

## Appearing on Television

“Time has convinced me of one thing. Television is for appearing on, not looking at.”

- Noel Coward

Television offers a tremendous opportunity to a business leader, but as Noel Coward says, it is one thing to look at and quite another to appear on. Yes, television can make you - but it can also break you. In the technology's very beginning Jack Kennedy understood the medium, Richard Nixon did not. Kennedy accepted the make-up when it was offered, Nixon declined it for macho reasons and his five-o'clock shadow beard cost him the debate and perhaps the election. You might say he lost by a whisker.

Television amplifies some aspects of your presentation and nullifies others. Here are some thoughts on using this dynamic and powerful communication tool.

Basically, there are two ways to relate to a television camera – as a mirror or as a window. I recommend the window. Think of a specific person to speak to on the other side of the window – someone you like and consider a friend and supporter. Have a friendly conversation with that person. Speak to their benefit.

**Posture sends a message.** Slump and you look weak, go stiffly to attention and you seem rigidly inhuman. The position of the shoulders, neck and head are crucial factors in coming across well on television. Anxiety will often create tension in the neck and shoulders, rounding forward and down. This posture gives a “hang-dog” impression and provokes at best pity, at worst contempt in your viewers. If you drop your eyes, letting the head fall forward as happens when you read from a page on the lectern, you will have withdrawn from your listeners. The same result happens if you drop your head back slightly, so that you seem to be looking down your nose at the audience. Video cameras amplify all of these problems.

**A relaxed alertness is the best posture,** a comfortable athletic stance with the feet shoulder-width apart, weight evenly balanced, knees flexed, arms and hands at the sides ready to gesture when called upon. Let your chest ride high and your head rest level, eyes aligned to the horizon. Let your shoulders fall away to the sides and the back of your neck extend to its full length. Put your attention on the nape of your neck rather than your adam's apple. Let your head float easily in front of and above your neck.

**Television exaggerates your gestures** so take care to make your moves moderate. Remember that a cameraman is not a mind reader, so give a little warning by telegraphing a move with a hand gesture or appropriate comment if you rise from a chair or walk across the set for instance. Suddenly jumping up or leaving the frame can make you appear out of control.

**When sitting, it's best to lean forward slightly.** Leaning back creates all sorts of unhappy impressions - you might seem careless, indolent, dull, uninterested or tired. Also, it does unattractive things to the body - revealing a caved-in chest, paunchy belly, and wattles beneath the chin. Think of the posture adopted by hosts and guests on The Charlie Rose show or on CNN - they are given a table or counter to lean upon, which has them thrusting their heads forward energetically. If there is nothing but soft upholstery, ask for a board beneath the cushion and sit as erectly as possible. You want to maintain a posture of alert and forceful energy, positive and firm. Both feet on the floor, hands in plain sight.

**Teleprompters:** These devices are a godsend to speakers and newscasters, and they are used in two different situations. One type is used in delivering a speech to a live audience as the President's annual State of the Union speech to Congress, and is called in the trade "the Presidential" type of prompter. It is simply an angled pane of glass which reflects the words on a computer monitor over which it is suspended. There are usually two of them, to the right and left of the speaker's lectern. They provide the speaker with the text and the illusion of eye contact through the glass.

The second type of Teleprompter is one that is attached to the front of a television camera, again with a pane of glass reflecting a computer screen with the text, but this time the video camera shoots right through the glass all the time. The effect of this prompter is to allow the television audience the impression that the speaker is talking to them directly, with full eye contact. This is the setup in every major newsroom where the anchorperson is reporting directly to the audience.

It is essential that you practice reading from the prompter and that you run through it with the person controlling the scroll. Understand that it is that person's task to follow your lead, not to set the pace for you.

**An ability to read interpretively** is the skill this technology requires - that is, to read without sounding as though you are reading. Some people have a natural ability to read a text easily, comfortably and conversationally - others need a little coaching. One danger, especially with the on-camera setup, is over-focusing on the words of the text with the eyes. If you narrow your vision to one word at a time, the audience will see your eyes moving from side to side as you read. This destroys the illusion that you are reaching through the screen and speaking directly to the listener. To avoid this, widen your field of vision to include the entire prompter screen - look with "soft eyes."

**Facial Expression:** Finally, it's wise, if not essential, to maintain a positive, benevolent demeanor when facing a television camera. Fear, doubt, uncertainty, self-consciousness, and anger all become amplified on camera; and what may feel like a thoughtfully neutral expression can read as a hostile scowl. Still, an insincere, pasted on grin is hardly any better. To adopt a winning facial expression requires a bit of "method acting." Imagine your viewers to be a group of friendly supporters whom you

are pleased to address. Reassure them with your pleasant attitude and warm smile. Wear the pressure lightly and gracefully and make it look easy.

"I think the one lesson I have learned is that there is no substitute for paying attention."

Diane Sawyer  
ABC Television Anchor