Have you got Zoom anxiety?

Twice this week I have been on video conference calls when people were reluctant to appear on-screen. They had their cameras off and were replaced with an icon and their name. One said she didn't want to switch on the webcam because her hair was a mess. The other individual said that they were looking too tired.

There are increasing anecdotal reports of people switching off their cameras during conference calls these days. Now it has been given a name – "Zoom Anxiety".

It is also connected with another issue which you will doubtless have experienced which also has a name these days, called "Zoom Fatigue".

Video conference calls are tiring. You are "on-show" and in "performance mode" throughout the call. That is not the same as face-to-face meetings where you can look away, lean back and mentally remove yourself without anyone else really noticing. Some people try to replicate this during conference calls by dipping into their emails while the call is going on. The trouble is, your brain is also listening to the online discussion, and you are now trying to multitask, which leads to a reduction in performance and an increase in tiredness.

On video calls like Zoom, you can see yourself. Even if you are not looking at your image, you are aware of it. Now and then you will check it. You don't do that in "real-world" meetings; you don't have a mirror on the desk throughout an office meeting, do you? The constant awareness of our image is anxiety-inducing. We want to know that we are looking OK, that we are professional and that we seem interested. That, in turn, leads to more tiredness because you have to keep your "game face" for the entire duration of the call. A constant smile or looking interested keeps your facial muscles tensed. Plus, you hardly move around in your chair. The result is muscular tiredness brought about through the anxiety of ensuring you look good on screen.

There is another problem with video calls which leads to anxiety and fatigue. This is the lack of non-verbal cues which help us communicate. For example, in a meeting, you can see a person's posture, their body language and the fact that might lean forward or raise even a finger suggesting they wish to speak. You can see the entire room in a typical office meeting, and you can sense movement around you. On the screen, this aspect of communication is absent, and so you compensate for it by trying to scan the screen and see what everyone is doing at the same time as listening to the speaker. That is tiring. But you are doing it because you are becoming anxious that you might miss something.

Personality factors also come into play on video calls. Introverted people are anxious because many online video calls are run in such a way they want to give everyone a chance to say something. So, an introverted individual spends the call worrying they are going to be called on to speak. Meanwhile, the extroverts feel pressured into filling the inevitable gaps that arise in video calls. That too is anxiety-inducing and tiring.

You have probably spoken with people who have been working at home for the last ten weeks who are saying they feel more tired than before. There's a good chance they are doing a lot of online video communication.

So, what can be done to alleviate all these issues? One thing is to reconsider what we are doing. Many people have simply replaced a traditional meeting with an online version on Zoom or Microsoft Teams. However, they have not adapted their meeting to the new format. So instead of

having a weekly meeting to discuss four agenda items, for instance, you could have four 15-minute video calls interspersed throughout the day to deal with each agenda item separately.

Indeed, the shorter your calls, the better. That's because people will adjust their posture, get up and move around – which they would not do in an hour-long Zoom call. On top of that, they can pay attention to the entire call, leading to improvements in productivity as well.

Another possibility would be for the main speakers at the meeting to have their cameras on and everyone else to switch off their webcams until they want to speak – make it more like a webinar. That will reduce the screen anxiety people have, make it easier for everyone to see what is going on, plus reduce interruptions. At the same time, participants in the call do not have to maintain a "game face" or sit still the whole time.

A further way of reducing anxiety and reducing fatigue is to use the features available. Yesterday I was in a call when someone complained that the software wasn't as good as Zoom because that program allowed you to show a PowerPoint presentation. I didn't have the heart to say that you definitely can do that with Microsoft Teams, as well as use a whiteboard, play videos, add files and interact in several ways. Most video conferencing platforms include several tools, but many calls are just a sea of faces with everyone chatting. You can reduce on-screen anxiety and associated fatigue by making each meeting varied. Start with a sea of faces, move to a whiteboard, go to a poll, show a video, present a couple of slides, go back to the sea of faces and so on. Making an online meeting just a bunch of people all looking at the screen is not conducive to good results because it increases anxiety and fatigue simultaneously.

We have had several weeks now of using Zoom or Microsoft Teams in earnest. It's time to assess what we have learned and start to make changes with how we approach these systems. They are not replacements for traditional meetings, yet that is the way most people appear to be using them. It is time to realise they are a different form of communication, and we need to adapt what we do with them. We could start by taking steps to help our online colleagues reduce their anxiety and fatigue with shorter meetings.

Your visitors want a deeply personalised website just for them

The Internet is intensely personalised. Even Google doesn't present you with the same results as other people. If you searched for "personalised website" you would get different results to me because Google tries to personalise the results based on your location, your prior search history and the kind of things you click on. You are used to Amazon customising its results for you. Plus, if you use Netflix or other streaming services, they personalise their recommendations to you based on your prior viewing habits. A sizeable slice of your online life is personalised.

We love it when our name is mentioned. Indeed, your own name is one of the most important things in the world. It is central to your identity. It is so vital that you can hear your name being whispered above a noisy background. This is known as "the cocktail party effect" and shows how finely tuned-in to our name we are.

Personalised websites create more sales

Amazon's personalisation is essential in helping it sell more. Those suggestions as to what else you might like to buy – based upon your shopping habits and searches – bring in about 40% of the company's revenue. Without this personalisation, Amazon would be around $90bn worse off each year…!

New research, though, shows that it isn't just simple personalisation that helps. It turns out that what has the greatest impact is deep personalisation. The study shows that conversion rates for sales only start to peak when people have seen several personalised web pages. Far from "over-doing" it with extensive personalisation, it seems that when people see 10 or more personalised pages they really want to buy.

