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ENERGY
OPPORTUNITIES**

WEB CONFERENCING 2.0

By **Martin** Vilaboy

It's not uncommon for a technology product introduction to address an ongoing or emerging trend in user behavior. Often, that's precisely what new technologies are developed to do. It's a bit less common for a new product or service to squarely align with several prevalent trends all at once. Yet that's precisely what PGI has done with its new virtual meeting platform, which officially hit the agent community earlier this spring.

Billed as a "new way to meet online," PGI's new iMeet platform seamlessly integrates and accommodates many of the issues and advancements facing the communications landscape: the growth of online video, an increasingly dispersed workforce and distributed value chain partners, the explosion of social media and personalization and the related "consumerization" of business IT and workforce tools. Not that PGI is simply chasing trends for the sake of marketing buzz words or style points. Rather, the ultimate objective of iMeet is to make video-enabled collaborative conferencing more productive by making it more enjoyable for the individual users, and hence more engaging.

Designed for elegance and simplicity of use, iMeet is based around online personal meeting spaces, or "rooms," into which participants are invited to collaborate using any combination of audio, video and chat, as well as document or media sharing. Requiring no downloads, no user manuals and no technical support or previous knowledge of Web conferencing software, each personal meeting room is a unique URL address specific to the individual user. To join a meeting, participants simply click the link to the host's meeting room.

When participants click to join in a meeting room, iMeet automatically recognizes each user and instantly populates the host's room with that user's "cube." The iMeet's user cube is where the platform provides its social networking functions and sensibilities, albeit "cleaned up for business," as PGI says. Each user of iMeet populates their cube with their personal profiles, images and bios, as well as links to any social networking accounts they may hold. When participants in a meeting scroll over or click on an individual's cube, which displays either an image, avatar or live video, they can access that person's information or view her respective profiles on LinkedIn, Facebook, Flickr, etc.

Some might argue that personal and social profiles and pictures of folks on the golf course could be a



As a Web-based solution, iMeet is accessible anywhere via any computing device.

distraction in a "business" context. Executives and product developers at PGI, however, believe iMeet's social networking influences achieve at least two key objectives.

For starters, frustrations over poor user engagement and distracting behavior during remote meetings are universal, expressed by an overwhelming 99 percent of SMB owners and IT decision makers, according to a 2010 StrategyOne survey commissioned by PGI. Top complaints among SMB owners and IT decision-makers included meeting participants engaging in side conversations (72 percent of IT decision-makers and 69 percent of SMB owners), checking personal emails (49 percent of IT and 54 percent of SMBs), "zoning out" (49 percent IT and 54 percent SMBs) or folks simply leaving the room (38 percent IT and 41 percent SMBs). And despite these frustrations, 56 percent of the SMB and IT decision makers surveyed also admitted to multi-tasking during conference calls or meetings themselves.

With this in mind, iMeet's personalized user cubes are set against a very clean and white, wide-open background, helping to promote user engagement, says Trisha Fields, PGI vice president of marketing, by placing participants' focus on the people in the meeting.

"Everything was designed for that reason," she says.

The other upshot is the "connections" that are made as participants browse each other's profiles and pictures, glance at a LinkedIn page or view someone's local weather, presumably facilitating deeper relationships that can be translated into better collaboration or increased sell through.

"User engagement is improved by the experience itself," says Ralph Hawkins, senior vice president, PGI Partner Channel, "not only from seeing someone live

on the video cam but by learning about them without ever having to leave the iMeet platform.”

“We all have stories about someone we made a connection with on iMeet who we learned something about only because we were able to check it out on their profile,” adds Fields.

At the same time, “it makes remote workers feel less remote,” she says.

Much the same can be said about video, but video conferencing usage, for many reasons, has been less than pervasive, even among organizations that have purchased the capabilities. Though not a video conferencing solution, per se, iMeet is built around video collaboration, says Hawkins, and a large part of that was making video communications simple and affordable.

As a Web-based product, iMeet video capabilities require no downloads, set up or configuration. Initiating a video conversation is as easy as clicking on a Web cam. Users also can hold unlimited video meetings for one flat monthly fee (suggested retail is about \$70 per month per seat).

