

Sample chapter from
Cue the Director:
10 Simple Steps to
Online Video Success

Originally entitled:
“Live in Five”

Meet Me Online

When should you
use which video
conference,
broadcast
or IM tool?

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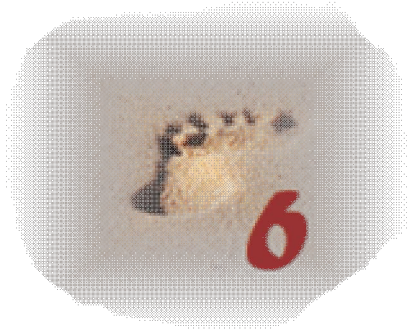
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Live in Five

There was a game I learned to play when I was a child that never failed to get a lot of laughs. Whether you realize it or not, you've played it too. But you may not have thought it was very amusing.

It was a variation on the old "telephone" game. Whoever was "it" had to stand with his back to a group of kids sitting around a table with paper and crayons (OK, pens would probably work too). The person who was "it" had to tell the others how to draw a picture of something without using the name of the object. He couldn't look at the group, gesture or show them the picture he was drawing. He could only speak.

Let's try it now. Get yourself a blank sheet of paper and a crayon (Go on, you know you want to!). Ready? See what you wind up with when we're done.

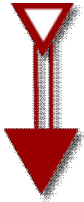
I'll be it. Here's what I want you to draw:

1. Looking at your paper, mentally divide it into thirds from top to bottom.
2. The first thing you want to draw should sit at the bottom of the top third.
3. It should be roughly centered from side to side as well.
4. In that space I want you to draw an upside down triangle.
5. Inside that triangle I want you to draw another upside down triangle.
6. Next, draw two parallel lines extending down from the tip of that triangle down the middle of your paper.

7. Stop when you get to the top edge of the bottom third of your page.
8. Draw the next object so that its top touches your two lines.
9. Before you draw it, look again at your triangle at the top of the page and picture one about 30% larger than that.
10. Now go ahead and draw that 30% larger upside down triangle.

Now what did you draw? (scroll to the next page to find out)

This is a common object, found in many a homeowner's garage. Congratulations! You figured it out. That's right. It is a shovel.



I mean that sincerely. You did a lot more work than you might think to reach that conclusion and draw that object. When I do this exercise in a public training session, people think I'm testing their listening ability, and to a certain extent they're right. But here it would have been a poor test of your reading ability because you could go back and review the steps as often as you needed.

And what a lot of steps there are. This is also a test of my ability to convey information to you, clearly and as precisely as possible, so that you could understand and act on that information. And even though it was my test, and my choice of object, and I've done this hundreds of times, it still took me **10 steps** to explain to you how to draw a shovel. OK, so it wasn't a very good looking shovel. The idea of a shovel is what's important.

But what happens when the idea of a shovel isn't enough and you need 100% accuracy? What happens when you haven't done this often enough to realize that you have to add those "visualize this first" steps? And what would have happened if you didn't know what the word "parallel" meant, or how big 30% was?



We would have had some pretty strange looking shovels drawn wouldn't we? That's what happened to make this game so funny when we were kids.

How many times have you been in the middle of a phone call with a customer, or even your Aunt Margaret, and you've fumbled around trying to describe your shovel. How many times have you gotten caught up in a series of emails, of the "no, that's not quite what I meant, and I'm sorry if it sounded rude..." variety? They're more than just a huge drain of your time and energy. They can mean lost business, or worse, three Sunday dinners at Margaret's house to make up!

Even if you can't walk down the hall to meet with someone face-to-face, right now, to discuss your shovel, you can do it virtually. Now you can plug in your handy webcam, log in to your streaming video account, set up a quick profile (through pull down menus and clicking either/or choices) and request a video chat if your customer shares your video streaming service.

If he doesn't use the same service, or if you decide you need to get more people in more locations involved in this shovel project, you can simply email them a link to join you for a face to camera meeting. They'll need no special equipment, or even a broadband connection to participate.

