

INSIDE
 BUSINESS WEEKLY

Webcast may reduce travel

Profile



Owner Thomas LaFree runs his successful business, Rent-A-Bit Inc. with the help of technology and staff. LaFree, a quadriplegic, has opened other business locations in Fort Wayne, Cincinnati and Indianapolis.

Page 3

Economic analysis



Are the people of Hendricks County more intelligent, far-sighted, and wise than most Hoosiers?
 Morton Marcus

Page 5

Focus - Elkhart



Cam Snyder has opened his second restaurant and calls it the Chubby Trout. A catchy name that customers shouldn't have a problem remembering. The restaurant is in Elkhart.

Pages 10-15

By **ROBIN TOEPP**
 Tribune Staff Writer

SOUTH BEND — Business travelers tired of flight delays, expensive tickets, and impersonal baggage searches are getting some good news.

The news is that fewer meetings will require travel as live webcasts become an option. And, reducing travel is not the only use of the technology.

For example, when Linda Budny was faced with the task of distributing updated tax information to clients across the country, sending out a live webcast became an integral part of her plan.

As senior manager in the education and development department at Crowe Chizek, Budny has seen a lot of change in how she gets her job done, most notably in the abilities that advances in technology afford the company.

"I think travel is really driving a lot of our decisions right now," Budny said. "And if we've got a new regulation or rule, how do we get that out there quickly?"

So, in December, when the company wanted to make a presentation to clients in the banking and financial industry, rather than requiring attendees to travel to South Bend, a live video production was sent via satellite that was combined with a PowerPoint presentation.

Depending on the location, viewers either met in a hotel conference room in their own city where the satellite feed was distributed, or they logged on to the Internet from their own computer and viewed the presentation via a live webcast.

Brent Shaffer, general manager of Rent-A-Bit, a video production company with locations in South Bend and Indianapolis, specializing in Web conferencing, produced the event.

"We had a television studio set up, with proper lighting, broadcast-quality cameras that sent the information to an uplink truck in the parking lot, where we then sent that analog video up into space and it came down and was grabbed by all of these dishes,"



Photo shows the staging area for a live webcast for Crowe Chizek clients that was produced recently by Rent-A-Bit. The webcast originated in South Bend and was delivered via the Internet to clients across the country.

Shaffer said. "The webcast company, they took our video over the satellite, compressed it, converted it and put it on the Web."

Compression, Shaffer continued, was necessary in order for the video to stream properly because webcast video requires a lot of bandwidth.

"I think it (webcasting) is going to play a bigger role as time goes on and as more bandwidth becomes available and the streaming technologies improve," Shaffer said.

Webcasting, in its truest form, is simply a live broadcast of video or text over the Internet. Text or video, "streams," or downloads, live through the viewer's computer.

Just like a radio or television broadcast, a signal is sent and received.

"Anybody can do it," said Ron Van-

derMolen of CVM Productions in Mishawaka.

"You can buy the little cameras, you can call your relatives, and they can see you and you can see them," VanderMolen said.

While that simple method is considered a low-end webcast, VanderMolen said, there are better options, options that are piquing the interest of business and industry.

"When you have a corporation that has 1,000 satellite sites and thousands of employees, what better way to train someone rather than fly them in, they can get everybody on a live webcast," VanderMolen said.

That was the case earlier this year at St. Joseph Regional Medical Center.



Tom LaFree, owner of Rent-A-Bit, wears a silver dot on his nose to bounce an infrared beam controlled by his head movements, enabling him to run his business from home. See accompanying story on Page 3.

See **WEBCAST/4**

FROM PAGE 1

Webcast

As part of the Trinity Health-Care network, the medical center is one of numerous locations all over the United States.

When the organization decided to upgrade its purchasing software, a training PowerPoint presentation was webcast from its Farmington Hills, Mich., office to all of the locations involved in the upgrade.

"It allows us to do our webcast meetings, produce pre-recorded training, and in the future, deliver live training," according to Margaret Lynch, director of technology learning for St. Joseph Re-

gional Medical Center.

Other advantages, Lynch said, include eliminating travel time and expenses.

All of the training participants could follow along with the presentation from their own desktop computer.

"Typically, in a meeting, you'll see all of their names (listed in the tool bar at the left), and we like to put an identifier so we know where they are from," said Margaret Lynch.

"You can click on the hand so the presenter knows you are raising your hand," Lynch continued. "The presenter will say, 'Margaret in South Bend, what is your question,' or you can click on the smiley face to show laughter."

Once the training session is complete, the video, if preproduced or recorded, can be stored for future playback — another huge advantage for employers looking to cut training costs.

Webcasts also create accessibility.

Victor Minatel, with the South Bend office of CISCO Systems, said webcasts are quickly replacing conference calls, on-site training and some regional meetings.

"If there's a new product we can sit at our desk, take an hour, listen to top people in the field, see how it will work," Minatel said. "Any internal announcements, like if we had a message from the (company) president (John Chambers) or attend a webcast where (he) will

announce our quarterly results, they can be live."

And, as is the case at Crowe Chizek and St. Joseph Regional Medical Center, Minatel says webcasts also reduce travel time for employees who work in rural locations.

"Up here, there's only two people in South Bend, but in our Indianapolis office they will often have a webcast in our conference room and the whole office will be there watching," Minatel said.

But, while webcasting presents seemingly limitless opportunities — well beyond a seminar or business meeting — bandwidth capability and regulation remain important issues.

It takes a lot of bandwidth to

send a webcast, particularly if there is a video feed accompanying it.

And unlike radio and television stations, whose frequencies are regulated by the FCC, Web bandwidth remains unregulated.

Anyone surfing the Internet can reach in and "grab" a signal, unless it is coded and encrypted, requiring a user to register and log into the web-cast with a password.

"It's really in its infancy as far as people have been using it over the years," said Ron VanderMolen of CVM Productions. "But I think between now and this time next year, it will be pretty commonplace."

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