



Technology in action

In today's declining market, firms are under increasing pressure to tighten their budgets. Overseas meetings can be expensive but maintaining that all-important client relationship is crucial. Communications firm DRP Group has realised the advantages of video-conferencing. Spencer Dalziel went along to find out more

Pick at random any old sci-fi TV programme and there's no doubt you can find an episode that features some of the best video-conferencing kit in the known universe. Transgalactic connections beamed over a trillion light years with full-colour full-motion video, high-quality audio and no breakdown in signal.

Well, the future hasn't arrived yet but some companies are doing their best to ensure that the jerky nightmare that characterises most video-conferencing becomes as dated as the man wearing a rubber suit costume in a 1960s sci-fi.

The potential company benefits of video-conferencing technology are manifold. Increased productivity is music to the ears of any organisation, and video-conferencing is likely to please the accounts department when travel expenses drop to zero because employees no longer need to jet off for important meetings.

That said, video-conferencing is still emerging from its infancy into a difficult adolescence. While it's great in theory, in practice its implementation only serves to highlight the limitations of most current technology.

Action stations

DRP Group MD Dale Parmenter has been in the presentation and communications business for 23 years, so he's well aware of the issues that plague video-conferencing and the related technology.

DRP Group offers a diverse range of services from corporate video productions to interactive multimedia presentations. Video-conferencing has been an integral part of the business for some time. Dale admits that early efforts at conferencing were no better than using two cans and a bit of string or sending smoke signals. It also didn't help that many companies lacked high-speed internet connections.

However, things changed when he stumbled across some new hardware. "About three years ago I was in the offices of an organisation VMC [The Video Meeting Company]. They demoed some conferencing solutions supplied by a manufacturer called Polycom."



Dale was impressed with the audio and visual quality offered by Polycom's communications device and decided to purchase two ViewStation 512 models for his company.

This video-communications system is compatible with the protocols used by desktop and room-sized video-conferencing systems. Thanks to support for a new video standard termed H.263, the 512 can deliver full-motion video at 30fps (frames per second) eliminating the usual jerky motion from the visual display.

Since installing the two ViewStations, Dale claims that the system has improved customer service as well as saving time and money. "We use the ViewStations to edit client videos online, which speeds up the decision-making and approval processes so much that it has totally transformed our productivity."

In fact, thanks to the ViewStations, DRP Group has created a new service for its clients – adding video clips and live real-time material to presentations.

Speaker in the spotlight

Ascertaining what is being said and by whom when you're making a video-conference call is a notorious problem. To this end, the ViewStation aims to suppress noise and cancel out echoes. It employs voice-activated switching so it specifically targets the users speaking in the room. The additional voice-tracking



feature allows the ViewStation camera to home in on the current speaker.

The ViewStation 512 can make conference calls at up to 512Kbps (kilobits per second) across the ISDN network. This is complemented by the ability to use the ViewStation on IP (internet protocol) networks.

Anyone who's made a long-distance call understands the surreal and stilted shift that occurs when there's a severe time lag on the phone. Dale explains that with the equipment DRP Group uses "clients can now see and hear in real-time". It's as if you were there in person.

You'd think the ViewStation needs to be supported by a pretty hefty network to maintain constant quality. DRP Group has 60 ISDN lines coming into different parts of the building, but Dale swears by the reliability of the video-communication system.

"The 512 is incredibly reliable because it automatically changes lines to allocate the optimum connection speed," explains Dale. This method ensures the ViewPoint doesn't have to revert to jerky pictures and audio lag.

While this initial outlay will dent the pocket of most firms, Dale claims it wasn't long before the system started to pay for itself. He can now see four clients in a day rather than one

Technology made simple

The technology behind the ViewPoint may be complicated, but Polycom has made the hardware as easy to use as possible. The ViewStation is operated via a remote control and Dale states that it couldn't be simpler to use. Polycom also priced the ViewPoint competitively. Dale researched the cost of competitors'

systems but none was as cost-effective as Polycom's.

Installing the two ViewPoints took three days so there was a fair amount of disruption at DRP Group. The installation fee was £350. Add the cost of the devices and the grand total is around £15,000. While this initial outlay will dent the pockets of most firms, Dale claims it wasn't long before the system started to pay for itself. He can now see four clients in a day rather than one: "The money we've saved on 10 business trips has paid for the entire package."

Independent research carried out by Noel Edmunds' new business venture, Face2Face, backs this up. It indicates that most business trips last more than six hours and cost £2,000 per person. With several people due at any one conference at a time... well, you do the maths. ■

DRP Group: at a glance

- History Originally known as DRP Films, Dale Parmenter formed DRP Group in 1980. The company originally specialised in film and video production but made the jump to creating interactive multimedia during the 1990s. The company now offers a totally integrated range of services.

- Employment DRP Group employs 30 people in two UK centres.
- Achievements Won Business of the Year for Central England Training and Enterprise Council in 1994.
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