Dear Free-Range Thinker:

It's a simple deal.

This newsletter is free, but once each year you have to remind us you're alive and well so we'll know to keep sending it your way.

If your contact information isn't changing, just send an email to Lori Matsumoto *(lori@agoodmanonline.com)* saying, "Keep me on!" As long as that email also includes your name, we'll have everything we need to keep those free-ranging cows coming your way for another year. (If your address is changing, though, please let us know.)

**Please check in no later than Friday, October 20th** so we can keep your newsletters coming without interruption. Thanks, and happy reading!

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Free-range thinking™ is a monthly newsletter for public interest groups, foundations, and progressive businesses that want to reach more people more effectively. For a free subscription, send your request to: andy@agoodmanonline.com or call 323.464.3956. Back issues are available on the web at www.agoodmanonline.com.

*Newsletter edited by Lori Matsumoto.*



free-range thinking

# "We Can See You, But We Can't Hear You"

Videoconferencing offers entirely new ways to ruin meetings and trainings unless, says Dean Freedman, you observe a few simple rules.

You walk into your conference room and the first thing you notice is a large video monitor at one end of the room. The screen displays another conference room where a couple of people are seated at a table, doodling and drinking coffee. "Good morning," you say affably towards the camera mounted above the monitor, but the doodling and caffeinating continue until someone at the table notices your mouth moving and says, "Turn on your microphone, genius." Another videoconference is off to a roaring start.

The technology for videoconferencing was introduced more than 40 years ago, proliferated widely in the 1980s, but truly rapid adoption can be traced back to a single day five years ago: September 11th. Since then, Tandberg and Polycom have become common names in conference rooms, and you have probably attended at least one videoconference within the past six months. But it's *unlikely* you've had any training to help you make the most of this experience. If videoconferencing is ever going to become something more than just the means to have the same lousy meeting in several cities simultaneously, that has to change.

And that is precisely what Dean Freedman is working on.

# "We Can See You, But We Can't Hear You"

If an hour-long videoconference seems like an eternity to you, imagine how Dean Freedman feels: he's spent the last ten years in videoconferences. As Director of New Technology for the Human Services Education Network (better known as EdNet), Freedman has designed and implemented videoconference systems for several New York City agencies including the Fire Department, the Administration for Children's Services, the Human Resources Administration, and the Department for the Aging. Besides designing and installing the physical hardware, Freedman also conducts workshops to help people interact more effectively in a videoconferenced meeting or training session.

When I asked Freedman to grade the videoconferences he has observed, he didn't hesitate: F-minus. "You have to have some training to know how to operate in a videoconferencing environment," he told me, "and most people don't have any." Consequently, the same mistakes are repeated so frequently that Freedman has no problem rattling off a list of videoconference dos and dont's:

### Don't favor the room you're in.

"Other sites have inherent disadvantages because the instructor or meeting leader isn't in the room," Freedman says. "If you don't use techniques to keep them involved and send the message that everyone is on an equal footing, they can feel like they are not members of the class or meeting," and that may tell them they're free to check their email or check out entirely.

Unfortunately, Freedman says, many meeting leaders will say and do things that subtly send the wrong message. Using expressions to describe other sites such as "remote sites" or "out there in TV Land" only makes the people at these sites feel farther away. Freedman recommends referring to each site by name or location (e.g., Lets hear from Boston) and never to refer to the room you're in as the "home" site or "main" location. And if you ask people to state their name and location prior to making a comment, Freedman says you must apply that rule evenly to all sites, especially the one you're at. "It's very easy to fall into the habit of having people at the other sites identify themselves before they speak, while forgetting to have those at your site do the same," he says.

### Be patient and limit the small talk.

In an exchange between two sites, you may notice a short lag before each response. That just comes with the territory, Freedman says, but he constantly reminds videoconferencers to be patient and leave time for those at other sites to respond to questions. "I literally tell them to tap their feet like a horse counting," says Freedman with a laugh. This built-in delay can also turn small talk into a big time-waster. If you ask "Hi, how are you?" across sites, Freedman says, you are very likely to get a reply a second or two later of "I'm fine, how are you?" to which you'll reply one or two seconds later, "I'm doing OK, thanks," and before you know it, several minutes have passed. The delay is something you just have to live with; small talk is not.

### Speak in full sentences.

Audio-activated microphones shut off when nobody is speaking, thereby cutting down room noise – a welcome and widely adopted innovation. They can also create problems, though, because they may not pick up the first syllable or two when you begin to speak and may shut off prematurely if your voice drops below a certain level. So if you say only "welcome" or "hi" when you greet new arrivals at other sites, they may hear nothing at all. Instead, Freedman points out, a full-sentence opening such as "Good morning and welcome to the workshop" is more likely to be heard.

### Make sure you have candy for everyone.

Another way to send the wrong message to other sites is to have handouts only for people in your room, and then to send someone scrambling to fax or email the materials to everyone else. Freedman strongly recommends that meeting organizers ensure that everyone at every site has the same materials at hand when the meeting or training begins. "Don't bring candy into the room," he says, "unless you have candy at every site." (While Freedman acknowledges he is speaking metaphorically, he adds that the rule goes for candy, too.)

### Stop clock-checking.

When you look at the clock (or your watch) in a meeting, it often sends a message to participants that you – very possibly like them – are wondering when the damn thing is going to end. "This is a bad habit in *any* environment," says Freedman, "but in a videoconference, people at other sites are going to wonder what you're looking at when you're turning towards the clock on the wall and not towards them."

### Don't get caught up in the technology.

"Come in and do what you do," Freedman offers as a final piece of advice, "and do not focus on the technology. You're going to use it, but you don't want to focus on it and you don't want to waste time discussing it." ■

*(If you'd like to learn more about improving your videoconferences, Dean Freedman is happy to field your emails: freedean@pipeline.com)*