

Expanding Reach through Streaming Solutions



A Frost & Sullivan White Paper
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INTRODUCTION

Web-based communications is an evolving landscape with services and functions changing daily. The 2008/2009 global recession forced a dynamic shift in business operations. Out of necessity, businesses sought creative ways to continue business expansion despite shrinking budgets. Companies used webcasting and Web conferences as ways to reduce travel costs and increase productivity. Targeted webcasts are used to increase awareness of products and expand the market share of companies that use them. This has shifted Web-based communication tools from “nice to have” to essential business tools for successfully meeting the growth challenges of businesses over the next decade.

Increased popularity of Web-based communications tools and expansion of functions has blurred the lines of distinction between Web conferences and webcasts. Traditional webcasts provide a one-to-many or a many-to-many event such as a town hall meeting, e-learning/training, or global product demonstration. Their purpose is to disseminate information to an audience with little to no feedback from participants. Improvements in video quality and broadband technology have shifted the emphasis from a push technology toward an interactive streaming technology. Streaming events expand the capabilities of traditional webcasting to allow companies to incorporate multiple presenters from multiple locations and to receive feedback in an interactive, real-time format. Throughout the next decade, these tools will continue to evolve as companies increasingly rely on Web and video communications to compete and grow with globally dispersed clients and branch offices.

Web conferencing is used to conduct live meetings or presentations through the Internet. Multiple computer users are able to see the same screen at all times in their Web browsers. Web conferences are often collaborative in nature and represent a many-to-many event. Control of the session can be passed among users.

Webcasting is a push technology where a media file is distributed through the Internet and allows multiple users to view a live or on-demand audio or video presentation.

Streamed events are enriched webcasts that provide enhanced viewer experiences. New functionality in streamed events enables PowerPoint builds and animation and the inclusion of videos into the presentation, whether live or on-demand. Additionally, streamed events incorporate an interactive element through polling and Q&A capabilities. Increased bandwidth and HD-quality video enhance the streaming technology.

MOVING BEYOND TRADITIONAL WEBCASTING TO STREAMING EVENTS

In the last decade, businesses have slowly adopted audio, Web, and video communications tools due to the varying availability of broadband connectivity. However, the increasing influence of the millennial generation¹ in the workforce has forced a paradigm shift in the way technology is used in workplaces around the world. Business users want to be able to view and interact with each other at any time, from any device, and any location. The

¹ “Generation Y.” Wikipedia. 26 April, 2010. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Generation_Y>

interactive dynamics of streaming events are able to meet the business needs of the millennial generation and will transform business operations for companies around the world in ways that weren't possible until now.

STREAMING EVENTS EXPAND A COMPANY'S REACH

The recession forced reluctant business leaders to open the door to creative business solutions such as streaming events to achieve a needed balance between expense cutting and revenue generation. Streaming events enable organizations to extend their global reach, deliver corporate messages, create lead generation, train sales, and collaborate among employees. Companies have reduced operating costs, such as travel and special events, while increasing productivity. Other streaming tools such as webinars and video e-mail messages are also used as marketing tools to reach new customers or sell additional products.

Webinars are a specific type of webcast and are usually a one-to-many event with limited audience interaction. Webinars are generally broadcast live with on-demand viewing available after the event.

Video e-mail is also referred to as video mail, video e-mail or video messaging. Video e-mail is an e-mail message with a video file inserted in the body of the message or accessible through a hypertext link.

Universities and colleges use streaming events as a tool to reduce dropout rates and expand enrollment. Interactive streaming technology shifts e-learning from video watching to a virtual classroom with the ability to engage participants through both real-time and on-demand attendance. Instructors are shifting teaching methods to track course completion and test results, and respond directly to student questions during real-time events.

Associations and other member-based organizations leverage streaming events to offset revenue losses from decreased attendance at conferences and workshops. Associations have also increased revenue by offering conference events to members and non-members via on-demand services.

Businesses in the healthcare, pharmaceutical, and technology industries are utilizing streaming events to educate and inform staff through enriched e-learning "classrooms." On-demand e-learning has eliminated the need for training-related travel and instead offers the ability to gain new skills and update certifications at convenient times and locations, and at a lower cost to the organization.

A healthcare diagnostic company converted its three-day, in-person training session into a Web-based, self-paced program. E-learning enabled team members to complete the training at their own convenience – no travel or time spent away from their offices required. In the first four months, 120 people completed the training and saved the company \$120,000 in travel expenses.

“The biggest pay off... we no longer have to pay to fly people in to our corporate office and staff this training. There’s also an environmental pay off that comes from the reduction in travel.”

