WEB & VIDEO

CONFERENCING

YOUR GUIDE TO THE FUTURE OF MEETINGS

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MEDIA PLANET

Broadband: Advancing the Conferencing Solution

BY: GRANT SEIFFERT, President of the Telecommunications Industry Association

With the convergence of IP-based applications across multiple platforms, the surge toward realizing the technotopian dream of unified communications has swept the information and communications technology (ICT) industry. Fueling this growth are enhanced conferencing tools, increased user familiarity and, more recently, an economy that's making everyone think twice about travel.

If you're in the business of conferencing, this is great news, backed by the following new findings:

Research for the Telecommunications Industry Association's (TIA) annual *ICT Market Review & Forecast* shows that revenue for conferencing in the United States is booming. Sales in video conferencing rose from $600 million in 2007 to $765 million in 2008, and are projected to skyrocket to $1.5 billion in 2012. Projections for Web conferencing are even better: Sales hit $1.2 billion in 2008 and should grow to $2.5 billion by 2012.

According to Yankee Group Research, Inc.'s Anywhere Enterprise—Large: 2008 US Fixed-Mobile Convergence/IP Communications Survey (November 5, 2008), Web conferencing has already been deployed by 65 percent of survey respondents. An additional 33 percent plan to deploy it within one to three years. Room-based video-conferencing numbers are also extremely good, with a 55 percent deployment rate and 27 percent more planned. For desktop video conferencing, deployment is 37 percent, with an additional 37 percent planned.

Along with conferencing's productivity boost, it's also a green solution that can help companies respond to the global mandate for a cleaner environment by reducing the environmental impact of travel-related pollution.

A joint goal of encouraging greener business practices inspired TIA and InfoComm International to request that the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC) award Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED®) points to companies with on-site video conferencing facilities
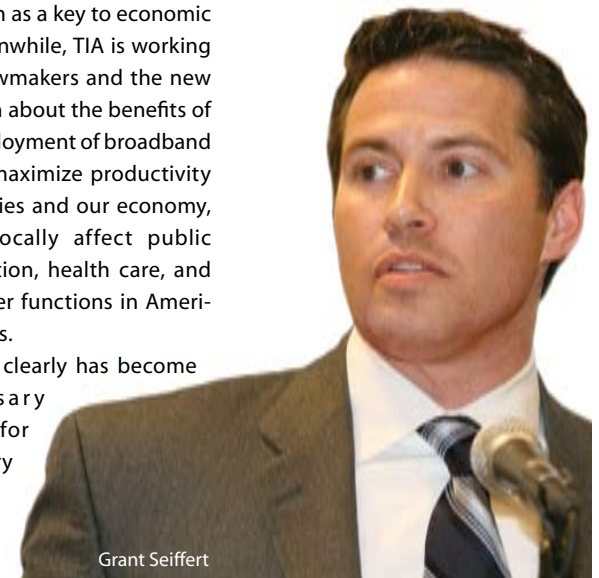
Of course, conferencing tools are not quite enough to realize the full potential of this technology. It's going to be necessary to continue to build out the broadband infrastructure that enables ever-greater speeds and bandwidth for applications such as desktop conferencing and multimedia collaboration.

The incoming administration has emphasized broadband infrastructure expansion as a key to economic stimulus. Meanwhile, TIA is working to educate lawmakers and the new administration about the benefits of increased deployment of broadband networks to maximize productivity of our industries and our economy, and unequivocally affect public safety, education, health care, and countless other functions in Americans' daily lives.

Conferencing clearly has become a necessary component for success in every economic sector, and broadband

solutions for unified communications will help the ICT industry attain new heights.

Grant Seiffert

Lower travel costs through responsible financial decisions

Web and video conferencing holds great appeal for companies seeking to demonstrate their commitment to reducing cost as well as their carbon footprint. Yet, as with any new technology, there is always an issue over picking the vendor who matches performance expectations within budgetary restrictions.

As companies start to take an increasingly tough stance against unnecessary expenditure while also showing they care for the environment, Guillermo Rotman, CEO of Regus Americas, believes many companies are looking for quality and simplicity so they can get the most from their executives' time.

