

## Looking Good

Today's Web-enabled meetings programs have better presentation capabilities than ever. Just add worthwhile content, and you're on your way.

By Rebecca Aronauer

For the past two weeks, you've worked on a sales presentation for your company's top customers. When you finally introduce the new product using PowerPoint and prerecorded audio, you're confident that the charts, art displays, and animation will convince your audience to buy.

From the questions you receive after the presentation, you can tell that your clients were engaged, but you can't see their enthusiasm because you and your company are based in Cleveland, and your buyers are scattered across the country. With the help of online meeting software and Web conferencing, you just presented an entire sales pitch (or, perhaps, held a meeting or gave a training session) from anywhere to anywhere in the world.

Online meeting technology is nothing new—WebEx Communications Inc., a leader in the field, was founded in 1996—but integration with standard programs, along with other advancements, have made it easier to give a presentation to buyers and to your sales force without having to gather everyone together in a single room.

According to Rajiv Saxena, the manager of WebEx Sales Center, in Santa Clara, California, 30 percent to 40 percent of WebEx customers are in sales. "It really helps [them] with the velocity of business," Saxena says, "You can move the deal around faster."

Because it takes less time to set up a Web conference than a face-to-face meeting, your client can decide to make a purchase earlier in the sales cycle. So instead of making travel plans, turn to an online meeting program. Many sales presentations can be made without even a separate application download. Your audience of buyers need only arrange computer and phone access for the presentation. Traditional presentation methods, like PowerPoint, can be used in the Web conference, and communication programs like instant messaging (IM) can also be incorporated.

Meeting online is generally cheaper than meeting in person, which is why Web conferences have the potential of offering strong return on investment. Whether this is true for your upcoming sales pitch or training session depends on your needs. If you want to present your product to as many clients as possible, or train sales reps located all over the world and have a limited travel budget, an online presentation may be just the ticket.

Steve Acterman is the director of corporate information technology for Volt Information Sciences Inc., a company that offers staffing services, and supplies telecommunication

and information systems. Volt's headquarters are in New York, Acterman works in Orange, California, and the company has other offices throughout North America, Europe, and Asia. Because Volt's staff and customers are scattered around the world, online meetings offer a cheap and effective alternative to live training sessions and client presentations.

"[Online meetings are becoming] a regular forum for internal training, internal collaborative meetings, and customer presentations," Acterman says.

**Live Meetings** Acterman and Volt use Live Meetings, a Web conferencing service developed by Redmond, Washington-based Microsoft. The program does not require a separate installation, and uses existing programs from Microsoft Office, such as Word, PowerPoint, and Outlook. "Folks don't want to learn new software just to attend a meeting," says Serhii Sokolenko, product manager for services at the Microsoft Unified Communications Group. "One of the major benefits of Live Meetings includes the integration with popular business productivity applications."

Live Meetings also has other useful features that enhance the presentations environment, like online document collaboration, private and public chat, and video options. For Acterman, the program is ideal for both in-house projects and customer relations. Through Outlook and the Meet Now feature, Acterman can arrange a live meeting with a sales rep or present a training session for a client anywhere in the world in what he describes as "a couple of extra clicks."

Acterman credits the program with cutting down on his travel time. For some projects, like developing sales pitches, he believes online meetings can be a more effective way to present information than in-person conferences. Online, everyone—not just the alphas or the person at the computer—is able to offer insights, and actually make corrections through IMs and document collaboration.

"In some cases, where you would be in a conference room but not everyone would have a computer, it is an improvement [from the live presentations] because everyone can contribute," Acterman says.

### **Improved Customer Support**

Online meetings can also be a great venue for customer support: Volt uses Live Meetings to create demos for its customers, which allows them to ask questions and receive feedback instantly. And the presentation can be paced at the customers' comprehension level. Acterman values the flexibility of online meetings, and the presentations component makes the meeting a more interactive experience. "It's helpful for people's focus and their retention," he says, while additional types of support improve customer relations, and can lead to more sales.

**InterWrite** Another Web-based conferencing service, InterWrite, can also be used as a teaching tool. As with Live Meetings, customers or sales reps need only a Web browser to participate in an InterWrite presentation. Along with showing slides and audio commentary, InterWrite hosts can draw directly on the presentation, using InterWrite's wireless tablet and pen.

Tina Cox, a technical trainer for Analytical Graphics, a company that produces integrated land, sea, and air analysis software, based in Exton, Pennsylvania, uses InterWrite and its integrated tablet-and-pen capabilities to teach new and potential customers how to use the company's products. Cox, who is based in Colorado Springs, Colorado, believes the technology greatly enhances her training sessions.

