



Your virtual appearance

Five gentle suggestions for making your virtual appearance less painful for yourself and everyone else

By **JUDGE ASHFAQ G. CHOWDHURY**

The toothpaste is not going back into the tube. Obviously, the pandemic accelerated the movement toward virtual appearances. Teleconferencing became second nature to almost everyone. Virtual appearances save lawyers time, effort, expense. They're better for the environment. Lawyers don't need to find parking or sit in court listening to a long calendar. Lawyers can sign off of one appearance in one courthouse and sign onto another appearance in another courthouse a minute later. It seems unlikely that we'll ever go

back to the days of civil courtrooms full of attorneys waiting to make appearances.

So that's all great. But the new world of virtual appearances is not all good vibes. There are poor connections. There are vertiginous echoes and Jimi Hendrix-like feedback. There are mysterious disembodied voices in the dark, talking over each other. There are people making elaborate arguments while muted. There's always that one unidentified person chiming in at irregular intervals with the question "Can you hear me?"

Many lawyers have figured out how to use LACourtConnect and how to make an effective appearance through it, but, sadly, many have not. So, below are some brief tips for making virtual appearances, offered in the spirit of making morning calendars less painful for everyone involved.

1. Figure out how to use the camera on your computer or phone

Not everyone is super tech savvy, and the software can be finicky, but you should be able to figure out how to



make your appearance with your camera on. You should be able to use the camera on your computer or your cell phone. You should figure out how to do this before the morning of your appearance.

There is a helpful video tutorial on LACourtConnect available here: https://www.lacourt.org/generalinfo/youtube_jitt.htm?vid=8r3H73w2KEE. There is also a Service Desk (available between 7:30 a.m. and 5:30 p.m. on days the Court is open) that can assist you with technical issues with LACourtConnect. Their phone number is (213) 830-0400.

You can download the LACourtConnect app to your computer or your mobile device. Just go to <https://my.lacourt.org/laccwelcome>. You can use the app on your laptop, desktop, cell phone, iPad, tablet, etc.

What I'm trying to tell you is that there is literally no excuse for not being able to appear remotely with your camera on.

Having everyone on video is much more helpful to judicial officers, and, I assume, everyone else on these appearances. Everyone can see who is talking. Lawyers can see if the judicial officer is raising his or her hand or trying to pause the discussion to ask a question. We're communicating with each other on these calls, and facial cues are obviously an important part of human communication.

Without video, there are situations where there are multiple lawyers on a call, all black boxes on the portal, with people talking over each other and the judicial officer, etc. That is not an ideal situation for a productive legal discussion.

Virtual appearances are convenient for lawyers: The bare minimum courts can ask is that lawyers at least use the technology now available pretty much universally so that everyone is visible on video when making these convenient virtual appearances.

2. Adjust your camera and background

Following up on the previous header, consider not making your appearance while driving on the 405, in line at Trader Joe's, etc. Have a quiet spot designated for your appearances.

Check your camera angle and distance beforehand. Too many people unfortunately have their cameras set up to look directly up their noses. Or to cut off one half of their head. Make sure you're not a cat.

Consider what is in the background of your video. Choose a virtual background on LACourtConnect if you wish.

How you present on a virtual appearance involves not just the professional attire you're wearing (at least from the waist up), but also how you're presented on camera. This wasn't anything we learned in law school, but it's more and more part of modern practice.

3. [Check if] you're muted

I've often considered making my virtual background on LACourtConnect just large text reading "Are you muted?" That would probably be distracting. But the issue is that people regularly forget to unmute themselves before launching into a legal point. Remember to unmute yourself.

4. Avoid feedback and echoes

Every morning, at some point, there is an appearance that involves very weird, ear-piercing feedback, and sometimes an echo of everything being said, so that the judicial officer (and everyone else) ends up hearing every word they say repeated back to them one second later.

This is, obviously, annoying. Apparently, echoes and feedback can occur if

- someone has a cell phone or other digital device near their computer or near their speakers;
- speakers are too close to a microphone, or

- a digital device is too close to surfaces that can reflect sound, like windows, walls, or other hard surfaces. (See, e.g., <https://www.linkedin.com/advice/0/how-do-you-manage-feedback-echo-problems-when>.)

Related to header 3 above, and potentially requiring additional attention, consider muting yourself when you're not speaking, to help avoid feedback and echo loops. Just remember to unmute yourself when you do need to speak.

The LACourtConnect app offers you the option to test your microphone and speakers before joining a call. You should do this occasionally to make sure you're not creating feedback or echoes. The app also allows you to adjust sound settings, which will help avoid feedback and echoes.

5. Remember that you are "in court"

Often, people will be on an LACourtConnect appearance on a phone without the camera turned on and will start getting exercised about some point or other, and will begin speaking at a crazy clip, which is a problem when there is a reporter or interpreter present, as there is sometimes; while going on like this, the person appearing is also likely to run roughshod over attempts by the judicial officer to pause them to ask a question. This tends not to endear the lawyer to the judicial officer.

It's obviously very different to be on a cell phone making an appearance than sitting in court right in front of the judicial officer, but to avoid virtual appearances becoming glorified customer-service calls, everyone involved should try to keep in mind that when appearing virtually, they are "in court" for all effective purposes. So, be mindful if there is, for example, a reporter or interpreter in the courtroom or on the call, if the judicial officer is trying to ask a question, etc.



In short, taking a few minutes to figure out how the app works will make your appearances run much more smoothly. Judicial officers and your colleagues will appreciate an appearance without echoes, feedback, voices in the dark, silent gesticulation, etc. Virtual appearances are clearly not a temporary fix, so we should all figure out how to do them properly.

Judge Chowdhury is a judge of the Superior Court of Los Angeles County. He is currently assigned to an Independent Calendar civil courtroom at the Glendale Courthouse. Prior to joining the Superior Court, he practiced civil litigation and worked in the trial and appellate units of the Federal Public Defender's Office in Los Angeles. He is a graduate of Williams College and Columbia University Law School.



Chowdhury