



## Until We Meet Again



It is time for a meeting of the minds, a coming together of sorts. Let's face it; meetings are a necessary cost of doing business. Disseminating information is a prerequisite for success. Whether done in the old way or the new way, meetings are mandatory.

### The New Way

As many producers know, more and more companies are using on-line Internet-based meetings to facilitate training and compliance requirements. Producers who have not yet had the pleasure of attending one should expect to do so soon. There are advantages to Internet-based meetings. This new kind of meeting is cheaper to host and much more time efficient. A producer simply can dial a toll-free telephone number and with a few clicks of his mouse, he can join a fully interactive audiovisual meeting via the Internet.

### Sell Away

Many producers might not realize it, but they too can reap the benefits of hosting their own Web-based meetings. Think about it, how many people does the producer know who have Internet access? As a sales tool, Web-based meeting services can be used to take advantage of this. For a nominal fee, a producer can host a meeting, show presentations, and interact with prospects without ever leaving his desk. Full-fledged video conferencing it is not, but it provides a means of displaying visual content along with audio.

As an example, my office has created custom software that makes illustrations of client's accounts. An online meeting makes it easy for me to show clients their current investment allocations and graphically show and highlight my recommended changes. As they say, a picture is worth a thousand words. Online conferencing enables me to close the sale easily by sharing these illustrations with my prospects remotely while pointing out the important parts verbally and visually.

As the producer knows, the key to any successful meeting is preparation. And like a meeting in person, online meetings require the producer to do some planning. The producer will perform best in online meetings by preloading PowerPoint presentations to the service provider beforehand. This will enable the service to cache the information to the participants' computers in the background during the course of the meeting. Slide transitions then seem almost instantaneous. Producers should keep in mind that materials used in a

Web meeting must be compliance-approved prior to sharing them with prospects.

## Top Contenders

Three large online Web conferencing services worth mentioning are Mshow.com, Webex.com and Placeware.com. All offer similar features and pricing structures. With security always an issue in conducting business online, most providers other than Webex ensure meetings are 128-bit encrypted. The Webex standard offer is 40-bit encryption with an up-charge for 128-bit SSL services.

While online meetings are efficient time-wise, producers should keep in mind that every attendee including the host counts as a seat in a meeting. A meeting between two people would occupy two seats. As an example, a two-person meeting using Placeware.com at its current non-subscription meeting rate of 35 cents a minute per attendee would cost a total of \$42 for an hour-long meeting.

Producers or agencies needing larger online conferencing capabilities and wanting to host meetings extensively will find it well worth the price of signing up for a subscription with one of these providers. This is particularly true for agencies with a widely dispersed staff.

Subscriptions allow the user to host an unlimited number of meetings per month with many participants at a time. Some additional features such as a session recording and playback of the presentation are available only to monthly subscribers for an additional fee. Some might find this a helpful feature, particularly for training purposes.

## Meet Away

An alternative online meeting solution is also available from Intra-Agent.com. For a monthly fee, a user can sign up to host unlimited online meetings with up to 50 users at a time. Under the plan, producers pay a per minute fee for teleconferencing services only if their telephone system is not capable of providing the audio. The service is robust enough for almost any producer's or agency's needs, and offers an excellent alternative to the pricier solutions offered by the larger services. The solution is perfect for producers wishing to meet online with clients and prospects for annual insurance and financial reviews.

Somewhere on the horizon I see some unsettledness between "old" types of meetings and "new" types of meetings. Which to have when could be a subject in itself. In my opinion, on-line Web-based meetings are ideal for short client presentations or company meetings of up to an hour in duration, two at the absolute most. It is hard enough to gain a producer's attention much less hold it for any length of time. Longer meetings are better served in person with lunch or a snack and some colleagues with whom to schmooze.

With all of that said, though, there still is something about those old traditional meetings worth pointing out. One might recall when the

Internet was younger and the media hype predicted the demise of brick and mortar stores. Forecasts were that shopping malls would be left abandoned with tumbleweeds blowing down the aisles as a population feverishly purchased everything from virtual online malls. Of course, this didn't happen. It didn't happen because we are a needy touchy feely bunch. It is more appealing to hold and try on those new shoes than peer into the wonder-glass and ponder if the size is correct.

The same goes with meetings. What makes an old style meeting so important that we clear a whole day to attend it? It's not necessarily the subject matter or the speaker, but it is something more. It's the pat on the back, a colleague's handshake, the networking. These are old-fashioned things that new-fangled online meetings cannot provide. Before people celebrate the cost benefits of online get-togethers, they may want to keep that under consideration.

Web-based meetings have a place. Short collaborations with prospects and associates, or brief company sales meetings are perfect uses of this new technology. Online meetings, however, cannot compensate for the human touch. Finding oneself in the wonder-glass of prospects and in meetings with vendors and other producers will help us sell more by making our use of time more efficient. Like the brick and mortar stores, however, face-to-face personal meetings still offer a warmth, a touch, and a feel that can't be found online.