That's six steps instead of ten. Six steps that could save you how many phone calls or emails back and forth? Stop and think for a moment about all the meetings you have attended in the last month. What were they about? How many of them were planned in advance and how many just happened? Where, or when, did you get the most done?

I must confess, while I love getting out of my office now and again and mixing and mingling with people, face-to-face meetings always take way more time than originally planned. And way more expense if I need to travel anywhere. Not to mention the fact that there's a real shortage of hard hitting, actionable information on how to handle your shovel given out at most meetings.

We've all experienced our share of mind numbing, badly run meetings too. While "how to run a good meeting" has been the subject of several books, today's video conferencing technology certainly has added at least one chapter on easy and affordable ways to save time. Or rather, live vide broadcasts can be done easily and inexpensively if you've selected the right live video streaming service to host and manage your video conferences and webcasts. Or are they called webinars this week?

Selecting the right service for live video

Even the names of the service or product are confusing. What you stream across the Internet to a group of participants is called a live event, a webinar, a webcast, or

a web conference. In the beginning these different names were used to help differentiate between the actual features of the different company offerings, but those differences were largely lost in translation as a general public came to recognize all of these alternatives simply as web meetings.

There are actually just three routes that they all take to deliver your message:

- **Chat:** whether between two people or ten, the live video images and audio messages are usually “technically” open to everyone to speak at will. Some text chat is typically included. This is your basic conversation mode.
- **Broadcast:** Pushing information from one, or even a collaboration of two or three hosts to an audience of many is a largely one way form of communication. That’s why features such as text chat and interactive polling are so important to keep your audience involved and engaged in your presentation. These are the webcasts, webinars and live events so frequently used in public.
- **Conferencing:** This many to many conversation is the most interactive of the three levels and the most intrusive and worrisome from a security standpoint. Sharing in such a conference can include the use of a shared whiteboard, or even allowing control of another participant’s desktop, applications and files. Control of the meeting and all features can be given from one person to another. For obvious reasons, a meeting coordinator or host with the capability to “demote” participants to the status of listener is desirable.

By far the most frequently asked question I hear from potential online video users is a variation of this:

Which one is the best? Which one should I use?

The fact is, with the capabilities and pricing you can find in the marketplace today, my questions back to you are:

Why paint yourself into the corner? Why choose just one?

You'll find plenty of high quality product offerings that allow you to combine separate features within those groups to present all of these meetings and more. And you'll find them at least the most basic forms of each of them at price levels that any business can afford. You can:

- **Chat** one-on-one using video with another subscriber of your service
- **Broadcast** your live video message with some combination of text chat, polling, and picture or slide graphics
- **Broadcast** your live video message with text chat, polling, push graphics and the ability to switch between presenting locations
- **Broadcast** live audio and static presenter pictures with some combination of text chat, polling, picture or slide graphics
 - (this is by far the most common service level used today)
- **Conference** with two to 10 participants with live video chat and/or text chat, polling, slide push, annotation of graphics
- **Conference** with two to 10 participants with live video chat, slide push, annotation, shared whiteboard and/or application sharing

Which of these capabilities match the majority of your business needs for that type of meeting?

- When you hold a project team status **conference** whiteboard sharing and application sharing may sound great, but will you really use them? Or will you get more from the ability to throw the meeting over to another presenter who has his own graphics showing how he added to your information?
- Is being able to draw a circle around a word on your slide during your **broadcast** really necessary, or can you achieve the same level of emphasis by making that word **bold** when you create your slide.
- Will you look less than professional if you just initiate a two minute **chat** session with someone else and hold up a piece of paper and draw your shovel for them rather than initiate a broadcast or conference?

I predict that the next time an invitation for a free webinar lands in your email inbox, you're going to go ahead and register for it. And when you attend it I'll bet you'll

look at it much differently than you did the one you went to last year when you decided this whole online conferencing thing was too slow and frustrating for your dial up modem.

Here's a very simple way you can begin your product and service evaluations. Grab a piece of paper and a pen before you attend that online meeting and take notes. You may want to take notes on the content, but look beyond the content as well. What does the screen look like? Is it easy to follow the slides and see what's happening in the live chat box? Or is all that scrolling chat distracting (and if so, can you turn it off)? Is the picture pretty clear, the sound sharp, the stream smooth (not jerky with a lot of stopping and starting)? Etc., Etc., etc..

