

2005 is well underway. It is hard to believe where this country has come with advances in technology assisting business practices. In the good old days meeting with a branch office meant packing up the entire management staff and traveling to meet with other personnel in the remote city. During the nineties video and audio conferencing came on the scene. However, video conferencing required expensive equipment and line services to operate. Audio conferencing was also pricey as most companies offering the service were the carriers who could charge a lot for their elite service.

In the late nineties audio conferencing companies began to emerge, making it more affordable for the small to medium sized business to take advantage of audio conferencing. However, many business owners still felt hampered by this type of communication. While audio conferencing did eliminate the need for excessive travel expenses, improved the sound quality of a multiple person conference and created a way that remote workers could stay in touch, there was still a missing link. That missing link was the ability to share documents or better yet, perform a live presentation with multiple conference participants.

Thus a new trend was born called "web collaboration". This is usually performed combining a minimum of audio conferencing and web conferencing. By using this tool conference participants not only have a means of hearing all members of the conference but sharing in data applications at the same time. The other item that can be incorporated by many services is video conferencing along with the other two media (audio and data). This new business tool has been driven by a market where businesses are increasing their global presence plus entering into more business partnering and sub-contracting relationships. The other factor making web collaboration a reality is that bandwidth requirements are not as excessive as they were several years ago. Many audio/web conference users simply need a minimum 56K connection and a phone line to effectively use the collaborative conferencing services. If a video conference is desired there is no longer a need to set up special dedicated lines or purchase expensive monitor equipment. The users need a simple, inexpensive PC camera.

There are many similarities to a worker's day that cross vertical markets. Day to day business functions of most office workers combine inter-personal communication (research, creating and absorbing information obtained) and personal interaction with other professionals (communications, collaboration, decision making). With the use of multi-media conferencing services allows those two types of functions to merge together. Using the various tools a worker can perform research and absorb information presented via video or web placement of documents while at the same time communicate and collaborate on action items and ultimately resolutions to projects. This collaboration assists in quick decision making, many times affecting the outcome of a project.

In order to ensure that the technology is implemented properly, a manager must choose a service that best matches their current business needs but also provides flexibility to grow into the different types of services offered. Not to mention test the service for user-friendliness. If the service is not easy to use or flexible in its scheduling and media choices, then any hope for productivity gain is a mute point. A service should be chosen that combines audio, web and video services in one session, but also flexible enough that the business can elect to use only one of the media if desired and not be charged for the other options during that specific call. For instance, a business may not always need the web tool for a meeting where audio only would be sufficient. The log-in should provide quick access to all features, allowing a user to join via web or telephone interface. The service should also be flexible in its scheduling opportunities. Look for a service that allows users to call in and achieve space on an as needed basis. This will help with emergency meeting productivity allowing those

crucial decisions to have the collaboration needed while at the same time maximizing the turn around of that needed action.

Another benefit to using an off-site conferencing center is the ability to archive meetings. Many times key committee or project members cannot be present. Instead of those participants simply getting a type written synopsis of the meeting in the minutes, they can listen in real-time to the entire meeting and view the presented material on the web at the same time. In 2003 44% of survey respondents stated that they planned on increasing their participation in web conferencing by 100% in the first 6 months. Other companies that had already made this a standard business practice were experiencing one month ROI from reduced travel, increased productivity and quicker decision making ability.

Many business managers and owners do not see how the company they are serving can benefit from this type of service. Listed below are several examples of how companies have found success with this application:

- Example 1: A Boston executive had a team of employees in New York. Before utilizing a conferencing service he was traveling to New York from Boston once a week. Now that the team is able to meet every week via the audio/web/video conference they have reduced that meeting to once a month. This eliminated approximately \$2,000.00 per month.
- A nationwide PR firm uses the technology to collaborate with their own in-house teams, but also to conduct client progress meetings during a marketing campaign. This allows them to have “face to face” contact with the client but eliminate the travel cost FOR THE CLIENT. The meetings are still productive because they can share files real-time. Each participant sees the product slick, new logo, or other applicable material and again decisions are made on the spot. They no longer have to wait for e-mail passes and yay’s or nay’s on an action item.
- A business consulting firm uses this type of service to conduct mini seminars with prospective and current clients. These seminars are recorded for future viewing to allow those that miss out an opportunity to connect and learn at their own schedule.

In short, business managers and owners need to be thinking outside of the box to attract, maintain and better serve their customers. Today, web conferencing is emerging as a feature-rich, cost-effective tool for many business applications. Each business should assess its’ business practices to determine if multi-media conferencing can be used to increase productivity and make a positive impact on customer service and ultimately the bottom line in 2005. It may be just what is needed to soar into the next year.