Best Practices for Hosting Online Meetings

Youth ministers and directors/coordinators of religious education have become more comfortable using online meetings. Here are some suggestions if you are looking for ways to improve your online sessions. The recommendations below come in introductory, intermediate, and expert categories. Depending upon your experience and technical comfort, see if you can find some ideas to take yourself to the next level. *If your meeting includes minors, make sure that you follow all safe environment guidelines and policies.*

Basic

1. Use a computer or laptop, not your phone. A phone might be good for listening in on a call but is unsuitable for running a meeting.

2. When setting up your meeting, use some form of security. Depending upon your conferencing software, you may be able to use a waiting room or a passcode. A form of security allows you to control who is attending your meeting. You don't want uninvited guests!

3. Arrive early. Use the time to test your microphone and speakers. Look at yourself on video. Do you need to adjust the lighting? What about your background? Is it cluttered and distracting? What about noise? Is there a ticking clock or other ambient noise? Don't forget to turn off your phone (cell and landline) so there are no interruptions.

4. Start and end on time. Have a clear plan/agenda for your meeting. Provide participants with information that prepares them for active participation.

5. Decide how the meeting will run beforehand. What are the ground rules? For example, a good rule of thumb is to have everyone on mute unless they want to speak. Explain the ground rules at the beginning of the meeting. How will you handle questions and other input? For example, are there so many people you'll need to use a chat feature? In that case, you may need help by asking someone to attend to the chat feed.

6. Create a community as folks enter the meeting. Greet them by name. If you don't know them, introduce yourself and ask them to do the same.

7. Model appropriate behavior. Be faithful to the teachings and values of the Church Catholic.

8. Your username should be professional rather than comic, cute, or familiar. In addition, use a professional-looking profile image or photo.

Intermediate

1. Keep your video conferencing software up-to-date. Don't have it? Install it. Programs are regularly updated with new features and bug fixes.

2. Configure your settings so that the controls always show. This way, you do not have to move windows around in an attempt to find the controls; they are always in front of you.

3. Be thoughtful about those times when you record. Always inform people that you are recording the session and why you are doing so. Note: if you are meeting with youth, you must record and keep the video recording of the meeting at the parish.

4. Keyboard shortcuts are easier to use than the mouse. Find the keyboard shortcuts for your program, such as mute/unmute, enter/exit full screen, pause/resume recording, or any commands you frequently use. Find these shortcuts with a Google search: GoToMeeting keyboard shortcuts, Zoom keyboard shortcuts, etc.

5. If you are interrupted for any reason, turn off video/mute so as not to provide entertainment for your meeting.

6. A waiting room is an excellent feature to use. It is a security measure and a way to let participants into the meeting when you want them. And a way to let your speakers or key participants in so you can prepare as a team beforehand. Don't forget to customize your waiting room with your parish logo or other branding material.

Expert

1. Consider using a second monitor. An extra monitor gives you the "real estate" to see more than one window/program at a time, so you don't have to search for apps.

2. Wifi is good, but a wired internet connection is better. Wired connections provide a more stable connection. See if you can wire your device from your router.

3. Close unneeded apps/notifications before your meeting. You do not need to be unnecessarily distracted from your participants.

4. Don't forget to look at the camera when talking to your participants. It is not a natural skill because our attention is drawn to the faces on our screen. But eye contact helps connect with our participants.

5. Reach out for assistance when necessary. Having a colleague assist with some tech tasks (e.g., admitting participants, taking attendance, sharing the slide deck) can help take the onus off leading a meeting. It frees you to focus on running the meeting itself.

6. Having a microphone integrated into your device is good. However, for optimal audio, use a headphone with a mic. The sound quality is superior, and you will transmit less ambient noise.

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