

Some Comments on the 2021 USC Tax Institute and Presenting on Zoom

I recently attended two days of the USC Tax Institute. The Institute was provided by video.

Some of us are giving other video presentations to large or small groups.

Some of us are using Zoom or similar software for business meetings.

This note collects my thoughts on the Institute and giving video presentations on Zoom. These merely are quick observations – not a formal presentation on giving Zoom presentations.

These are not “school-solution” comments. These are quick, informal, personal observations. These comments are not endorsed by any institution. These are merely the observations of one old guy who tried to pay attention during Zoom presentations. Many will disagree with my comments. If you can do better with a different strategy, pursue that strategy.

Many of us are giving CLE presentations using video conferencing. This is a comparatively new experience for us. Giving a CLE presentation on Zoom is different from simply giving a presentation at a regular seminar in person.

Many of us are experienced giving CLE presentations. We have to completely rethink our presentation techniques to give video presentations.

Agree with them.

Disagree with them.

Draw your own conclusions.

I hope some of my comments may be useful to you. If any one of my comments was worthwhile, then this project has been time well spent. If not, I apologize for wasting your time.

If you do not like my ideas, just take them as the rantings of a crotchety old guy.

Just think for yourself.

Come up with something better on your own.

If you want to learn how to give a video presentation, look to the professionals and learn what you can from them. The evening news on television is similar to a CLE seminar presentation. It is a great prototype for a CLE presentation. National

news anchors are good at presenting on television. Also, advertising on television can be similar to the requirements for CLE presentations. The products that they advertise may be junk, but the presenters often are good presenters. Perhaps I cannot stand what Tom Sellick is selling, but he does a great job as a presenter.

I will start by discussing equipment.

The ideal is that you will give your video presentation from a professionally equipped studio with proper sound isolation. That, unfortunately, is unlikely to be available to us who are working from home.

Microphones. The first major problem with video presentations is the terrible microphones on most laptops. Most of us continue to use them. That is because we are cheap, we are careless, and we are not particularly professional. We do not pay attention to the audio quality of our voices. We do not plan our presentation strategies well. In short, we are incompetent as video presenters. We need to learn. We need to teach ourselves something new.

There are numerous potential faults with the cheap microphones. Most of these faults were exhibited at the Institute.

Law firms and accounting firms generally issue laptops with low quality built-in microphones. They produce poor audio response. The advantage is that they were provided to us as part of the laptop and they are free of charge to us.

Cheap microphones do not have great fidelity and also tend to clip the extreme audio wavelengths. They can go in and out or create noise. Volume can go up and down as you turn your head or move closer to or farther away from the microphone. The microphone can have echoes. Your microphone can sound like the sound is coming from the bottom of a metal bucket. Microphones also can produce feedback, depending on the positioning of the microphone and the speakers. You may be able to hear background noise – dogs, cats, spouses, fire alarms, etc.

Some built-in microphones in laptops do a reasonably good job. (I have not encountered any built-in laptop microphone that provides true broadcast quality.) You should deliver broadcast quality audio if you are giving a formal CLE presentation for a national CLE program.

Test your microphone well before your CLE session and decide whether it gives you broadcast quality reproduction of your voice. If it does not, ditch it for formal presentations at least.

You may (or may not) get by for client conferences if your microphone is not too bad. My view is that most laptop microphones do not provide adequate audio fidelity for client conversations.

Be realistic in evaluating the quality of the microphone that you are using. Most built-in computer microphones do not provide true broadcast quality. Many built-in computer microphones provide poor fidelity.

At the Institute, there were examples of good microphones and poor microphones. It made a substantial difference to listen to speakers who had good microphones. These speakers usually were using headsets with headset microphones.

Good quality headsets with microphones make a big difference in audio quality. Good headset microphones have much better quality microphones than microphones that come with a computer. I regularly use a high quality headset with an excellent headphone microphone. A high quality headset microphone will cure many audio problems. Not only is the microphone better quality than the microphone that came with your computer, but also the microphone follows your head movements, which should guarantee a consistent audio volume. (Consider getting a headset or microphone with a USB connection.)

