

The virtual meeting centre in today's business environment

Conferencing service providers start to break down the wall of fear

The Australian operation of ACT Teleconferencing, Inc. (Nasdaq-ACTT), a leading independent worldwide provider of audio, video, data and web-based conferencing products and services, has experienced healthy growth in the demand for its services over the last 12 months.

The company launched its comprehensive, state-of-the-art video inhouse video conferencing facilities late last year to enable organisations to undertake a try-before-you-buy approach to undertaking their regional, interstate and overseas communications needs.

David Harwood, Pacific Regional Sales Manager, ACT Teleconferencing indicated the growth was between 15-20 per cent. Harwood sees the next three years as an exceptional time as the telcos merge with the internet cloud. Harwood claims, "With customer expectation and the imminent deployment of the voice and video over IP a reality, the business opportunities and business problems that can be solved particularly through service provider portals; are enormous."

Harwood maintains that, though an understanding of the business benefits currently exists, there is still a requirement for ongoing education when it comes to videoconferencing. Executives need to become more comfortable with the technology, claims Harwood. He believes that the technology has started to reach the level of ease of use of a PC. The level of complexity in video conferencing operation has reduced sufficiently to address the fear factor and deliver results for first-time users.

Today, there are legacy conferencing systems that companies invested in some years ago. Not only were they costly, they were challenging to operate, says Harwood. Because there was no standard operating environment, there were a number of disparate systems in the market resulting in users having to operate different user interfaces.

In summary, these systems have not been intuitive, Harwood says. And your senior executives are typically not there to learn operator skills just simply to use and facilitate. In the recent past, to bring five to six people, from different global offices, together in a virtual meeting required an engineer to make the meeting happen. But there are still multiple break points that can impact negatively that virtual meeting with the end result that the executives decide to catch a plane next time!

Failures can occur with the operator, with the equipment, cables (often involving 15 to 16 cables to be plugged in) and with the carrier backbone (usually an ISDN link). The issue still exists within organisations that video conferencing is delegated to someone else. It does not fall into the IT domain or the voice domain often left to the PAs or secretaries to coordinate its operation and expected successful outcomes.

No wonder there's a substantial reluctance out there with using the technology fear of failure, says Harwood. But the growing availability of low-cost, high-speed IP connections through broadband and the ability to, therefore, video conference from the desktop is simplifying the technology for users. We are talking about clicking and speaking, clicking and viewing versus protocol-based connections and reliance on ISDN which requires higher levels of maintenance and support.

The switch to IP is good news beyond ease of use with a lower cost per minute for video services as well as a move to fixed monthly video network services.

Harwood adds that many users are increasingly interested in single-source conferencing service providers (CSPs) like ACT that deliver and assure the total conferencing experience. By offering audio, video and data services, as well as handling IP and circuit-switched customer needs and handling traffic across all geographies we have become an audio and video conferencing partner of choice with a rapidly growing number of organisations, said Harwood.

Harwood explains that growth in the conferencing industry over the next few years is coming from web conferencing which is clearly the most cost effective of accomplishing meetings and events. Wainhouse Research (Conferencing Markets and Strategies Volume 3 December 2001) supports these views forecasting, as more organisations become web conferencing savvy, a growth of 48 per cent worldwide in web conferencing with a 20 per cent decline in average per minute revenues.

Another trend has been the move towards on-demand audio conferencing services rather than scheduled attended audio conferences. ACT's customer Request Broadband says Request utilises the automated service for its sales conferences which involve between 10 to 14 attendees nationally. This allows the organisation to be more flexible with arranging times and dates and making alterations to these due to unexpected occurrences.

We do not have to arrange advanced reservations or an operator. We simply use our ReadyConnect calling card to commence the audio conference, said Scott Carter, Request Director of Sales. As chairperson of the conference call, I have control of each sales meeting with staff simply joining the conference by dialing-in themselves from any remote location. It's simple, timely and cost effective.

At the end of the business day, says Harwood, a video or an audio conference must be conducted professionally, replacing a physical high-powered meeting. ACT ensures that the meeting is more important than the technology supporting it, Harwood says. As a genuine end-to-end CSP, being much more than just a bridging company enabling conferencing technology, we are the insurance that these organisations need and willingly pay for.

ACT believes video conferencing should provide a complete simulation of a normal meeting environment, enabling both parties to see, hear and present material, just as if they were in the same room. We see videoconferencing as speeding up business process and procedures in the same way that the fax and the email have revolutionised the way we share information, concludes Harwood.

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About ACT Teleconferencing

ACT Teleconferencing, Inc. (Nasdaq-ACTT) is a leading independent worldwide provider of audio, video and web-based conferencing products and services. Established in 1990, ACT Teleconferencing provides unmatched coverage around the world with 15 service delivery centres and sales offices in nine countries.

ACT is the only conferencing company with integrated global audio and video conferencing platforms that provide uniform international services, uniform billing and local language services.

ACT's comprehensive suite of applications enable organisations to collaborate with customers, team members, investors and employees locally as well as globally for increased productivity, lower travel expenses and more efficient communications. ACT technology and custom-built applications enable organisations to reach their communication goals around the globe with ease.

For the third year in a row, ACT has been named to Deloitte & Touches Fast 500 program, a ranking of the 500 fastest growing technology companies in the USA.

ACT Teleconferencing clients in Australia include Compaq, National Meat Federation, ABN Amro, University of Queensland, CSR, AMP, Woolworths, Westfields, Lend Lease, Ernst & Young, Arnotts, Oil Search and KPMG.

For more information about ACT Teleconferencing visit the company's website at www.acttel.com