Conferencing for Business: A Bottom-Line Solution

Audio, Web and Video Conferencing Saves Cost and Builds Relationships

The Web conferencing market is projected to exceed $2.4 billion by 2016. Nearly half of information workers will have some type of personal video solution in 2016, up from just 15% today (Forrester, 5/11). Personal video is expected to increase in excess of 340% 2010-2012 (Gartner 4/11). Mobile device sales were nearly 1.775 billion units in 2011, up 11.5% from 2010 (Gartner, (2/12). What does this mean? In a business environment where overwhelming demands, competing priorities and increasing mobilization are driving people apart, new telecom conferencing capabilities are bringing them together.

Businesses that haven't looked into conferencing for a while will find that the landscape has dramatically changed. It's most certainly not just conference calling anymore. An array of new opportunities now exist to economically connect their people through high-quality, reliable audio, Web, video and unified communications. The extensive benefits range from stronger relationships and better service to increased efficiency, faster response times and bigger bottom lines. There is also an increasingly important environmental benefit.

But as always, new technology comes with increased complexity and an avalanche of information that must be assimilated. To optimize its conferencing services and avoid numerous pitfalls, a business must achieve a steep learning curve or get expert assistance to navigate the many options and opportunities conferencing has to offer. Following are the basics a business needs to get started.

BUSINESS BENEFITS OF CONFERENCING

Historically, conference calling was used as a substitute for in-person meetings when travel was not possible. It was widely viewed as the "better than nothing" option when meetings with customers, coworkers, vendors and others were not possible. Today, that has changed. Not only has telecom conferencing exploded into a feature-rich, multidimensional business tool; but it has also become the first choice for efficient, economical communication and highly effective with both inside and outside the company. The benefits and advantages are extensive:

- **Build Sales & Bottom Line** – the advantages of conferencing add revenue and save expenses that go right into the profit column.
- **Expand Capabilities** – conferencing enables a business to do things it would otherwise be unable to do if travel or face-to-face meetings were required.
- **Act Immediately** – an audio, Web or video conference can be instantly initiated and issues can be resolved without waiting for people to get together.

- **Work Efficiently** – conferencing saves the time of coordinating, scheduling, getting to and from meetings and follow up.
- **Reduce Travel** – eliminate the time, expense and hassle of unnecessary trips, whether they are across the facility or around the world.
- **Save Money** – on reduced travel, staff time, entertainment expense and more.
- **Build Relationships** – conferencing enables a business to connect more often and more closely with customers, prospects, suppliers, offsite employees, etc.
- **Focus on Key Priorities** – less travel and more efficient contacts allow staff to spend their time on other critically important activities.
- **Sustainability** – conferencing is a far more environmentally efficient and responsible way to communicate. This is becoming increasingly important to some customers and companies.

TYPES OF CONFERENCING

Conferencing services can be broken down by their methods of delivery and by the type of conferencing. First the delivery methods:

- **Premise-Based** – the equipment and system that powers the conferencing is located at the company's facility. These systems are usually most appropriate for businesses that have limited needs (primarily audio) and fewer users**.** Premise-based video conferencing is best for businesses that require very high-quality video, such as technical training.

- **Hosted** – also referred to as cloud-based, the conferencing hardware and software are at a remote site managed by a service provider. It can be accessed by virtually any computer, smartphone or tablet. Hosted conferencing services can be unlimited in their capabilities, so they are preferred for larger organizations with many users and any business that needs more advanced audio, Web and video capabilities.

There are now three main types of conferencing services, plus the comprehensive integration of all three with other telecommunication capabilities. They are:

- **Audio** – basic phone service with multiple connections, or bridges, that enable two to many people to join in a conversation. These can be on-demand service, where a small number of people directly connect, or operator-assisted, where a live person greets and manages the call. Audio conferencing is offered by such service providers as Intercall, PGI, Conference Group, AT&T, Level3 and others.
- **Web** – combination of audio conferencing and content sharing utilizing computers. Web conferencing enable two to many people to use their computers, tablets or smartphones to log onto a cloud-based service that manages the call. Each participant can see the content displayed on the host's computer screen, just as if it were their own. Content can range from simple documents to webpages and sometimes video. Some also include video of the participants through

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webcams. Web conferencing providers include: WebEx, Adobe, GoToMeeting and more.

- **Video** – conferencing services that enable each participant to see and be seen by all others in real time. Traditionally, video required installation of high-cost AV equipment in a special room at each location. This made it prohibitively expensive for all but the largest companies or those who required video conferencing for their core business. However, new cloud-based hosting technology and high-speed, low-latency IP connections have made it possible to achieve excellent quality video conferencing at an affordable price for most businesses. There are now three levels of video conferencing:

  - High Quality – participants at each location take part in special rooms, furnished with high-cost AV equipment. This top-quality HD video conferencing is typically used by large companies that do a large amount of training and group interaction. Service providers include: Polycom, Tandberg, LifeSize and more.