Due to the service being a high quality, studio-based solution, Rotman reveals that Regus is not just used for meetings between co-workers but also the stars of the screen and the boardroom.

"People are using our studios for many things, not just face to face meetings," he adds.

"We have a lot of stars and top business people that use the service so they can be in one place yet they appear on a screen elsewhere to address an audience. We have a lot of companies using our six hundred studios so a person can appear to a lot of people in different locations. A person giving training, for example, can interact with several offices around the world at once. You only have to think of the huge cost saving for getting all those people to one location to realize why they want to use video conferencing but still need a high quality service."

Save time and money

The message that corporate America must take a responsible look at its travel budgets is the most powerful driving force which Greg Plum, Channel Manager at Conference Group reveals is influencing clients, particularly those looking to reduce international air travel bills.

"One customer began conducting interviews with job applicants in India via our video conferencing service," he explains.

"This afforded the client the ability to conduct a 'face-to-face' meeting at a fraction of the cost and time required to travel from the States to India. Web and video conferencing services allow businesses to reduce unnecessary travel, while maximizing their virtual footprint, allowing them more productive use of their time so they touch more customers in a shorter period of time."

This obviously has very real benefits of deepening client relationships but also allows companys to show they take the responsibility of cutting cost and carbon emmissions very seriously.

Philippe Schwartz,
CEO ooVoo

Web conferencing is not just a business tool. People are using video communiction—multiparty video conferencing or face-to-face video calling—to connect with colleagues, family and friends anywhere, anytime. Many of the features that attract ooVoo business users: high-quality video and audio, a simple download and installation process, file sharing and portability (connect from the office, from home or on the road) also appeal to individual users. Business users use ooVoo to telecommute, hold team meetings across multiple offices, or to interview job candidates. Our non-business users send video messages instead of greeting cards, host book clubs, or use ooVoo video calling to enhance their long-distance romantic or family relationships. While nothing substitutes for seeing someone in person, a high-quality video call solution that's easy-to-use and affordable (ooVoo has free and premium plans) makes staying connected—beyond a phone call, email or text message—an everyday reality.

Remote Collaboration Stretches Budgets And Cuts Pollution

If you were to ask the average business person if they truly enjoy the process of catching numerous flights around the world to meet colleagues and clients, most would probably admit they would prefer to travel less yet still be a familiar face to their contacts.

At the same time, as the recession bites, companies are becoming increasingly aware of their dual responsibility to cut travel budgets as well as meet longer standing commitments to reduce their carbon footprints. Hence, the appeal of reducing travel through web and video conferencing holds great appeal for American companies and their staff.

In fact, according to Glenn Fleischman, President of web conferencing provider Arkadin North America (for further information see page 2), there are benefits which go beyond reduced travel budgets and carbon emissions.

"The most obvious and well-documented benefit is reduction of travel-related environmental effects such as carbon footprint expansion and natural resource depletion, but there are positive health benefits as well," he says.

"Reducing travel cuts down on fatigue, stress and sick time which puts less strain on companies, families and the health care system."

Human touch

Nevertheless, a common concern among executives is that whilst they can see the benefit of remote collaboration, both in financial and environmental terms, there is still a lingering concern that technology could take the human element out of dealing with contacts and bonding teams of colleagues. However, in many cases the opposite can be true, Fleischman reveals.

"Remote collaboration (RC) technologies will never completely replace face to face business travel but that's not really the goal," he explains.

"While a portion of face to face business is migrating to RC, my view is that most of the increase in RC usage involves finding new and more effective ways to communicate information. For example, instead of traveling to see a customer four times per year, perhaps a company will only travel one or two times for a face to face visit, but using RC tools it might also interact with the client an additional six to ten times per year. So the total number of interactions actually increases and hopefully the relationship deepens. I see RC as one of several tools in the suite of communication options and primarily a way to increase interaction; not simply to replace one form of communication with another."

Although economic and environmental factors are significant and often encourage a business to investigate web conferencing vendors, feedback from video and web conferencing vendors suggests that these are not the only factors involved. For companies who commit to the technology in the long term, the deciding points tend to be increased output from employees who are better utilized in and around the office than in the air and in airport lounges.

