Videoconference Meetings

The last step up the ladder of electronic meetings is videoconferences. We have come a long way since AT&T first introduced the Picturephone at the 1964 World's Fair in New York. Videoconferences are growing in popularity, as the cost of equipment and connection time has almost become a non-issue. The advantage of video-conferencing is obvious: each participant can see everyone else and converse in real time. The strategies and tips for phone conferences apply to videoconferences, as well as a few others.

For several decades, videoconferencing has been available to those who could afford it, and the quality of such video meetings has continuously improved. With high-speed Internet connections, anyone who wants to hold a video meeting with reasonable quality can do so with relatively little expense. For meetings of two or three, at least one vendor (Skype) is a free videoconference service.

For distributed meetings with six or fewer participants, the next step is to use any one of a number of applications that enable low-cost videoconferences. Each participant must have access to a computer with a videocam at his or her desktop or laptop. Most newer computers have videocams built in (or available as an inexpensive add-on), which makes this option even more affordable. The software programs I have reviewed enable participants to view others in individual windows or in other screen configurations. If visual aids are used, they should be simple, as participants will have much to look at on their screens. Even better—send the visual material or documents by e-mail prior to the conference, so participants can review in advance and then refer to their own copies during the video meeting.

If the program or connection produces jerky images (similar to watching an old movie), participants should slow things down and speak clearly so that everyone can track the discussion.

Meeting Management Software

Software, such as MeetingSense, is available that provides tools for meeting initiators, facilitators, and participants to streamline the planning, note-taking, and follow-up of meetings. The best of the packages enables users to invite participants (including linking to Microsoft Outlook), clarify the meeting purpose, distribute advance preparation materials, record decisions and action items in real time, and send summaries, action steps, and follow-up reminders to all participants and other interested parties. Meeting management software can be used effectively to support real-time live meetings, telephone conferences, and videoconferences.

Additional Thoughts on Electronic Meetings

Despite the ability to connect electronically with virtually anyone in the world, meetings are still interactions between two or more individuals. Be careful of getting too swept up in the gadgets and toys, and losing sight of the basic elements of planning and running meetings that matter: purposeful, focused, and action-oriented.

When people who normally meet by phone, Web, or videoconference get together face to face, I have observed that the dynamics change dramatically. Nuances that are lost in etherspace are noticed, body language and eye contact take on more importance, and "water cooler" sidebars come into play. For this reason alone, I recommend that people who usually meet electronically strive to meet in person at least once a year, in an environment that allows some social interaction as well. It will make a difference.