

Virtual Presentation Skills for a Brave New World



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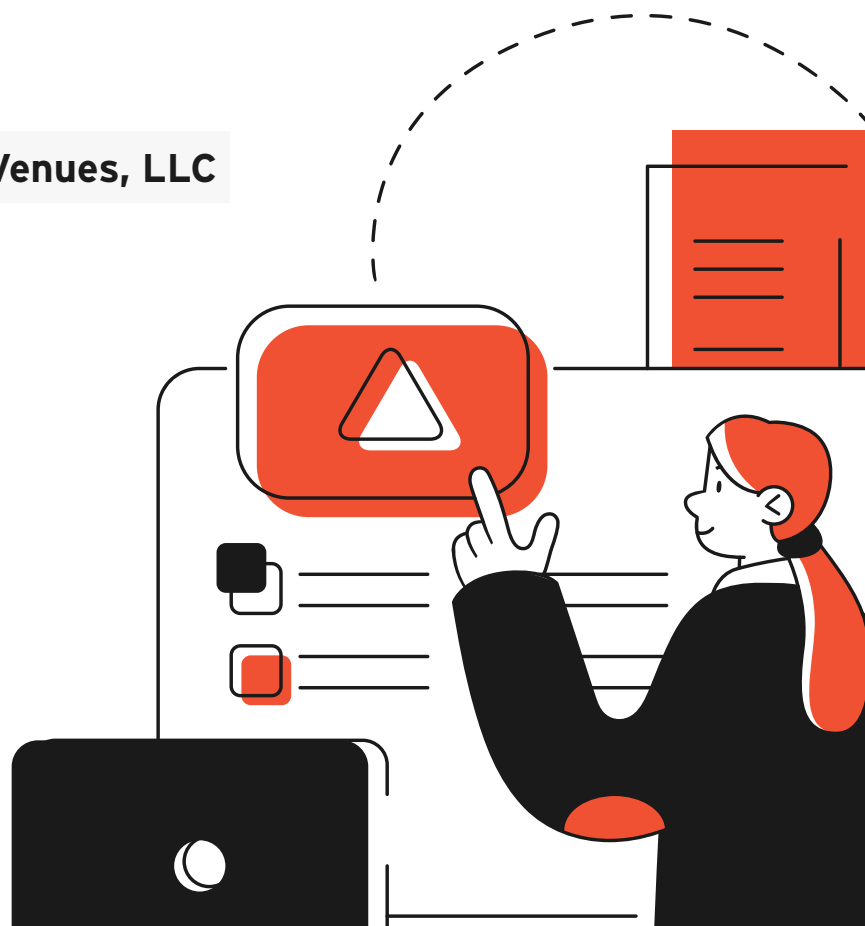


Table of Contents

Introduction	03
Why: Raising your game on virtual presentation skills is no longer optional	04
Setup: Create a presentation space that enables multi-directional engagement	07
Practice: Map offline engagement tactics to the online “room”	11
Go Live: Present for attention and action	18
Next Steps	24
About: Roger Courville, CSP and GoTo	25

Introduction

The world of events – onsite or online – has changed forever, and it's likely safe to say that our expectations are vastly different relative to a decade ago.

Think about it. In 2010 the iPad had just been introduced, and computing was barely mobile. Ride hailing apps, electric cars, and movie streaming services were new to the world and far from ubiquitous. Smart phones were still primarily used as phones.

What has not changed is every presenter's need to engage and delight their audiences – onsite or online. And the good news is that personal growth in your virtual presentation skills isn't hard, it's just different.

This paper makes recommendations based on the results of an independent study conducted on behalf of GoTo – a “10-year anniversary study” nearly identical to the study a decade ago. Unlike a decade ago, however, this paper isn't a research report; it instead focuses primarily on skills distilled into a targeted set of “what you need to know” and “how to” recommendations.

Why raising your game on virtual presentation skills is no longer optional

The global pandemic has pushed us even faster into a digital transformation and accelerated a flexible-work revolution. Two foundational observations have emerged.

