

## Webconferencing – A Practitioner’s Perspective

Sumanth raghavendra  
Citigroup

In the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks, business practices worldwide changed in multiple ways, and one of those changes was the dramatic increase in Web conferencing as an alternative to business travel. Over the past two years, what started off as a rearguard response to security concerns has evolved into a potent business case with multiple value propositions. With corporate travel costing companies millions of dollars annually, Web conferencing offers a new vista that not only reduces costs but also facilitates richer communication, speeds up decision making, generates revenue and increases productivity.

While the business case for web conferencing has never been stronger, given the presence of a wide spectrum of web conferencing vendors and offerings, it is perhaps a worthwhile exercise to draw up a checklist of web conferencing product desirables that will in effect, sift out the cheese from the chalk. I have the opportunity to leverage web conferencing tools in business situations ranging from project management to training to marketing presentations and these are my gleanings:

1. “Product not Service” – Premise-located versus hosted model – Cost has been the primary driver behind the adoption of web conferencing solutions in various scenarios. It has never ceased to amaze me that several vendors offer to replace one high-cost item (business travel) with another one that often ends up costing the same as the one that it seeks to replace. This is the hosted model of web conferencing that offers the solution as a service chargeable by different usage parameters. In my experience, this model is fraught with risks on multiple fronts – Firstly, there are several hidden cost items that rear their ugly heads at inopportune times. These costs are rarely factored in while sponsoring the buy decision and customers often watch in dismay when they receive enormous bills at the end of a billing period. Secondly, there is the crucial issue of confidentiality and information security that can be compromised in several ways in a hosted model. While in theory, having a hosted model provides the customer with a low exit threshold as compared to the customer premise-located model, this is rarely the case in practice since vendors lock in customers in various ways that render an exit difficult – ranging from long-tenure contracts to the unwieldy ways of transitioning collateral located at the hosting premises. The customer premise-located model where the customer purchases the solution as a product and hosts it in-house is preferable in terms of ensuring a lower TCO, providing greater transparency and reliability over the conferencing sessions and allows for peace-of-mind regarding information security issues such as encryption, archiving and password authorization that might embed serious legal and regulatory concerns.
2. “Contextual Collaboration” – Collaboration, per se, makes business sense only if it is adopted at those points in the value chain where it impacts business results – be they in terms of facilitating more cogent information flows or enabling faster, more informed decision-making. To satisfy this requirement, the web conferencing solution should have the requisite facility to be embedded into normal business flows in a seamless manner. Experts call this “contextual collaboration”. A common application of this phenomenon is providing multiple kick-off points to initiate web conferencing sessions from relevant points in an

Enterprise Information Portal or Intranet. For instance, the ability to detect presence-awareness in a “team members” page for a project management portal and thereafter, initiate an ad-hoc web conferencing meeting to discuss project issues. Most vendors offer their tools essentially in vacuum with respect to business contexts and typically are geared only towards formal business meetings that need to be scheduled formally. The strong linkages with other business tools is rarely present.

3. Scope of features – While different vendors offering feature sets, one has to keep in mind that the often-discussed Pareto Principle applies to web conferencing too – 80% of the users typically use only 20% of the features. In my opinion, the 20% of features would include the following:
  - a. Presentation-sharing: Ability to share presentations – typically Power Point presentations.
  - b. Application-sharing: Ability to view a remote desktop or application
  - c. Text-chat: Ability to text-chat
  - d. Polling: Ability to take polls in real-time

While vendors might offer several bells and whistles, the ones who offer the four features stated above consistently and reliably are the ones who have their ears close to the market.

4. Quality of User Interface – It is essential to keep in mind that in sales and marketing situations, in customer support situations or in any other interaction between a company and its customer, the quality of the web conferencing tool used often serves as a parameter by which the customer or prospective customer makes an inference about the quality of the company in general. The web conferencing tool is at once a branding opportunity and a marketing extension. In this age of slick and rich advertising, it might be worthwhile to invest in a web conferencing solution that reinforces the brand equity of the company by presenting a rich yet user-friendly face to the customer. It is incongruous that while companies spend millions of dollars on advertising each year, they often use third-party web conferencing solutions that have the look-feel of a student project. Web conferencing vendors that offer polished interfaces and allow customers to not only embed their corporate logo but also customize the interface to match their corporate branding guidelines in terms of fonts and colors, recognize the often-neglected branding benefits that a web conferencing session can endow upon the presenter.

While Web conferencing technology is not a panacea and is not meant to replace all business travel, choosing the right web conferencing solution and applying it ardently can bring disproportionately high cost savings and business benefits.

*\*The author is a senior executive with Citigroup and has extensive experience with web conferencing products from a user perspective.*