DE MAURO'S QUICK TIPS FOR VIRTUAL CONVERSATIONS AND PRESENTATIONS

Break your sentences into short phrases, (about six to eight bits or words at a time). Long, run-on, and compound sentences (with a lot of "and" s, and "so" s) are hard to understand.

Speak naturally, but more slowly than you do in face-to-face conversation. Allow a little absorption time, a brief pause, after your thoughts to let them land with your audience.

Know that digital audio makes you and others sound more clipped and abrupt than a typical face-to-face conversation would. This may make you (and others) feel and sound short or dismissive. Be aware of this, but try not to take it personally.

You might want to flavor your comments with an intention like "to share", "to assure", or to "find out". Use a tone that encourages conversation. Discussions are a two-way street.

Be aware of the situation others might be coming from. Consider what might be going on in their lives and be sensitive to their current experiences. Use social cues to gauge the state of your peers, colleagues, or superiors. Be cognizant of your role and position in the conversation.

Take a picture of your self with your device, if possible beforehand, so you know what the viewer is seeing and experiencing. There are some situations in which you need to be credible, and impression management is appropriate. And there are many others situations when you can just be yourself, when how you look and sound matters less than doing what you need to do. (Times when you just want to be with your friends, get a complex job done, assemble visuals, and trade info).

Consider your background and locations. Ask yourself, does my background matter or not?   Do you want people to see your bookshelves, your collection of action figures, your bathroom wall? Does it matter? Sometimes yes, sometimes no. Everything communicates — logos, photos, flags, masks, plants, artwork and photos send messages about who you are. Be aware that, however, what an American flag means to you, may not have the same meaning for those watching.

Use the mute button if you aren't speaking, especially if you are in a noisy place with family members, a radio or TV, computer or phone with noisy notifications, etc. Some listeners can't concentrate with the noise you like.

Decide if the online event is primarily public, as in a classroom, workshop, or performance, or private. Most of us have different public have and private selves. Watch what you say in public venues, both for your own physical and psychological safety and health as well as for others.

Dynamic intentions, like "to assert" are hard to pull off online without appearing to be a bully, or a know it all. That said, committed speaking (declarations, promises, clarifications), often communicates more effectively that uncommitted phrases, and vocal patterns. Know your own vocal patterns and be careful of frequent use of words like "kinda" "sorta" and "um". As you feel or hear these words come up, look for a replacement behavior like breathing in, or pausing.

A common vocal pattern is to end every sentence with a question (your voice goes up). This makes you appear uncertain and questioning. To ease this, practice ending some sentences with a period; bring your voice down, not up, at the end. Also, watch out for end dropping (fading away at the end of phrases and thoughts), and being overly emphatic. Vocal patterns cause the listeners to zone out.

Use vocal variety. Vary your rate, pitch, volume and timbre. When you speak all at the same rate (fast/slow), or volume (loud/soft), or pitch (high/low) nothing stands out. Vocal variety creates interest and help listeners sort out what matters from what doesn't. Stress key words by making them louder, slower, etc.

Remain aware that it is your job to be seen and heard, as well as to see and hear others.

Online buffering causes a time gap when the body and voice are not in sync. It is is disconcerting to watch, and makes speakers hard to understand. This is often due to a bad internet connection. You may or may not be able to fix this. If you do not have access to a tech solution, ask someone on the call or site to tell you if important points do not get through.

Listen well. Take notes. Echo and repeat others' words, when you can. One way to do this is to say, "What I hear you saying is . . .", or ask, "Did I get that right?"

When possible, look directly into at the camera light on your device, rather than down at a keyboard, or at another person talking. This gives viewers the sense that you are looking into their eyes. Cut out and tape a little half face with two eyes and a hole cut out for the camera at he top of your computer to remind you where to look. (This fun idea is from Simon Brooks, Storyteller.)

Focus on helping the viewer picture what you are talking about, rather than just emphasizing being "good" or "impressive".

Look down or away from the screen if someone's body language makes it hard for you to actively listen. Most people can't help it if they are visually distracting.

If you don't know the answer to a question, feel put on the spot, or rushed, say: "Let me think about that", or "I want to pass on this", or "Would you get back to me on that". Slow response time, as distinct from blurting out reactions, is often a welcome gift to the group.

Basic good manners usually apply. Apologize when you interrupt. Acknowledge when you hear or see something useful. Assist those who need tech help if you can. For example say, "I think you might be muted. Could you please unmute yourself?" and then tell them when the unmute button is. Practice patience and kindness.

I hope these tips help you in your future online conversations. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at karendemauro.net.

Best Wishes,
Karen De Mauro