

Virtual meetings can reduce business expenses

By Bruce A. Love

Rising gas prices impact society in many ways. One effect is the increase in the cost of doing business. This puts pressure on companies to reduce expenses in other areas, or raise prices on their products and services in order to maintain acceptable profit levels. Ultimately, these costs will be passed along to consumers who already feel the burden of soaring fuel prices.

Companies can minimize fuel-related expenses (thereby increasing profits) by eliminating unnecessary travel expenses. While meetings with customers are a necessary part of business, holding meetings online can eliminate some trips.

This week I had an opportunity to use GoToMeeting (available at www.gotomeeting.com). GoToMeeting is a subscription-based web conferencing service that is both powerful, and easy to use. It is ideal for businesses with a need to discuss projects while showing visual images to augment discussions. This service is particularly useful when significant distances separate hosts and attendees.

When I downloaded the software for a free trial, I was a bit concerned that it came with a 79-page user's manual. My hope was that the program would not have a steep learning curve. This is an important consideration if companies expect new meeting attendees to be comfortable participating in the virtual meeting. As it turns out, the program is very intuitive, and reference to the user's guide was practically unnecessary.

After installing the software, it is very easy to schedule and hold meetings. Meeting hosts and organizers simply click on the GoToMeeting icon on their computer's desktop (or in the tray), decide if they want to hold the meeting immediately or schedule for a specified time, and invite the guests. Meeting invitations can be sent via email, or meeting details can be given over the phone or Instant Message (IM). When you email or IM invitations, the message contains time and date of the meeting, a link to the meeting room, and any necessary passwords.

As a virtual meeting attendee, it is not necessary to purchase the service. Simply click on the link included in the email or IM invitation, or go to the GoToMeeting website and enter sign-in information given to you by the meeting organizer. Software will temporarily download and install on your computer to enable you to participate in the meeting. This will take less than a minute if you have a broadband connection (which is strongly recommended for any web conferencing).

Once the meeting control panel opens, you will be able to exchange pleasantries with the host and other attendees using an integrated chat program. When the meeting starts,

you will see the host's PC desktop, and any applications that the host wants you to see. You will even see the host's pointer move around on screen, and see everything the host sees on his or her computer.

At times, it may be convenient to allow guests to take control of applications on the host's computer, or switch the meeting view to applications and images on one of the attendee's computers. It is easy to hand-off control of the meeting to others in attendance! Of course, if an attendee gets off topic, the original host can take control back at any time.

I first tried the service with my father-in-law who was able to view my desktop and take command of my computer from his home in Virginia. I wanted to be comfortable with the software before trying it with clients. We discovered that online meetings were greatly enhanced using speakerphones. Obviously, if a meeting has more than two participants, a conference call is recommended.

Next, it was time to try a virtual meeting with a client. I put together some interactive web pages and was anxious for the client to see them in action. The materials were not quite ready to run on a server, and wouldn't run on the client's PC without a copy of the program used to generate them. Before pushing ahead with what I believed was a good design, I decided to allow my client (200 miles away) to try it out on my computer. I accomplished this using GoToMeeting.

GoToMeeting has many benefits:

1. Companies may dramatically reduce travel costs, save time, and increase productivity.
2. Companies can hold as many meetings as they want for as long as they want – for one monthly or annual fee (\$49.00/month, or \$468.00/year).
3. Meeting participants can exchange information and images in real time.
4. Chat discussions during meetings are recorded for future reference.

The meeting capacity of the standard package is 10 attendees, and up to 25 attendees for the corporate package. Special event licenses can be purchased for up to 200 attendees.

On Sunday evening, August 7th I will be holding meetings online for any Altoona Mirror readers interested in trying the GoToMeeting software. Just send me an email (info@loveconsulting.com) and I'll send you the password and an invitation to join the meeting!

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