

Fact Sheet

Information for Consumer Representatives

Strengthening meeting skills for teleconferences

Teleconferencing is a great communication option as it is quick and easy to set up, saves travel time and costs, and enables you to conduct high-quality, reliable meetings over the phone with other stakeholders.

Teleconferences work best when:

- Committee members have previously met face-to-face.
- 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.

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Participating effectively in a teleconference

- Prepare ahead of time for the topics under discussion and 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.
- Just like any other business meeting, it is important that you arrive early. Dial into the call a few minutes early. If you wait until the last minute, you may encounter technology issues that can take time to fix.
- Be aware of your location. If you are in a loud area, you may have difficulty hearing the conversation over the phone line and may find yourself quickly distracted and missing important information. Also, if you use a microphone or speakerphone, be aware of its location and surroundings. You want the device close enough that it picks up your voice but far enough that it won't pick up every little sound you make. Additionally, be aware of any electronic devices. These items can cause interference and affect the quality of your call.

Conducting an effective teleconference

- Introduce yourself and then invite all participants to do the same. This also assists participants to recognise each other's 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.
- Stick to the agenda. By discussing the current problems and topics at hand, you will receive more participation and more willing participants. Also, do your best to stay within your scheduled timeframe. By extending the meeting, you may also quickly lose participation and attentiveness.
- Use visual aids when necessary. If it is a web conference, visual aids can help entice participation and encourage discussion among attendees. Visual aids are ideal if you are presenting new ideas or strategies to a large group.

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- Become Familiar with the Conference Call Service. Each service can offer different features and tools, particularly interactive features such as hand raising, polling, whiteboards and more. Before you begin a conference call, spend some time researching the service and learning its features.
- Keep the meeting short. One of the quickest ways to lose participants' focus in a phone meeting is to extend it much longer than is necessary or its scheduled length.

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'.
- 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.

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- 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.

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