



It's Our Time, For those of Us in Visual Communications!

by Randy Palubiak

For the corporate media communicator, has there ever been better time than this - As far as tools and technology solutions to do our jobs? It's not likely. Especially for those of us in visual communications.

Remember when? How?

Over the past few years, we've seen a lot of changes take place.

Here's a brief reflection on where some of us have been, the tools we have used. You may remember some of them. Maybe not. For those of you who can't, maybe you are too young, consider this: change is constant with how and what we use to communicate...and these changes are moving at an ever-increasing pace. It won't be long before you reflect back on the changes you have experienced and recognize that the differences will be far more dramatic.

Then, we'll address briefly some of the technologies available to us today and the foreseeable future. Which ones will rise to the top and have the most significant impact on us?

So, for those of us from earlier generations remember when corporate communications, television programs and commercials were shot and delivered on film and presentations were made with 35mm slides? Now everything is pretty much digital.

Remember the days of the various videotape formats, including two-inch quad tape, the one-inch and three-quarter-inch formats and of course the VHS and Beta formats?

Remember the RCA TK-76 (or equivalent) hand-held video cameras and portable video record decks -very heavy and cumbersome systems for remote shoots? Now, systems are smaller and lighter - more sophisticated and cheaper.

Remember when graphics, logos and other visual representations were hand-crafted and available via 35mm slides and poster boards for display? Now we have sophisticated computer graphics systems.

Remember when films were projected on screens? Then in the late seventies, early eighties videotape machines and television monitors started showing up in classrooms and corporate meeting rooms? Now, digital display screens are virtually everywhere – flat screens, HDTV screens.

Remember when the fax machine was heralded as sliced bread? Now, we have e-mail, the Internet, instant messaging, cell phones, laptops, the iPod and other PDAs to send and access information.

Remember when the delivery of content was via hard-media? Now the hard media is complemented, supplemented with transmissions of pre-recorded and live content via satellite, terrestrial fiber and even wireless technologies. Video compression technologies and IP-based (Internet Protocol) video services have dramatically improved delivery options – enhancing the visual quality and lowering costs.

Remember when all things were analog? Now they are digital!

Remember when you used dial-up for the Internet, e-mail? Now it's DSL, broadband services – high speed access with video, video and more video. Not just text and static graphics. Delivered via satellite as well as terrestrial options.

We are truly in a digital world, a visual society!

The X and Y generations have grown up with a wide selection of television/cable channels to view; video games are high quality, realistic – not Pong – and to think how sophisticated on-line gaming is getting; even the hand-held video games provide remarkable quality; cell phones, iPods and other PDAs (personal digital assistants) provide video at acceptable if not high quality.

The Internet provides commercials that nearly challenge commercial television (in creativity if not quality), video games, entertainment and information on such sites as MySpace and YouTube; video news and information clips are on hundreds of sites hosted by the networks.

Video and information is displayed everywhere; museums, theme parks, retail floors, offices, and restaurants – not just in the bar areas, but in dining areas and even bathrooms. Yes, it's true. I recently dined in a restaurant that had a television mounted in the men's room, tuned to CBS.

This takes us to the next key fact: No longer are the programmers making all of the decisions about what and when we view! As consumers, we have a choice – a lot of choices! We've advanced from time-shifting programs with VCRs (viewing on-demand and speeding past the commercials) and TiVo-like devices to place-shifting. DVD players, iPods and laptops made us mobile. Now with devices such as Sling Box, you have total control of your viewing habits, from scheduling record sessions to playing back and watching programs anywhere you have broadband Internet access.

It has been years in the making, but the telcos (AT&T, Verizon, Quest and other telephone companies) are nearing a realistic competitive service to the cable companies and satellite providers (DISH and DirecTV) to bring entertainment programming into the home: IPTV. IPTV will be the telcos' "Triple Play" of video, voice and data services, including on-demand programming capabilities.

