



Big TMCs Tool Up For Telepresence

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Supplementing virtual meetings services that include pretrip assessments of travel versus virtual options and bookings for corporations' internal telepresence systems, American Express Business Travel and Carlson Wagonlit Travel have partnered with Tata Communications to help clients make bookings in Tata's expanding network of public Cisco TelePresence suites.

"With two of the largest TMCs in the world announcing they are engaging telepresence technology as a solution for customers, it reinforces the view that this technology is a serious meeting alternative to face to face," noted Paul Tilstone, executive director of the British and Irish Institute of Travel and Meetings.

CWT—which last week announced it would "help in determining if and when a virtual meeting meets" customer business needs, manage the reservations process and provide "reporting on adoption and related cost savings"—is looking forward to learning "exactly how strong the uptake will be," said Eric Bausman, global product manager for corporate card and emerging products.

In addition to Tata (which currently runs 10 public Cisco rooms, and plans to expand with 15 new rooms by year-end 2009 and another 10 by mid-2010), American Express Business Travel has a deal with Cisco TelePresence distributor Regus, an executive suite and office space provider. Amex recently concluded a pilot program with one large client in which it offered a dedicated desk taking TelePresence room reservations by phone. Amex now is offering that service to other clients and expects next year to integrate with online booking tools to bring TelePresence arrangements directly to travelers, according to officials.

While any clients using Amex's services to manage inventory for their own telepresence systems would pay Amex for that, a representative said, "I don't know that there's a single answer" to whether clients using the Tata public services would pay Tata directly and separately pay any handling fee to Amex, or if Amex would bundle the solution. CWT for now is planning to charge in similar ways as it does for traditional travel or meetings services. "The price for the room rental is in some way like a hotel room or conference facility," said Bausman. "We facilitate the booking and take a fee for that, and payment of the room services would be either through us with a credit card or the participants could settle" with the supplier. "There is no volume discount" from CWT, he said.

“There are a couple ways it can work,” Bausman added. “Initially, it’s like any other kind of inventory. We see it as a new form of content, so in that regard, we might see it more as an a la carte booking: ‘I need a reservation for a TelePresence facility, and while I’m there I might spend a night at the hotel.’ In the future, if there is a lot of interest and clients need a lot of time, we might be able to be an intermediary in terms of being able to book a block of space.”

The broader “virtual meetings space today is really the Wild, Wild West,” said Bruce Morgan, marketing and business development senior vice president at BCD Meetings & Incentives, which studied virtual options for more than a year. “Frankly, we find ourselves handling consulting on these events as much as we do implementing. If we’ve talked to 100 customers on this, we’re consulting 80 percent of the time; implementing 20 percent of the time. Telepresence is typically a direct buy, where our customers say, ‘We’re going to invest in telepresence; we want you now to embrace telepresence and push it out.’ We’re not finding clients coming to us to say, ‘Can you help us facilitate telepresence?’ ”

According to a September 2009 survey by Sabre, whose GetThere unit this year announced plans for several similar and related services planned for its self-booking tools, 42 percent of 222 travel professionals polled said their organizations “own/lease and currently use ... broadband collaboration/virtual meetings technology (e.g., TelePresence, Tandberg and Halo).” [Cisco recently announced its planned acquisition of Tandberg; the Halo solution is provided by Hewlett-Packard]. More than one-third of respondents said their firms had “no plans to invest in broadband collaboration/virtual meetings technology,” while more than 20 percent said they were actively investigating or planning to purchase or lease the services. Just 8 percent of surveyed professionals from large firms said they had no systems and no plans to use them.

“We’ve been solicited by all the telepresence facilities very interested in having placement with us and having us facilitate introductions,” BCD’s Morgan added. “But in most of the telepresence we’re involved with today, our clients have made an investment, and our job is to help usage and maximization of that investment.” Morgan said he knows this is a different approach to some of his competitors.

“There might be some opportunity for us to help [clients] with reserving their own internal rooms,” said CWT’s Bausman. “They would have to open up the access to see the availability. For such clients, the need might be greater to optimize utilization. Some have done a great communication campaign resulting in great uptake; for others, the rooms aren’t being used.”

While the initial phases of such services are based on phone calls to dedicated agents, Amex is planning and CWT is considering integrating them into online booking systems next year, depending on client system capabilities and services from such suppliers as Tata.

