

## Cruise.com - Using Web Conferencing Technology for Training (Jul 06)

**July 2006 - Tom Toperczer**

The Internet has given many small companies a competitive edge because they are able to reach out to millions of consumers all over the world. But the Internet has also given these same companies the ability to search for, recruit and train new employees they might not have found otherwise. It has helped organizations decentralize operations, sometimes outsourcing core business functions and establishing some departments in various states or even abroad.

Once a company decides to decentralize, the question becomes how to integrate all business processes, manage them centrally and make sure that all departments function as one cohesive business unit?

Today's collaborative, real-time Web conferencing technology has enabled Cruise.com, a Web site specializing in discount cruise vacations, to train and maintain a sales force spread throughout the United States. Cruise.com was launched in 1998, and today it offers vacations from 99 cruise lines that can be booked and purchased online and offline by experienced agents. Three years ago, Cruise.com, based in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., started seeking sales agent talent outside of Florida, and it now recruits and contracts with agents from all over the country.

Once most of the sales function was decentralized, Cruise.com had to find a method in which to train the sales and customer service force, which had grown to roughly 180. Most importantly, the training method for new employees has to be easy to use as well.

"While our agents are experts in the cruise and travel industry, not all of them are highly technical," said Jose Grullon, the IT administrator at Cruise.com. "We had to find a fast and fairly inexpensive method in which to train new agents and to provide recurring, ongoing training to the entire department."

New hires at Cruise.com must complete a 40-hour training program once they join the Cruise.com sales team. Vivian LaMadrid, the company's corporate trainer, is responsible for making sure that new employees are fully trained and knowledgeable about not only the software and systems at Cruise.com, but also on the policies and procedures of various departments.

Cruise.com does employ a fully Web-based, in-house reservation system that actually eliminates much of the cost and infrastructure, such as application servers, for the reservation process. The company's Agent Booking Center (ABC) allows the agents to book the cruise while talking with the customer, and the Agent Booking Engine (ABE) is where the reservation information resides in a database format. A separate application, Consumer Booking Engine (CBE), allows customers to book their own cruises online. LaMadrid's job is to make sure that all new agents are fully knowledgeable about how both the ABC and ABE systems work so that the customer-booking and Cruise.com-invoice process is seamless, quick and easy.

"Once we decentralized agent/sales operations, we knew that only some type of collaborative, real-time communications solution would enable us to launch an efficient and comprehensive training program," Grullon said.

Once the decision was made to incorporate Web conferencing as the means by which to hold new agent training classes, it became a matter of whether to bring Web conferencing in-house or to contract with a service provider that could host the application for Cruise.com.

“Initially, we weren’t set up to host our own conferencing application, and like our phone service, we decided that outsourcing this function was the way to go,” Grullon said.

### **Web Conferencing Supports Business and Training Program Continuity**

Doing business in the eye of hurricane country requires companies to have special business continuity and emergency plans in place for the lengthy hurricane season in the Southeast. Cruise.com relies upon its telephony systems, including phones and Internet connectivity, in order to support its Web-based business model. Cruise.com’s co-location facility in Utah enables IT personnel to redirect phone lines in case they lose power or are evacuated from their offices in Fort Lauderdale.

“During hurricanes, we may still have power and dial tone, but when local authorities ask us to evacuate for safety purposes, we must leave our building until we have permission to return,” Grullon explained.

Organizations in the Southeast must be prepared for the onslaught of hurricanes, especially due to the severity of seasonal hurricanes experienced in recent years. In the event of a weather-related emergency, Cruise.com’s Web-based applications allow “business as usual” for Cruise.com employees that are based in other parts of the country or even for those that must work at home because of regional evacuations.

“Even during a hurricane, the show must go on,” said LaMadrid. “During one evacuation, I was able to get home to Miami and continue the training session that was interrupted using our Web conferencing software.”

For Cruise.com, the business continuity and the cost-savings benefits of bringing their Web conferencing application in-house was the right decision. Web conferencing is easy to use and just like training in a physical location, there are several “classrooms” set up, such as the Outlook Express Set-up Room, Trouble-shooting Room and Remote Assistance Room that only requires the trainee to click on the correct link to enter the training session.

Most Web conferencing software solutions are fairly easy to install and use. The cost of deployment and upkeep is generally minimal. Beyond the cost of the standard software license, Cruise.com’s IT staff installed the Web conferencing software on a dedicated PC and the company uses a dedicated T1 line for Internet connectivity.

As with any software application, the more you use it, the less it will cost in the long run. LaMadrid trains approximately 15 people in two-week sessions per month. If the company used a service to accommodate its current training schedule, it would cost the company approximately \$10,000 per month. After bringing Web conferencing in-house, the company now spends approximately \$7,200 per year on the software alone — less than what it would cost for two trainings.

“For Cruise.com, it wasn’t just about the money, but about providing complete, comprehensive and ongoing training to all new employees,” LaMadrid said. “When we used a service for training, we had to limit it to very important meetings or initial training and had to eliminate recurring training sessions. Being able to provide more intensive training has benefited the company from a productivity standpoint. Our new employees are better trained and therefore more well-equipped to do their jobs too.”

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