technology
Get Real

After 9/11, some predicted that Webcasting and videoconferencing would replace most regular meetings. Should they—and will they? **BY JIM CARROLL**

SOON AFTER THE HORRIFIC events of September 11, as the public struggled to get back to work and return a sense of normalcy to their lives, the drumbeat of technology hype began in earnest.

It was suggested by many that more sales deals would be closed over the phone rather than in person, and that we would see a long-term reduction in travel as e-mail and other communication methods became more prevalent. Many meetings and events would be forever cancelled, as Webcasting and videoconferencing became the norm. The experts were telling us that high-tech would become an even greater part of our working lives than it is today.

Well, there's no doubt that our use of e-mail, telephone, and even online video has increased since the attacks. But I shudder every time I hear one of the "experts" suggest we are about to see a lot less human contact in the way that we work, and in the way that we get together, particularly when it comes to meetings and conferences.

As someone who helps people understand and cope with the implications of new tech-

nologies and ways of working, I often find myself thinking that many of the predictions made about technology are off-base. I was particularly rankled by these claims because I'm a believer that meetings and conferences have always been, and always will be, something driven by the simple need for human contact.

Don't get me wrong—I'm sure that new technologies will continue to have a big impact on the way that meetings and events are organized, structured, and delivered. But to suggest that we're suddenly going to see the outright cancellation of hundreds of events that will move online is, to me, downright silly.

The importance of face time

MUCH OF WHAT CONSTITUTES A SUCCESSFUL meeting is the networking that takes place. Sure, the program and content are impor-

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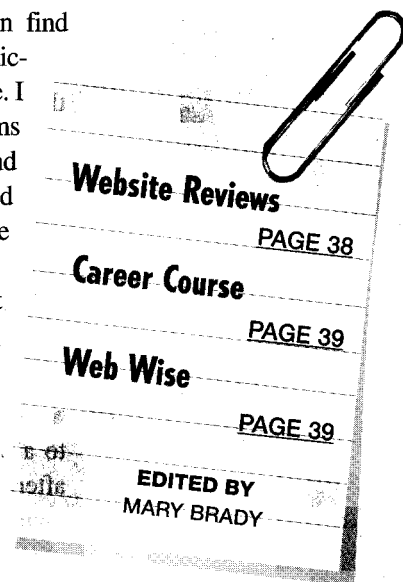
tant, but it's the cocktail hour, the "big-event" dinner, and the after-hours hospitality suites that often make for a great meeting. The reason organizations are willing to spend so much money to fly people to a central location and hold a big shindig is that they want to communicate a common message and encourage contact and discussion among those who share an interest in that message.

An event is as much about networking and team-building as it is about the content—a fact that we should never forget. A virtual meeting will never replace a real meeting because quite simply, no one will ever be able to invent a virtual beer.

Don't forget that for many companies and industries, the annual meeting or conference is a "big thing." Many of us who work in the meetings industry spend a lot of time on planes and in airports and become quite sick of traveling.

Perhaps we've become jaded by our experiences and have forgotten just how special a trip can be. But take a purchasing manager out of a small town and send him to Las Vegas for the annual conference—now that's an incentive! Take that away, and an organization is doing itself a great disservice, because it's killing a big chunk of motivation for its staff.

So what should meeting planners do as they assess the role videoconferencing and Webcasting might take in the industry? I'd suggest several approaches:

Keep your focus

IN CHALLENGING TIMES, IT IS EASY TO THRASH about, seeking some type of instant solution to a difficult problem. That's what happened after September 11. Suddenly, there were many meeting cancellations and postponements. Revenue took a hit, and given the massive changes that swirled around the industry, fear took hold.

And the instant solution—the panacea of the moment—seemed to be that videoconferencing and Webcasting would offer a way out. People don't want to travel? No problem—we'll put 'em in a room and still hold the meeting. It's only natural that people would reach for the quick fix.

But it's likely that more sober thinking will take hold over time, as people learn to cope with the impact of the attacks. That's why it's so important to keep focused right now. Concentrate on doing the best job that you can with the events that you have underway, and don't get sidetracked. Goal number one for most planners has to be keeping the revenue coming in the door. You've got to do the marketing in order to build awareness of who you are and what you do. Your time needs to be spent networking and keeping in continual contact with your key clients in order to build your business back. Any other activity must be secondary.

Be wary of the "next big thing"

ALL TOO OFTEN, INDIVIDUALS CAN BE BLINDsided by the emergence of something that's "hot," and the bandwagon effect begins. Videoconferencing and Webcasting are the next big things, it was said, and so the drumbeat that surrounds you suggests you'd better get on board. But very soon after something is hot, it cools down, because the hype quickly wears off.

We've learned from the past that there is no "next big thing." The wreckage of the dotcom age, for example, is littered with the visions of those who believed they had come up with something revolutionary.