1 | Remote and flexible work attitudes have reshaped expectations for online events

For example, a recent 2021 study found a general hunger to “return to normal.” Respondents still expect video conferencing usage to increase 134% in the coming year¹, and 49% expect to increase spending on virtual events platforms.²

Interestingly, the survey found that some cases, participants now prefer virtual venues for content consumption and connecting with others. Consequently, their expectations for the quality of online events has risen. Presenters should be asking, “Is ‘good enough’ good enough?”

¹ 1080 Group, LLC privately study commissioned by GoTo, 2021. Also, separate from regular organizational use of webinars, a 2020 Wainhouse Research report projected that market for virtual events (multi-session, multi-day events) is expected to grow to 48% by 2025. Regardless of what happens with in-person events, we expect that demands for virtual presentation excellence will continue to create opportunity for those who choose to embrace how to engage online audiences.

² Metrigy, custom Webinar and Virtual Events Study commissioned by GoTo, 2021.

Respondents expected increase
video conferencing usage:

134%

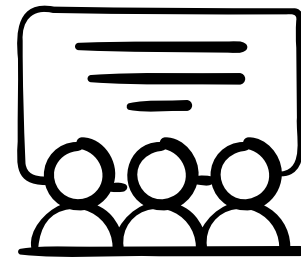
Respondents expected increase in
spending on online events platforms:

49%

2 | Audiences suggest presenters still need to raise their game

Our decade-over-decade study showed that presenters now demonstrate a higher level of awareness of their need for skills unique to virtual presentations. Qualitative comments suggest they still, however, find it disquieting to not be able to see their audience in online events.

Importantly, respondents from attendees of virtual presentations illuminate where virtual presenters need to grow (see Figure 1). This suggests the need still exists to coach virtual presenters for skills in “connection” via other tools on their presentation dashboard that give them a way to “see” their audience (e.g., attention meters, chat/Q&A, polls).



“

It is nice to participate and then sleep in my own bed. **But why attend live if I cannot interact with others?**

– 2021 SURVEY RESPONDENT

”

As a participant in a video conference, I find it distracting or annoying when a leader...