The low cost and simplicity also lets individual participants toggle video on and off as desired. A team leader, for instance, can populate her cube with the video feed, while all others in the meeting can keep their images or avatars in their cubes. Video also can be used only at the start of a meeting or to make a point of emphasis.

“Looking into a camera and making a point sometimes is more effective than just audio,” says Hawkins.

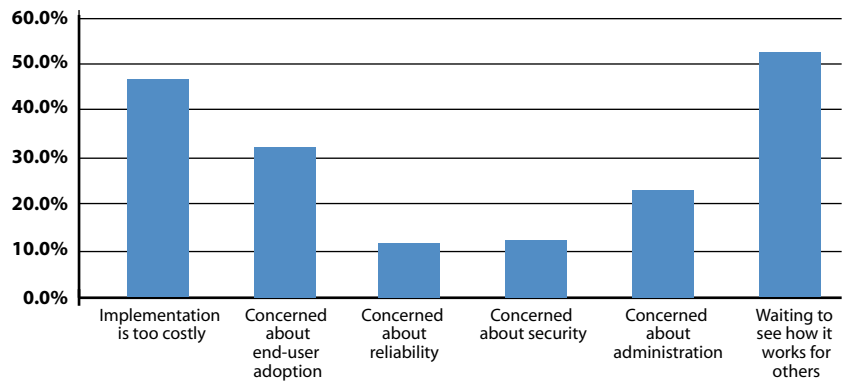
So far, PGI’s efforts to make video conferencing more accessible seem to be working. According to Hawkins, about a third of the meetings held over iMeet, across its 20,000-plus user base, currently include video. By comparison, a study of enterprise video communications from CCMI and BizTechReports found that among more than half of organizations with a video solution, video-enabled collaboration currently accounts for less than 10 percent of their inter-office communications.

Of course, a virtual meeting platform wouldn’t be complete without some collaborative capabilities, and in this regard iMeet goes beyond the typical document sharing. In addition to the ability to collaborate on Excel sheets, PowerPoints and PDFs, all of which can be intuitively accessed from the user’s hard drive, iMeet also provides the ability to easily share media files.

Looking to break the ice with a company introduction video? Simply search YouTube and pull up that video for all to watch without ever leaving the iMeet platform. Each iMeet room also comes with storage space, so frequently used media files and documents can be at hand. And contacts could be pointed to a room anytime to view a file, video or project. Access to those files, as well as the room itself, is controlled by each individual subscriber. Partners also have the ability to plug their home-grown applications, such as provisioning and commission tools and other online resources, into the platform.

Within the channel, iMeet will be handled much the same as PGI’s traditional products in terms of revenue sharing, support and the like, says Hawkins. Co-branding of the platform is possible, but PGI won’t be making iMeet available for private labeling, says Hawkins, since PGI, fully aware that the platform grows more powerful as more people connect to it, is putting

My enterprise doesn’t currently use video-enabled collaboration because:



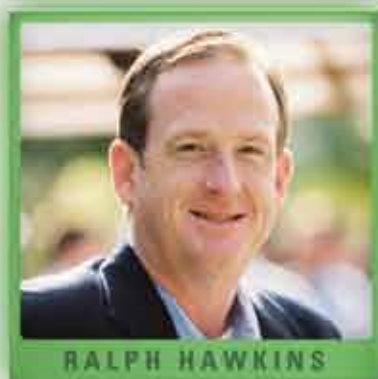
Source: CCMI; BizTechReports

substantial investment in building awareness of the iMeet brand among the prosumer market. The push behind this new social, video, virtual and personalization platform, including the company’s first significant television campaign, represents the largest marketing and branding effort in PGI’s 20-some years of business, says Hawkins.

“If I were a partner, knowing the effort PGI is putting behind it and the commitment PGI has for the product, I would be really excited about being able to sell iMeet,” says Hawkins.

Once they’ve experienced the simplicity and slickness of the platform, and considering all the hot points of culture virtual meeting space environments such as iMeet intersect, we’re guessing many partners will agree. □

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PGi CHANNEL MANAGEMENT TEAM



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