– Manager, Education and Travel Department

STREAMING EVENTS WITHIN WEBCASTS BENEFIT THE BOTTOM LINE

Recognizing the value of streaming technology to support business operations, companies are using streaming events to extend global reach, acquire and retain talent in dispersed global offices, as well as to sell products and services internationally. Web-conferencing enables people from different locations to collaborate at scheduled times or on an ad hoc basis when necessary. Partner collaboration, on the other hand, allows large and small enterprises to extend their reach and broaden their messages via streaming events that enable companies to reach segments of the market with targeted messaging. Presenters are able to interact with attendees to answer specific questions from events such as investor relations meetings, product releases, or press announcements. Functions such as polling and interactive questions provide immediate feedback. If issues can’t be immediately addressed, the interactivity of streaming events helps ensure faster and more efficient post-event follow-up.

A social networking organization was able to host a streaming event at one-third of the cost of an in-person event. Attendees were able to log in from a computer of their choosing. Flash-based technology does not require attendees to download any software or install any plug-ins.

“The quality was precise, crisp and clear. It was as if you were watching ‘Meet the Press’ on television.”

– Event Coordinator

WEEDING OUT THE WEAK FROM THE BEST OF WEBCASTING SERVICES

As the webcast market continues to mature, Frost & Sullivan believes leaders will emerge based on three key characteristics: 1) technology, 2) service, and 3) application functions. When determining which application to use, organizations should weigh the following factors against their needs:

Technology

Streaming events deliver a high-quality, enhanced visual and interactive experience compared to traditional webcast applications. Webcast solutions support applications primarily based on Adobe Flash and Windows Media technology, though other formats are available. Adobe Flash is used most frequently and is installed on 99 percent of the Internet-enabled desktops in mature markets². The quality of a webcast is enhanced with Adobe Flash, which allows for presentations containing PowerPoint builds and animation interactive tools, easy customization for end-users, and the ability to embed the application into customers' websites. Many industry verticals, including pharmaceutical and education, require the flexibility that only Flash can offer.

Customer Service

As the market continues to develop, customer requirements for individual event support will vary based on event complexity. The type of support a company receives and how it meets its needs will be a key purchasing factor. End-users' initial venture into webcasting requires extensive assistance to set up and run an event. A natural migration to a self-service mode or self-service with support has occurred over the past 12 months as end-user familiarity with tools increases and as webcasting vendors have offered self-service and hybrid-service options. A self-service option is generally more attractive as most companies do not have the budget to outsource the setup for the majority of events. Overall costs can be reduced dramatically by shifting the process away from the webcast vendor. Vendors that provide a breadth of service from total implementation to partial or on-demand support more often meet the needs of corporations.

To attract customers, many webcasting vendors have taken customer service to another level. Vendors are shifting from an on-call model of interaction toward a more partnership-driven model. Account managers and customer support staff interact with customers regularly to understand clients' business needs. Account managers recommend new and creative ways to incorporate streaming solutions as a means to expand clients' reach.

Applications Features – Key Questions to Address When Evaluating Vendors

Features are often what attract customers and retain clients. As companies migrate from traditional webcasting toward the more advanced features of a streaming event solution, there are several key questions that should be considered when evaluating vendors:

- **Technology** – Can it adapt streaming event features and functionality easily? Will the application allow for synchronization of PowerPoint build and animation elements? Does it need to be Flash-based for easy viewing on either Mac or Windows? Can it spontaneously check and adapt content delivery for end-users with varying connectivity speeds? Is it a technology that will meet business objectives? How easily is it installed? Can it be migrated into existing applications and processes?

² "Flash Player Penetration," April 26, 2010, www.adobe.com/products/player_census/flashplayer

- **Adaptability of the Application** – Is it a legacy technology (often Windows-based) that requires rewriting of codes, or is it a new technology that is cloud-based or modular? How customizable is the application per event? How will it interact with the current IT environment?
- **Functionality** – Is it able to manage PowerPoint builds and animation? Can the PowerPoint slides, animation, and video be synchronized? What does it provide, and how extensive are the features such as whiteboarding, polling, and Q&A? Can it provide desktop solutions for access and management? Can attendees begin inside of a general session, be pushed into breakout rooms, and then later pulled back to a general session? Is it customizable? Can it be branded by the client to ensure a common look and feel with other company services? Can it be tailored to fit specific needs?
- **Features** – Can it easily incorporate video into the presentation? Can it include presenters from multiple locations? Does it include tracking of time, quizzes, certification issuance, and other features for e-learning? How robust are the reporting and analytics? What type of interface does it have, and is it easy to use?
- **New Features/Technology/Capabilities** – How often is the application updated with new features? What new technologies or tools are on roadmap to be added to the platform (e.g., webcams and smartphones)? Does the vendor solicit improvement suggestions from its customers? How quickly are customer suggestions implemented?

Streaming solutions vendors that are able to successfully address these questions will continue to grow their customer base.