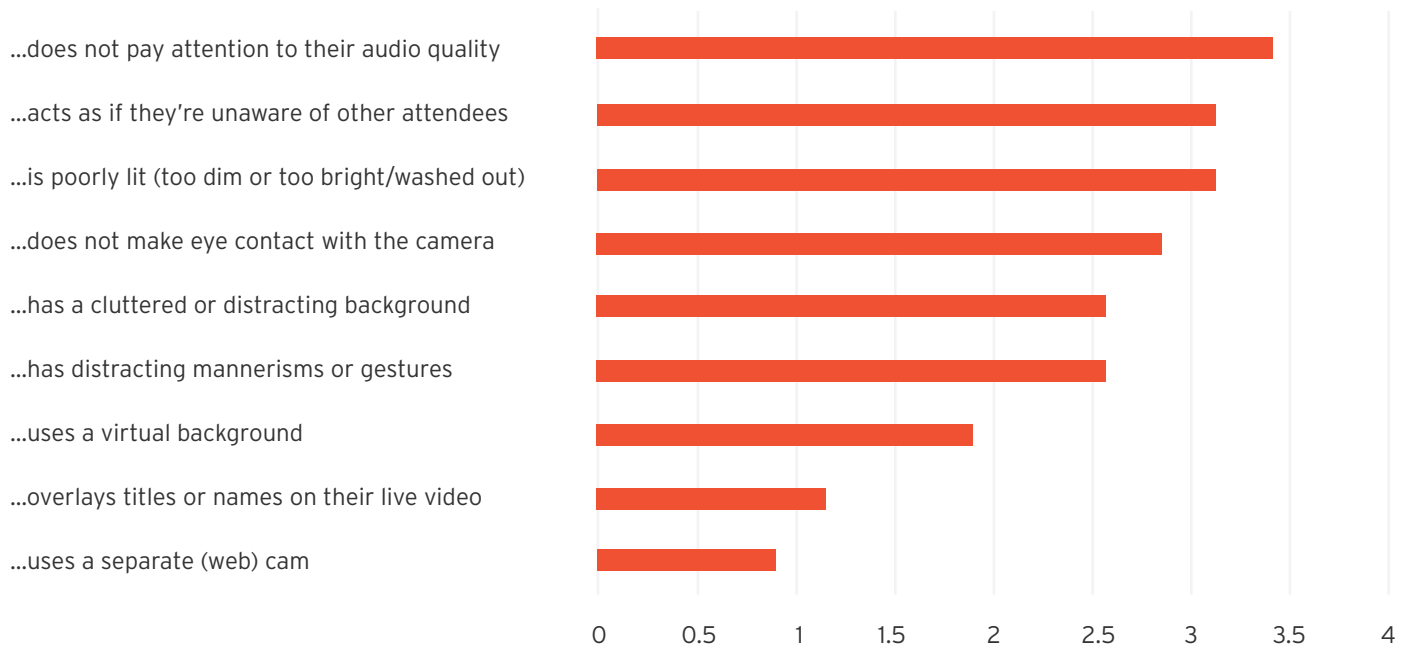


Figure 1: Next to being able to hear clearly, ATTENDEES find it most annoying when they're 'unseen' by PRESENTERS

THE BOTTOM LINE

Compared to a decade ago, attendees of online events have higher expectations of both online events and presenters' skills. The good news is that it is not hard to meet or even exceed those expectations. As you will learn below, it's possible to significantly improve relative to one of their highest priorities: feeling "seen."

SETUP:

Create a presentation space that enables multi-directional engagement

One of the most powerful things you can do to command the “room” is to show up well. Many elements that go into showing up well, however, are those your audience will notice unconsciously. In your presentation environment, this touches down in two realms, sensory (hearing and seeing) and cognitive (interpersonal interaction).

Help your audience connect with you aurally

Studies have shown that vocal resonance is linked to the perceptions of the presenter's competence and authority.

STAND UP.

This opens your body's “core,” improves the opportunity to breathe diaphragmatically, and decreases the chance of using a thinner or nasally tone.

**USE A TIGHT-
TO-THE-FACE
MICROPHONE.**

Vocal “warmth” is based on the proximity of a microphone to the sound source (your mouth). This is why, for instance, radio DJs and sportscasters are close to their microphones. Having a microphone or telephone headset close to your mouth also eliminates most background noise as computer mics and speaker phones are omnidirectional. Use an external USB microphone designed for voice.

**ELEVATE YOUR
AWARENESS OF
EXTRANEOUS
NOISE THAT IS
PICKED UP.**

Amateur presenters underestimate how much additional noise is picked up by microphones that are “listening” to a wider area. Typing, computer notifications, rustling paper, etc. are heard more than is expected, and with contemporary attendees listening in better audio environments than yesteryear, they notice.

**IMPROVE HOW
WELL YOU CAN
HEAR.**

A key reason co-presenters talk over each other in virtual presentations is because they cannot hear well enough to notice subtle-but-audible verbal cues from fellow presenters or the emcee/moderator. Headsets or earbuds are optimal as they also eliminate the distraction of other environmental noise. Even without a source of audio directly in your ear, test how you hear a range of volume from high to low – and make sure you can hear the softer, more subtle sounds.

Help your audience connect with you facially

Virtual presentations shift the relative importance of various aspects of how you “show up.” For instance, your facial expression communicates more in a virtual presentation than an in person presentation because all attendees have a close, “front row” seat.

POSITION

YOUR CAMERA

JUST ABOVE

EYE LEVEL.

This is an old trick from the business of professional photography. Positioning your camera just above eye level will keep people from looking up your nose. It also comes with a bonus: it reduces the risk of your head leaning forward and constricting your breathing (which impacts the fullness of your voice’s resonance).

BALANCE

LIGHTING ON

YOUR FACE.