Once the event is over, take a moment to review and flesh out these notes. Go a step beyond the simple presentation to consider the mechanics of the show and the tools that were used. Was there anything the presenters did in that meeting that you particularly liked or that you disliked, or thought was overkill? Then hang on to these notes.

Our discussion and your webinar notes should be all you need to map out which product will serve which of your needs best in a very rough way. You don't need to get too specific about when, who, and how many quite yet, but you will want to return to filter your choices by price, ease of use and overall business account needs.

Just as use of the products isn't mutually exclusive, your choice of streaming subscription service doesn't need to be based on just price, or just ease of use, or even on whether or not you can get all you need under one roof. I know of no service out there today that can offer all three (two yes, but three, not yet).

Pricing, as discussed earlier, is obviously going to rise along with the number of features added, or with the complexity of the back end work needed to deliver that feature. And we're not talking cheap for most of these. The exception is video chat which is frequently included in a video email account as a bundled add-on feature (which makes it impossible to gauge it's real cost).

Broadcast and conference packages range from a low end of \$40 per month, to a high of \$2,000 or more). Unfortunately, prices are sadly mistated and misrepresented in a number of different instances online today. **Dig deep** to investigate what's behind those claims of unlimited time or flat rate pricing.

There are typically three components that go in to making up that cost:

- The size of the file(s) you will be streaming live
 - Made up of the different upload stream speeds, graphics, etc.
- The number of minutes you are allowed per month or per meeting
- The number of participants you are allowed per month or per meeting.

A fourth optional component will look and act more like your regular personal video account costs. It is your archived cost. If your streaming service allows you to record and archive your live meeting for viewing by visitors to your website, you will typically be charged a separate fee for that based on the number of viewers you anticipate and the amount of time they spend viewing.

One of the top advertisements found on a search engine results page claims their company offers unlimited video conferencing time for a \$69.00 monthly flat rate. However, once on the site and looking in to features, you'll find that for \$49.95 a month you get two way chat. For \$74.00 per month you can add a third person to your video broadcast or conference. For any number over five participants, add \$25.00 per person, per meeting....Oh, and did we mention the set up fees? That \$69.95 price point wasn't listed anywhere.

Free is a word lots of people are looking for online. In contrast to the service above, there are a couple of free, or nearly free, video chat services available today with more being added on an almost weekly basis. Even though they're free, they may not serve your business needs or look so great when you look at them from the perspective of your second and third filters: ease of use and account management.

As a matter of fact, I suggest you look at anything "free" very carefully. For example, one widely known portal service is advertising its video chat as compatible with AOL, ICQ and the MSN Messenger instant chat features many people are already using.

Dig in to their online literature a little further and you'll find that yes, you can send **text** messages to buddies using those services. But, the people you're chatting with won't be able to send you a video message back in real time (which is what chat is as opposed to email) unless they too are signed up for the same service you are using. True two way video chat can only be done right now between two users of the same streaming subscription service.

Marketing Soapbox Sidenote: In the majority of the cases I've run across that are like the above, I really don't see a real intent to deceive or cheat the public about these services. Instead I see uninformed copywriters and marketing departments working from the technical feature sheets that they've been given by the software engineers. As a person who used to spend her days translating those features into standard English, I know firsthand how easy it is to misinterpret the power or reach of a particular capability.

I don't say that to let the marketers who haven't done their homework and simply copy from these system requirement lists off the hook. Nor do I mean to excuse the programmers for not reviewing the copy or saying – in English - no, we really can't deliver what you're promising here.

I say it to reassure you as you go out looking for these services that you will come back with a product worthy of your time and effort. As a consumer of these services right now, you have a tougher job than you should have to decipher what is real and what is meaningful to you in a business context. But you shouldn't fear this as a lawless western frontier any longer. It's not open season on the buyer.

