

Web Conferencing: Why all the Fuss? Ask your Champion!

Jim Garrettson

Every corporation has a champion, who looks for a better way to get the job done. He/she's a motivator, a communicator, someone who pushes the rest of us. This person often times drives the adoption of a new technology.

Sustaining a business communications model for any size business is becoming increasingly complex. Workers have become more mobile, geographically dispersed, self supporting and technologically savvy; making sure everyone stays connected is a continual challenge. Champions understand that Web conferencing is an effective medium for bringing people together. Web conferencing connects their co-workers with a product that weaves them in and out of a virtual technical fabric with ease. Web conferencing bridges together the Desktop PC and the phone, 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; 44 percent said they do it one to five times a month. (See below chart for additional results.) For many large enterprises, online multimedia conferencing has become a standard medium for conducting meetings, briefings, interviews, and seminars. Now at a low price point, Web conferencing provides businesses -- of all sizes ways -- to cut expenses while improving overall business effectiveness and employee productivity, avoiding travel, and allowing participants to feel a lot more "connected".

In order to best understand why your company may want to Web conference for certain applications, you should consider the cool capabilities of this technology. Features include:

- Presentation Mode – allows users to share a document (PowerPoint, Word or Excel) 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 has been extremely helpful with customer service and technical support. When was the last time you asked (or heard), "what are you seeing on your screen now?"
- Web Touring – allows you to lead one or many participants through a web site in real time. Now, you can walk customers through your Web site, 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. If you have your own business (large or small) and are working with, and paying for, an attorney to mark up a document; this feature is for you. The constant back and forth between parties is very time consuming and expensive. Now, imagine making these edits in real time? Sales forecasts, group projects, customer requests or change orders could also be handled "live time".

There are a number of Web conferencing products available on the market today. When choosing a provider, you will want to do your homework. You should identify each product's various strengths and map those strengths to your needs. In addition, you should also evaluate the products based on their features. 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.** Products range in price. At the low end, a two-person, 30-minute web conference should cost less than \$10, or with some name-brand user agreements, you may end up paying flat fees of over \$100. Start out with metered service and help the champion in your firm make this product a success, 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 to consider all your company's employees and work with a product that can be used by the least technical people. Basic rule: Keep in Simple.
- **Ability to work through firewalls.** Make certain your product is “lightweight”. Heavy applications consume memory and struggle with the corporate firewalls, which are designed to protect your company. The basic requirement of any product must have the ability to get to the user's desktop. Bells, whistles, private data networks, ultra security all sound great, but if your average user can't see through the firewall, these features are all for naught.
- **International.** If you plan to be communicating with people outside the US, make sure your Web conference product is up for the task. Many parts of the world remain bandwidth constrained and one bad connection can impact your overall call quality. When one of ten participants on a conference call has a bad connection, all ten people share the bad experience.

While the above process may seem like a lot of “fuss”, it will be well worth your investment of time and resource. But you can't do it alone, you'll need a champion. 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. Empower your champions; allow them to lead the change, because if you don't, your competitors will.

About the author

Jim Garrettson is a well-known veteran in the Washington business community. The founder of TownHall Teleconferencing (THTWeb), which provides international audio and web conferencing products; Potomac Officers Club (POC), a non-profit networking organization comprised of 500 CXOs; and ExecutiveBiz, a digital business magazine for Washington executives. Prior to founding these companies, Jim held senior-level sales positions with Net2000, Teleglobe, Qwest and Cidera. He can be reached at jim@thtweb.com.

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