For this reason, once the downturn has prompted companies to examine travel budgets and invest in web and video conferencing it would appear likely that, when the economy recovers, interest in collaborative technologies will not wane.

Randal A Lemke, PhD
Executive Director, InfoComm International

The reduction in travel expenses is quickly seen in today's economic environment. But after companies and organizations deploy conferencing they also begin to see that it turns airport and ground travel time into productive time. They are also able to include more relevant staff members since their travel does not need to be expensed. Finally, in today's environment conferencing is green. The reduction of carbon usage for air or ground travel is significant. Conferencing also has a rich mix of media can reduce the amount of paper used in meetings and can save meeting records for later usage.

The next big thing in conferencing is telepresence. You can now conduct conferences in life-size images that are HD quality, which changes the way people interact. Sitting across a virtual table from meeting participants, you can see the non-verbal cues that are so important to communication. You can also hear and speak in natural voice. Participating in a HD quality conference is instantly viewed as being natural. You can get all the messages and interact easily.

Conferencing companies are deploying this technology now and the future will only bring more telepresence capability and more ways for people to interact from their conference rooms and from their desktop.

Chat Without The Noise

Dialing in to listen to a presentation or discuss a project with several colleagues is an almost daily routine for many busy business people and so a range of services have sprung up from many audio conferencing vendors to connect colleagues in various offices.

Although many companies will try to bring together employees and clients on an internal phone system, Dave Rickert, President of BroadData cautions that this can lead to inferior quality calls on the one device that people have long become accustomed to receiving good quality audio. Opting for a dedicated call conferencing service can also allow experts to ensure a call is as clear as possible.

"Most phone systems were not designed for conference calling. Audio conferencing provided by a conferencing service provider will perform much better," he says.

"Poor audio quality on a standalone audio conference is often attributable to noise being brought into a call by a participant who has static on their line, or dialing in from a cell phone. We have technical support that can be requested at any time during an audio conference if there are any sound quality issues and the tech support specialist can identify which participant is bringing the noise into the conference and resolve it by muting that line or asking that participant to drop and dial back in an attempt to get a better connection."

Satellite For The Big Screen

The technology which allows roving reporters to file stories from every corner of the globe is also being used by companies for high quality video conferencing.

Rather than rely solely on the terrestrial web or telephone infrastructures, satellite video conferencing can beam images of, say, a CEO address to multiple offices around the world with picture and audio quality which Dori Schmitz, Director of Operations at SCS Communications, claims is most in demand from companies looking to fill a large screen.

"Clients often will say that they want to have that 'Nightline' look or something similar," she says. "It's used most often for medium to large groups because a satellite signal provides a broadcast quality signal that displays well on a large screen projection system."

Flexibility key

Satellite technology often needs to be combined with other forms of telecommunications, to give a truly interactive two-way discussion between the typical scenario of one, or a small group of dispersed speakers, and a larger audience. Hence a company needs to discuss its needs in advance with a supplier to discover whether additional technology is required, or a satellite link will suffice.

"The actual design of the satellite videoconference varies and can be customized to meet the specific needs of the meeting," Schmitz adds. "Sometimes the message just needs to be one-way; the CEO's address during an all employee meeting is a common example. Perhaps there will be a Q&A session? This can be done with a telephone line coming in from the remote sites, with the question and answer both being rebroadcast over the satellite for all to hear.

"In other situations, various elements of the meeting need to originate from more than one location; maybe the CEO is in Los Angeles, the Director of Marketing is in Denver and the CFO is in London. A hybrid approach, involving a combination of satellite broadcasts, telephone connections and remote downlinks make it all possible."

Hence, the advice is to pick a partner with care to ensure they can combine technologies around a core satellite offering to ensure the required quality is achieved with the minimum hassle.

Application Advancements for Web Conferencers

As broadband penetration has improved to give individuals and businesses sufficient bandwidth to conduct web conferences between computers, so too has the software behind each vendor's service.

As use of the web has become more sophisticated, web conferencing has had to stay ahead of the curve by allowing people not just to see and hear one another but also to collaborate on projects and integrate web conferencing from a third party vendor in to a company's own systems, Marv Toyer at eBLVD.com explains.