The good news is that if you make a mistake with this, at this end of the price range, you haven't necessarily put yourself out of business or out of a job, but you have wasted one of the resources these programs have been designed to save; your time.

If you really did your homework when we matched your audiences to your messages in our second step, you'll already be aware of how the stopper issues that we mentioned in the first step are likely to impact your live video reach. But there are many smaller technical or compatibility issues that may exist as well.

To protect yourself even further, in addition to digging in to the fine print of price and general features, you'll also want to try the conference feature out first hand if you can. Go ahead and take any offered demos or trials, or asks lots of questions during their live online demonstration seminars to see if the features and capabilities are really as easy to use as they appear. There are a lot of things to remember and try to stay on top of during your first few live video broadcasts, so don't expect perfection from yourself.

You also shouldn't be too quick to accept your conference provider's offer of a virtual assistant to set up and run your meeting technically unless you really didn't have any other use for that \$1,200 (yes, I said \$1,200). After your third meeting, if you're still having trouble answering incoming chat questions and pushing out slides at the same time, it may be a sign that you really shouldn't be using any more bells and whistles than that.

Remember though, we're talking about a streaming video subscription service that is designed to make creating and delivering videos on your own **simple**. On the fly live meetings like the one I outlined at the opening of this chapter are being broadcast every day. They're being sent out to the world from small home offices as well as well staffed IT departments in corporate headquarters. If the web conferencing product and its documentation and support materials aren't easy to use, every single meeting you conduct with that set up will suffer as a result (and your career??). No matter how enticing the bells, no matter what the sales copy says about the whistles, the product has failed. Move on.

So why do this now at all? Why not wait until "the product" is perfected? Surely in a year or so the prices will come down, and everyone will have products that are as easy to use as "record, stop, preview and send?"

Sounds great! But do you think you might have a little trouble convincing the CEO to suspend all corporate meetings for a year or so until that happens? Or do you think, in hindsight, that he would thank you for waiting after he spent another XYZ thousand of dollars flying people around from office to office to attend or present

meeting materials that could have been delivered for a few hundred dollars – or less online.

Do you need a shovel to help you dig that hole?

The fact is there are some very good video conferencing options available today. They are becoming simpler to use by the day. They feature high quality outputs without requiring users to know very much about the technical workings of Internet protocols, tunneling, java, media codecs, or any technical acronym soup. And they offer easy user account tracking of your viewer's activity.

A sample first time set up

Once you step behind the camera to create and deliver your own live video broadcasts, your step by step instructions on how to do it should be guided by your conference service's manuals and tutorials. However you should look for and make sure you take the time to take advantage of any extra branding or business automation features they allow you right when you set up your account. Because you'll never know when you'll need to switch into instant live meeting mode.

Here are the instructions one live video subscription service gives its users for setting up and starting their first live broadcast. I'm quoting directly from the FAQ page subscription service VM Direct provides its users to illustrate two points which I'll explain in a moment. First, let's look at their instructions:

1. After successfully logging in to your LIVE admin center, click with your mouse on the **Broadcast** link in the main navigation tool bar.
2. Now look at the **STREAM NOW without scheduling a LIVE Event using** section on this screen.
3. Locate the Profile pull down menu, click on it and select **Default**.
4. Since features vary by access plan level let's keep it simple. If you have the option to customize your broadcast select the **No** option, then click the **Go** button.
5. The next step is to let people know that you are holding a LIVE Presentation. Even though the Announcement Step is optional (you can skip it by clicking the Skip Announcement button, bottom left of the screen), let's send a quick Announcement to your own e-mail address so you can see how it works.
6. Even though the Announcement screen offers a variety of options, we are going to concentrate mainly on the tools on the left side of your screen. Please type a **topic** for your Announcement e-mail in the designated text box.
7. Please type a short text **message** in the designated text area.
8. Please type your own **e-mail address** in the designated text area. (You can send your announcement to multiple e-mail addresses by entering more addresses in this text area, one e-mail address per line.)

