Tech Tips: Making the Most of Your Equipment for Video Calls

Video calls are one of the best tools we have to connect with one another while adhering to social distancing guidelines. But if you've done them before, you know that sometimes technology can trip you up. There are lots of tools out there you can buy to improve your audio and video—but this short guide will walk you through 7 steps to help you get the best experience out of the things you likely already have at home!

Step 1: Pick your device

Do you have a computer with a camera (either built-in or an external webcam)? How about a smartphone or tablet? Any of these will do! If you're not sure which to use, go with the one you're most comfortable with—or read through the list below and pick the device that will let you be in your ideal location, or give you more internet connection choices.

Step 2: Pick a spot

Choose the location in your home in advance. Here are a few things you might want to take into account:

- Comfort: Do you have a comfortable place to sit?

- Quiet: Background noise (wind, traffic on a busy street, appliances, housemates) can make it hard for your attendees to hear you. Pick a private spot, ideally with a door you can close.

- Backdrop: Look for a place where the scene behind you isn't too distracting.

- Light: Webcams and smartphone cameras don't do well with low light or when the subject (you) is backlit. Find a place with good light, and avoid having your back to a window.

Step 3: Check your internet speed

Once you've picked your spot, test your internet speed in that location. To check your speed, visit www.speedtest.net and click "GO," then wait until a number is displayed under "UPLOAD." If your upload speed is at 3.5 Mbps or higher, you should be set to go! If it's lower, here are some things you can try:

- Try another internet connection if there's one available (or even LTE/4G—but be aware of your data limits if you go this route).

- Limit number of devices using your internet connection. This might mean asking any housemates to avoid downloads, other video calls, or Netflix while your event is going.

- If you're on a Wi-Fi network, test your connection from different locations in your hoome. Some locations may have better connectivity than others.

- If you are using a computer and are not doing so already, try using an Ethernet cord to connect to the internet instead of Wi-Fi.

If all else fails and your upload speed is slow no matter what you try, you can definitely still give it a go—just give your guests a heads up that your internet connection may be a little unstable. If your connection becomes poor during your event, turning off your video camera and going audio only might help.

We recommend doing this speed test at least twice—once when you're planning, and again immediately prior to your event.

Step 4: Position your camera

If possible, try to position your camera at or ever-so-slightly below eye level. If you're using your smartphone, find a way to avoid holding it in your hand during your event. There are tripods out there that will hold your phone—but if you don't have one, try to find something you can prop it up on.

Step 5: Check your lighting and audio

You've picked a spot, checked your internet, and positioned your camera. Now it's time to check your lighting! Record a test video on your device of choice, then play it back. Is your face well lit? If not, you could try moving around—or find a lamp that you can position in front of you. Is your voice audible? If not, you might try headphones with a mic if you have them—if not, make sure you're close to your device and that you keep your face turned toward it when you speak.

Step 6: Clean your camera lens

Especially if you're using your smartphone, don't forget to clean your camera lens! It helps a lot.

Step 7: Practice

Make sure you practice ahead of time! Use whatever video calling platform you'll be using for your event to have a call with a friend or family member for practice. If you're going to have speakers as part of your event, we also recommend a short tech rehearsal prior to the gathering. You are welcome to share this guide with them as well.