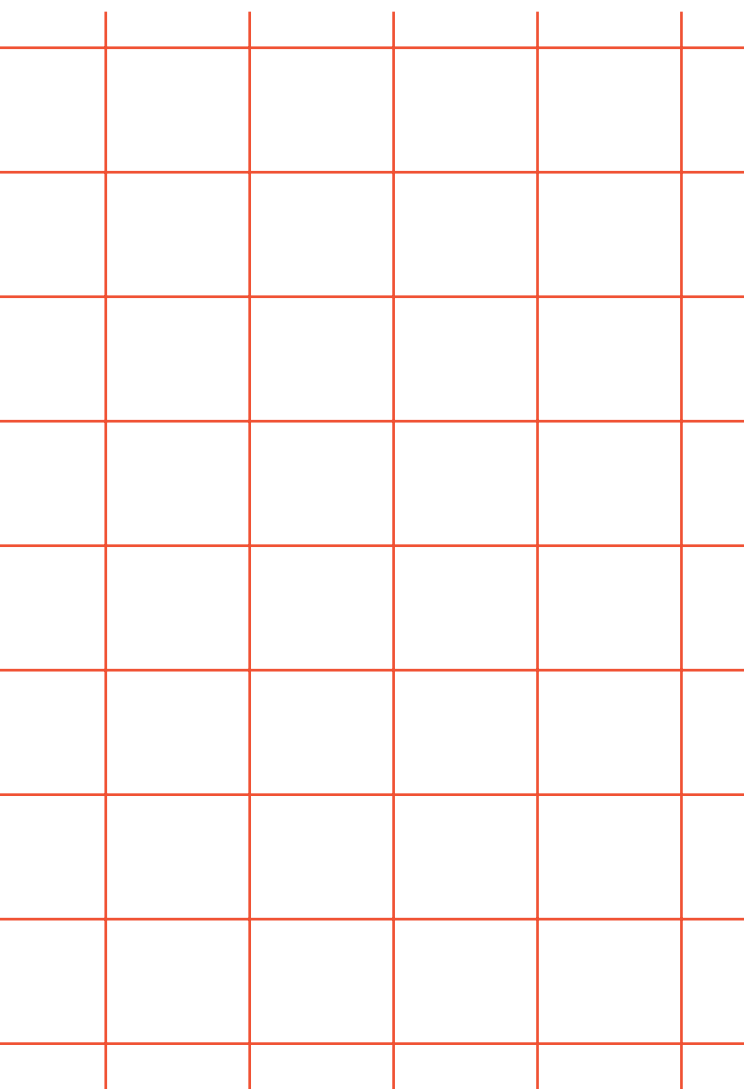
There’s a difference between “the audience can see me” and “the audience can pick up subtle facial expressions.” The untrained eye will give you feedback about the first yet fail to realize that they need the second. It’s best to use two lights in front of yourself that are adjustable so you can, for instance, ensure there is no glare off your forehead or glasses.

Pro Tip:

If you wear glasses that reflect light, they may inhibit attendees from seeing your eyes, a key part of your non-verbal communication. If possible, change the angle of your lighting. If the offender is your computer, try changing your apps or visual theme to “dark mode.”

BACKLIGHT**YOURSELF****TO CREATE****SEPARATION****AND FOCUS.**

Pro photographers use a third light to illuminate the space behind the subject in proportion with the lighting in front of you (which should be significantly brighter). The effect is subtle and often unnoticed by the untrained eye, but your goal is to create a sense of depth behind you and, by extension, to focus attention on your face.



PRACTICE

Map offline engagement tactics to the online “room”

Imagine a rapport building activity in a class of 20 people where you ask each person to introduce themselves. Offline that could take 20 minutes because verbal communication is sequential. Online in a chat however, it might only take two minutes because the same communication is simultaneous. Additionally, that chat is more easily referenced later for remembering or even reporting. The point is this: virtual presentations are different, not better or worse.

In the table below, the simple process represented will help you think through adapting what you do offline for a different “room.” Consider what you do offline, map it to a corresponding feature in your new “room,” and think creatively about what you may even be able to do better online.

Pro Tip:

More visual real estate makes it easier to keep your tools of engagement in view. [See this blog post for an extended “how to.”](#)

OFFLINE ACTION	ONLINE FEATURE	ADAPTION FOR ENGAGEMENT
Keep an eye on the whole room	Reconfigure your layout	Open the panes in your control panel that enable you to glance at what is important to you (e.g., participant list or the dashboard that shows participant attentiveness). BONUS: Undock individual panes, and then drag the panes and control panel to where you want them.
Read a participant's name tag; call on him or her by name	Attendee list	People are hardwired to like hearing their names, and it adds a personal touch, helping them feel "seen." An additional benefit (especially with a large group) is that even participants you don't call on realize you are there and are personally vested in them
Keep an eye on attentiveness	Attentiveness indicator, Questions indicator	Attentiveness indicators detect the active application on participants' desktops, and those who are "somewhere else" are registered as inattentive; look for this in a dashboard for whole-group indicators or on the participant list to see attentiveness by individual

