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The show must go on

Get the right audio-visual equipment to present successfully in the courtroom



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By Miles B. Cooper

The lawyer sat in the courtroom gallery, straining to listen as a video deposition playback began. The audio, through laptop speakers, was turned up as high as it could go. The tinny sound could barely be heard. The judge, watching the jurors cupping hands to their ears, interrupted the proceeding. "The jury can't hear this," the judge said. "I need you to figure out another solution. Let's get a live witness so we can keep moving forward."

Professional grade

This information is framed around courtrooms. But the equipment fundamentals and guidance have global applicability, including conference rooms, lectures, and in-person focus groups and mediations. Presenting effectively is all about audience comfort and retention. We've said this before: Roughly sixty-five percent of the population are visual learners, thirty percent auditory, and five percent kinesthetic. If one wants information retention, consider the medium and the method. Visual information needs to be big enough to see without effort and positioned where the audience can easily see it. Auditory information needs to be crisp and loud, recognizing older listeners may not be able to hear as well.

Having a good projector, speaker, and screen to augment one's laptop, along with a little know-how required to hook them up, takes little effort. And it yields wonderful results as one is more likely to present if the items are easily accessible rather than borrowed or rented. Equipment costs have plummeted over the years. For less than $3,000, one can pull together a highly portable platform. Not all equipment is the same, though. Before throwing money away on equipment, consider the technical specifications needed for challenging environments like a courtroom.

Project strength

Potential projectors must be evaluated for brightness, quiet operation, and placement. For brightness we recommend something north of 4,000 lumens (the light output rating) so that one can keep the lights on while projecting. Far fewer jurors fall asleep this way. Bright projectors use fans to keep themselves cool, and fans make noise. Noisy fans frustrate those near the projector, particularly court reporters. Given courtroom geography, court reporters frequently find themselves near the projector. A projector that is under 38 decibels tends to be quiet enough. Finally, consider a projector equipped with a short throw lens. These lenses used to be prohibitively expensive and are now quite affordable. A short throw lens allows one to place the projector right by the screen. The name comes from the image being a short throw between the projector and screen. This simplifies projector placement and reduces the times a lawyer, witness, or juror gets blinded or tries to talk while unwittingly getting painted with an image.

Speak truth

While projectors are wonderful, their speakers are typically not sufficient for a large environment. Nor are laptop speakers. The solution? Studio monitors, used by recording studios. These are wonderful compact powered speakers with crisp sound. One will be sufficient for a state courtroom and two for a federal courtroom. No matter how good the speaker though, the sound quality for video deposition tends to be terrible. The advent of Zoom depositions has only worsened the issue, as microphone pickup is subject to the whims of the lawyer's office or home setup rather than the videographer. On the recording end, consider investing in a good microphone to improve the audience's ability to hear during playback. On the playback end, anticipate that the audience will still struggle. Playing video depositions with scrolling synched audio subtitles makes it easier for the audience to follow along.

Screentime

While courtrooms frequently have screens, they usually aren't in locations where jurors can easily see information. This is particularly true if the jurors are presented with written information one wants them to be able to see easily like economists' damages analyses. Da-Lite has made its Insta-Theater line for decades now. This highly portable screen lifts up directly from its carrying case, setting up in roughly 45 seconds. The 10' by 10' version is usually large enough for a courtroom and will fit in a sedan with the seat down.

Cable Guy!

No presentation setup is complete without a wide variety of extension cords and power strips as well as some gaffer tape. Old courtrooms lack good plug access. Avoiding new trip-and-fall cases means taping down cords, and that means getting gaffer tape. Gaffer tape is designed specifically to hold cords down while not becoming permanently stuck to the cord, carpet, or floor.

I got the hook-up

Finally, avoid technical failure embarrassment by hooking up the equipment and making sure it all works a week before the presentation. That leaves enough time to make modifications or get help should something not work quite right.

Outro

Back to our lawyer watching trial. The lawyer returned the next day. Overnight, the attorneys had located a better speaker and turned on the subtitles feature for the video deposition. While no video deposition playback is riveting, it was now far easier to hear and process the testimony, increasing the chances the jury would retain the information.

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