BLAME IT ON STAR TREK: THE NEXT WAVE OF VIDEOCONFERENCING IS HEADED OUR WAY

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Prepare yourself for video conferencing, the next generation.

It's all Star Trek creator Gene Roddenberry's fault.

In the classic science fiction TV show way back in the '60s, the crew of the Enterprise used a communicator device that flipped open when they wanted to contact the ship. Twenty-odd years later, we were all flipping open our mobile phones to talk with someone in the next ZIP code in as close to a beam-me-up- Scotty moment as we'll ever get.

Next up is the Holodeck, Star Trek's virtual reality lounge. You'll sit in a room, say "Talk with Greg House," and a moment or two later, an ephemeral image of Greg, your valued customer who is about to sign a lease on a bunch of copiers and printers, will appear across from you. You can talk, joke, and cut a deal. It will be totally normal and get better every year. You'll occasionally wonder how you ever lived without such technology. That will be then.

But in the now, we still must use these antediluvian things called phones and computers, some of which are still tethered to the wall with wires. How quaint…how… how primitive!

All Digital All the Time
Around 2050, the car in your driveway will be fully autonomous. Climb in, sit down, turn on the TV to watch the morning news and say, "Office, please, and don't spare the electrons!"

But well before then, say by 2025 or 2030, will you even bother going to the office every day? Within the next few years, many customer meetings will be entirely virtual. Okay, it won't be quite like the Holodeck on the USS Enterprise, but hey, Star Trek gave us the flip phone, so why not more substantive versions of augmented and virtual reality without the weird talking labels or dorky goggles.

For now, most of us turn to Zoom, Skype, or Microsoft Teams for video conferencing, mostly on laptops or desktop monitors. They work okay, but glitches in technology aside still offer at best a lukewarm experience. Many of us have video confabs a few times a week, if not daily, and know the bumps in the road. Sometimes, though, we can even see what is almost possible.

For example, a couple of weeks back, my wife and I were doing a Zoom call with friends in Oregon—three time zones away. Then, our daughter Lisa happened to call in on FaceTime from her home in New Zealand, 18 time zones distant. We held the phone so everyone could see each other, connecting across time and distance as Lisa talked with our friends—who welcomed her home from the hospital 27 years ago—and introduced them to her 15-month-old daughter. Sure, it could have all been coordinated on Zoom or FaceTime as we'd recently done over dinner, but this just sort of happened. It's not hard to imagine it being far easier.

"Easier" is coming soon to your office and then your house, and it will business-as-usual in your customers' offices. It will be well beyond what we think of as telephony and got me wondering where the opportunity may lie for copier/printer dealers. So, I reached out to a couple of the biggest technology players in the copier/printer market to hear their thoughts on video conferencing. It was interesting.

Virtual Becomes Real
"The pandemic has accelerated demand for remote communications. One approach involves "video-enhanced, safety-enabling, hands-free technologies that simplify meeting management. These have become a top interest among customers," said Bob Madaio, vice president of marketing for Sharp Imaging and Information Company of America.

According to Madaio, Sharp sees a continued need for—and even acceleration—what the company calls "smart meeting rooms" that are video-enabled, easy to use, and without the random upgrades needed by Zoom, GoToMeeting, Teams, and the like. Moreover, as users become accustomed to such capabilities, they will be as expected as hallway copiers and printers.

At the moment though, "many corporate meeting rooms with video capabilities are hard to use, not capable of room-level video, or both," continued Madaio.

Without room-level video enabled for meetings, people are left to stare at their own laptop, get distracted by other work, forget to turn their audio on, and, ultimately, not work collaboratively, which is the main reason to have the video call in the first place. Because intuitive, video connectivity will (hopefully) be the norm, not knowing how a video conferencing system works will be unacceptable for regular users. Familiarity will come with repeat usage, and more than a few office millennials will find themselves in demand because they "get" how a meeting room works. But this goes deeper.

