

Videoconferencing Becoming More Practical For Home Offices

By Jim Muench

cbt@premiermeansbusiness.com

Videoconferencing used to be reserved for corporate boardrooms, but now even professionals who work at home are using the technology.

Over the years, prices have come down, and picture quality has improved. According to Jeff Riley, regional manager for the Oslo, Norway-based company Tandberg Inc., which has been in the videoconferencing business since the mid-1980s, prices have dropped to anywhere from less than \$3,000 to the \$60,000 system that President George W. Bush uses at his ranch.

"Fourteen years ago, when I first started, it was pretty easy to figure out who you sold to because if you'd get one system outfitted in your conference room, it was about 200,000 bucks," Riley said. "It's evolved over the years to where now it's practical to have it in the home office."

According to Riley, the industry picked up after the tragic events of Sept. 11, which made travel less attractive, and it is growing at about 55 percent a year.

"The good news is the public Internet is to a point where it's supporting videoconferencing," Riley said. "Now that networks are merging, it doesn't matter if you've got cable modem or DSL at your house."

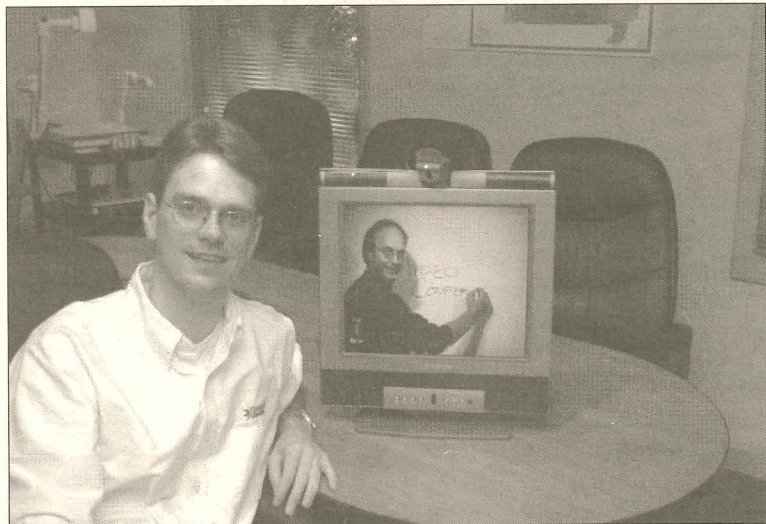
In choosing the right system, it is most important to match the needs of the particular business.

"A lawyer just wants to see the expert witness, and they want to talk directly at them and ask them a question, and they want to get that recorded," said Scott Christianson of Kaleidoscope Videoconferencing in Columbia. "Whereas an architect or an engineer, they don't really care so much about seeing the other person in high quality, but they need to be able to send very high-quality images of the CAD stuff they're working on."

There are several different ways to bring videoconferencing into a home office, Christianson said. The least expensive option employs special software and a Web camera to turn a computer into a videoconferencing system via the Internet. The software costs about \$150, and the Web cam is about \$100. It requires a DSL or other high-speed connection, which costs about \$200.

"It can do a videoconference using the same standards that a regular conference room would use, the H323 standard," Christianson said. "That way, someone who's working at home can use that application and the Web camera on their computer, and they can talk with the home office's main conference room that has all the higher-end equipment in it."

However, this system does not offer encryption, so users may not feel safe to discuss confidential matters, and the software can be affected by computer viruses and potential conflicts with other software programs on the desktop.



Scott Christianson, owner of Columbia's Kaleidoscope Videoconferencing, demonstrates equipment with an associate. Such equipment is now in affordable price ranges for many small, home-based businesses.

Polycom's V500, another simple, affordable videoconferencing system designed for a home-based business, connects to a TV and a cable modem and costs about \$2,000.

However, the best answer for many might be a computer monitor with built-in videoconferencing capability, such as the Polycom VSX3000, so that calls can be made directly from the home office rather than another room. The flat-screen LCD computer monitor easily switches from the computer desktop to videoconference mode, and there are three different models, ranging from \$5,000 to \$10,000, depending on the desired features.

Extra features include the capability to hold multipoint videoconferences with more than two locations; dual streaming, in which the video image and information on the computer screen can be sent at the same time; and peripheral applications such as a special camera to show documents.

On these units, encryption is standard, which can be important for businesspeople negotiating deals, physicians practicing telemedicine, or lawyers taking depositions.

Another good option for the home is to integrate videoconferencing into a home theater system, creating a mini studio in the home. Depending on the features, such a system can cost between \$10,000 and \$20,000.

Businesses that use the technology are beginning to sprout. Judy Stainback, executive director of GreaterNET in Battlefield, Mo., a suburb of Springfield, uses videoconferencing technology to help independent or retired schoolteachers teach from their homes, conferencing with classrooms across the state. The organization matches instructors with rural or small schools that cannot afford to hire a full-time teacher for a particular subject.

Stainback said many schools in central Missouri have used interactive television technology for years, but it tends to be limited to conferences between one school classroom to another.

So far, she has no mid-Missouri teachers working for her, but she is looking for some, especially those certified to teach Spanish and other foreign languages, subjects that can easily be taught via telecommunications. ♦