

Tips for Becoming the Best Video Version of Yourself

Ditch the personal items and keep it professional from head to toe. Here's how to create the best backdrop for your video conference calls.

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Want to look professional in the age of coronavirus? Tops and bottoms are required.

With millions of Americans now working from home, the formalities of the office have slipped a little. Pat Brown, the CEO of \$4 billion startup Impossible Foods, recently conducted a video call from his son's bedroom while wearing a hoodie and T-shirt.

Participants on video meetings report getting distracted by what's behind the person speaking. "Is that a bottle of nose spray on the shelf?" Adam Meshberg, the founder and principal of Brooklyn-based architecture and design firm Meshberg Group, asked himself recently while peering to see what was behind a caller on a virtual meeting. He advises clients to remember they are inviting people into their homes they never would otherwise and should thus curate by eliminating anything too personal. While a completely blank white wall would look strange, so would family photos or a painting of a nude, he says.

"A business meeting is still a business meeting, regardless of medium," says Carol Davidson, a Manhattan-based image consultant who primarily works with executives and entrepreneurs. "There should be no loss of professionalism or productivity."

Ms. Davidson worked with Vicky Hayes after she left New York to start a marketing-consulting company from her home in Greenville, S.C. The first order of business was creating a suitable backdrop for video calls held with clients across the country.

She removed clutter, streamlined the titles on her bookshelves and kept family photos out of the picture. When videoconferencing, clients see Ms. Hayes in front of a white wall, with only one piece of artwork—a framed New Yorker magazine cover featuring dogs.

Her first tip: Don't dress nicely just from the waist up. "The first time I did that, I had to get up to let the dog out," giving clients a peek of her scruffy leggings.

Elissa Morgante, a founder of Morgante Wilson Architects, in Evanston, Ill., says first and foremost never sit in front of a window: No matter how nice the view is, the back lighting makes it very difficult to see your face. Second, choose a desk lamp as opposed to overhead lighting, because the shading from above is unattractive and light from the side is softer. Daylight bulbs will always help, as will plants. “They help take away the edge,” she says.

Here are some tips from Carol Davidson, a Manhattan-based image consultant, for turning your home office into a professional-looking—and operating—videoconferencing studio:

1. The primary light source should be centered behind the camera. Have an extra light source—LED lamp or overhead light—so you can adjust the brightness of the room, if necessary.
2. The background color of the wall behind you should contrast the colors of your attire. “You don’t want to blend in.” Avoid wearing white and bright colors, which might reflect light and look oversaturated. Muted colors are best.

A backdrop loaded with personal items, books and family photos looks cluttered and is distracting to clients and co-workers.

3. Adjust your chair height so the camera is positioned at eye level. Strategically place a pillow behind your back to remind you to sit up straight and “claim your space,” she says. Many people sit too close to the camera, so viewers feel like you’re in their face. The camera should be at a distance so more of you is visible. “It gives a feeling that you’re sitting in the same room.”

4. Make sure the office has furniture, draperies, rugs or other soft surfaces that help minimize echoing when you speak.

5. Some people wear appropriate attire from the waist up. “I’m a big proponent of head-to-toe dressing,” she says. “How you’re dressed overall is how you see yourself in the office. Our feelings project. With less of you visible, you want to project confidence.”