  - Mid-Quality – rather than using premise-based video, these systems use a hosted service that each participant connects with using their computer or other device. While it does not have the extensive capabilities of the high-quality option, it can deliver HD quality and excellent service for many applications. Service providers include: Vidyo, Blue Jeans, Simple Signal and others.

  - Economy – this is a Web-based conferencing service that is essentially the same as described above, except it has a video component. Quality is SD, which may be acceptable for basic needs and creating a more personal user experience without making a major investment. Service providers include: WebEx, Adobe, GoToMeeting, etc.

- Unified Communications – this is the integration of several forms of communication into one system. It can include voice, Web, video, instant messaging, email, fax and more, all accessible in real time and managed through a single point. A unified communications system enables a business to communicate more efficiently and economically by putting all its capabilities at every user's fingertips all the time. Any resource can be called up at any time with no reservations, planning or delay. Service providers include: Mircrosoft Lync, Cisco Connect and others.

HOW BUSINESSES USE CONFERENCING

The range of ways businesses can use conferencing services is as diverse as the businesses themselves. It goes far beyond cutting travel. Smart companies are leveraging their conferencing capabilities to connect more often and more effectively with customers to build relationships, improve service, cross sell and stay top of mind. The same strategy of greater efficiency, increased contact and more economical communications also applies to vendors, employees and others. Here are a few typical applications of conferencing services:

Finance
- Immediately report results, trends and adjustments
- Share company-wide financial reports
- Enhance investor relationships through conferencing contact
- Connect worldwide financial interests
- Efficiently distribute financial plans

Human resources
- Conduct efficient training throughout the company
- Improve the work-life balance of company staff
- Perform offsite candidate interviews more economically
- Approve and implement policies in real time

Sales
- Reduce travel time
- Cut decision-making time
- Manage contracts more efficiently
- Conduct better client meetings
- Improve relationship management
- Convert more business faster

Marketing
- Develop and approve marketing plans more efficiently
- Increase the speed and number of campaigns
- Stay connected with all stakeholders
- Conduct high-tech, remote events
- Save expenses and increase budget effectiveness

Personal assistants
- Connect people better

- Conduct meetings with limited budgets
- Hold larger meeting for more inclusion
- Share company-wide messages
- Get approvals and buy-in faster

Training
- Train more efficiently and more often
- Cut training costs
- Better train offsite staff
- More effectively assess and manage staff
- Develop and implement instant training

THE ECONOMICS OF CONFERENCING

So what does conferencing cost? Like most complex business services, it depends on a lot of factors – too many to be able to provide any kind of meaningful price list. Experience shows, however, that the expense of an effective, well-conceived conferencing solution is far less than the cost it saves plus the added opportunities it creates. To determine a budget, a business must consider the following:
- The type of conferencing needed – audio, Web, video, unified communications
- The quality and dependability required
- The number of bridges or participants
- How many users have host capabilities
- Will the participants be in the USA only or international
- Are new voice, data and Internet connections necessary – how much bandwidth
- How much new equipment will be needed
- Is cost tracking per conference necessary

If a company simply needs basic Web conferencing, a subscription service like WebEx, GoToMeeting, etc., can be a good solution. The cost is based on users and other factors which are easy to navigate online. For more complex needs, it is highly advisable to working with a knowledgeable, independent person or firm who understands the technology, knows the service providers and has the expertise to select or design the optimal system for the company's needs.

HOW TO IMPLEMENT CONFERENCING

These are the key steps:
1) Assign project responsibility to a knowledgeable person or firm
2) Assess the needs of the business or organization
3) Design a solution that meets those needs
4) Identify existing resources that can be leveraged
5) Determine what new equipment, connections and other resources are needed
6) Spec and provision all resources
7) Develop an implementation plan and schedule
8) Train system managers and users
9) Provide for helpdesk capabilities – in house or outsourced
10) Install equipment and systems
11) Track and evaluate results
12) Refine solution

SUMMARY

Some may criticize telecom conferencing for reducing face time and making business more impersonal, but there is a strong argument to the contrary. It unquestionably reduces the need for time-wasting travel and in-person meetings, but it also makes it far easier, more efficient and less costly to have significantly more "touches" with clients, staff, vendors and more. Rather than rare offsite get-togethers, users can have far more frequent face-to-face audio, Web or video conferences. In today's Internet and telecom-driven world, they can feel just as personal as a handshake. Do yourself a favor and find out more.

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