Learn when it works

VIDEOCONFERENCING AND WEBCASTING ARE a part of the industry; of that I have no doubt. But they are supplements to, and not replacements for, "live" meetings and events.

Keeping that in mind, you should understand that there are situations where using technology makes more sense. A Webcast of a simple press conference or annual meeting can be an important way of getting a message out. But you can't capture the essence of a high-energy motivational speaker or a three-day conference in the same way. No one is going to sit through that!

CARTOON: MARC NOBLEMAN

Gain insight and experiment

WHILE VIDEOCONFERENCING AND WEB-casting won't play as big a role as many suggest, you still had better gain a lot of insight as to what it is all about.

This means you need an in-depth understanding of the role that this technology can play in meetings and conferences. When does it work? How does it work? What does it cost? Who provides such services? There are countless questions that surround these two new methods of communicating, and if you can't answer the questions your clients might have, then you won't be doing your job as a meeting planner.

Don't restrict yourself to just learning about these technologies—actively try them out. If you've got a situation in which a client wants a videoconferencing or Webcasting element and is prepared to pay for it, then get involved. Don't be nervous or hold yourself back. Remember: Every technological advance is new to someone at some point in time.

Become a geek

OFTEN, TO GAIN SUFFICIENT INSIGHT INTO A new technology, you've got to step beyond merely learning about it—you've got to "geekify" yourself. Sure, you can rely on experts in the field, but without really knowing what's involved, you could easily be

snowed. That's why you should spend some time playing with the technology.

I spend a lot of time working with new technologies, and I've discovered that this helps me in countless ways. For example, as a speaker, I was once told that it would cost me about $10,000 to have someone produce a promotional video about me. I immediately set out to figure out how to do it on my own.

Today, I regularly edit and produce my own videos on one of my office PCs. I can convert them to a variety of formats and post them on my Web site. I've actually set up a Webcast using the video equipment and Internet servers I have in my home. Not that anyone was watching or would want to watch—I simply wanted to know what was involved. The result is that you could lock me in a room with a specialist in this industry, and I'll understand what he's talking about—and if I were a meeting planner, I could make a better decision on behalf of my client. I'm not suggesting that you try to run the Webcast at your next conference—but at least have substantial insight into what is going on.

Expect disasters

DO YOU REMEMBER MURPHY'S LAW: Anything that can go wrong will? Well, there's a variation on the theme that applies to anything involving technology: Anything that can go wrong will, in absolutely spectacular fashion, at the worst possible moment, in a manner that will cause you maximum incon-

QUICK TIP

IT'S ABOUT ATMOSPHERE

The atmosphere—the look and décor—of an event is as important as the content and the get-togethers, since it often helps to achieve the goals of the event. It fires up the speaker, captures the imagination of the attendees, and sets the tone. And that can't be done on a Web site.

BREAK TIME

WHO CALLED THIS MEETING?

WE THOUGHT YOU DID.

I THINK WE SHOULD DISCUSS ISSUES AND ASSIGN TASKS SO IT'S NOT A COMPLETE WASTE OF TIME.

MAYBE MEETINGS HAVE BECOME A LIFEFORM CAPABLE OF CALLING THEMSELVES AND THUS REPRODUCING VIA HUMAN HOSTS.

WOW!

GOOD ISSUE

venience, grief, and embarrassment.

Go into the world of Webcasting and videoconferencing with full expectations that your first project could be rather unsuccessful. Do that and it will be much easier to cope when the inevitable crisis occurs. And recognize that from problems emerge experience and insight.

Expect a revolutionary future

LAST BUT NOT LEAST, DON'T KEEP A CLOSED mind about the potential for videoconferencing and Webcasting.

Sure, things might be primitive today—it's as if it is 1950, and we've got this big, beautiful walnut cabinet TV with a tiny, fuzzy picture coming from it. But the world of technology and communications is moving forward by leaps and bounds.

I once described to an audience the dramatic bandwidth that is emerging from the world of optical networking. If we took all the telephone calls that were made in North America in 1998, and tried to send them through a single fiber-optic strand one at a time, we wouldn't finish until 155,632 years later. But with recent advances in optical technology, we could do the same thing in 11 days.

That's the type of technology that is coming to our telecommunication systems and the Internet in the not-too-distant future. The Internet 5 to 10 years from now is going to be very different from what is today and videoconferencing and Webcasting may one day really come to play a major and significant role in the industry.

Jim Carroll, FCA, is a columnist, keynote speaker, and author. As a speaker, he concentrates on issues of coping with digital change, leadership in the digital age, and motivating people to embrace the technological world that surrounds us. Visit his Web site at www.jimcarroll.com, or e-mail him at jcarroll@jimcarroll.com