

# Video chat comes closer to the mainstream

July 9 2010, By Victor Godinez

---

In a series of TV ads in 1993, AT&T pitched a vision of a near-future absolutely brimming with live video communication. From a busy mom tucking her kids in bed from a video phone booth and a barefoot exec participating in a business meeting from the beach to a student quizzing a professor about the history of jazz from across the country, narrator Tom Selleck confidently promised that "You will!" soon be doing all those Jetsonian tricks.

Seventeen years later, the technology is catching up.

The question now is whether anyone wants to use it.

Cell phones, video game consoles, hotel meeting rooms and even video phone sex providers are offering real-time video communication that is far more sophisticated than the glitchy, computer-bound webcams of yore.

Apple Inc . probably gave video chat its biggest boost with the launch of the iPhone 4. The phone includes a front-facing camera and software called FaceTime for users to make video calls over Wi-Fi.

"I grew up dreaming about this, and it's real now," a beaming Steve Jobs said during the unveiling.

Apple, which said it sold 1.7 million iPhone 4s in the first three days of availability, isn't the only tech company renewing the conversation over video chat.

HTC Corp. and Richardson-based Samsung Telecommunications America are also pushing video chat-capable smart phones, while Microsoft Corp. is touting the camera in its upcoming Kinect motion gaming accessory for the Xbox 360 console as a tool for gamers to videoconference with each other on their TVs.

And entrepreneurs are coming up with unexpected ways to use that technology.

Last week, an ad went up on Craigslist looking for women to work at a New York "online interactive pornography firm where (women) will use the iPhone 4 to video chat with potential customers."

Businesses are getting the hard sell as well.

Cisco Systems Inc. and Dallas-based AT&T Inc. are promoting a high-end system called "telepresence" that allows high-definition videoconferencing.

In the U.S., 40 percent of business professionals say their companies will deploy a videoconference system in the next six to 24 months, according to a survey released in February by Global IP Solutions.

For all the hype, video chat is not a new technology.

It's been a sci-fi dream for decades and a reality for years in other parts of the world, such as Japan, where mobile phones have traditionally been more advanced than in the U.S.

"Every 10 years, you would see kind of the same claims, that even though it's not here now, in the next 10 years it's really going to take off," said Robert Kraut, a professor in the Human-Computer Interaction Institute at Carnegie Mellon University. "I think the first paper I wrote

about that was in 1986."

But there are situations where the technology could be popular, experts say.

Kurt Scherf, principal analyst with Dallas-based market research firm Parks Associates, said a study done by his firm in March found that 20 percent of households with broadband Internet connections use computer-based webcams on a regular basis.

"That would be a mass-market phenomenon right there," he said.

Scherf said the new wave of mobile devices -- as well as more sophisticated systems such as telepresence -- could well boost video communication's popularity.

Much of that could be generational.

Scherf said teenagers might be quick to adopt mobile video chat.

"Frankly, I think that's how dating may start," he said. "Folks are getting together and breaking up over text messages, so maybe video chat is the next phase."

At the other end of the age spectrum, simple-to-use HD videoconferencing is ideal for adults who want to check on elderly parents who live far away.

"You can physically see the parent," Scherf said. "You can see the color of their skin. You can ask them if they're taking their pills and have them hold up the little pill holders."

Business professionals could also take advantage of the new wave of

video tech.

One of the buyers of the AT&T telepresence system is hotel chain Marriott International Inc.

Marriott has telepresence studios at five of its hotels in the U.S. and plans to have as many as 12 globally by September.

The large HD displays and lag-free transmissions make cross-country meetings feel like a traditional, in-person boardroom gathering.

Ed Goldman, Marriott's vice president of technology strategy, said the technology makes videoconferencing more natural and comfortable.

"Part of the reason why this now makes sense as opposed to before is that one of the challenges with videoconferencing was the latencies as the distances involved grew," he said.

Now participants can basically talk to one another in real time.

"I can interrupt you, and you can interrupt me, which is what happens in most meetings," Goldman said. "People interact as if they were in the room together using this technology."

Even though using a telepresence studio at a Marriott costs \$500 an hour, customer demand is driving his company's adoption of the technology, Goldman said.

"When the volcano issues happened in Europe, probably four or five companies called and asked if our London location was open," he said.

Even the biggest proponents of video communication acknowledge that most casual long-distance chats will remain voice only.

Faking a sick day, after all, is a lot harder when you have to look your boss in the eye.

And video won't kill business travel.

"People still have to travel," Goldman said. "We haven't come up with virtual drinks yet."

But video is now a much more useful communication tool for workers.

For consumers, Kraut said, the challenge for Apple, Microsoft and others is to video chat as easy as to use as making a phone call or sending a text message.

If video communication requires anything more complicated than pressing a single button, most users will ignore it.

"If you look at what has taken off, it's chat and Twitter with its 140-character restrictions," Kraut said. "If it's cheap enough and easy enough, people will love the most natural communication they can get."

But experts say there is a real opportunity for video chat -- particularly mobile video communications on cellphones -- to take off.

When his wife is out shopping, Scherf said, she'll often call to ask his opinion on a shirt or some other item of clothing.

"It would be much more useful if she could shoot video and show it to me," he said.

—

**WAYS TO VIDEO CHAT:**

New video chat technologies out now or coming soon include:

- Phones: Apple iPhone 4 (AT&T), HTC EVO 4G (Sprint) and Samsung Epic 4G (Sprint). The EVO 4G was the first of the new batch of cutting-edge smart phones with a front-facing camera for video chat, but Apple's [iPhone 4](#) could be the driving force in taking mobile video chat into the mainstream.
- Video games: Microsoft Kinect accessory for Xbox 360. The highlight of the Kinect add-on, coming later this year, is the motion-activated interface it brings to the Xbox 360 game console. But it also has a built-in camera, and Microsoft will include a [video chat](#) program to let gamers communicate via live video with other Kinect owners.
- Corporate videoconferencing: AT&T and Cisco telepresence. While videoconferencing has been available for years, this high-end setup with HD video and latency-free communication makes virtual meetings feel more like the real thing. AT&T and [Cisco](#) are also hyping the environmental benefits of video conferencing vs. travel.

(c) 2010, The Dallas Morning News.

Distributed by McClatchy-Tribune Information Services.

Citation: Video chat comes closer to the mainstream (2010, July 9) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-07-video-chat-closer-mainstream.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.