

SHELTERING

How to Look Your Best on a Webcam

Check your lighting and be deliberate about the background you're showing the world.

By Julie Lasky

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Catherine Minervini, a regional sales manager for the textile company Sunbrella, video chats in her New Jersey kitchen with a 15-pound bag of brown rice in view.

Allen Hart, a psychology professor at Amherst College in Massachusetts, uses a home office hung with an upside down world map.

David Korins, the Manhattan-based set designer of "Hamilton" and "Dear Evan Hansen," moves between his dining room and his daughter's desk, which he described approvingly as a "well-lit place with no background."

Working at home, under siege from the coronavirus, means finding a quiet space to communicate remotely with colleagues, clients, students and friends. Thanks to video conferencing tools like Google Hangouts and Zoom, it also means exposing one's private sphere to the eyes of outsiders.

Those who have telecommuted for years know how to create a professional niche within a larger landscape of dirty dishes, whining children and sentimental wall decorations. They have learned how to look presentable through the lens of a webcam, if only from the waist up. The cautionary tale still lingers of Robert E. Kelly, the political scientist whose young children barged into his home office in South Korea three years ago and disrupted an on-air interview with the BBC. (The lesson: lock the door.)

Then there are all the newcomers. Searches on Pinterest for "work from home setup" have increased 1,144 percent between March 6 and March 20, said Amanda Switzer, the company's consumer communications manager.

Asked for strategies to help rookies, design professionals came out of the woodwork.

Go Neutral

"Keep it as simple as possible," advised Gideon Mendelson, a New York interior designer about the view through the camera. "You don't want a staircase behind you where people are going up and down, or too long a vista. I don't want to see multiple rooms in the shot; it's distracting."

He suggested creating "a little composition behind you" that is easy to set up and break down: a console table with a lamp and a couple of books. Or there could be a few flowering branches cut from a tree or shrub in one's yard, or bought at a green market, and arranged in a vase.

Lauren Rottet, an interior designer with offices in Houston, Los Angeles and New York, agreed that a basic setup is best. "Find a place in the home that has the most neutral wall background," she said, recommending walls that are light gray or light blue (off-white, darker blue and beige are also fine, she said, but orange, yellow and red are off-putting). "Also, avoid any patterns behind you."

Consider Light and Sound

To make sure you can be easily heard, Mr. Mendelson advised using a room with carpeting and window treatments to absorb sound. (He was speaking by phone from his children's bedroom, which he described as having an area rug, two upholstered headboards, Roman shades and stuffed monkeys.) His home office is "all wood and glass" and a beautiful place to work, he said, but too echo-y for conversations.

And to look your best, Ms. Rottet warned never to sit directly under a light source; it will throw under-eye and next-to-nose shadows. A lamp or window positioned two feet directly opposite to you that lights you evenly will be most flattering and will not cast glare on your screen. (People adept at videoconferences also swear by ring lights: circular fluorescent or LED lamps that reduce facial shadows and the appearance of imperfections.)

To avoid glare and unwanted reflection, Ms. Rottet said you should not let a light source, either from a light or window, be seen directly in the camera. "Have the light source in front of you or beside you, but not in camera view," she said.

Or Give Them Something to Look At

But how much fun is neutrality? Some homebound workers are finding in videoconferencing setups a chance to project an upbeat attitude or convey a hopeful message.

Ms. Minervini, for example, prefers her own surroundings to be vibrant. “I love having video chats from my kitchen — it’s new, modern and bright, even on a cloudy day,” she said. For a background, she recently hung a mixed-media work by an artist friend, showing swirling waves, battleships, a rustic house and what looks like the profile of George Washington. She described the piece as “energetic.”

Mr. Hart said he chose to sit in front of a “What’s Up? South!” map while teaching remotely because it is attractive and makes a humanistic point: “North and South are relative to each other,” he said. “Depending on your perspective the world may appear upside down, and yet there is no absolute up or down.” He also wears school swag. The message to his dispersed students, he said, is that “we are all still at Amherst regardless of where we are currently.”

As a backdrop to her FaceTime conversations, the New York artist Judi Harvest composes her own sculptures and paintings (and whenever possible, fresh fruit and flowers). She changes the vignettes to avoid boring her conversational partners.

Judi Harvest, an artist, favors multiple backdrops in her New York studio, where she roams while chatting on FaceTime. She arranges vignettes of her glass sculptures of seeds and fruits along with bowls heaped with real oranges, changing the displays frequently so as not to bore her conversational partners. “I always have a plant or flowers and fruit in the picture, as living, blooming things now are optimistic,” she said.

And many Zoom users are dipping into their personal photo collections for images that can serve as virtual backgrounds, a bonus of the app. Helen Maria Nugent, the dean of design at California College of the Arts, in San Francisco, used a picture she took at Hearst Castle for a recent meeting. “Galaxy and outer space pics seem to be popular with my faculty and staff,” she noted.

For Gabrielle Prisco, who is the executive director of the Lineage Project, a New York City nonprofit that teaches mindfulness practices to young people and adult staff in detention, foster care, homeless shelters and other stressful environments, creating a place for videoconferencing added one function too many to an overburdened room.

The designated area in her Brooklyn apartment is also where she writes her novel, meditates, keeps family treasures and lately has dumped office files and hoarded supplies. While teleconferencing at her desk, she found herself turning her back on her window, with its verdant view, and facing piles of toilet paper and canned goods to spare her colleagues the sight of them.

“I don’t want to be focused on what people see or don’t see and what they think of me,” she said. “I want this space to support me in what is a stressful time.”

With the blessing of her partner, an educator who is currently teaching from their bedroom, she moved the clutter into other parts of their home. The people with whom she Zooms now see plants, candles and artwork. They can’t smell the essential oils that perfume the space and help soothe her nerves. But she is confident that they can feel them.

Mr. Korins, the Broadway set designer, said he believed the pandemic’s seriousness should overshadow any concern about appearance. It’s not the conferencing environment or background that matters, but the substance of the call. “I could give you a pat answer about composition,” he said, “but the truth is, I just want to know everyone is safe and OK.”

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