Being Professional in a Virtual Courtroom Hearing

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What a wonderful time to be in. With courtrooms and municipalities contributing to the battle of COVID we have the new and developing frontier of digital appearances. Though we are more than a year in, as I sit in hearings it is still apparent there is a lack of professionalism and understanding of the required WebEx functionality that is now prevalent in the courtroom arena.   This article is intended to present the best tips and tricks for appearing professional in the digital realm.

Interestingly, many of these tips are the same ones you should be implementing when appearing in person:

- **Be on time**.

  I have a mentor who has long taught me that if you're not at least five minutes early, you are late. In the digital world, being 15 minutes early should be easy because you're not fighting traffic or parking. Plan ahead and be early so you can be mindful of the remaining tips.

- **Be mindful of your surroundings**.

  This is just a polite way of saying that the judge or anyone else on the call doesn't want to hear your TV blaring, your kids fighting, or your dog crying to go potty. Instead, try finding a quiet space for the duration of the meeting, even if it means leaving your house because your neighbor decided to conduct a garage band session. If you live with small children, arrange for childcare during that time. If there are other adults in the home, let them know what's going on in advance so you will not be disturbed. These are critical baseline components to a successful court hearing and a professional appearance.

- **No eating.**

  No excuses here--there is usually no food or drink allowed in the court room either. A glass of water is generally acceptable, but make sure its not in your "Drain the Swamp" coffee mug, and make sure you wipe the orange Cheetos crumbs off your face before you make your appearance as well.

- **Be Ready**.

  Being prepared is your friend. I highly recommend utilizing calendar events so you can be prepared. You should receive the meeting ID number (or code) along with all the necessary information about how to log-in to WebEx or Zoom well before the scheduled court hearing. This e-mail usually has a URL (internet link) as well that

can be used by your phone or computer to join the meeting. I recommend saving this information in the location section of a calendar invite to allow for one click connectivity. Also be sure to set a reminder of the appointment.

- **Look presentable**.

  Look like you have credibility. Being at home isn't an excuse to wear pajama pants and a graphic tee to a court hearing! It might be virtual, but first impressions still matter, and so do bad impressions on the judge. Dress professionally, and NOT just from the top up. Give the occasion the respect it deserves. You never know what you will be asked to do while on the meeting.

- **Be prepared**.

  It doesn't take much to ensure you have a professional experience. Follow these techniques to make sure you don't have any technological limitations. Remember, since you are 15 minutes early, you have time to try and fix something if it's not working as expected.

- **Give it a test drive.**

  Even if you're used to video conferences, it's always a good idea to test your laptop and phone capabilities before the meeting begins. Make sure your camera works, is in focus, and you are squared in the screen. Lighting is potentially an issue, as is the filthy background. Don't have a window or any bright lights around you, especially behind you. Check and make sure your background is appropriate. You can preview this functionality prior to joining the meeting.

  Also, check your audio settings. Use the "test audio" feature--it will ensure you can hear and be heard. Use more than "testing 123" to test your microphone. The software can help eliminate background noise like your computer fan if you let it. Use something more along the lines of "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers, how many pickles did Peter Piper pick." This should give you enough duration to see if you are going to have any unexpected background noise.

- **Check your internet connection**.

  A virtual court appearance or meeting may go on for hours. Before you decide on a location from which to participate, be sure that you have a strong, reliable internet connection. Obviously, things happen (power outages, for example), but if you know there's a strong likelihood that you'll be kicked out of the meeting every five minutes, find a better alternative. Some options are to rent a meeting room at your local library or to find a friend with an empty office you can borrow. You can also

rent an office by the hour with a service like LiquidSpace https://liquidspace.com/. Some good planning will lead to a much more professional experience.