OFFLINE ACTION	ONLINE FEATURE	ADAPTION FOR ENGAGEMENT
Show a video	Upload a video file (e.g., .mp4, .mov, or .wmv) or link to YouTube	Think of videos as separate from PowerPoint or other visual elements. You not only can avoid embedding them in PowerPoint, but you can play them independently.
Project your computer	Sharing	Consider dropping out of PowerPoint "presentation mode" to show something else; treat it like a participant is standing next to you and you've invited him or her to look over your shoulder as you "show and tell." BONUS: Unlike in-person projection, online you can choose to share only a specific application or document.
Whiteboard	Drawing tools	Use a pointer or a variety of highlighters and pens to direct attention; change up what you use to keep it interesting

OFFLINE ACTION	ONLINE FEATURE	ADAPTION FOR ENGAGEMENT
Ask for a show of hands	Participant "hand up" tool	Whether planned or on-the-fly, gauge participation and response by learning to see hands up "at a glance;" HINT: You likely can do this in more than one place such as the participant list or a dashboard
Participants can "lean over and whisper to their neighbors"	Chat privately	Active participants are less likely to wander away; enable private chat to let them more naturally chat amongst themselves
Establish rapport	Chat publicly	Many presentations benefit when participants have a chance to introduce themselves; another benefit is that you demonstrate early that you are live and expecting to be interactive in a normal way
Tell the audience something they should investigate	Share a "hot link" in chat	Drop a link into the chat instead of burying resources in slides shared later.

OFFLINE ACTION	ONLINE FEATURE	ADAPTION FOR ENGAGEMENT
Facilitate group discussion	Chat publicly, Unmute all or select individuals, breakout rooms	While some presentations are about what the presenter has to share, often learning and engagement improve dramatically when participants can voice their questions and inputs
Maintain "control" of the side conversations and chatter	Mute/unmute all or selectively	Minimize distracting chatter by utilizing master control of when participants can speak
Ask for feedback that helps you understand how you're doing	Polling	Little is more engaging for participants than having the presentation catered to them; use polls to gauge their reactions and needs
Print/distribute handouts	Handout feature	Distribute digital documents of ANY type; load documents in advance or drag/drop to share on the fly

OFFLINE ACTION	ONLINE FEATURE	ADAPTION FOR ENGAGEMENT
Use your facial expression and gestures	Webcam	Draw participants in by making eye contact with your webcam; occasionally ask participants to watch your webcam feed so you can show them something. BONUS: Use advanced settings to select a different camera.
Control your visual environment	ChromaKey Pro integration	"Compose" your background with custom virtual backgrounds.
Gauge how participants are learning	Testing	Tests enable you to gather feedback formally; consider not only testing after sessions, but during a session to assess comprehension; HINT: Plan a break to give yourself a few minutes to check the report
Get participants back from a break	Break timer	Attention is improved dramatically when it's only asked for in chunks; HINT: Consider a game or incentive that rewards participants who return on time

THE BOTTOM LINE

The single greatest momentum killer virtual presenters experience is the hesitation they feel when delivering. This is what makes GoTo Webinar's "practice mode" so powerful – you can rehearse in the exact "room" you'll be using when you go live. Invest a small amount of time to adapt your engagement tactics and walk through them in a rehearsal setting. You will reap dividends in the confidence and energy that "comes across" to your virtual audience.

GO LIVE

Present for attention and action

Today's the day your preparation pays off. Here are tactical suggestions for increasing attention and engagement.

Start your presentation with momentum

CREATE "INFORMAL CONNECTION" BEFORE THE PRESENTATION BEGINS

A significant part of social connection isn't what happens during the formal presentation – it's what happens before or after. Start the webinar early and talk with people who have shown up in advance (just like you'd do in an in-person venue!). (See sidebar)

Roger's "start early" script:

"Good morning, afternoon, or evening, wherever you happen to be joining from!

