



FEAR of flying? or the MAIL? TRY the web conferencing CURE

the events of September 11 and beyond have affected each of us. One common reaction was avoiding plane flights; another was turning metal trashcans into mail receptacles throughout Washington, DC neighborhoods.

Whether physical travel or physical mail, we've grown suspicious of traditional ways of maintaining business contacts, and come to depend increasingly on the Web as a safe and cost-effective alternative means of communication.

Of course, this trend didn't start with September 11. For some time now, a growing number of vendors have been selling products providing multimedia and interactive access to presentations and training. Since September 11, however, Steve Crummey, CEO of e-StudioLIVE, estimates there has been a "40% spike in inquiries and business leads." For want of a better term, I call these vendors Web conference application service providers (ASPs). These ASPs offer a rich collaborative experience that can offer nearly the same benefits as physically going to a conference, a product launch meeting, or to a bricks-and-mortar university. I've tried out some of them via Web seminars, mostly vendor product demonstrations and presentations. I've generally been very pleased with the experience; there were occasional glitches, but the commute to these presentations was definitely more pleasant than traveling to bricks-and-mortar presentations. Vendors offering these services and products range from the familiar (WebEx, Eloquent, and PlaceWare) to new entrants.

What is a Web conference ASP and how does it differ from other categories of Web-delivered multimedia systems? Compressed, continuous-stream audio and video is provided by three vendors: Microsoft (Media Player), RealNetworks (RealPlayer), and Apple (QuickTime). These players always require a free plug-in that can be quite large, and plug-ins often require frequent updates. Streaming is essentially one-way, server-to-client, with optional hyperlinks, but no interactivity. Webcasting and media on-demand (MOD) are similar. They too are one-way and often use streaming multimedia to deliver audio and video presentations, typically of product launches or news releases. MOD delivers prerecorded content available from archives. Last, videoconferencing provides two-way audio and video and requires specialized (read expensive) videoconferencing centers.


If you've ever used Microsoft's NetMeeting bundled with Windows, think of Web conferencing products as NetMeeting on steroids. The categories are not clear-cut, but you can think of Web conference ASPs as offering some or all of the following: Streaming multimedia, limited videoconferencing, Webcasting, and media on-demand, plus interactivity, audience polls with instant results, chats, application sharing, and scalability. Note that users, students, or any other participants can often run applications being demonstrated even when they do not have the application on their desktops. Web conferencing

products also are often supplemented with traditional teleconferencing, handled by a dial-in service. Web conference products require few, if any, plug-ins and typically run via standard client browsers. Most also provide native support for Microsoft's PowerPoint. Although the Web conference experience works best with broadband connections, it is quite acceptable on 56K dialup lines, too.

Since these vendor offerings are so feature-rich, it pays to check closely before choosing one either as a service or as a product. Some vendors support only one streaming media vendor (Eloquent supports Windows Media), others like PlaceWare support Real and Windows Media. Scaling is another key feature; all the services can manage small audiences. However, if your event includes thousands of participants, check with the vendor. Eloquent's Kathleen Gogan told me Eloquent's LaunchForce Live can scale up to 10,000 simultaneous users. PlaceWare's Kent Kappen says they can support up to 2,500 connections per Web conference. Nearly all solutions include limited video; I've seen the equivalent of Web cam live video in a recent WebEx session; PlaceWare and Eloquent readily admit that video is not their focus, and that their "customers want to collaborate on the project at hand and see fewer 'talking heads'." Participant privacy can also be a concern, often solved with TRUSTe certification (PlaceWare), or by letting participants choose anonymity (Eloquent).

Vendor pricing ranges from purchasing the product and letting you do all the work in-house to leasing the product, or using the service per event. Eloquent's software costs start at \$100,000 for the first 500 users and will offer event-based pricing in 2002. You may also purchase professional services, including hosting, for your events. PlaceWare pricing is also based on the number of seats and events.

Maybe you don't need applications sharing, but you do want to emphasize video in a Web conferencing solution at a fraction of the ASP cost. If so, e-StudioLIVE's solution may provide a significantly lower-cost solution. This firm's ECHOLab Division has provided innovative live television studio equipment for 30 years, and is now the second largest domestic producer of video switchers. e-Studio demonstrated its real-time video Webcasting product CommuniCast to me, and it was impressive even at dialup speeds.

If your clients are less inclined to travel or open their mail, or you simply want to try innovative and cost-effective ways to deliver information interactively, consider the Web conference cure—no Rx required. 

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