Check audio and video and select the technology that is right for you.** Nothing is more distracting than hums, crackles, pops, static, etc., when trying to listen to a meeting or presentation. Do a practice run before attendees join.
- **Know who will take care of technical issues.** If people spend too much time trying to get things to work or can't register easily, it's not worth it to them, wastes their time, and they probably won't attend.
- **Avoid complex platforms and software.** Is the interface easy to use? Do you have the appropriate technology? Take the software for a test drive before committing to using it.
- **Plan your content.** Great technology can't cover up bad content.
- **Try to avoid background noise, but if something happens, acknowledge it.**
- **Pay attention to what is in the background.** Ask yourself if the background looks professional and sends the right message to your viewers.
- **Test it out and try things before you really need it.** It is better to figure out that something doesn't work without people watching (rather than when everyone is ready to go and you discover it along with your audience).

There are many differences between a video conference and a video chat, but the general idea of connecting people in real time using video is the same. Both are about making people feel connected to each other and to what is happening. Knowing how to create the best video conference, what features you might want to look for while picking a video conference provider, and some things to avoid can help you create memorable, informative, and collaborative video conferences.

Manage Your Video Conference Attendees with Smartsheet

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