Imagine you're walking into an in-person seminar and there's some funny looking guy at the door saying hello and shaking hands. If we do that for in-person seminars, why don't we do that for web seminars?

As long as we're both here early, tell me...

INTERACT IMMEDIATELY AS YOUR PRESENTATION BEGINS

The number one reason people leave a webinar early is “presenter is boring.”³ And we all know the difference between someone talking at us versus to us. Since often people attend webinars passively (and multitasking throughout), you’ll be instantly differentiated if you do something different. Right away.

INTERACT MORE FREQUENTLY THAN OFFLINE

Science shows that attention begins to wane after 10 minutes, so it is useful to “break their state” by changing things up. Keep it natural – forced interaction is a waste of everyone’s time.

Create “space” for interaction

MOVE SOME CONTENT TO HANDOUTS

Remember this aphorism: detail plus dialogue equals duration. The only way to increase dialogue (interaction) is to decrease how much detail you attempt to cover during the live session. Bonus: This also creates post-session engagement when they come back to your handout.

³ Missed Opportunities: Why Webinar Attendees Leave, 1080 Group, LLC research brief, November 2012.

BLEND THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE WITH HANDOUTS AND HOT LINKS

One good reason to blend the learning experience by using other forms of media with your webinar is because no one is going to remember all you said. Too, I'm a big fan of rewarding those who actually showed up with something that people who watch the recording don't get (that's the behavior we want, right?).

Improve attention with “virtual body language”

DIRECT ATTENTION VERBALLY

Virtual laser pointers are nice, but what if someone has looked away from your presentation? We know from the world of NLP (neurolinguistic programming) that attention is triggered with imperatives (commands) and interrogatives (questions). For example, “What do you see at the bottom of the slide?” or “...look in the GoTo chat box, because...” will guide participants in a way that is useful for both of you.

KEEP GESTURES INSIDE YOUR WEBCAM'S FIELD OF VISION

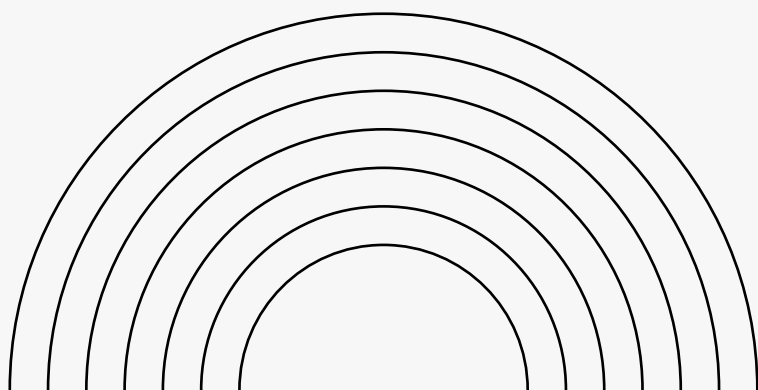
Your hands and other movements are an important and natural part of communicating visually, and this is more important in a more formal presentation (like a webinar) than a typical online meeting. Your webcam's “eye” only sees so much, however, so do a quick test to get a sense of the limits of your webcam's field of vision.

MAKE EYE CONTACT FOR KEY POINTS

Virtual audiences like it when you appear on camera – it's more personal, even if the science is inconclusive about cameras improving attention. That said, it's not all that helpful if what they look at is your forehead as you stare at the screen. Audiences don't expect you to make eye contact all the time (like a news anchorperson using a teleprompter), but it is powerful to draw people in by making eye contact for key points. Bonus: Combine this with "direct attention verbally" by saying, "Look at my video and look me in the eye and don't miss this next point..."

USE MORE SLIDES

Remember two things that are true. One, change is a cognitive trigger (you don't watch television and expect static images, right?). Two, it's not the quantity of slides you have that determines your presentation's duration, it's how long you spend on each one. Use the same amount of content spread over more slides to increase the rate of visual change.



Create inclusiveness by how you manage questions and chat

CALL ON PEOPLE BY NAME – MORE THAN USUAL

People are hardwired to like hearing their names, and it helps them feel “seen.” An additional benefit (especially with a large group) is that even participants you don’t call on experience a cognitive trigger and realize you’re a real person connecting with real people.

