

Video chat expands possibilities for face-to-face services

September 2 2010, By Shan Li

You once had to leave home to see a psychiatrist for therapy, a music teacher for guitar lessons or a makeup artist for face-to-face consultations. Now they can come to you, virtually, through video chat.

Long the darling of science fiction aficionados, [video chat](#) has never much caught on for personal calls. But this year, with the technology being incorporated into a widening array of digital gadgets, professionals specializing in one-to-one services are experimenting with video chat as a way to vastly extend their reach.

"My clients aren't looking for a makeover -- those they can get at the local department store," said Chris Scott, a San Francisco makeup artist. "They're looking for makeup expertise."

Scott charges \$50 an hour for video chat sessions during which he evaluates faces, suggests makeup and teaches application techniques. He has clients from as far away as Australia.

"It's the first time that they hear the right way to apply something from a real makeup expert," Scott said.

Online video chat technology, once the province of geeks and corporate users with IT departments, has become far more user friendly and available. Last month, Apple's [iPhone](#) 4 and HTC's Evo 4G phone debuted, both with video chat capability. Selected televisions from LG, Panasonic and Samsung now come with built-in cameras for video chat.

On computers, Skype, Yahoo Messenger, iChat and other messaging services have offered video chat for several years. But [image quality](#), reliability and user-friendliness have greatly improved over time.

"Previously, people had to be kind of tech-savvy to use video chat," said Alfred Poor, an analyst with research group GigaOm Pro. "Now, with new products coming on the market with video chat already installed, that kind of barrier is no longer there."

GigaOm is so bullish on the technology that it estimates the annual number of video chats will increase from 600 million worldwide in 2008 to 30 billion by 2015.

Susan Fussell, associate professor of communications at Cornell University, doubts that personal calls will be a huge part of that boom if it comes. Crowds famously lined up to see AT&T's Picturephone at the 1964 New York World's Fair, but the technology didn't catch on in homes.

"Back when the Picturephone came out, housewives thought they had to put on makeup and dress up," Fussell said. "No one wants to do that on a day-to-day basis."

But Scott, who has made up the faces of celebrities such as skater Kristi Yamaguchi, author Maya Angelou and symphony conductor Michael Tilson Thomas, is counting on makeup becoming a reason to video chat.

"I get two kinds of (video chat) clients -- the socially awkward women who feel uncomfortable getting [lessons](#) in public, or the ones who live in small towns where even a Sephora doesn't exist," he said.

The geographic factor is perhaps the biggest attraction for video chat services.

Christian Phoenix was taking guitar lessons when he lived in Huntington Beach, Calif. Then five years ago he moved to Pierre, S.D.

"Guitar lessons were nowhere to be found," said Phoenix, 33, a computer consultant. "There wasn't even a music store nearby."

David Fisher was a guitar teacher who lived in a city with no such shortage.

"There are tons of guitar teachers in Nashville (Tenn.), as you can imagine," Fisher said. He started giving online lessons to "stay afloat and stay competitive."

Now about half of Fisher's students come to him by video chat. Phoenix found him on Craigslist this year and began taking lessons for \$35 an hour.

"The main thing with the webcam lessons is that initially you have to get used to it," Phoenix said. "Sometimes you have to zoom so the teacher can see your fingers."

"Once you get going, it's a lot more convenient. I can schedule lessons early in the morning, and I don't have to get up 30 minutes before to get ready and drive."

Geography was also the prime factor for Paul Zeitz, executive director of the Global AIDS Alliance in Washington. He wanted a particular rabbi in Philadelphia to give his son bar mitzvah lessons. But that was a three-hour drive.

Zeitz had been down the route before. "We'd gone through the experience of driving every weekend to Philly with an older son for weekly bar mitzvah lessons, and didn't want to repeat it," he said.

The rabbi suggested Skype, something she had been trying out with other students.

"We were all surprised at how well the lessons went," Zeitz said. "It was really value added."

An area that's ripe for video chat expansion is medicine, said market analyst Ken Hyers of Technology Business Research.

"We're seeing a broad push across markets," he said. "The infrastructure is much more able to support it now."

Mental health professionals, who rely on talk and visual cues, have adopted the technology.

In February, during a blizzard on the East Coast, two of [psychiatrist](#) Patrick Barta's patients were snowed in and couldn't make it to his Towson, Md., office. In both cases, he suggested video chat sessions.

"I could see their mannerisms and felt safe enough to prescribe them the meds they needed," Barta said.

Video chat sessions now account for 20 percent of his practice. Most of these clients are under 35. "The older crowd tends to be more leery of it," Barta said.

Scott gives his video chat makeup clients pre-session instructions to help them ease into the remote consultations.

"I suggest they get a desk lamp and face the lamp on their faces before they call me," he said.

He customizes the lessons based not only on the client's physical

attributes but also on the makeup the person has on hand.

"The concept for online lessons is if I can climb through your computer screen and do your makeup for you, I would," Scott said. But he can only watch from far away.

"Obviously it's better in person," he said. "We're talking about people."

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