



Technology as Competitive Advantage: Virtual Goes Viral in A/E/C

By Sarah Wortman, CPSM

As people around the globe adjusted to living and working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the most notable changes became increased reliance on videoconferencing technology for various types of communication, from training to interviews.

For some, technology has been a curse, yet for others it's been not only a blessing, but also a competitive advantage. Let's look at ways smart firms are leveraging communications technology successfully.

1. Virtual training. Some A/E/C marketers see this as a great time to provide online training for technical staff related to business development, relationship management, and project management.

Russell Sanford, FSMPS, CPSM, chief marketing officer of Kleinschmidt Associates in Lexington, SC, found that the pivot toward virtual business development training has been a good one. In 2020, his firm had plans to conduct half-day seller-doer training in five different offices throughout the United States, but travel restrictions were instituted just after the first session. "Our team quickly regrouped and developed a shorter, more practical conversation skills workshop to provide our technical staff with relationship development hacks while on the phone with their clients," says Sanford.

His organization launched Microsoft Teams and used this video platform to ensure they had engagement from the attendees. The firm was able to have all 45 staff members attend, which was a huge success. He notes, "These sessions also spurred ideas for additional, practical training topics from the technical

staff. Now, instead of traveling throughout the country conducting in-person training this year, I'm building a training library that will save tons of time and energy in the future!"

2. Virtual interviews. Once a last resort for key team members who were out of town on interview day, online interviews have become the norm. Just prior to shelter-in-place orders, my firm was shortlisted for an opportunity and had scheduled an interview for which clients and project partners would be flying in from three cities.

Pivoting to an all-virtual interview meant coordinating not only with the team, but also with the client. The first task was to convince our internal team to go ahead with the virtual interview rather than gather at the office to conduct it. This involved reminding the team that this way of interviewing was going to be with us for a while, scheduling rehearsals to work out a strategy, and being a silent participant on the call to manage any technology hiccups.

Then we needed to make sure the interviewers were comfortable with the process. While reaching out to confirm expectations for the Zoom call, one of the client representatives expressed frustration at how long it was taking some firms to get their presentations onto the screen, citing that it was taking as much as 15 minutes into the scheduled interview hour before all participants and presentation materials were ready to go. In response, we chose to pretest the technology 30 minutes before the call and invited the client representative to join us, ensuring all systems were to their satisfaction. After we won the job, one

of the reasons identified was our ability to communicate and collaborate well remotely.

One way to ensure online interviews run smoothly is to pick the right videoconferencing service. Providers offer varying options for seeing/hearing participants on different devices, as well as different channels for asking and responding to questions. One thing I particularly like about doing online interviewing is the private chat feature, which allows my internal team to communicate with each other as the interview progresses, something we couldn't have done during a face-to-face interview. Another advantage, because this modality is new for most of our senior technical staff, is that it's encouraged pre-interview practicing to ensure presentations run smoothly, we transition the host function efficiently, and we manage our time effectively.

3. Virtual coaching. Coaching for Q&A is just as integral to preparing for online interviews as it is for face-to-face interviews. Donna J. Corlew, FSMPS, CPSM, chief whatever-it-takes officer at C*Connect in Nashville, TN, recently coached a client who won a sizeable new project early in the stay-at-home order phase. She and her client identified three strategies they would use during the Q&A that ultimately helped them win the project. "We began by clarifying which team member would take the lead to answer questions related to each specific topic," explains Corlew. "We also designated a quarterback who fielded and directed questions to the appropriate person when it

wasn't clear who should answer. Finally, we agreed on limiting follow-on commentary to one interview team member per question." Strategies such as these, which also help make in-person interviews better, are a good idea for any team that's anxious about the dialogue parts of an interview.

Marketers who are demonstrating their value to their firms in the new normal are those who've taken advantage of a variety of resources to help their firms better leverage the technology. A colleague of mine who mastered the screen markup feature on Zoom has not only impressed clients with his billable experience, but also with his mastery of the technology, which demonstrates a resourcefulness in problem-solving that clients value. Charles Raymond, CPSM, marketing and business development communications professional at Weston & Sampson in Worcester, MA, recently participated on an SMPS Boston Town Meeting Zoom call with about 35 chapter volunteers. A few minutes in, the organizer split participants into subgroups for 30 minutes so each group could discuss a different topic. At the end, attendees regrouped to compare notes. "I thought that was a great use of technology, and now I can leverage this capability for my firm," states Raymond.

Though none of us knows how long this current situation will last, firms that are succeeding are those that have leaned into videoconferencing technology, with A/E/C marketers at the helm to help them understand and leverage all the possibilities such technology affords. ■

We're Being Watched

I can't remember a time—since I studied broadcasting—that I've spent as much time as I do now watching myself work. If, like me, you find this part of the new normal a bit distracting, here are a few tips to make it easier.

1. Make sure you're either in front of or at a 90-degree angle from a strong light source. Sitting with the window behind you makes you look like you're in witness protection.
2. Keep your audio muted when you're not speaking to keep background noise to a minimum.
3. Use virtual backgrounds thoughtfully, with an awareness of how lighting affects them.
4. If you're on camera, behave as you would if you were in a meeting room with your boss. When you need to stretch, change places, use the bathroom, change a diaper, or eat your lunch, turn off your video.
5. When there's unavoidable background noise in your environment, using earbuds can help filter out unwanted ambient sound.



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