9. To preview your announcement message click the **Preview E-Mail** button.
10. Once you are satisfied with your announcement message click the **Send and Continue** button, bottom right of the announcement screen.
11. At this point your announcement message is being sent to the recipients specified (in this case, you), and the **LIVE Broadcaster** screen appears.
12. If this is the first time that you are on this screen the necessary LIVE broadcasting software has to download and install on your system. This may take some time depending on your internet connection speed. Please be patient.
13. Once the LIVE broadcasting software has been downloaded and installed you should see in the broadcast viewer your camera's video stream. If this is not the case please be sure that the correct video and audio drivers are selected. These controls are in form of pull down menus under the broadcast viewer screen. If you only see a blank screen make sure that your camera is connected properly and turned on. Now select the video and audio drivers for your camera and microphone from the pull down menus.
14. If your camera drivers and camera has been installed correctly and if the correct drivers are selected, you should now see the video from your camera in the broadcast preview screen.
15. Depending your internet connection speed you are limited to the quality of your LIVE A/V Stream. For the first time, no matter if you are a dial-up or broadband user, we will use the system default encoding setting. You can change the A/V Stream encoding setting by using the A/V Stream pull down menu in the upper right area of the broadcaster screen.
16. Now click with your mouse on the LIVE button, right top next to the broadcast viewer screen.

(My thanks to Amy Black, president of VM Direct and the rest of the crew for allowing me to use this piece out of the context of their complete instructions.)

Looks a little like the list of steps I wrote out for you at the beginning of this chapter, doesn't it. In fact, it looks **a lot** like those steps since I have left out any picture of the actual computer screen you work on while you set this up. One big difference is that there are 16 steps here instead of the 10 steps I used.

It took me 10 steps to explain how to draw a simple shovel. Add six more fill in the blank, or click on this button steps and you can broadcast your own live television show to any audience you choose to invite.

Miscellaneous live broadcast tips and techniques

Did you keep that list of good and bad things you noticed in that free webinar handy. Hopefully many of the concerns and questions you added to it while you evaluated services have been crossed off. Let's see if we can't get rid of a few more right now.

Audience viewing concerns: Your live video broadcast should be viewable by anyone on either a dial up or broadband modem. There are some minimum system requirements they need to meet or have enabled, however:

- They must be using Microsoft® Windows 98SE, ME, 2000 or XP operating system; Apple Macintosh OS X 10.2 Jaguar or higher;
- Microsoft® Internet Explorer 4.0 and higher, Netscape® Navigator 4.7 and higher;
- Windows Media Player 7.0 or higher, Windows Media Player 9 series strongly recommended;
- JavaScript Version 1.1 must be enabled;
- Cookies must be enabled;
- Pop-up Windows must be enabled;

Remember that since your meeting participants are simply clicking on a link that connects them to your meeting room, they shouldn't have any files to download to join your meeting. Some of the conference providers do have a proprietary player that they insist meeting attendees download to enable them to participate in meetings on their service. (These services typically don't offer a meeting on the fly capability.)

Your minimum systems requirements: In order to be able to create a meeting room and deliver a live video conference, you'll need to meet many of the same minimum system requirements, plus a couple:

- Microsoft® Windows XP operating system; (Sorry, Mac users)
- Microsoft® Internet Explorer 5.5 and higher, Microsoft® Internet Explorer 6 recommended;
- Windows Media Player 9 series or higher
- JavaScript Version 1.1 must be enabled;
- Cookies must be enabled;
- Pop-up Windows must be enabled;
- Correctly installed and functioning USB web cam device and a microphone;

- The latest available drivers for your USB web cam and audio capturing device.

Yes, you can use the same webcam that you set up way back in the beginning for your personal video messages, but for a longer lengths of time that are usually spent in a live broadcast, I recommend not relying on the audio provided by your camera.

Transmission quality concerns: Having a broadband connection is not a hard and fast requirement to conduct a live meeting, but it will improve the quality of your broadcast and is highly recommended. When you initiate a live meeting, you are uploading your video input (as well as graphics, text chat answers, etc.) to your streaming service servers. Someone participating in your live meeting is said to be downloading your information.

One of the settings your live broadcast service will ask you to select when preparing your live meeting (even on the fly) is what A/V stream encoding speed you want to use. You actually have several options from dial up and several flavors of broadband to delivery combinations that include both.