Once connected to your meeting, run a connectivity check. Services like https://www.speedtest.net/ are great to determine how your internet connection is going to perform. Most internet services expect subscribers to be more focused on downloads, so that is usually the way 'connectivity' is described/leased. For virtual court or meetings, upload speeds are what matter. This is VERY important to understand from a video conferencing perspective. Ever seen people freezing or hard to hear? They didn't make sure their UPLOAD speeds were sufficient. Doing the meeting from home? Turn off your Ring doorbell, security cameras, and any streaming services the kids left running. These all affect your connectivity, some more than you would expect. Running your connectivity test when connected to the meeting will allow you to see how much bandwidth is available while using the service. For example, my home office has a "50 Mbps Service". I can see this running speedtest.net:
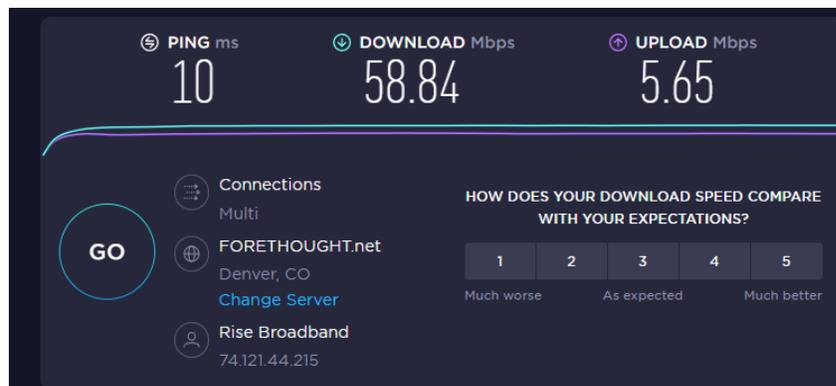
Note my Download speed is currently testing at 58 Mbps, meaning my internet provider is doing what they have contracted with me to do. Reading the fine print reveals that they guarantee a 5-10 Mbps Upload speed which is the critical part of web conferencing. This is how others see and hear you. You will want to make sure you have at a minimum of 5 Mbps available for the web meeting.[1]

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[1] Minimum requirements for HD Video and Audio is 2.5 Mbps Download, 3 Mbps Upload, but remember, these speed availabilities will fluctuate with other demands on the network, so higher is much better. The actual bandwidth will also vary based on make and model of camera, resolution of camera settings, FPS settings of camera, how many cameras are active on a meeting, etc.

If you are short on bandwidth, try this:

1) Disable other devices on your network: other computers; streaming services; ring doorbells; etc.
2) Reduce your camera settings. These steps are going to be dependent on your computer, so use Google for your specific model of computer and camera to find the right settings. Good thing you're 15 mins early!
3) Can't get it to work? Ask permission to disable your camera due to bandwidth limitations. This will allow you to hear and be heard effectively.

- **Check your background**.

Seriously, this says a lot about your credibility. Look behind you. Is there a storage closet? Did you leave your dirty underwear on the floor? Do you have a risqué poster hanging on the wall? Your camera will be on for hours, so even if you don't notice it, everyone else will. It is super easy to set a background in WebEx (or any other platform) with these general steps (note, version of WebEx software or different platforms may vary slightly):

1. In WebEx, go to **Preferences** and select **Video**.
2. From the Video tab, select **Change Virtual Background**.
3. Scroll to the **+** icon and tap. You can upload your own image, video file, or a WebEx custom background to use as your background.
4. Click **Apply**!

Choose something that looks professional. Remember, your choice reflects on YOUR credibility.

- **This is a courtroom. Behave accordingly**.

It might feel more relaxed than an in-person visit to the courtroom, but virtual hearings are still hearings. You are still appearing in front of a judge and it's still important to use proper titles and speak only when spoken to. Always state your name clearly before speaking.

Stay muted until spoken to. As a note, you can hold the spacebar to unmute and speak. Just wait a half second for the system to realize you are trying to talk, not type a message. The system will automatically mute again when you stop talking and let go of the space bar.

WebEx, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, etc. are tools. Just like any tool, it is critical you master its use to remain professional and ensure you are heard. These tips should keep you on the front line of professionalism. Just make sure you don't mess with the filters or risk being a cat on your next hearing: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lGOofzZOyl8