"Individuals and businesses both want an affordable, multipurpose solutions that allow others outside of their network to interact on a more personal level, share PC desktop materials and efficiently conduct hands-on collaboration and training," he says.

"These increased collaborative capabilities include real-time multi-point audio, video and text sharing, the ability to 'push' electronic documents, handouts and user-surveys as well as vertical integration into industries such as e-learning.

"The ability to seamlessly integrate a web conferencing service into one's existing Web or Intranet sites is very important, as is web conference archiving, which gives users the ability to mark it up to produce asynchronous content."

Going mobile

While the advances that allow integration, collaboration and support largely exist and are, of course, being constantly worked on, Toyer believes home users and businesses will find there are further refinements in new areas web conferencing vendors are either working on or wishing for.

"Some features we will be examining include high-definition (HD) video, support for multiple, concurrent presenters, and mobile phone and hand-held device support," he says.

"In fact, the feature we want to see from mobile and hand-held devices is the capability to project a web conference eight inches away onto a wall."

So web conferencing vendors' next move would appear to echo the move of online services on to the mobile so that mobile device owners can walk and talk as well as see and be seen.

Web & Video Conferencing Explained

Video conferencing is a wonder of modern day communications. Rather than just hear someone on the phone, fast telephony and internet networks allow people to send and receive video so they can see one another and interact as if face to face.

In fact, web technology has progressed so far that for very little or even no cost, individuals and companies can hook up a web cam to a computer and set up web conferences to catch up with work colleagues or friends and relatives.

The beauty of modern day communications means that people can not only see and hear one another, they can collaborate on data, perhaps review the same sales figures or work on a sketch of a prototype together.

Check quality

Whilst there can be a vast array of choices for businesses and consumers, Costin Tuculescu, President and CEO of Cosnet (owner of Instant Presenter) believes research in to the quality of the technology used by a vendor is key.

"Ultimately, what people should take into consideration is the overall video quality, or picture quality of the conferencing experience, which is all dependent on something called the 'codec'," he says.

"This stands for Compression-Decompression and is the technology that takes the video signal, compresses it and transmits it over the internet. Depending on what kind of codec is used, picture quality will vary greatly—so be sure that when selecting a video conferencing technology, you pay close attention to this factor and ask questions!"

No more meetings?

Of course, one question that will always lurk at the back of anyone's mind is whether staring at a screen will ever replace human contact?

"Meeting up in person is much more natural than video conferencing and I think once the teleporter is invented, most video conferencing companies will go out of business," Tuculescu jokes.

"Until then, video conferencing eliminates the need to travel. You can meet face to face with someone across the globe from your own desk— what's better than that?

"Web conferencing allows the sharing of documents, computer screens and ideas over the internet, instantly. In many cases, this technology leads to faster decision making, reduced travel times and costs, and faster communication capabilities which ultimately lead to better productivity."

Better Security Is Within Reach

Communicating over the web will always bring a fear of hackers but Marek Podgorny, President of security specialists Collabworx, is confident that web and video conferencing can be done securely with little extra cost securing connections.

"Online security cost is normally reflected in firewalls, VPNs, anti-spam and anti-virus solutions but well designed conferencing systems do not need this infrastructure," he says.

"In fact, they cannot even use such systems because conferencing software must connect people across disparate security infrastructures which have been set up to protect different corporations and service providers.

"So, security elements must be provided on the application level, meaning the conferencing application must assume the worst case scenario, that there is no network-level security, and provide functions such as data encryption itself. Hence, deployment of conferencing applications does not typically involve any hardware additions to the set of devices securing the network."

Affordable and Convenient

With broadband networks already in place and many computers shipping with web cams, vendors are starting to be able to offer web conferencing at very competitive prices and even, in some instances, for free.

That is certainly the case at ooVoo where CEO Philippe Schwartz claims the company was set out to make web conferencing affordable and hence, although there is a cost for upgrading beyond entry level, consumers can use the service for free.

"We want to make the service affordable, so it's free, though for a small monthly fee, people can add extra features, such as video conferencing between up to six people, sharing documents and recording video conferences," he explains.