To find your Internet connection upload speed, a website such as PC Pit Stop (www.pcpitstop.com) that features many system tests like this. Their free upload speed test can be accessed from the menu options on the left side of their page. Write the number down. Your speed capabilities will vary somewhat throughout the day, but usually not by enough to move you up or down a full step.

You should set your initial upload speed:

- **No higher than your upload bandwidth available through your internet connection allows.** If you're a dial up user, you can't deliver a meeting over a broadband speed. You can go ahead and click on the multi-stream setting (to deliver two streams one at broadband and one dial up) option in your pull down menu if you want, but your internet provider will block your stream and it won't even reach your streaming service server.

- **No higher than the lowest common denominator of your viewing audience.** If you know your audience is largely on dial up modems, you wouldn't set your stream to broadband only.
- A multiple setting for those occasions when you aren't sure what your audience will be connected with (but you know you have the capability to handle a high enough speed for both dial up and ISDN or broadband or all three)

Even if you've set your upload speed to the highest number you can support and your meeting begins to stream correctly, you could encounter problems during your presentation. Other demands on your bandwidth, transient Internet gremlins, or something else could cause some of your participants problems receiving a smooth audio or video stream during your presentation. Your participants could also experience the same sorts of problems on the download side of the stream. Some factors totally unrelated to the broadcast stream itself could be to blame, but you don't need to think about trying to track down what they are. Regardless of where the problem occurs, you should see a status bar change from green to yellow, orange or red (or a warning message pops up) depending on how many participants are affected on your broadcast control bar.

One change should correct any problems resulting from an interruption in the stream of your video and audio. And you can make that change on the fly without interrupting your meeting. All you do is go back to the same pull down menu command you used when you set up your meeting and select a lower upload speed. Your participants will only experience a screen refresh sort of flicker when you make the change! That's the kind of "easy and simple" you need to keep your meetings running smoothly.

Scripting concerns: The same script outline that you used for your two minute personal video recordings will serve you well when it comes to outlining your live meeting also. You may still have recording time limits dictated by the service package you purchased, but usually your live broadcast time will be measured in 15 minute increments at least.

It's still a very good idea not to exceed 45 minutes in a live meeting. Closer to 30 puts you closer to the ideal length of time most audiences can sit still and absorb your information. That allows time for questions, a repeat of your call to action and contact information and some "housekeeping notes" about how to use your chat or polling features to participate.

That means you can say a whole lot more than you could in two minutes. BUT...

- Keep the same basic outline of the script intact, don't forget a step
- Try not to make more than 3 key points that support your main benefit, or go over a 22 step process all in one chunk.
- Don't expand the time limits of each part of your script equally. For example, don't think you should pad the biographical section of your introduction to a full 6 ½ minutes just because you can. Yawnnnn!
- Don't get so wrapped up in the details of your procedure or the features that make up your benefit that you run out of time to Call for Action or a chance to remind people how they can contact you with follow-up questions.

Do you see how the seven step script formula can help you run great meetings as well as produce tight, short videos. Everyone is going to wind up being "it" sooner or later. Taking the time to write yourself an outline of your meeting, or scripting the steps of your procedure in as detailed a fashion as I did when I showed you the steps to drawing a shovel, will save you time planning and executing your online meetings as well.

Graphic concerns: If you have the time to plan your meeting in advance, you'll undoubtedly have plenty of time to create stunning powerpoint slides to illustrate your brilliant thinking. Well, ok, maybe not quite so brilliant, but they do the job. They might not do the job in your live video broadcast. Actual powerpoint formatted presentations are rarely used in live broadcast services (or even in some edited situations or when using the Visual Communicator software I've mentioned before.) What you will need to do to satisfy all these mediums is save each Powerpoint slide out as a .gif or .jpg picture. Jpegs are the most common for photos and can improve the sharpness of text.

There is one other overall graphic advantage you may have with your live streaming subscription service. We'll discuss this further in Step 10, but when you're evaluating your conference options, give extra points to any firm that allows you to "brand" your meeting room with your company logo. Your participant's are going to spend a lot of time looking at that screen. Do you want them looking at your company name and logo, or your streaming server's?

