

# Choosing a **Web Conferencing Solution**

Find out how to identify your needs, and what to look for in a vendor.

**W**hen beginning the search for a Web conferencing solution, it is important to screen a number of vendors. Visit their website, review live demos, seek client testimonials and, most important, ask questions.

Before taking these steps, be sure to set your objectives, note the features that you require and estimate your monthly budget. Once this is established, be prepared to spend time gathering information from each vendor being considered and attending live demos.

Here are a few basic areas that should be addressed before talking to vendors:

1. How many participants do you anticipate attending your online meetings or events?
2. Will the number of participants remain consistent from meeting to meeting or will the number change?
3. How many meetings will be conducted each week, month or quarter? Will usage fluctuate depending on the time of year?
4. What type of content will be presented (Power Point slides, software applications, web-based applications, documents, or spreadsheets)?
5. What degree of interactivity do you require (Q&A, polling/voting, application sharing, text chatting, live video, file sharing, etc.)?
6. How much support do you need before, during and after your meeting (remember, the degree of customer service offered varies greatly from vendor to vendor)?
7. What is your monthly budget?
8. Are there any special security requirements?
9. Are your attendees accessing your meeting behind corporate firewalls?
10. What types of operating systems do you need the service to support?

Now that you've determined your requirements, its time to choose a vendor. Here are a few suggestions:

1. Select a pricing model: When you shop for Web conferencing technology, you'll find a wide range of pricing plans and conditions. Web conferencing typically is priced either on a software user-license basis (pay per seat) or per minute of usage (pay per use).
  - Pay per use: you pay only for the time you and your attendees spend in Web conferences.
  - Pay per seat: you pay a flat monthly fee for a certain number of concurrent users ("seats").

At first glance the tradeoff may seem simple, however, the answer is far more complicated. Some additional considerations are:

**Minimum number of seats:** Most vendors require that you buy a minimum of five seats in a pay-per-seat license model. For example, at \$100 per seat, your monthly cost is \$500.

**Contracts:** Most pay-per-seat plans require a term commitment ranging from three months to one year. If you are beginning to use Web conferencing for the first time, you will most likely not make full use of your pay per seat plan in the first month or two, but you will pay the full amount anyway. You are also obligated to pay if you determine that the technology does not meet your requirements. With pay-per-use, you have more flexibility to make sure the technology meets your needs in a live environment and your costs grow with your actual usage.

**Set up fees:** Many vendors charge a set up fee for pay-per-seat pricing (usually ranging from \$1,000 - \$4,000). Amortized over the first year of the service, these fees increase the monthly pay-per-seat cost. These fees can be negotiated particularly if you are purchasing a large number of seats. Very few pay-per-use plans require a set-up fee.

**Overage charges:** In a pay-per-seat model, when the number of concurrent users exceeds the number of seats licenses you purchased, your vendors will apply an overage charge. For example, if you have a five-seat license and conduct a Web meeting with 10 users, you will have to pay for those extra five attendees. These charges are typically charged by a fraction of an hour and can cost as high as \$15 per quarter hour. Pay-per-use plans let you include as many attendees as you want at the same per minute price.

Use the following table to determine which solution is best for your needs:

| Usage Pattern   | Favorable Solution |          |
|---|--------------------|----------|
|   | Per Minute         | Per Seat |
| Using Web conferencing for the first time                             | X                  |          |
| Number of concurrent attendees will remain the same at any given time |                    | X        |
| Number of concurrent attendees may vary at any given time             | X                  |          |
| Usage level will be consistent during each month                      | X                  | X        |
| Usage level will change from month-to-month                           | X                  |          |
| Avoid contracts   | X                  |          |

2. Make sure it's easy to use: Most vendor brochures list the same set of features and functionality. The real difference between solutions comes down to how well it works; functionality, reliability and usability. Ask to demo the service as both a participant and meeting host. In each scenario, test each of the features to see how well they work and how easy they are to use.
3. Get the features you need: Some Web conferencing solutions only support online presentations, while others offer full-featured packages that include polling, chatting, application-sharing, white boarding and group Web surfing. Do you seek the ability to record and archive the event for playback? Can you transfer files within the meeting? Make sure the product meets your needs.
4. Customer support levels: Determine the customer support level that you require and find out if there are any additional costs involved. There are two types of customer support that you will most likely need:

- a) Real-time technical support: Attendees will inevitably need help from time-to-time joining your meeting. And, if you're presenting to clients and prospects, who need help joining your conference, you cannot afford to get voice mail when contacting technical support. Make sure your vendor has live support available, at least during business hours, without waiting on hold a long time. Call each vendors customer service number and see if you get a live person vs. a menu or voice mail.
  - b) Pre-conference training and consultation: Is training and meeting planning support available? Is there an extra fee? Is there a telephone number available so that you can contact a support person or is only e-mail support offered?
5. Consider security requirements: Depending on the audience and the information being shared, security might be a concern. Most solutions are secure enough and do not store meeting data any place except on the presenter's PC. Participants only see a graphical representation of the data through a standard Web browser. Some services provide passcode authorization, SSL encryption, and the ability to lock and unlock the meeting.
  6. Make sure the service works with corporate firewalls: If you are meeting or presenting to individuals at business locations, make sure the service can tunnel through multiple Internet ports in the event a primary port is blocked by a firewall.
  7. Cross platform support: Find out what the system requirements are. Does the solution support multiple operating platforms including; Microsoft™ Windows (95, 98, ME, NT, 2000, XP), MAC (which versions?), Linux, Solaris?

Pay-per-use pricing is the better conservative choice for most companies learning how to leverage Web conferencing for their business. You avoid set up fees and you don't have monitor the number of concurrent users in order to avoid overage charges. You can always start with a pay-per-use plan and switch to a pay-per-seat plan once there is a clear, long-term financial advantage.

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