Personalised websites conversion rate graph

What this study shows is how much personalisation is important to people. The more you show them that the website is "just for them", the more they feel connected to you. That makes them feel even more liked by your company and makes them want to buy.

One of the main reasons why people do not buy from businesses is because the "company did not make me feel wanted". In studies of selling by phone, most salespeople give up after the first or second refusal. But most purchases are made after the sixth call. It turns out that people want to be shown how much they are wanted. With fewer phone calls, they think the salesperson is not interested in their business.

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It's much the same on websites, it seems. Unless your website shows how much it values visitors by personalising as much as possible, then many potential sales are lost. You need to show your visitors a personalised website wherever possible. The more personalised pages your visitors encounter, the better it will be for your business.

How to create a personalised website

There are a number of ways you can personalise your website without going to the expense that Amazon has needed to do in order to achieve its deep personalisation.

Membership. Get people to become members of your site, ask them some questions about their interests and then email them regularly with suggestions as to what to read on your site.

Campaigns. Create campaigns around psychographics and then provide links to these "trails" around your site. Promote those links on social media.

Geography. Provide sections on your website devoted to each geographical region you serve. Change the wording and language to reflect those regions.

Tools. There are several tools that help with personalisation including Optimizely, Taggstar and Personyze.

WordPress Plugin. If you use WordPress then try PRZ which can personalise your blog.

You may not be able to personalise your website to the degree that Amazon does. However, the more you make people believe your website is "just for them", the more you will connect with your visitors and, as the latest research show, the more they will buy.

How do people make the positive decision to buy from your website?

The decision to buy anything is made in fractions of a second. Almost the entire decision-making process takes place in the emotional centres of the brain. Only after our emotions have come up with their idea of the right thing to buy does the more logical part of our brain come into play. It then attempts to justify the decision that is made. And all of that takes place in less than a second, according to much neuroscience on decision-making.

For an online business, you want people to decide in your favour. You want the brains of your visitors to be thinking "yes, I want to buy that", rather than "maybe" or even "no". So, how can you get people to make the decisions that you want?

Research on the process through which people make purchasing decisions shows that we tend to go through a similar set of steps before pressing that "buy now" button or take an item to the checkout in a store.

You'll see these stages in a recent set of lecture slides I used for my Business and Management undergraduate students that I teach at the University of Buckingham. Essentially, before buying anything we need to:

Know that we want something

Clarify our precise need

Explore the possible solutions to that need

Identify suitable suppliers

At each of these stages, the Internet plays a crucial psychological role in the decision to buy.

Helping people know what they want

Often people do not know what they want. They do not wake up each day with a shopping list inside their head. Instead, almost everything that we purchase is generated by a subconscious desire, as I explain in Chapter 1 of my book Click.ology.

What this really means is that you need to constantly be in the mind of your target audience for whatever it is you sell. That, in turn, means that you need to be adding content to your website regularly, frequently updating social media and being present wherever your target buyers hang out, whether that is online or in the real world.

Customers will soon forget about you and potential clients will not even know about you, unless you are "omnipresent". The subconscious nature of decision-making means that most people decide to buy from people they have already heard about. Many businesses appear to leave that job to Google's algorithm. In other words, these firms have no control over how people hear about them or even think about them in the first place.

To help people to make the decision to buy from you, your company needs to be highly visible in your marketplace.

When people do realise they want to buy something, they start some basic searches. These could include looking at blogs and videos from "YouTubers" to collect ideas. Many people talk to their friends, family or colleagues to try and get a notion of what's best for them.

In the modern parlance of the online world, this means you need to be using "influencers". These are bloggers and vloggers who can talk about your company's products and services. Before the Internet came along, this was called "public relations". Essentially, you need to get other people talking about you, if you are going to be able to help potential clients clarify their needs and be steered towards a decision to buy that is heading in your direction.

When people who want to buy something get to the stage of serious consideration, they start looking around the web for companies that might be able to sell them what they want. At this stage, they are making rapid emotional decisions about products and services that might work for them. One piece of research has shown that people make the choice of websites to explore in 560 milliseconds – just over half a second. There's a problem with that; you are not consciously aware of anything until 700 milliseconds. So, people are deciding whether your business website is one they wish to explore BEFORE they are even aware of what they are looking at.

This means your website has to be well-designed, fresh, up-to-date and obviously easy-to-use. If you do not meet these minimum requirements, as well as look aesthetically pleasing, your potential customer will not even consider you.

In the world of consumer psychology, when people are just sifting through a range of potential websites and suppliers that is known as an "Evoked Set" of possible suppliers. Once they have taken a look at these possibilities, buyers focus on what is known as a "Consideration Set", or what might be called a short-list. Your business needs to be in that short-list of suppliers that will be considered. Otherwise, your target audience cannot even make the decision to buy from you.

Your target visitors need clear information, detailed specifications and a guide to what they will pay, preferably an exact price. Often online, companies will display prices in US Dollars to appeal internationally. But that is off-putting. Research shows that if you don't put prices in the local currency of each visitor, they often make the decision not to buy from you.

Also, compare yourself to the competition; highlight their weaknesses. List all the features of your products and services, in addition to the benefits. Much marketing advice is to focus on benefits. But in the "Consideration Set" phase of purchase decision-making, people are much more focused on features.

There is a lot you can do to influence people and make them more likely to want to buy from your business. However, you need to make sure you have satisfied their needs at every stage of the decision-making process, otherwise, you will lose out to the competition.