

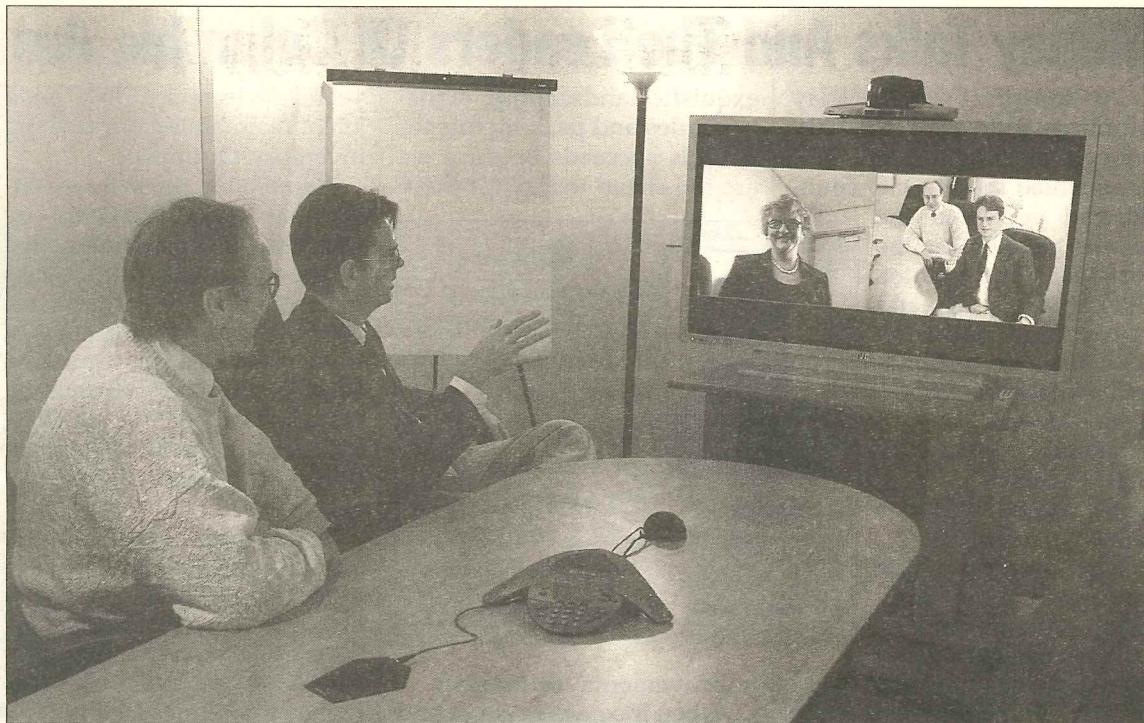


Photo by L.G. Patterson

Videoconferencing provides a cost-effective tool for small and medium-sized businesses.

Videoconferencing: Not Just For Fortune 500 Companies Anymore

By Rodric J. Bradford

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Videoconferencing and its technology have often been associated with Fortune 500 companies and their executives scattered across the country, but recent technological advances have made videoconferencing accessible to small-business owners.

"As a cost-effective tool for small and medium-sized businesses, videoconferencing is a better, more effective way to do business," Kaleidoscope Videoconferencing owner J. Scott Christianson said. "It combines the effectiveness of a face-to-face meeting with the convenience of a telephone call, enabling a business to have better communication with its customers, investors and vendors, and between management and employees."

The basic technology behind videoconferencing is simpler than one might think. The video and audio from one site is encoded and sent over a digital network to another site where it is decoded back into audio and video and displayed at the remote site. With the same process occurring in the other direction simultaneously, the result is the two-way communications channel. The main devices used are called CODECs, short for CODer DECoder. Videoconferences with two sites are called point-to-point calls; ones with more than two are referred to as a multipoint conference. In multipoint conferences a third device, a Multipoint Conferencing Unit, allows participants to bring up to hundreds of sites together in one conference if needed.

"Videoconferencing will be the fax machine of the 21st century," Christianson said. "With it you can sell more, manage better, and save money in the process."

Kaleidoscope Videoconferencing separates the perks of videoconferencing into primary and secondary benefits. Many of the benefits are easy to quantify, while others are more difficult to estimate monetarily.

Primary benefits include cost and time savings, increased schedule flexibility and increased safety for staff due to reduced auto travel.

Reduced travel costs are obvious by avoiding mileage, hotel expenses, vehicle service and daily meals; however, the timesaving benefits

often outweigh the direct-cost savings offered by videoconferencing. One primary benefit not in the forefront of videoconferencing is improved quality of family life for employees.

"Columbia is proud of its quality of life, but what good is it to a businessperson who is constantly on the road?" Christianson said. "Videoconferencing allows businesspeople to avoid the hassles and hazards of travel, while getting to spend more productive time at the office and more time at home with their families."

Although not as obvious as the primary benefits, the secondary benefits of videoconferencing can greatly assist a company's infrastructure as well as client and associate relations.

Secondary benefits include improved access to clients and colleagues, employee recruitment, project management and increased collaboration.

"Compared with telephone conferencing, the visual interaction provided by videoconferencing improves the focus, trust-building and persuasiveness of meetings," Christianson said. "Videoconferencing is often used as a recruiting tool in business organizations of all sizes. By converting first interviews into "virtual" interviews, companies limit travel investments to those candidates worthy of serious consideration.

"By offering services such as network design, technical and end-user training and ongoing technical support, Kaleidoscope makes sure that videoconferencing becomes a key tool for communication and increasing productivity," Christianson said.

Kaleidoscope Videoconferencing is a division of Kaleidoscope Consulting, which has been installing videoconferencing technology for primary, secondary and higher education institutions since 1998. In 2004, Kaleidoscope Videoconferencing was established to better serve mid-Missouri's business community. Past and current clients include the U.S. Coast Guard, Sho-Me Power Cooperative, Premier Bank and The Boys & Girls Town of Missouri.

"Videoconferencing is more than just saving money and time by reducing travel," Christianson said. "It is also about increasing collaboration within an organization so they can accomplish goals that were not previously possible." ♦

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