



Convincing your boss you need streaming media?

You may firmly believe that streaming media is the best thing since sliced bread, but your boss may need some education. Streaming media is not a magic bullet or a miracle cure. It is merely a very cool and very useful technology that is capable of making business (and life) better for us all. Streaming media is powerful, but it is evolutionary rather than revolutionary. It is a technology of subtle application. It is not something that sells itself. Therefore, if you're anxious to introduce streaming media into your organization to improve your workday life, you're probably going to need to use a little persuasion with your boss.

Thankfully, however, even though streaming media is still a relatively new technology, it's been around long enough to generate plenty of success stories. There are lots of good things to be said about streaming media. You can start with the old adage from Confucius: "A picture is worth a thousand words," and then pose a new question—if one static picture is worth a thousand words, how much are thousands of moving, interactive pictures worth?

The Power of Pictures

In a landmark 1971 study called "Silent Messages," Professor Albert Mehrabian found that "a person's nonverbal behavior has more bearing than his words on communicating feelings and attitudes to others," and he concluded that 55% of human communication is visual. Put another way, communication without sight is less than half as effective as communication with sight. Yet many organizations have been slow to deploy visual communication systems, because the technology seems too complex, the cost too high, the benefits fuzzy, and return on investment unarticulated.

Virtually every organization seeks improvements in communications accuracy, immediacy, and effectiveness, while meeting return-on-investment objectives. "Streaming Media" can be an important component of a comprehensive communications strategy that includes face-to-face meetings, telephone calls and teleconferences, broadcast television, electronic messages, and similar forms of modern human communication. This is important because the deployment of streaming media rarely requires new infrastructure or significant changes within an organization. Rather, streaming is incremental to what most organizations are already doing and can provide tremendous communications benefits. But convincing your boss may be another matter.

Streaming? Media? (A Rose by Any Other Name)

A few years ago, if you looked at a live video displayed on a computer screen, you would have been (and perhaps were) disappointed. The term "Streaming Media" was used because it was new, and to call it "television" would have set the wrong expectation for the quality. The whole world is familiar and comfortable with conventional television, and the expectation for the quality of such an electronic moving image was set many years ago in the minds of millions of viewers. To provide anything less than this quality level is unacceptable to many viewers, and with the advent of DVD, viewers' expectations have only risen.

Streaming distinguishes the media as different from more conventional network data. The Internet was not originally designed for such a continuous flow, which audio and video are. (It is interesting to note that packet switching largely replaced legacy networks that were circuit-based and could only stream.) With the rise of IP telephony and other convergence technologies, our networks are increasingly capable, and we are reaching the point where the term streaming is no longer an important differentiator.

Today, the quality of standards-based streaming video now rivals, and sometimes surpasses, conventional broadcast television. The three principle technology standards for streaming—MPEG-1, MPEG-2, and MPEG-4—are all capable of delivering high-quality streaming media over virtually any network today. In addition, the destination for streaming video is no longer exclusively a software player on your computer, but now includes your TVs, projectors, and video monitors. Hence, streaming media now goes everywhere your enterprise network reaches and potentially reaches the half-billion people connected to the public Internet as well.

BOSS: “Show Me the Money!”

Most decision-makers want some sort of benchmark to determine whether a streaming initiative makes financial sense. What your boss wants to do is compare a familiar way of achieving a result against your new proposal, and wants a return-on-investment in hard numbers. But since the application of streaming is often an enhancement of a communications strategy that has already proven its ROI, it may be best viewed in terms of cost avoidance, and in terms of leveraging investments already made—such as your networking infrastructure.

Does Streaming Make Money?

Unless you are in the “content creation” or “broadcasting” business, streaming media will not make you money...it will help you avoid spending the money you have by providing a better way of doing the things you already do:

1. **Improved Communications:** Streaming media provides unambiguous, instant delivery of your message to your target audience. Your audience may be employees, students, customers, investors, or the whole world.
2. **Training & Education:** Employees and customers receive continuous training without the costs, scheduling difficulties, and hassles inherent in classroom sessions.
3. **Advertising & Marketing:** Nothing communicates a sales pitch better than sight and sound. Complex messages and demonstrations are best delivered using as many of the human senses as possible.
4. **Security & Monitoring:** Streaming video allows you to monitor important or sensitive areas from virtually anywhere in the world.

Streaming media goes well beyond merely “improving” communications. It fills a basic need to engage multiple senses that were heretofore impossible to truly engage at a reasonable cost.

Overcoming Objections—The Three Cs

Hopefully, when it comes to your boss, seldom is heard a discouraging word, but just in case, you should be prepared to counter some of the myths of streaming. There are three categories of objections that bosses seem most often to have with streaming media: Cost, Complexity, and Content Quality.

