

Conduct “Visual Communications” from Your Home Office

The Future of Meetings

By Daniel Burrus

Visual communications heighten the bond you have with someone when you cannot see them face to face.

Rising gas prices, airline cutbacks, canceled and delayed flights, skyrocketing travel costs... These are just a few of the challenges facing businesses today.

As a result, more and more home-based business owners are looking for ways to eliminate or at least greatly reduce travel expenses, and they're re-examining how they'll conduct meetings in the future.

In the past, some business owners have overreacted and tried to conduct all meetings virtually. Since no one had “meeting guidelines” in place, they learned some hard lessons—that there are times when you actually need to see someone face to face, there are times when an audio conference will do, and there are times when an email is perfectly fine. Companies use video and Web conferencing today more than ever before because they discovered the technology. Now it's time for business America to step it up a notch and use the new meeting technology to not only save costs, but also to build relationships.



The Future of Relationships

The challenge today is that many companies are going into crisis mode. Because air travel and gas costs are high, they're using video and Web conferencing, as well as the new high-end videoconferencing called telepresence offered by Cisco and HP, to save travel money. However, if companies' only motivation is to save money on travel, rather than the more important goal of enhancing communication and collaboration throughout the enterprise, then they're simply creating another fad. Video conferencing has evolved tremendously over the past few years, and companies need to use the technology of today to pave the path to future profits, all of which hinge on relationships.

Smart companies are changing how they think about meetings and the new video conferencing technology, and they're realizing that it offers business something more powerful than they've had in the past. These companies are thinking in terms of "visual communications" rather than simply video and Web conferencing.

Visual communications heighten the bond you have with someone when you cannot see them face to face. It's about adding dimension to the communication. There's a reason why you shake someone's hand when you meet them: The more senses you involve, the higher the connection. Those companies that can enhance their communication, both internally and externally, are the ones who can cause change faster and stay competitive longer.

How to Make Visual Communications Work

Before you mandate that video conferencing be the only way of conducting meetings, consider the following principles of visual communications.

- First, realize that the need to meet, establish relationships, and share information, knowledge, and wisdom is not going away. No amount of high-tech gadgetry is going to change that in a fundamental way. That's why face-to-face meetings are still the dominant form of meeting and extremely relevant, because there is no better way to build trust. In our increasingly global marketplace, trust is the glue that creates strong, successful, and enduring business relationships. Those who believe video conferencing will end face-to-face meetings are using "either/or" thinking, which often occurs when dazzling new technologies first appear. They view the new thing as destined to totally supplant the old thing, except that rarely happens.
- Companies that make visual communications work will have the new and the old coexisting by allowing each to do what it does best. Video conferencing is a superb tool for saving travel time and expense, focusing on a structured agenda, obtaining senior-level points of view in real-time, building consensus, and making announcements. It's not so good at smoothing out contentious give-and-take or handling emotional or sensitive issues. Fortunately, both virtual meetings and face-to-face meetings are readily available. It's not either/or anymore. "Both/and" thinking is the new paradigm.
- In the past, video conferencing required a big fancy room with expensive equipment. That's not the only option for video anymore. Many new computers come with a built-in video camera. That means you can do video conferencing on a personal laptop from your desk, your home, or anywhere in the world. The software is free and comes with your system. And with some computers, you can have multiple people on at the same time and video conference with them all at once.

Let the Meeting Goal Determine the Role of Technology

The future of business includes an interdependent world that generates increasing

quantities of data, information, knowledge, and wisdom that companies need to communicate. The key is to develop guidelines for determining what type of meeting to have. To do this, you must look at the meeting's goal.

One of the traps people fall into when planning a meeting is looking at business goals instead of human/emotional goals. Therefore, before you plan any meeting, ask yourself, "What is this meeting's goal? Is it to inform, motivate, inspire, persuade, influence, sell, gain trust, negotiate, gain respect, establish new relationships, strengthen existing relationships, share information, share knowledge and experiences, gain credibility, change how people think, solve a problem, determine a strategy, or simply create dialog?" Thinking about the goal for the meeting in this way makes it easier to decide what type of meeting will be best and what technology is most appropriate.

Once you know your meeting's goal, use the following guidelines.

- If the goal is primarily to inform by sharing data and information, then a meeting may not even be necessary. It might be far better to use email, groupware, a wiki, a blog, or an Intranet or Extranet, and let people collect and absorb the information at their own rate and in their own time.
- If you determine that sharing the information at the same time with everyone would be best, then consider audio conferencing and/or web-conferencing as an alternative to a face-to-face meeting.
- If the information delivery will primarily be one-way, then an e-conference would serve the purpose. If, however, informing involves hands-on demonstrations and/or high levels of interactivity, then a face-to-face meeting is definitely in order.
- If the goal is to influence, build on existing relationships, share knowledge and experiences, gain credibility, solve a problem, or determine a strategy, then a face-to-face meeting is best, but it is no longer the only option. Technologies such as high-end videoconferencing telepresence systems and satellite-broadcast services that use full-motion video could help you accomplish your goals. If all participants have access to broadband connections, and almost all today do, then web-conferencing offers another increasingly attractive option. Audio-conferencing could also be a viable option depending on the number of people attending and the amount of interactivity required during the meeting.
- If the goal is to gain trust and/or respect, or to inspire, motivate, persuade, establish relationships, negotiate, or change how people think, then a face-to-face meeting is a must. If this is not possible, then the next best thing would be telepresence video conferencing rooms, which typically have three huge curved screens and a fourth screen above for shared work, custom lighting, and acoustics, and life size images.

Despite the current conditions of gas prices, transportation costs, and airline cuts, the need to meet, share knowledge, and develop relationships will continue. Therefore, successful meetings will depend on your ability to master the concept of visual communications and develop guidelines that leverage both old and new tools to build trusting relationships that foster greater communication, collaboration, and community.
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