

3G Videoconferencing: An Applications Perspective

by Leslie Townsend

A Different Take on Wireless Videoconferencing

This takes advertising research out of the focus group to a model in which literally hundreds or thousands of potential buyers can provide their opinions on an upcoming campaign within a matter of a few hours.

I read last month's *ConferencingBuyer* point-counterpoint discussion on 3G videoconferencing with a long sigh. As a 20-year veteran of the wireless industry, I can find points of agreement on both sides. Those cute camera phones are selling—in spite of the fact that networks cannot support them and carriers are not interested in selling video. Carriers are still trying to stimulate demand for data services, meanwhile lacking the capital for investments in 3G.

These points may be demonstrated by some application examples derived from a technology space I work in, and from my company's service, Mobile Memoir (MM). MM enables market research companies to administer surveys on cell phones. MM is primarily a replacement for diary-based reporting mechanisms, where people use written diaries or response terminals to keep track of specific types of purchases. MM offers an alternative by supporting survey data delivery via cell phones. Cell phones are a convenient mechanism for diary reporting: they are always with the panelist (as Alan Greenberg argued last month for camera phones always in the hands of users); as a novel means of reporting purchases, they encourage accurate and complete study participation; and the company is able to provide a real-time solution to its clients.

I'd like to believe that there is a broader range of research applications that we can serve than simply questions and answers to marketing department needs. But I can also foresee many applications that we currently cannot provide—not because we are limited by our own software capabilities or by subscriber devices, but because we cannot rely upon the underlying cellular/PCS networks. For instance, ethnography research is an area in which we hope to play a large role in the future. Today ethnographers typically equip individuals with cameras and/or video camcorders, audio or data recorders, and other equipment and ask them to generate notes and photos of their purchases and lifestyle throughout the day. Imagine the possibilities if we could replace all of this with a simple real-time handheld device that also includes a camera or video combined with the ability to record voice and data. Such a solution would represent probable savings in both costs and time. (The lifeblood of the research industry is time).

Most of you have probably been solicited to take web surveys. Web surveys have brought new life to the research industry. For example, they have enabled advertising agencies to test future ads using pop-up displays and streaming video. This takes advertising research out of the focus group (an assembly of a dozen opinions at most) to a model in which literally hundreds or thousands of potential buyers can provide their opinions on an upcoming campaign within a matter of a few hours. While we do not believe that advertisers will rapidly begin to test ads on cell phones, there are many niche applications in which the use of graphics and streaming video would be useful. But the last time I sent an MMS (multimedia message service) on a GPRS network, the recipient received it the following day. This kind of experience suggests that still and motion images (per Andrew Davis's comments last month) are some time away.

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There are situations where graphics and video would be invaluable. For a long time researchers have been able to capture bar code information (via manual input or via a miniature scanner attachment) that can be uploaded later to databases. The world's largest research firms have made their living off of the capture and analysis of bar code data for groceries and other consumer goods—but suddenly it is possible to interject, in real-time mode, questions associated with specific bar

codes. There are times when I can see that our clients' efforts to study situational factors could be augmented through quick environmental photos that would tell what is transpiring in a certain location, such as a shelf where a purchased or "slow-to-move" item resides. That too may have to wait a while until the networks provide the bandwidth necessary to support that type of application.

So for now, the handful of companies doing what Mobile Memoir delivers are providing black and white, text-based solutions. Respondents in clinical healthcare trials may rapidly report on side effects; diary respondents may report their purchases; mystery shoppers may complete questionnaires surreptitiously; and we continue to believe in the

value of bar code capture in the retail and other environments. In most Asian countries, where telephone directories do not exist and cell phone ownership far exceeds computer or wireline phone ownership, surveys on cell phones might replace door-to-door interviews. When wireless networks can support still image photography and video streaming, we will be there with applications. In the meantime – and to us ironically—network providers are waiting for applications developers such as Mobile Memoir to generate sufficient demand to cost-justify further investment in 3G. We're raring to go when we can trust that the networks are there for us. ♦



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