

## Web Conferencing: Why all the Fuss?

By Jim Garrettson, Founder, TownHall Teleconferencing

**T**he rapid adoption of new technology is necessary to sustain a healthy business communications model for a business of any size. Today's workers are more mobile, geographically dispersed, self-supporting and technologically savvy. Making sure everyone stays connected is a continual challenge. Web conferencing is an effective medium for bringing people together by bridging the desktop PC and the phone and offering users an efficient, rich media experience that improves the effectiveness of communication.

In a recent poll, *ExecutiveBiz* magazine asked its readers how often they Web conference. Forty-four percent said one to five times a month. For many large enterprises, online multimedia conferencing has become a standard medium for conducting meetings, briefings, interviews and seminars. With prices coming down, Web conferencing provides businesses of all sizes a way to cut expenses while improving overall business effectiveness and employee productivity. Travel can be avoided, yet participants still feel connected to each other in spite of the distance.

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The basic capabilities of Web conferencing include:

- **Presentation Mode** allows users to share audio and video with one or many people. All participants are on a "shared screen." Possible applications include sales presentations and staff meetings.
- **Application Sharing** – allows users to share applications across the Web. This capability is appropriate for customer service and technical support.
- **Web Touring** – allows you to lead one or many participants through a Web site in real time, thus ensuring they have seen your company's important information.
- **Collaboration** – allows you to work simultaneously on a document with one or more virtually connected parties. For example, if your business is paying an attorney to mark up a document, Web conferencing's collaboration feature can minimize the constant back and forth between parties, saving you both time and attorney's fees. Sales forecasts, group projects, customer requests or change orders also could be handled in a similar manner.

There are a number of Web conferencing products available on the market today. When choosing a provider, do your homework. Identify each product's strengths, and map those strengths to your needs. Here are a few things for you to consider during the evaluation process:

- **Terms and minimums** Many providers have revenue requirements and long-term commitments associated with their service. Go with a company that allows you to "try before you buy" the service and offers a pay-as-you-go plan.

- **Cost.** At the low end, a two-person, 30-minute Web conference should cost less than \$10. However, with some name-brand user agreements, you may end up paying flat fees of more than \$100. Start out with metered service before you sign up for fixed fees.
- **Ease of use.** Look for products that are easy to install and use. While bells and whistles excite the technophiles, you need a product that can be used by the least technical people.
- **Ability to work through firewalls.** Make certain your product is "lightweight." Heavy applications consume memory and struggle with corporate firewalls, which are designed to protect your company. The basic requirement of any product is that it must have the ability to get to the user's desktop. Bells, whistles, private data networks, and ultra security all sound great, but if your average user can't see through the firewall, these features are useless.
- **International use.** If you plan to communicate with people outside the United States, make sure your Web conferencing product is up for the task. Many parts of the world remain bandwidth constrained, and one bad connection can impact your overall call quality. If one out of ten participants on a conference call has a bad connection, all ten people share the bad experience.

Like the adoption of email, instant messaging, fax machines and other technologies that have reshaped our office environment, the introduction of a new technology represents a departure from the way we currently do business. While Web conferencing may seem like a lot of fuss, it may well be well worth your investment of time and resources. ■

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The FCEDA assists businesses interested in locating, relocating or expanding their commercial office or industrial operations in Fairfax County. FCEDA's services are available on a confidential, no-cost basis.

### 2004 Annual Report Available Mid-March

The 2004 FCEDA Annual Report highlighting the activities of the Fairfax County Economic Development Authority will be available in mid-March. The Annual Report includes information on the FCEDA's marketing initiatives in the U.S. and overseas, highlights the achievements of minority-owned firms in the county and includes an overview of the commercial real estate market in the county. The report also lists the 2004 announcements—companies the FCEDA worked with throughout the year who are expanding in, or relocating to, Fairfax County.

Copies of the report are available by calling 703-790-0600, sending an email to [info@fceda.org](mailto:info@fceda.org) or downloading a copy from the Web site [www.FairfaxCountyEDA.org](http://www.FairfaxCountyEDA.org). ■