Less hassle

Larry Dorie, CEO of RHUB Communications takes a different approach of having a web conferencing appliance inside a business so corporate IT systems do not get bar access.

"The number one barrier to web conferencing is blocking the download of client software by firewall policy, antivirus products, locked down computer or supported platform issues," he says.

"Our 'no download' technology overcomes this and we've invested heavily in engineering to be able to deliver on a cost effective platform which is also green, consuming less than 5 watts of power."

David Hittinger
Digital Samba USA

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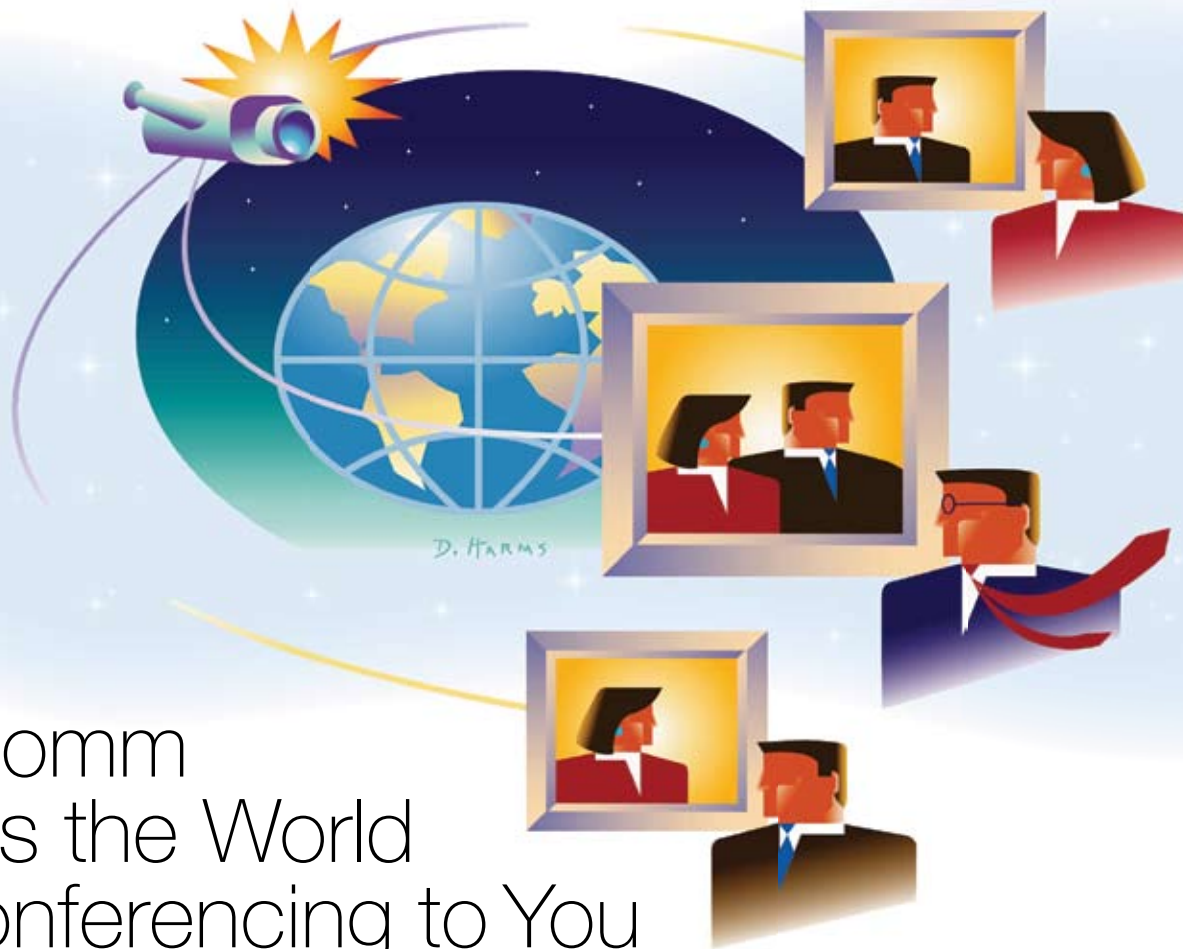**800-961-4620**

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