Another possibility is to use a high quality microphone suspended from a boom stand. Consider also using a shock mount to isolate the microphone from vibrations. Also consider a foam microphone cover and a pop filter. This may be a more sophisticated solution than most attorneys and accountants want to try. If you want to try and need help, consider consulting a son or daughter in high school.

Test your Microphone. You can test your own computer microphone and listen to its audio quality. Zoom lets you preview the broadcast quality of your microphone. If your computer microphone does not give you adequate audio quality, research a replacement microphone. I expect that you will want a USB microphone. Good USB microphones are readily available and simple to install.

Camera. Candidly, I have not had much trouble with laptop cameras. I personally use an accessory USB camera. Soon, I will explore connecting my Nikon 810 DSLR to my computer to use the Nikon camera as a video camera. This may give me an improved video image – or it may not.

Test Audio and Video Before Every Zoom Session. Before every Zoom session, I test the quality of my audio and my video. I look skeptically at the video image to make sure that lighting is correct and that my background is acceptable. I make sure that the

volume on my microphone is properly adjusted. I try to do this for every Zoom call. I certainly would do this for any CLE program where I am a speaker.

Audio Adjustments. Use the audio adjustments in Zoom. Test speaker and microphone before each Zoom session using the audio setting screen. I also use the high setting for Suppress background noise. I use the manual gain control for my microphone and adjust my microphone gain carefully. I try to ensure that my microphone gain setting is not set so high that it will result in clipping of the signal.

Illumination. Your image should be centered in the foreground on your video image. Zoom permits you to preview this image. Make sure that you are properly illuminated and not over illuminated. Watch the lighting on your face to ensure that it is properly illuminated and not over-illuminated. Watch for hot spots. Candidly, not many people speaking on Zoom manage to have proper illumination of their faces. This can take a bit of work. Many speakers at the Institute did a mediocre job of facial lighting. It can be a little difficult to do a good job. It takes much more than just sitting in front of the computer and turning it on.

Many of us wear eyeglasses. Glasses can reflect light. You may need to adjust the lighting in your room so that your glasses do not reflect the light. Alternatively, you might consider taking off your glasses for your presentation.

In Zoom, if you press the arrow to the right of the Camera in the Stop Video icon in Zoom (bottom left of screen in Zoom), you will find the video adjustment screen. Consider manually adjusting background light using the Adjust for low light setting. This can make a material difference in the image. I always use this setting.

Backgrounds. Backgrounds for video presentations are a problem. Perhaps your background will not make your presentation, but it can break your presentation. You need a studio for a proper CLE presentation. In current times, you just need to do the best that you can with what you have available at home or at the office. There is a little more tolerance for backgrounds for telephone calls than there is for formal video presentations. These are comments on video backgrounds:

1. Windows and other glass are difficult to work with as backgrounds.
 - a. As an amateur photographer, glass is one of my greatest challenges.
 - b. Lights in the room can create bright images in the glass.
 - c. I suggest avoiding background windows and mirrors if you can.
 - d. Cover windows and mirrors if you can with blinds or curtains.

- e. If you cannot avoid windows and mirrors in your video image, do what you can by situating your camera so that the background is not a disaster.
 - f. Particularly look for lightbulb image reflecting on the class. This does not work well.
 - g. Of course, if you think you truly are an exceptionally good speaker, you may want the illuminated halo over your head.
 - h. Otherwise, consider closing blinds, shutting curtains, etc.
2. Lights in the room can create hot spots on your face. I found that I had to remove the bulb from an overhead fixture over my computer.
3. Messy offices and rooms do not work well in the background.
4. Preview your video image and your audio carefully.
- a. You may not want to discover later that you are displaying risqué pictures to the world that you may have on the wall at home.
 - b. You may want to move muddy boots and half consumed bags of chips or half consumed sandwiches out of the field of view.
 - c. You may want to hide clutter – books, files, piles of paper, etc.
 - d. You may not want to display dogs and cats, spouses, children, etc., etc.
 - e. You may not want to have light bulbs in the background.
 - f. Watch for objects that may appear in the video image to be growing out of your head or out of other parts of your body.
 - g. Be careful with your background and how it is illuminated.
 - h. As an amateur photographer, I am conscious of the lines in photography. I want vertical lines in the background to be vertical. This takes a bit of adjustment of your camera position.
5. Make sure your video camera is at the level of your eyes or slightly above.
- a. Up-the-nose shots where your camera is at the bottom of monitor on your laptop do not work well unless there is

something about the bottom of your nose (or your chin) that you are particularly trying to emphasize.

