

# Virtually Everything You Need to Know for Your Support Group to Meet Virtually



*Rick Davis is the founder of AnCan, a partner organization of Us TOO, which offers virtual support to the prostate cancer community (as well as many others) via online and call-in groups. Rick has been moderating groups for over 13 years, 9 of them virtually bringing remote participants from all over North America and the world. AnCan convenes 22 monthly virtual meetings, 9 of them with Us TOO specifically on prostate cancer. You can find a list at <https://ancan.org/prostate-cancer>. We have asked Rick to provide a few pointers on how to conduct a successful meeting virtually...*

Hello fellow support group leaders! While many of you are experienced moderators, handling a meeting in a virtual rather than physical space is a little more tricky and poses problems you may never have considered, like how does a participant ask a question without shouting down the meeting? Here are some helpful hints on how to create and run a successful virtual meeting:

## **1. CHOOSE A PLATFORM THAT IS EASY TO ENTER**

There's no doubt that video platforms like GoToMeeting are best – so those who join online can be seen if they want and utilize the chat window, see a shared screen, see URLs other provide and more. However, many of us old fogies are intimidated by technology, rightly or wrongly, so relying on the old 'blower' is easy. Make sure that however you convene your meetings, they are accessible by phone.

## **2. STARTING THE VIRTUAL MEETING**

Open your virtual room or telephone conference (telcon) a few minutes early – and allow a good 5-10 minutes for folks to arrive. By and large our meetings rarely get underway that promptly – it's better to have folks arrive before you start the meeting than interrupt once you have started.

If using a platform that permits a video image, we ask our moderators to show their image. That makes it much more personal - like a physical meeting. For everyone else, it's totally their choice ... no pressure. And we don't insist that people identify if they are not comfortable doing so. "Lurkers" are welcome if the group helps them.

Have at least one co-moderator to help out. However good you are at multi-tasking, keeping an eye on all fronts in a virtual meeting can overwhelm the best. If you are using a video platform, this is all the more true. So have your buddy in hand, and speak about how you'll divide some of the tasks I am about to elaborate.

Set the ground rules UPFRONT – the key is to respect the moderators. Ask people NOT to speak over each other – this is so important in a virtual meeting.

In our meetings, we frequently ask if anyone wants to comment on what has been said to get around having no visual prompts. But just like in a physical meeting, don't let anyone hijack the meeting by turning it to themselves when they get the floor. Don't be shy - interrupt to keep them on track. While we have rarely had to use it, moderators on video platforms and some telcon platforms can mute the speaker.

While you probably cannot control how many people will attend, the sweet spot is usually around 10-15 for a 90-minute meeting.

## **3. SOUND ISSUES**

Be sure to ask everyone to mute their computer microphone or telephone when they are not speaking – if they don't, you can mute them if you see background noise coming from their mic on your control panel.

And if you get feedback, echo or reverberation, it is likely someone has their volume too high; or maybe they are using both their online apparatus and a telephone, so they'll need to mute one.

#### 4. LISTENING

Moderating online can be tricky ... listen carefully to identify voices. That way you can often hear who is trying to break into the conversation then return to them when the conversation breaks. If you are using a video platform or conference call technology, you may be able to see who is talking. It will identify the speaker as well as anyone trying to talk at the same time ... and/or sources of background noise that you can mute.

#### 5. CHECKING IN AND MEETING TIMING

Let's revert to old technology now ... pencil and paper! If on a video platform, watch your attendees list and jot down all the names. If someone calls in by phone, be sure to identify them by name and label them so you can see who is speaking later on. Best to have one person writing names and the other labeling them – set that up with your co-moderator beforehand.

If you are going to do an individual check-in, keep it short or you can lose the whole meeting – you know how your guys like to talk about themselves!

Here's what we do – the lead moderator runs down his written list of attendees and asks everyone “if you need time?” Then you'll know who wants to speak. It helps you figure how long you have to spend with each of your new guys/caregivers upfront, and how to plan the rest of your meeting. Make sense .... ?

#### 6. NOTES AND TO-DO'S

Just like in your regular meetings, keep the same notes. I like to have records on my participants – even little social notes like the names of their wife, kids, pets etc., etc. Sprinkle these in, not to mention prior treatment info, and the group will think you have the memory of an elephant!

I also keep my follow up notes alongside my attendance list – so I remember what to do later, like connect Joe to Fred by e-mail.

#### 7. MODERATING TIPS

Try to avoid dead air ... it feels very awkward in a virtual room, even 3 or 4 seconds. My style of moderating is to get everyone to participate at some point during the meeting. “Silent types” are often a little reticent but, like some of our guys, once you get them started, your finger might wind up hovering over the mute button!

Since you are at home, you may want to share a link in the chat window or something you have read on screen. If you do share your screen, make sure there is nothing on your desktop that you don't want seen. I use the chat window to converse with my co-moderator(s) privately ... maybe to ask them to jump in to stop someone; or to find a piece of research. Just be sure you are sending your message only to the person you want, and not to everyone ... we have all done that!

You are all welcome to attend one of our sessions to hear us in action. Or visit our YouTube channel at <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCOX221U27DhVDCe3Ozz2rDg> to hear a recording.

Good luck to all ... onward and upwards - happy moderating!

Rick Davis  
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**For more on AnCan, visit:**  
[www.ancan.org](http://www.ancan.org)

**For more on Us TOO International Prostate Cancer Education and Support Network, visit:**  
[www.ustoo.org](http://www.ustoo.org)