Other mobile, personal devices make the access and viewing of content even more readily available: Devices like Treo and BlackBerry, provide news, information, stock quotes, sports scores and entertainment updates as well as trafficking e-mail activities; Sprint has the rights to provide live coverage of the 2006 NFL draft to its cell phone customers; iPods and other PDAs will facilitate an increase of activity with the podcasting craze – may be the next phenomenon.

Bottom line, consumers want it ALL....and they are closer to getting it!

Thoughts & Perspectives to Ponder

So, with the plethora of new and innovative technologies that are available today, here are a few thoughts to ponder:

As a consumer:

- Will the computer screen challenge the television as your primary viewing device? Is it possible with the move toward large flat screens? HDTV?
- How well will you adapt to the hand-held, mobile devices for receiving/viewing content? How small of screen will you accept?
- How big is on-demand for you? How drastically can/will it change your viewing habits?
- How much are you willing to spend for video, media and communication services, including the Internet; programming services; cell phone (PDA) messaging, information and program services; and other?

Let's take moment to look at how communications tools and services have changed over the past 10 to 12 years, and the impact the associated charges have on your budget.

In the early to mid-1990s, things were much more basic, probably looking something like this:

Telephone service	\$45 - \$50/month
Single line with services, such as Caller ID, Messaging	
Long Distance	\$20 - \$30/month
Cable Television	\$35 - \$55/month
A premium channel	\$10/month
Estimated Total	\$110 - \$145/month

Today, well, your home is likely to be quite different:

Telephone service	\$45 - \$50/month
Long Distance (some costs are going down)	\$10 - \$20/month
Cable Television	\$45 - \$60/month
A premium channel	\$15/month
TiVo service	\$20/month
High-speed Internet service	\$30 - \$50/month
Cell Phone service (family plan of 2 – 3) Not including PDA/service	\$60 - \$80/month

Estimated Total \$225 - \$295/month

As a corporate communicator:

- How are you communicating today? What should you be looking at doing in the next year, two years?
- Are your viewing/training areas more conducive to desktops, television monitors, flat screens or mobile devices?
- Is your viewing audience computer savvy, technology savvy?
- How critical is it for your communications and/or training to be live?
- How often and quick does your content need to be updated?
- How important is on-demand for you, your organization?
- How capable is your existing network infrastructure? Especially as technologies reduce the bandwidth requirements?
- Regardless of the delivery options used, distribution is likely to be very cost effective - far less than the development and display of content.

It is a bit more difficult to do a cost comparison for communications tools and services for companies and organizations – too many different factors to take into account, such as company size; purchase scale; geographic disbursement/locations – corporate facilities versus virtual offices; varying industries; culture; etc. However, we are engaged by organizations to help assess their communications approaches and technologies and develop business cases, cost models. One of the more interesting comparisons that usually stands out is what the organization pays to communicate with its executives and field management versus company-wide communications and training.

Here's an example (brief comparison) that we address quite often:

Personal Communications with/to 2,000 key executives/field management	
Cell Phone service	\$60 - \$80/month
News/Information Messaging service	\$40 – 70/month

Estimated Total \$100 - \$150/month*

*Typically, not including equipment

Over a three year period, the organization will pay \$7.2 - \$10.8M to reach 2,000 individuals on a regular, as-needed basis.

As media communicators, we understand and accept that this method to communicate is critical for many organizations! That needs and methods to communicate to targeted individuals or groups vary from one organization to another. Basically, all things are relative.

When working with clients, many of them are enlightened to find that they can reach employees company-wide on a regular basis with corporate information and training for about 50% to 60% of this amount, over the same three year period, by using a satellite-based IP network. Clearly, price range and differences vary due to size and structure of company. Also, other means of streaming, webcasting, transferring visual-based communications are equally cost effective.

In closing, a few additional thoughts:

What can, will you learn from what you are doing at home?

What technologies and systems do you use for delivery, storage, management and viewing?

Can you envision how they will apply to what you do in the workplace?

What are your children using and doing? Their peers? ...With computers, the Internet, video games, mobile devices?

How much is the visual society impacting them, influencing them?

How will it prepare them for their careers?

Bottom line, there is a great deal to be learned from up-and-coming video generation.