- b. Too many laptop cameras deliver up-the-nose shots.
 - c. If your laptop has a camera at the bottom of the monitor, get a USB camera and use it.
6. Be careful with camera placement.
- a. I have my camera on top of my monitor.
 - b. Before Zoom, my monitor was a little too high for the best presentation of the background in video image (my home office).
 - c. As a result, vertical lines in the background were not properly vertical.
 - d. The camera should be positioned so that vertical lines in your room (picture frames, doors, cabinets) are vertical and horizontal lines in your room are horizontal. That is just basic photographic technique.
 - e. Few Zoom users pay any attention to keeping parallel lines in the image parallel. This results in a terribly amateurish, unprofessional background video image.
 - f. Proper alignment can require raising or lowering your monitor and perhaps swiveling your monitor a bit so that horizontal lines in your background are horizontal and vertical lines are vertical.
 - g. If you adjust your camera position properly, this can vastly improve your background image and make your video image look much more professional.
 - h. This makes a tremendous difference in the video image.
7. You can use a built-in Zoom background.
- a. I think that they are terrible.
 - b. Zoom backgrounds result in strange, mutating edges in the image of every person in the foreground and creepy hands and arms.

- c. You do not have to rely on my judgment. Evaluate them yourself.

Speaking for Video. I saw some great examples of presenters at the Institute and also some fairly mediocre ones.

1. I would go back to the television news/advertising paradigm. The people on television are dynamic and exciting – or, at least lively.
2. You need to create excitement – or, at least, life – in CLE presentations, particularly video presentations.
3. All-day Zoom presentations can be bottom-numbingly boring.
4. You need to be enthusiastic to break the boredom.
5. You need to exercise all of the principles of good public speaking – energy, rhythm, volume control, tone control, pace, movement, hand movement, etc., etc.
6. The Zoom presentation is much more challenging than the presentation before a live audience.

Allocating Screen Real Estate. The Institute did a terrible job of presenting speaker images and slides.

1. It seemed like the video screen was planned by marketing people.
2. Marketing people think marketing, not CLE.
3. Give a marketing person an opportunity to use a logo, and he will brand everything in the room.
4. Roughly 50% of the space on the Zoom screen was consumed by the USC logo and totally useless borders – also a \$\$\$ logo – perhaps the Mafia was a sponsor.
5. These framed a small picture of the speaker [much too small] and the PowerPoint slides.
6. The resolution of the PowerPoint slides was poor and both text and diagrams were often unreadable.
7. You can judge for yourself.
8. I thought that this was totally bush league for a national-class program.
9. It created extra challenges for presenters.

Who leads: PowerPoint or You? When you give a Zoom presentation, you have to decide whether your PowerPoint slides are a prop to help your presentation or whether you yourself are a prop merely to help your PowerPoint slides.

1. I have strong views that the speaker should not be the prop.
2. Many speakers treat themselves as the prop.
3. I believe that is important to use slides to enhance the program and not to distract from the speaker.
4. The speaker should be the focus of attention.
5. The speaker should not have to compete with the slides.

Problems with Images. The Institute typically projected a small image of the speaker and a larger image of his PowerPoint slides – both in a single monitor image.

1. The Institute apparently broadcast video images in low resolution. At least, it seemed like there was low resolution.
2. Slides that otherwise might have looked fine on the screen were totally or partially illegible.
3. Images of speakers were only marginal and were small.
4. Text in PowerPoint slides often was unsatisfactorily small and illegible.
5. As a practical matter, 80% of the screen was completely wasted.
6. That is not a professional approach.

Choice of which image to present. A speaker at the Institute had a choice.