Cost

Your boss may believe that streaming media is exotic, expensive, or has “hidden costs.” He or she may be right if you are proposing to go down a proprietary path. Proprietary solutions tend to lock the customer into one vendor, leading to “mandatory” and expensive upgrades at the whim of a vendor. On the other hand, if you are proposing a robust, field-proven, virus-proof, standards-based solution, the cost can be quite low. But more importantly, the cost is predictable. Today, a single streaming video appliance can deliver MPEG-2 video to every enterprise desktop and simultaneously deliver MPEG-4 to remote offices and the general public. When you take such an “appliance approach,” the cost to deploy streaming media is about the cost of a high-end PC. And a “PC approach” can also be very cost-effective.

Complexity

In the past, industry literature tended to speak of streaming media in terms of an “event,” such as a Webcast, concert, or a conference. Service provider companies formed that traveled to the event location, set up complex equipment, and managed the technology. Of course, they charged for this service, and a single “event” could easily cost \$50,000 or more.

Today, complexity has given way to a high degree of automation and simplicity, allowing virtually anyone to stream audio/video within an enterprise and on the public Internet. Challenges still exist in the networking infrastructure, but these challenges are not dissimilar to ones that a company’s IT staff must overcome with or without streaming media. Streaming media just makes those challenges more apparent. To convince your boss that the complexity is low, you might consider showing a demo.

Content Quality

Streaming media is not an answer; it is a means to an end. It is the means to deliver meaningful content to an intended audience for a purpose. That purpose may be to educate, inform, or entertain—the same as it is with conventional television. The difference is that the content is up to you, and, of course, that the content reaches where conventional closed-circuit television does not...the workplace, the schoolroom, and, indeed, the world.

When you think of streaming media in terms of “a special event,” the production value of the content may be a concern. Certainly, a company’s marketing department will want promotional videos to have high production value to hold the audience’s interest. But when you think about live, casual, daily streaming within an enterprise or to a specific audience, the production values are less worrisome. Whether live or stored, content may range from video shot inside of any conference room, training facility, or office to video shot in a set within a studio, complete with special effects. Content may be a live classroom lecture, an investor presentation, or a security camera feed, or it may be a slick video that you produced on an offline video-editing suite. Content may be a 24/7 live newsfeed delivered to every desktop, an emergency broadcast channel, a security camera feed, mandated human resource training on demand, or an endless variety of demonstrations, lectures, and entertainment. My point is that different types of content require different levels of quality. Don’t assume you need Hollywood-style quality for every kind of content you own. Sometimes good enough is good enough.

One way to demonstrate your content is to put your best company spokesman in front of the camera and stream his or her presentation to your intended audience. (Perhaps your boss himself would be appropriate “talent.”) Using in-house talent also strengthens group cohesiveness and morale. Deploying streaming media is not just a technical or financial exercise—it would be foolish to try to deploy any system without first getting “buy in” from the organizations or departments that would benefit most. Most people quickly grasp the power and benefit of streaming media when they use it and see it, so you might convince your boss by demonstrating it to your marketing, sales, training, customer service, and other departments.

The Bottom Line

Today, streaming media is as valuable a business tool as email, the telephone, and other forms of modern communications. It can be just as simple and easy, but more compelling. Probably the best way to convince your boss that streaming media is ready for prime time in your company is to demonstrate it right now.

Sidebar: Comparing Approaches to Streaming

As with fax transmission and telephone calls, streaming media can be deployed via dedicated appliances or via software/peripheral hardware running on a computer. There is no “right” answer, and your choice will depend on what you are trying to accomplish.

What Is a Streaming Media Appliance?

Think of a streaming media network appliance as a specialized PC inside a black box that looks like the component of a stereo system. The actual configuration of an appliance (what's inside the box) differs from manufacturer to manufacturer, but most contain circuitry for encoding and/or decoding digital video (usually MPEG) in real time, along with a hardwired proprietary operating system. On the outside of the box are various input plugs, usually to connect a National Television System Committee (NTSC) camera or other video source, along with various output plugs for connecting to a network, usually an Ethernet.

The Appliance Approach

"I've never had to reboot my telephone" is often the rallying cry for the appliance promoters. While dedicated appliances are generally more reliable than multi-purpose computers for video (often because of other applications running at the same time), there are other benefits. Appliances tend to be simpler, smaller, portable, and more rugged, and the overall streaming latency (delay) from appliances tends to be lower than that from PCs. One would not expect to see a PC at the top of a telephone pole, but this could be a comfortable home for a video appliance. On the other hand, the appliance will never provide word processing.

The PC Approach

"I can do streaming on my PC by simply installing software" is often the rallying cry for the PC promoters. General-purpose computers can do many things, and processing streaming video is certainly one of them. Unlike an appliance, a PC can be used to create original content and to edit and manipulate audio/video. The list of compression and streaming software choices for the PC is long. Dedicating a PC to streaming, PC proponents claim, turns the PC into an appliance. On the other hand, PCs are subject to user abuse, viruses, and security issues that appliances overcome.

Making a Decision

It is rarely an "either/or" choice between PCs and streaming appliances in today's converged world. The choice may be more similar to a decision to add more hard disk space to your PC or to add more hard disk space to your file server. It depends on what you are trying to accomplish. The right answer may well be "both."

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