

Videoconference robot Beam walks the walk at SXSW

March 12 2013, by Robert Macpherson



Banners hang in the atrium of the Austin Convention Center on Thursday, March 7, 2013 on the eve of the opening of the 27th South By Southwest (SXSW) interactive, film and music festival. After a long day at the SXSW interactive trade show, Susie Kim and her colleagues took a leisurely two-block virtual stroll back to their hotel in downtown Austin through a remote-controlled videoconference robot

After a long day at the South by Southwest (SXSW) interactive trade show, Susie Kim and her colleagues took a leisurely two-block stroll back to their hotel in downtown Austin.

Except that Kim never left her office in southern California, on the other side of the country.

Nor did her other colleagues at Suitable Technologies who virtually attended SXSW via Beam, a remote-controlled videoconference robot that not only talks the talk, but walks the walk.

The "remote presence device," as its manufacturer likes to call it, has been a breakthrough hit at this year's SXSW, a 10-day showcase for [innovative technology](#), indie film and new music that wraps on Sunday.

Using the cursor keys on her computer, users can twist and move a Beam in any direction they like—enabling them to just roll up to someone and say hello, or walk alongside people while keeping up a conversation.

"People loved it. They took pictures. We chatted," Kim told AFP via Beam on Tuesday, recalling the walk back to the Hyatt the night before with Suitable Technologies CEO Scott Hassan, the only Beam team member physically at SXSW.

"You don't see a robot walking and navigating itself every day. It's kind of fun"—although Kim acknowledged, that once at the hotel, Hassan "obviously had to help me press buttons for the [elevator](#)."

Fewer than 100 Beams have been made since manufacturing began in California in November, and they don't come cheap—\$16,000 each, or the price of a compact car in the United States, plus \$3,200 for service and support.

But Hassan, part of the team that developed a search engine at Stanford University that came to be known as [Google](#), sees big potential for the useful gadget that stands a humanly five feet two inches (1.57 meters) tall.

"Basically any time you need to have a face-to-face meeting with someone, or where physicality is important, you can substitute a Beam for it and then you can be there," he said.

All that's required is an Internet or mobile data connection. The Beam itself is battery powered and comes with a custom docking station.

So in lieu of traveling half-way around the world, a designer in New York or London, for instance, can use a Beam to zip around a factory floor in China to inspect an assembly line in real time and talk to colleagues on the spot.

Surgeons in one place can similarly take their place alongside colleagues in a hospital operating theater in another, lending their observations and expertise to those actually wielding the scalpels.

"We think this is a good way to lower health costs all around the world," said Hassan, adding that Beam is working on a new model with a high-definition zoom camera especially suited for precise medical applications.

In time, depending on demand, "we might build a unit for the consumer market," he said, raising the prospect of using a Beam to go to a family reunion without, er, actually going.

Basketball legend turned tech tycoon Shaquille O'Neal came up with yet another mission for Beam when he discovered it at SXSW over the weekend and expressed interest in supporting the venture.

Instead of making a personal appearance for, say, a store opening, celebrities can just turn up on a Beam and interact with their fans, without leaving their home or movie set, said Kim, recalling her conversation with him.

For now, however, the target market for Beam are businesses that operate in several countries and looking to improve on the static nature of existing videoconference technology.

With Beam, said Kim, "you're not just on a computer screen.

"I can walk and talk with you from the conference room to your desk and then go with you to the kitchen and have coffee. You get more of that cultural interaction with each office—and I think people really love interaction."

More information: www.suitabletech.com/

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