

Fact Sheet

Information for consumer representatives

Strengthening meeting skills for teleconferences

Teleconferencing is an interactive communication between three or more people in two or more locations, using the telephone. In general terms a teleconference brings people together even though they are geographically separated. The reasons for holding teleconferences rather than face-to-face meetings include savings in travel time, savings in travel and accommodation costs, and environmental considerations.

Basic types

- Audio conferencing – verbal communication via the telephone.
- Video conferencing – television-like communication augmented by sound.
- Web conferencing – printed communication through computers.

Teleconferences work best when:

- Committee members have previously met face-to-face.
- The business can be considered in less than an hour.
- A short meeting is required to follow up actions from previous meetings.

However, teleconferences have certain disadvantages, including:

- Difficult medium for complex interpersonal communication, such as negotiating or bargaining.
- Can be intimidating for new committee members and is less likely to create an atmosphere of group rapport.
- Possible lack of familiarity with the equipment, and possible equipment failure.
- Acoustic problems within the room, or disturbances from outside.
- Difficulty in determining participant speaking order.

How to be a good participant in a teleconference

- If it is a 'dial in' teleconference, ensure that you have the telephone number and PIN required to connect to the teleconference. If you are being connected by an operator, be ready a few minutes before you expect the call.
- Make sure you are in a quiet space, ideally with no background noises such as a radio or barking dog, and where you will have minimal disruptions. Also ensure that you have all relevant agenda papers with you so that you do not have to leave the teleconference part way through to look for them.
- Every effort should be made to ensure that you are available for the whole of the teleconference, but if for some reason you must leave for a short while, let the Chair know (preferably in advance) and also let him/her know when you are back.
- Ensure that your voice projects your interest and enthusiasm. You can be more effective in what you say by varying the tone of your voice, and speaking slowly and clearly.
- 'Keep it simple' by presenting information in an easy-to-understand manner.
- Use active, direct information to hold the interest of your audience.
- One of the most common complaints is that people speak too fast. Do not be afraid to pause. Pauses can lead to a much clearer presentation of information.

How to be a good Chair of a teleconference

- The Chair should always introduce him or herself, and then invite all participants to do the same. This also assists participants to recognise each others' voices.
- If you are to chair a teleconference you may find it useful to keep a list of all participants' names beside you and to check regularly that all are being given equal opportunity to contribute to the discussion. This can prompt you to invite a quiet member to give an opinion.
- You must ensure that all participants are given the opportunity to speak, and be heard by everyone, without people speaking over each other.
- You must keep to the agenda and not allow discussion to stray from the business at hand.
- Consider calling the roll part way through the meeting, so that latecomers may introduce themselves. The Chair should also quickly inform latecomers what has already been considered, and which part of the agenda is currently being discussed.
- If progress is not being made, or discussion is becoming difficult, consider referring the issue to a face-to-face meeting.

Some strategies to help with effective teleconferencing

Scenario 1

You are participating in a teleconference with a large group. The Chair has not identified all participants and you have not met these people previously. As the teleconference progresses you can hear some valid contributions being made, however you do not know who has made them. There is also a very dominant member who continues to speak over you when you are making a point.

- Ask the Chair if everyone could introduce themselves, to help you recognise the voices.
- Always make sure you clearly identify yourself. For example 'This is the consumer representative'.
- Make your point strongly, and then leave it.
- Be confident that your perspective is relevant and valid and do not worry if it is not picked up straight away.
- Ask if people could make comments through the Chair as you are having trouble identifying voices.

Scenario 2

The teleconference is under way, but you notice that discussion is straying from the agenda, and that not all members are actively participating. This is made more difficult because the Chair has not introduced everybody. You feel that the meeting might finish without the opportunity to raise your own points or to hear the views of all participants.

- Ask the Chair to list who is participating.
- The Chair may be unaware that he/she has not introduced some people or that they are not being given equal opportunity to participate.
- Ask the Chair if the representative of one of the interest groups you have not heard from could provide their perspective.
- Ask the Chair how long you have left for discussion.