You may also be able to make this graphic a hotlink. That's an easy way to move participants from your meeting to your sales or order page. And that's an effective way to implement your call to action!

Shooting quality: All of the same background and lighting options are opened to you and apply to your live meeting set up the same as they did your regular personal videos. You may not have time to set up any business backdrop you might normally use if you need to launch a meeting on the fly. It's a good idea to plan on using one though if you can for a scheduled meeting. With more time to view your video, your participants will become more easily distracted by your open background.

If you normally rely on natural light from a window beside or behind you as part of your standard light source, over the course of your meeting it could shift and cause some pretty unpleasant effects. If possible take a moment to turn on a lamo or two and close the blinds before you start.

But by far the hardest thing you'll face in shooting your longer live meeting, is controlling all those nervous movements, and unconscious habits that you don't want on display. While I even try to control my "wide eyes" reaction when I give an in person seminar now, more viewers will be turned off or distracted from your information after just a few seconds of watching you rock back and forth in your chair, or twirl your fingers in your hair as you speak.

Audio echo concerns: While this can be a problem in all your live meetings where you have more than one presenter, it's far more common and more of a nuisance when you're video chatting with one other person. When you chat using just your webcam and the microphone it includes, what you say is being picked up and

delivered through your participant's computer speakers. What he says to you is delivered through your speakers.

Since your camera's microphone picks up all sounds in the area, it's going to pick up and record what it hears from your speakers as background noise to what you're saying. Both you and your participant will hear echoes of what's being said as a result.

The easiest fix for this is to use a headphone microphone combination when you engage in live video broadcasts or video chat. What he says to you comes through your headphones, not through your speakers and into the background of your audio. If this isn't possible, you can lower the volume on your speakers to a point where it becomes too weak to be picked up by your camera, but still loud enough to be heard. Hardest to remember to do, but the only sure way to make sure you don't echo is to toggle your speakers off and on as you go through your conversation.

Using a headset with headphones and microphone attached during your live meetings will always help you deliver more consistent sound volume as well. Volume control issues have always been a high ranking complaint of online meeting participants, but you can ensure that your meeting participants never experience it for a relatively low cost of roughly \$40-50. Or, you can invest in a higher end set-up that costs hundreds of dollars.

If web conferences will play a large part in your marketing efforts, and you envision recording your meetings (either the full video, or just the audio portion), the extra investment you make in your headphones may make a big difference in your audio quality. It may be noticeable, but not crucial, to your web delivery of your meetings, but will be noticeable when recording for offline delivery on CD or DVDs.

Take aways

Web meetings have become very easy to attend or to launch and host yourself. A big factor behind their rapid development has been the willingness of companies to invest heavily in the technology even when it is delivered in a Beta, or testing, stage. The reason is simply cost.

It costs less to engage in online meetings than it costs to participate in live meetings. In some cases, it costs a lot less, consistently.

At the same time it's very hard to determine what a basic live video broadcast service is or what it should cost. You could pay \$125 for an unlimited amount of live meeting time per month for up to 10 different offices, or up to \$500 per meeting for 10 different offices. Both these prices could be a bargain when you factor any extra features and capabilities the service includes. Both would almost assuredly be a steal when weighed against the cost of attending a live meeting covering the same topic at a central location for all 10 of those offices.

With some careful shopping every business can find the right service to meet their conferencing needs today from two way chat applications that keep multiple office locations connected, to the most robust application sharing services that would allow tech support personnel to reach out to participant's desktops and correct faulty programs remotely.

The live video conference landscape is evolving by the hour, as illustrated by the experiences of VM Direct. When Amy Black, president of the firm, opened her first public live video conference in November of 2004, she told the more than 430 participants online that they were about to see "video at it's worst. It will only get better from here."

After spending nearly seven years and more than 42 million dollars to develop their product to that stage, VM Direct introduced its first major upgrade to the product just two months later, in January, 2005. And still Black said, "It will only get better from here."