“

“The best virtual events create connection by creating a sense of belonging. One critical element of this continuity is use of a virtual emcee who creates energy and consistency through the conference.”

– THOM SINGER, CSP, HUMAN CONNECTION CATALYST

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START WITH REMOTE QUESTIONS IN A HYBRID EVENT

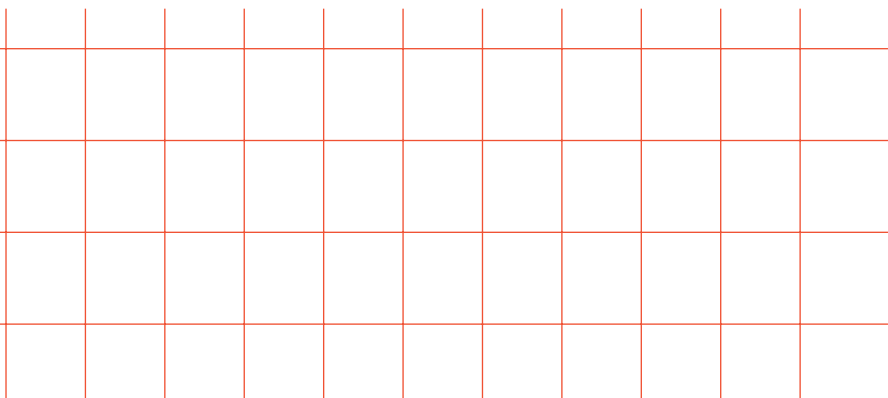
Creating a sense of inclusion for remote participants in a hybrid event setting requires conscious awareness. Remember, “acts as if unaware of attendees” was a top complaint of survey respondents, but the tendency when presenting is to focus on one (in-person group) at the expense of the other (online).

RE-ORDER THE COLUMNS OF THE QUESTIONS PANE

The Questions pane that GoTo Webinar organizers see has multiple columns (question, name, time it came in, etc.). You can change the order of those columns so you can see what you want to see. I personally just want to see the question and name of person asking or commenting, because I respond verbally and personally. By re-ordering the columns, I can resize the Questions pane to get more out of it in less visual real estate.

SORT THE ATTENDEE LIST BY WHAT YOU WANT TO SEE

The list of attendees that you see (as a presenter who has 'organizer' level privileges) has columns, too, where you see if they're paying attention or not, what type of audio connection they have, whether or not they have their hand up, etc. When you click on the column header, the whole list will sort by that column (like you might sort something in Excel). Want all the 'hand ups' to bubble up to the top? It's pretty handy not to have to go looking through all attendees just to find them.



Next Steps

Your next step is less about technology and more about skill development. In fact, that hasn't changed. When presenters were asked about what knowledge or skill would help them feel better equipped for success, both the original study and the 10-year anniversary study garnered the same top response: "how to combine video with other webinar tools."

The good news is that GoTo is easier to use and more robust than ever. The key, then, is threefold:

One, commit to raising your game with virtual presentations. They're not just here to stay, they're an integral part of creating connection.

Two, use the table of ideas herein to adapt more of your offline engagement tactics to your online "room." This is essential to answering the desire of "how to combine video with other tools."

Finally, connect *through* rather than *to*. There is little more engaging for attendees than when they feel you're talking with them instead of at them. And GoTo has assembled the perfect blend of tools for doing just that.

About Roger Courville, CSP and V2



Roger Courville, CSP is an analyst, award-winning author and speaker, and Head of Strategy at Virtual Venues, LLC. Since joining the webinar industry in 1999, he's delivered consulting and training for organizations as diverse as Australia Institute of Training and Development, Fedex, Colgate Palmolive, and, of course, GoTo. Now as part of V2 he works with a team to design and deliver unique virtual and hybrid events for clients such as Nike, PNC Bank, Square, and the New York Stock Exchange.

www.virtualvenues.com →

About GoTo

GoTo Webinar is a simple all-in-one platform for webinars and virtual events, designed to make creating, hosting, and managing digital experiences easy. With customizable modes, interactive features, insightful analytics, powerful integrations, and flexible pricing, GoTo's intuitive webinar platform has everything you need to host virtual events of all sizes.



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