

Outsourcing conferences: The latest fad in corporate cost cutting

Companies look to save money on bandwidth, travel costs

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As energy, health care and other overhead costs are on the rise, companies are looking for new ways to save on their collective bottom lines. One emerging trend is that of outsourcing conferences and meetings. "Instead of investing a lot of money in technology, facilities and travel expenses, companies are choosing to use specialized companies like CDS to save money," said Dionisio Ortiz, president and CEO of Corporate Digital Document Development Solutions Inc. (CDS).

Companies large and small are taking advantage of these services. "We have had companies from major banks and pharmaceuticals to small, single proprietors use our facilities," Ortiz said. "They know that if the meetings can't be or don't have to be face-to-face then this is the very next best thing," he added.



Attending a conference presentation at CDS from left: Wilmer Burgos of Wilmer Burgos Real Estate Corp.; Héctor Rivera, director of Baya Empresas; José Marrero of Derma Solutions Corp.; Joel Dávila, conference room coordinator of CDS; Dionisio Ortiz, president and CEO of CDS and Jorge Flynn, Bayamón regional director of the Small Business Development Center Network.

Web conferencing, or teleconferencing if only 'low-tech' infrastructure is available, is the engine that is enabling these meetings—and consequently savings. "Web conferencing offers not just the opportunity to chat and communicate via web cam so that you can see each person in your conferencing link, but to

exchange documents, share applications, whiteboards and other presentation features," said Joel Dávila, conference room coordinator for CDS.

Although Banco Popular does not outsource much of its conferencing, it has invested a considerable amount of money to develop the capabilities in-house. "For us it is an issue of cost and time but most importantly, the time associated with travel," said Ashvin Daven, vice president of technology for Banco Popular North America. "Most of the meetings we have usually involve senior executives, are ad hoc, short and occur frequently," he said. "Developing this technology for ourselves, which can be set up in a matter of minutes, has been vital to saving both time and money."

The most important aspect of the conferences is bandwidth—especially in regard to video conferencing—according to Daven. "It all comes down to the 'plumbing,'" he said. "We have had to acquire additional bandwidth just to support the video aspect of conferencing." The bandwidth is the most expensive part of the operation. "Affording the video bandwidth is the difference for most companies between having in-house capabilities or needing to outsource them—especially when adding in the costs of the accessories," Daven added.

If bandwidth is the highway for the conferences then the software is the car, or better yet, bus that is transporting the information and video along the highway. In CDS' case, it utilizes Internet-based software called WebEx developed by WebEx Communications Inc. "If

our clients have a presentation they want to share with colleagues around the island or around the world, all they need to do is bring it on a CD or USB flash drive," said Dávila. "WebEx doesn't care if your attendees are in Barceloneta or Cataño or, for that matter, Japan or New York City," he added.

WebEx is also loaded with features that automatically and continuously update for a reasonable monthly cost. "The whiteboard feature on WebEx is probably the most powerful and it allows the host to set the theme of the meeting," said Dávila. "It also allows the host to write over any presentation that is being shared and he or she can save all the notes."

The video element of the software is equally impressive. "The WebEx video feature shoots video at an impressive 30 frames per second assuming all users have a least a broadband Internet connection," Dávila said. Attendees communicate via telephone, which supports the video feature. "The host and attendees can also choose to communicate using the chat feature that is similar to any instant messaging program," he added.

Programs such as WebEx are also labeled as being completely secure. "WebEx is 100 percent safe because every person has to log on using the host-identified password and username. Secure Socket Layer (SSL) encryption provides multi-layered security of data and sessions to conduct interactive meetings with even the most confidential information—securely," Dávila said. "Furthermore, for us, the conference takes place on our unique WebEx website," he added.

It's not just conferencing hosting and services, many of these companies such as CDS are offering consulting and information systems (IS) design, among others. "We don't just offer conferencing solutions," Ortiz said, adding, "we offer many professional services like project management, enterprise business assessment, cost-savings analysis and IT system topology design and implementation." In only five years of business, CDS has worked with the Department of Homeland Security, is an authorized IBM partner and has opened a second branch in Orlando, Fla. ■

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