THE INTERCALL STREAMING SOLUTION

InterCall Streaming is a strong solution for the large- and medium-sized business within the webcasting and, more specifically, the streaming events space. The InterCall Streaming product stands out from the competition in several areas, including customer service, technology features, and software suite adaptability. InterCall Streaming is deployed onto a multi-tiered network comprised of SQL servers for data storage, Flash Media servers for video delivery, Adobe Flex for the user frontend, and .NET for middleware and integration services.



InterCall Streaming's intuitive interface offers automatic video feed and color scheme options.

Customer Service

InterCall, through its 24 offices around the world, supports customers at multiple levels and seeks to establish long-term relationships. InterCall's customer-oriented position is a significant advantage compared to other approaches, namely:

Listening to Customers

One of the most useful tools enabled by InterCall's Streaming solution is the gathering of client input and feedback. User comments are gathered by project managers and sales support teams for immediate feedback to the development team. As part of this initiative, InterCall sponsors a national webcast with a panel of key users one to two times a quarter. The webcasts educate new and potential users on how to use the product, answer questions, and solicit input on future product developments. Additionally, a client advisory group of five to six companies provides feedback in a more formal manner and beta tests new functions and features.

Dedicated Account Executives

Traditionally, Web-based communications services organizations interact with clients when the contract is renewed or in an effort to sell new products or services. InterCall has taken a different approach and assigns an account executive as the primary contact for each client throughout the relationship. Account executives are also tasked with understanding the business needs of each client on an ongoing basis. This approach emphasizes the importance of supporting and retaining existing clients. InterCall recognizes the importance an ongoing relationship with its customers will provide. Customers offer feedback on the application, identify new ways to apply the technology, and recommend new features for future releases.

Features

InterCall Streaming delivers both a self-service and on-premise desktop solution for access and management of streaming events. The desktop solution is fully customizable to a client's look and feel from content to design and branding. The application is able to be integrated into third-party learning management systems or embedded into customer websites. Each event automatically includes up to 1,000 simultaneous attendees, with the option to increase the number of participants, and is able to have multiple presenters from different locations. Other key components include:

- PowerPoint builds, animation support, and synchronization of slides;
- Video slides that are easily incorporated into presentations;
- Webcam events that are available from any location provided the participant has Internet access;
- Capacity to shift participants from a general session into breakout rooms, and to pull them back into general session; and

- Scalability that is supported by back-end application technology and increased network infrastructure.

Additional functionality planned to be released within the second half of 2010 includes:

- Integration of text messaging into the application for real-time responses to polling questions;
- Multicasting with Flash in order to enable presenters to use any video source (webcam, in studio, on-site video crew, etc.) from multiple locations. This functionality allows for an unlimited number of presenters at multiple locations and can easily alternate between presenters as needed.
- Integration of a phone bridge into the application that allows presenters to dial in from any location and be bridged directly into the live streaming software.

Application

InterCall Streaming is Flash-based and enables clients on multiple platforms to easily use the application. It also offers features that Windows-based applications lack. As a Flash-based application, live streaming videos or other IFrame Coding features can be embedded directly into clients' websites. InterCall Streaming's application is modular and allows customers to modify the look and feel as desired, including branding. Because the application is 100 percent Flash-based, the entire interface is easily customized.

A company in the education sector uses InterCall Streaming to host virtual college fairs. As a result, 130 colleges were able to expand their pool of potential students. More than half of the students were ethnically diverse, and attendees came from all 50 U.S. states and more than 100 countries. The virtual fair also eliminated travel costs for college recruiters, as well as the expense of shipping brochures, school applications, and other supporting material.

“The InterCall Streaming platform is reliable, easy to integrate, requires no access software download, and offers users an easy, compelling interface that allows our attendees to interact and ask questions of our nationally known speakers. We operated six studios concurrently across the country.”

– VP, Product Development

In addition to major annual rebuilds, InterCall constantly evolves its application with 10 to 15 new functions added each quarter. This enables InterCall to offer high levels of customization to its clients and quickly add requested features within one to four weeks.

CONCLUSION

Organizations are continually realizing the benefits of using webcasts and webinars as tools that can be leveraged in all aspects of their businesses. Streaming events allow companies to deploy targeted communication and educational training. Interactive tools enable organizations to reach beyond traditional territories to engage customers. As webcasts migrate to a more robust streaming event solution, customers will select vendors based on functionality, services offered, support provided, and platform capabilities.

InterCall Streaming goes beyond traditional webcasting to provide a streaming event solution that enables clients to meet the challenges of today's businesses. The Flash-based application is positioned to support new technology and features. Its easy-to-use, flexible application is available as a hosted or on-premise solution. Companies are able to manage the events in a self-service mode or tap into InterCall's customer support team for assistance as needed.

Through a strong customer-oriented approach, InterCall Streaming offers businesses the advantage of partnering with clients to understand their needs and identify ways to better utilize the tool. InterCall Streaming empowers companies to meet the challenges of a video and interactive generation and continually seeks user input to improve its streaming offerings.

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