

Virtual Presentations: Wasting No Time

By Jelena Lewis

The idea of being able to make a presentation accessible to a much larger audience from the presenter's office, classroom, or own home for that matter, is not only appealing to the presenter but the audience as well. Imagine being able to transmit all of the multimedia fields used in the boardroom or classroom, across the web to anyone in the world, at any time, right along with you. Thanks to Internet services and developments in user-friendly hardware, online presentations may become a beneficial and easy to master tool for those involved in business, education, and virtually anyone who needs to get his/her ideas and information across to an audience.

Website Services

Sites providing webcasting services on the Internet make it easy to organize and create an online presentation, for the most part, requiring little more than a browser.

Astound Conference Center, available through Astound (ae.astound.com), allows you to present your Microsoft Power Point slides over the web. All you have to do is download the Astound Publisher software from the site, which converts Power Point slides, or Astound's own slides, into HTML format. Conference Center then provides a virtual conference room location which you and your viewers enter at a time you specify. As the audience views your presentation from a remote location, they can interact with you, asking questions and giving feedback due to Astound's chat feature. You can also refer your audience back to specific slides. Astound's service is free for a one month trial period. After that, you have the option of creating your own permanent conference room for you and your associates or fellow educators, starting at \$99 per month.

Active Touch is another provider of real-time presentation services and like Astound, requires only a browser. It allows you to add your own documents and slides but the service is completely free of charge to the presenter. Active Touch also provides you with a permanent web page, through WebEx Office, where you can publicly update your upcoming presentations and maintain your own personal calendar and records.

New software such as Microsoft Office 2000 and Power Point also provide limited webcasting capabilities.

Whiteboards on the Web

Another way of webcasting may be of particular interest to educators. Electronics for Imaging Inc.'s eBeam Presentation System is a device that allows the transfer of images directly from a generic classroom whiteboard to a remote

viewer's computer screen via the Internet. Ebeam distributes those images in real-time so remote users see each mark on the board as it is being made. They are also able to zoom in to view fine details of the image.

The eBeam system consists of two sensor pods that connect to a standard PC serial port and attach to the upper corners of your whiteboard. These sensor pods pick up signals from eBeam's, battery operated, marker holsters and eraser which transmit each stroke to the PC and then over the net. As you use the eBeam Presentation System, you can save your written work, erase the board, and then start again. The system records every mark made so you always have the option of going back to a pre-recorded point if you make a mistake. Internet viewers can also review previous "pages" of the presentation and save them in various formats so they can view them later.

Aside from the price, just under \$600, the eBeam has few drawbacks. Although there is a limit to the amount of sensing area the hardware covers and the number of colors that can be used during the presentation, the eBeam is user-friendly to both the presenter and remote user. The presentation system is not only lightweight and easy to set up, but the remote users do not need any special software to view the eBeam presentations, just a browser with Java capability.

Why Webcasting?

Research shows that teacher development and training are essential elements of successful schools. However, many school districts must balance the needs for maintaining intensive training without sacrificing school days, or exceeding limited training budgets. Webcasting technology may be particularly helpful to reduce indirect costs of training, such as transportation, room and board. With webcasting, teachers can receive quality training at their own school base, with less disruption of theirs and their students' schedules. This resource is especially beneficial for countries that have schools scattered over large areas and with few transportation resources. In these countries, moving teachers away from schools for training becomes an enormous challenge. Webcasting enables the teacher in the rural, isolated area, to be connected to the main training center, and receive the same training as a teacher in a more affluent area.

In addition to saving time and money, the medium also improves the sharing of information and ideas. For example, Biology classes can be taught directly from a museum, and an astronomy class can take the children in a virtual trip across space. The world shrinks, while knowledge expands. This is the power of technology.