Tata offers an “online portal where our customers can book any room on our public Cisco TelePresence Suites network, in real-time, 24x7,” according to a Tata press representative. “This portal is also used by our private-room customers to book meetings in any of their rooms on our network as well as the public rooms. Our partners—be they the hotels or telecom providers—have an interlock process with us, where they either pass the request to our concierge staff or designate administrators in their organizations who have direct access to the portal to make the reservations themselves. This depends on the partners’ preferences; we offer them the flexibility of choice.”

“Our plan is to integrate across all online booking tools,” said Amex vice president for marketing services and corporate affairs Alicia Tillman, using a “hub” that feeds “whatever point-of-sale tools our customers want. It will be available for agents, as well.”

Demand Management

For the moment, Amex’s dedicated agents are tasked with incorporating information about trip purpose, length of trip and carbon impact to come up with recommendations about virtual versus physical options.

“In our demand-management offering, we have some discussions with clients and there are some engagements to help clients understand the best way to travel—how to travel smarter,” said Bausman. “We’re helping them with policy compliance,” and planned reporting components would offer data on “utilization, cost savings and trending on ticket prices and hotel room rates in their cities, along with incorporating telepresence room rates. Eventually, we can see an expansion of the capability in terms of ‘Would you really have traveled, or is it replacing a conference call or a WebEx, etc.?’ ”

Other remote conferencing solutions that are less sophisticated, less costly and possibly more appropriate for other sorts of events also merit consideration. Such solutions may be better tailored to big meetings or those that include more one-way communication, and there are different approaches from travel management providers here, as well. “Clients have been doing conference calls and WebEx for some time,” said Bausman. “Clients who had installed them gave us insight on how they were using them to bring people together without the costs of traveling. We have investigated some WebEx arrangements, but we haven’t done anything yet globally. We do have some local agreements, but clients tell us they know how to book a conference call and do a WebEx.” BCD M&I, on the other hand, has forged “key supplier relationships with suppliers who specialize in key segments of the space. For example, one is a leader in Web conferencing; another a leader in virtual world experience,” said Morgan.

But there’s no mistaking that telepresence is the sexiest of the virtual options.

“This technology is at a level that it has never been before in terms of clarity and crispness,” said American Express Business Travel senior vice president and general manager for worldwide sales Andrew McGraw this summer of the telepresence options from Cisco and HP. “There’s a direct correlation between business travel on a macro-level and increasing revenues—but there are some areas of travel that can be scaled back and supplemented with telepresence solutions, particularly internal meetings. If you remember some of the old telepresence technology, it was kind of grainy, choppy and you would over-speak one another. The reason this technology never took off for business travel—or in general, I think—is that it never was at a point that customers were comfortable with it.” He said the latest generation of “this technology is as if you were sitting in the same room together. It is that clear, it is that crisp, there’s a facility to sync power points, the interaction is real-time and it is absolute virtual reality.”

Nevertheless, some debate continues about just how effective travel alternatives are, relative to different kinds of travel and meetings.

Participants in a virtual meetings session during the National Business Travel Association conference this summer were “pretty protective of the traditional travel space. A number of people stood up and said, ‘We understand that face to face is good, and we want to make sure

that it continues to happen,' ” Morgan said. “But the reality is, our clients are saying that they can accomplish their business objectives without meeting face to face. If they can, we need to be able to enable that. From a solutions perspective, we have about a half-dozen solutions in play right now with different customers [in which] we’re bringing virtual meetings, events and managing those.”

“Whilst travel will still be required, undoubtedly, it is the extent to which this technology will pervade every day meetings use and the implications for the long-term business travel sector that is of interest to ITM,” ITM’s Tilstone said. “It is an area we plan to explore in more detail in 2010 through a considerable research project, entitled All Our Futures, and a series of global buyer debates—themselves held using telepresence technology.”

“Virtual will never replace face-to-face interaction for building stronger relationships and changing behavior, but it can be very valuable in extending and supplementing experiences,” said Carlson Marketing engagement and events president Fay Beauchine. A Carlson official suggested the potential benefit in hybrid solutions, in which, say, 300 people gather live in a meeting room, but “1,000 could benefit” if they were to participate via virtual technology.

Smaller-scale telepresence events also enable business travel flexibility, said CWT’s Bausman. “We can see a case where a company has a room in their New York location. They need to connect with their Los Angeles location, but don’t have a room there. They could connect [at a public facility] and have their meeting, and at the same time there might be other participants who fly to New York from Cincinnati or wherever, which could be cheaper than booking another room,” he said.

by Jay Campbell

~ Mary Ann McNulty contributed to this article

(Courtesy: NetEvents)