

## The potential of Web conferencing is virtually here

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In the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks, business practices worldwide changed, and one of those changes was the dramatic increase in Web conferencing as an alternative to business travel.

Immediately after the attack many companies reduced air travel because of concerns about flight safety, and over the past six months they have been cutting their travel budgets to deal with the slowed economy.

With corporate travel costing companies \$470 billion annually, Web conferencing offers a new horizon that not only reduces costs but also facilitates communication, speeds up decision making, generates revenue and increases productivity.

The reliability and capabilities of Web conferencing were put to the test in the aftermath of Sept. 11. Web conferencing vendors exceeded expectations, however, and gained a newfound respect and acceptance among businesses.

As a result, Web conferencing now represents a reliable third alternative to audio and video conferencing for businesses facing increased demands on productivity with ever-decreasing information technology budgets.

The worldwide Web conferencing market stood at \$266 million last year, according to Frost & Sullivan, a marketing, consulting and training company. With projected cumulative average growth rates of 35 percent over the next seven years, the Web conferencing market is expected to reach \$2 billion by 2008.

In the days right after the terrorist attacks, conferencing vendors reported a 50 percent increase in interest for Web conferencing services, while actual sales rose by 25 percent. Although these growth levels have slowed in recent months, they remain considerably higher than pre-Sept. 11 values.

### **Don't Tell Me, Show Me**

Most Web conferencing services include features that allow participants to work on the same document or file, share applications for training or demonstrations, present to large audiences, and conduct Web-site tours.

SavvyData, a Fort Lauderdale, Fla.-based provider of computer-security products and services, uses Web conferencing for live demos of its Web-based security products.

"Web conferencing enables us to affordably connect a sales representative in Maryland, a technical engineer in Florida and a prospective client in Colorado," says Jim Core, SavvyData's sales director.

### **Doing seminars online**

While face-to-face marketing seminars have long been recognized as very effective builders of business relationships, the costs associated with travel and valuable time away from the office have become significant barriers to acquiring and retaining customers.

Web seminars eliminate air and hotel logistics, hauling equipment, and catering expenses, making them a cost-effective way to generate quality sales leads and build stronger customer and prospect relationships.

Web conferencing not only makes seminars more affordable, but also offers considerable functional advantages over typical on-site meetings with features such as interactive Q-and-A sessions, real-time collaboration, and the ability to digitally record and archive the event for playback from a company Web site.

### Choosing a Vendor

What do you look for in a Web conferencing vendor? Here are a few suggestions:

- Select a pricing model. Web conferencing typically is priced either on a software-user license basis or per minute. Usage levels should determine which model is best for you. The crossover point from a minute-based service to a software-license purchase hovers at roughly 2,000 users over the course of a year. It's best to start with minute-priced service before committing to a license.
- Make sure it's easy to use. Do not simply rely upon demo movies and brochures. Ask the vendor if free trials are available. Is the service easy to set up and use? Can presentations be uploaded in real time or must they be sent via e-mail to the vendor for uploading onto a server? Ensure that a voluminous manual isn't required to conduct a simple presentation.
- Get the features you need. Some Web conferencing services only support online presentations, while others offer full-feature packages that include polling, chat, application-sharing, white boarding and group Web surfing. Do you seek the ability to archive the event for playback? Make sure the product meets your needs.
- Consider security requirements. Depending on the audience and the information being shared, security might be a concern. Security issues determine whether to use the service on a hosted basis or to install the software internally. Most products are secure enough and do not store the meeting's data any place except on the presenter's hard drive. Participants simply view a graphical representation of the data through the Internet. The service should provide password authorization, basic encryption, and the ability to lock and unlock meetings.

Web conferencing technology is not a panacea and is not meant to replace all business travel. However, it can certainly supplement travel in many cases.

*Communiqué Conferencing is based in Reston, VA and provides audio conference calling and Web conferencing services to businesses. E-mail: [info@ccimeet.com](mailto:info@ccimeet.com).*



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