So You Are Thinking About Doing A Video Teleconference?

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Why Do A Video Teleconference?

Today's libraries face many challenges, two of which are insufficient budgets and a changing environment that creates pressure to provide staff development opportunities.

Many staff development topics are suitable for a half, or at most, a one day workshop. If one selects a single site for the workshop, attendees may have to travel long distances and, perhaps, incur expenses for an overnight stay. Few libraries can afford to send many staff members to a one day workshop that would incur significant travel or per diem expenses. Thus, a one day workshop in one location will most likely only draw participants from the area closest to the site.

Video teleconferencing provides a means of offering one day or shorter workshops over a large geographic area and maintaining most of the interaction benefits of single location programs. By using this technology one also increases the potential size of an audience. As an example, the Information Technology & Management Service Sections recently offered a half day program video teleconference at four locations. We had a total of 123 participants with a range of 20 people at one location to a high of 59 at another. Given the registration cost, no single site would have broken even on expenses; however, in combination they generated a reasonable "profit" for the Sections.

Participant comments provide testimony to the value of this approach for staff development. "Enjoyed the smaller group size with the larger participation and the shorter time!" "Liked the interactively and that I didn't have to travel 3 hours to get to a conference." "This is a great way to provide speakers from all over the country without the time and expense of traveling - great for limited budgets vs. continuing education needs, particularly as we grapple with constantly changing technology." "I really liked the video conferencing - I was skeptical that it would work effectively, but it was great."

Video teleconferencing allows people at all the sites to see and hear one

another without requiring each site to have the costly uplink and downlink capability required for one-way satellite-based broadcasts.

What is the Technology?

Video teleconferencing employs high speed digital telephone line connections (ISDN lines that operate above 112/128 kilobytes per second). Our September 11, 1996 program used three ISDN lines at each site. Using multiple ISDN lines requires a multiplexer and allows the use of two or more cameras at each site. One camera is for the speaker/audience and one for documents or alternate views of the audience. Most of our program sites employed three cameras - one for the speaker, one for the audience/questioners, and a document camera for textual material. (The figure provides an overview of the technology required. Illustration provided by Pacific Bell.)

Sites are connected through a telephone "bridge." One aspect of the technology that requires some adjustment on the part of participants is that only one person can speak at one time. That is, whoever is speaking is controlling the image at all the participating sites. In order to reduce or avoid pictures jumping from one site to another when a speaker pauses for breath and someone at another site coughs, the nonpresenting sites simply mute their microphones. This also means there is a more formal process of waiting to be certain the person has finished before someone else begins to speak: "regulating talk". Having a planned sequence in which the sites will respond or interact is important to maintaining a smooth flow to the program.

What Are the Costs?

There are some additional costs over that of a single site program. Room charges may be higher than one would pay for a single site program. There may be equipment "rental" charges and technician fees, if they are not part of the room charges. An important additional cost is the line charges. A small study undertaken by Pacific Bell of these costs for the libraries taking part in their "Education First"***** program, indicated the average was $15.00 per hour per ISDN channel. (In our case we used three ISDN lines, each using two channels or a total of six channels per site. Thus, our average was $90 per hour per site.) Actual costs will vary depending on the distance of the site from the multiport video bridge and which long distance carrier the site uses. As a comparison, satellite downlinking generally costs $300 to $500 per site and uplinking substantially more. Therefore, the $90 per hour ISDN costs are lower.

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Another charge is a "port" charge for access to a multiport bridge. In the case of Pacific Bell's Group Video Service, the charge ranges from $30 to $40 per port per hour. Education First sites receive the $30 rate.

What To Do To Help Assure Success?

Like any other program, careful planning is the key to success. All of the steps one would take in planning a single site program are, of course, necessary. One of the essential first steps is to determine the venues for the event AND the costs for the technology aspect of the event at each site. Those costs will be the critical factor in determining what to charge for the program. (In the case of our program, we were fortunate that three of the four sites were Demonstration Sites for the Education First program. This fact kept our costs very low.) Another important element in achieving success is taking the time to rehearse the program using the technology at all the sites. This allows technicians to make certain all the components will work with one another as planned. It also allows the host/moderator and presenters at each site to become familiar with the technology and how it will or will not impact their interaction.

Limiting the scope of the program - fewer presenters than one might use in a single site program - will provide more opportunity for interaction between sites within a reasonable time frame. The fact there are per minute costs for video teleconference programs means keeping to a time schedule is critical.

Use of textual or graphic material must be thought out carefully and in advance. Samples of each type of material, if not all of it, should be included in the rehearsal in order to assure they are clear and readable at all of the sites. (Note: even the color of the paper may make a difference.) Very specific examples of best practice are available regarding graphic material. Key factors to a successful program include for each site the following:

- an on-site technical coordinator
- a librarian/liaison person to deal with content and local arrangements such as refreshments, signs, room setup, registration, troubleshooting.
- a host to moderate the discussion.

In addition, central coordination needs to:

- coordinate registration with parent group
- prepare tip sheets for presenters
- procure and provide maps
- arrange publicity

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- keep in contact with hosts and technical people at each site for problem solving
- arrange for speakers
- arrange practice sessions if not done by library liaison.
- monitor financial issues.

Best wishes for a successful program.

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