1. He could display his own image. He could display a PowerPoint slide. He could display both at the same time.
2. If he displayed both his image and his slide, his PowerPoint slide was illegible, and his own image was much too small.
3. Consequently, most speakers decided to display both. They maximized their ineffectiveness.
4. Another possibility was just to display slides. That makes the slides more legible, but it just does not work well.
5. Another possibility was just to display the speaker's image. For my money, this is far the best solution. I am there to here the speaker. I

want to see the speaker. I do not want to see a micro-image of a miniature speaker.

6. Another possibility was to introduce a passage with a slide and then switch to the image of the speaker, so that the speaker's image is the only thing displayed. That can work well. It can be particularly effective when you have diagrams.

Slides are often less valuable than you imagine. Slides often offer much less than speakers imagine that they offer.

1. Diagrams in PowerPoint slides can be great.
2. Slides with text typically are much less great.
3. True bullet points can be useful.
4. Slides with lots of text typically are absolutely useless during the program even when the slides are readable.
5. Maybe it was an advantage that the slides were illegible.
6. Interestingly, even many of the diagrams were illegible on account of the poor broadcast resolution and the terrible waste of monitor space by the Institute.
7. Slides should have true bullet points or diagrams.

Basic rules for PowerPoint slides. Of course, pay attention to the basic rules for PowerPoint slides.

1. Generally, the effectiveness of a slide decreases with each additional word that you put on the slide.
2. Make slides word sparse.
3. Make font size big.
4. Most presenters at the Institute violated these rules.
5. Their slides usually were worthless – worse than worthless, since the illegible slides detracted from the presentation.
6. Text on slides needs to be big enough so that you can read it.
7. Text needed to be particularly big for the Institute on account of their poor broadcast resolution.
8. I generally suggest 32 point or larger font size.

Diagrams. Also, if you display diagrams, work with the diagram in your presentation.

Make the diagram part of your presentation.

Use your cursor to follow the different steps in the diagram.

Consider using a digitizing tablet so that you can write on the PowerPoint slide.

Also make sure that the text is large enough so that your audience can read the diagram.

Do not just display the diagram without using it in the presentation.

A PowerPoint slide should be more than a flag to be displayed.

Do Not Run Your Laptop on Battery. Never, ever give a presentation from a laptop working off of a battery. There seems to be an iron law that the battery will run out of power during the call.

Cell Phone. I could not imagine using a cell phone for a video presentation. If you try that, all that I can say is: good luck. Cell phones do not work especially well for professional video calls. Cell phones may work ok for calling granny.

Preview Your Video Image. Be careful to preview your own video image in Zoom. Ensure that you are the proper distance from the camera.

Experiment a bit to decide what works best for you. Adjust the height of your chair so that you're the vertical adjustment of the position of your head on the monitor is what you want to project.

Watch Your Head. Make sure that all of your head appears as part of the image. Do not cut off the top or side of your head. You generally should be looking into the camera. Position your head carefully in the image. Adjust your distance from the camera to create the image that you want to project.

You will have to decide on your own how much of the rest of you should be in the image. Make sure that your video image excludes parts of your room that should not be in the image.

Close doors. Close drawers. Clean up your room a bit. Eliminate clutter from the video image.

Speaking Style. Video conferences stress the importance of speaking style. You are limited to your voice, facial expression, and the movement of your hands and arms. Use them effectively. Control your energy, rhythm, volume, tone, pace, etc., etc.

Fight to Keep Attention of Your Audience. You need to use your voice well enough to keep the attention of your audience. That is a big matter. It is even more difficult to maintain the attention of your audience if it is late in the day.

Watch News Presenters. Watch news presenters for examples of use of voice – and for their style. This includes energy, rhythm, volume control, tone control, pace, etc., etc. Your audience should feel that they are involved in an interesting conversation with you, not like they are attending a speech. Watch news anchors and pay attention to their use of voice and to their overall speaking style. They often provide good examples.

Merely Projecting Photograph of Yourself in Zoom. As an alternative to a live image, Zoom will permit you merely to project a photographic image of yourself. If you want to do this, I suggest that you first take a photo of yourself dressed in a bright orange, red, and white costume, with a smile painted on your face, with heavy white face painting, with a large, bulbous red nose, and with a bright orange wig. If you are going to insist on looking like a clown, it makes sense not to go half way. You might as well go all in.

Terence Floyd Cuff

Loeb & Loeb, LLP