Just like former football coach and current TV commentator John Madden, she writes on her prepared screens during the lecture. She draws on freeze-frame images, just as Madden often does when he directs viewers to the significant elements of the previous football play with his trademark squiggly lines. Cox uses her tablet and pen to show her clients the key elements of the slides. (Although she does her presentations in person, this type of interaction can also happen online.)

If customers ever lose the thread of her training session, they can easily check the information she has circled, and almost immediately get back on track. Cox believes the program has made her a better teacher.

"I think we present [information] much more efficiently and effectively now," Cox says. And her customers agree: Since she started using InterWrite, her evaluations have become more favorable, and she has gotten inquiries about the product.

"For [attendees] to look up and clearly see what I'm talking about has helped immensely," she says.

Because her presentation and screen notes are all saved, she can pull back previous screen shots and easily return to any points her clients might have missed. "It allows you to literally revisit what you've done in class," she says.

Even though InterWrite (from GTCO CalComp, based in Columbia, Maryland) aids her presentations, Cox advises users not to rely on the technology to make their presentation interesting: Old-fashioned preparation still counts.

Roopam Jain, a senior analyst on conferencing and collaboration at the New Brunswick, New Jersey, branch of consulting firm Frost & Sullivan, also believes that online meetings have increased presentation opportunities. "Online meetings extend the reach of your message to geographically dispersed audiences that were not easily within reach before, or required travel," she says.

**GoToMeeting** That is indeed the case for Louis Celli, the president and CEO of the Northeast Veteran's Business Resource Center, based in Boston. Using GoToMeeting, a

program from Citrix Systems Inc., based in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, Celli is able to hold business-training courses for American soldiers overseas. The soldiers do not have to install additional programs; all they require is Web access.

### **Training From Anywhere**

Celli has also taught veterans in person, and initially found it difficult not to see his students react to the material. "One of the first challenges I noticed is that you don't get to see their faces," Celli says. He overcame that problem using GoToMeeting features like chat and polling to keep his students engaged, and to make sure they were following the lessons.

"I ask a lot of questions, kind of as a temperature check," he says. "If they're off track, you can redirect them."

While the separation between the presenter and the participant can be frustrating, it can let some users react more freely to the lesson. With the private chat feature, those who would be too intimidated to ask questions or offer advice in front of a large group can say anything, under the cloak of a moniker. Celli has found that the questions he gets from his online presentations are more thorough and thought-out than in-person questions, a tendency he credits to the physical separation between him and his students.

"I have found that, online, participants have a kind of anonymity so they're able to express ideas a little more freely than they would in person," Celli says. For example, in a seminar about business start-ups, a male soldier inquired about starting a day-care center. Celli wonders whether his student would have felt as comfortable asking that question live and in-person in a room full of soldiers, because starting such a business is normally associated with women.

Although Celli uses GoToMeeting for prearranged presentations, other users take advantage of its flat-fee pricing scheme to use the product more spontaneously. Matt Reid, director of product marketing for Citrix says, "Our customers say to us that they'll set up a GoToMeeting as they would set up a conference call." Many clients hold calls and do document collaboration without even using the visual element of the service. Programs like GoToMeeting can be a communication, as well as a presentation, tool.

**WebEx** Similarly, WebEx extended its long-standing relationship with America Online (AOL) this February, announcing it would begin testing AIM Pro, an instant-messaging program. The new integration allows users to see one another's availability, and has a built-in scheduler enhancing the AIM buddy list. Widespread beta testing will begin late in the second quarter.

While WebEx can still be used for more formal presentations, the new features with AIM Pro allow for instantaneous collaboration. This might allow, for instance, a sales rep in Denver to hold a spontaneous meeting online with fellow reps in New York, just by seeing their availability on a buddy list. The synergy of IM and online meeting tools

allows both services to be used to their fullest potential, believes Krista Thomas, senior director of corporate communications for AOL, based in Dulles, Virginia.

Because WebEx enables desktop sharing and document collaboration, and AIM Pro allows for nearly instant access to your contacts, "You can have that 'Here, just let me show you' capability with people in India," Thomas says.

However you use these tools—whether it's for customer presentations, sales rep training, or desktop collaboration with colleagues and clients—Web conferencing can improve communication, even if your target audience is located on the other side of the globe. And now, ease of use and product capabilities are better than ever.