"The demand for state-of-the-art meeting rooms may spur additional investment for companies that are focused on maintaining a balance of corporate culture and collaboration in new work settings," said Madaio. "This will become especially important as working remotely becomes more common. In all likelihood, some remote workers will schedule in-office days to take advantage of meeting room availability."

Differentiation & Opportunity
The emergence of meeting rooms will spur opportunities for dealers. Think monitors, routers, cameras, microphones, and lights. As major equipment vendors roll out virtual meeting systems, one of the natural sales and support channels may be copier-printer dealers. Imagine, for instance, offering the law firm where you placed 73 copiers and printers the ability to hold virtual meetings with its clients. Then, there's your local city hall, home to a dozen or so of your copiers and printers, that might need a modern meeting system. Or how about local hotels that already have your copiers and printers but want to offer business travelers virtual conference rooms. None of this is happening in a meaningful way yet, but it is coming up fast, and smart dealers need to be poised and ready. Such capabilities will be easier to deliver for dealers that have the technical savvy to provide managed IT services. Video conferencing is intertwined with computer networks and is an excellent extension of managed IT services. There is money on the table.

Granted, these are not sales that will happen right now. Most companies are still trying to figure out how to make remote working part of day-to-day business activities. But as a dealer, you may

be able to make it easier while adding value that translates into a new revenue stream that can differentiate your business from competitors whose mission in life is leasing copiers, printers, and selling consumables.

"There is absolutely potential for dealer diversification," confirmed Madaio, "but it's an opportunity that will be easier for dealers who have made—or are ready to make—meaningful steps into AV services or managed IT."

Several OEMs—and the editorial team here at *The Cannata Report*—have focused on the need for dealer diversification for a long time. Many who have broadened their offerings will see smart meeting rooms as an opportunity, while for others it will be out of reach. Yet, there's still opportunity.

"Fortunately," said Madaio, "there are degrees of complexity."

If offering and installing a large display for a meeting room fulfills a customer's needs, it's not too difficult for a dealer to get up to speed. Going further, Madaio suggested that deployment (plus potential value to end-users) can grow to sensors that push data to cloud-based analytics for information about room temperature, air quality, and even attendance. "Of course, the steps on that value staircase depend on market and customer demand, as well as the skills and interest of the dealer," he said.

Make It Better
The well-known cloud-based options like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, GoToMeeting, and the like have set the bar for putting people in disparate locations on screen for a meeting. Some companies use all three. However, do not try to surpass or replace programs that already have a foothold in the market and the preferences of your customers. This is above your pay grade.

As Madaio noted, "Office technology vendors who try to out-engineer these tools are destined to struggle. Success, despite the provision of excellent service and customer-centricity, will likely be fleeting and hard to maintain as a profitable venture."

That's probably putting it mildly.

Instead, focus on how you can make the in-office or remote experience better. Listen to your customers to find out what they need so you can help provide it. Maybe you begin with training to ensure customers can quickly start meetings regardless of content or platform. Then, a few months down the road, you're the first call when customers want more microphones, better lights, new cameras, or bigger monitors.

Keep an Ear to the Ground
Another player to consider—and watch—is Ricoh.

"We have frequent conversations with dealers about how the marketplace is changing," Jennifer Healy, director channel and field marketing, Ricoh USA, told me in an email. She reported that the company is looking at the increase in hybrid learning and hybrid workplace environments. In each, she said, participants can be onsite and remote but still collaborate as a team.

Bear in mind that Ricoh typically doesn't discuss or roll anything out until it is ready for customers to use right away. They don't beta-test a concept that needs a few more months of development. Over the past year, we have had hints that Ricoh has been looking into

specialized meeting rooms for video conferencing, but the company is still quiet about this—which may mean a lot either way in a fast-moving field where the technology is far from being stable. Keep an eye on Ricoh.

Healy also noted that smart dealers should keep an ear to the ground, listening to customers to make informed decisions about adding remote meeting offerings based on demand in their market.

In my experience, this tells me the company sees the potential but may be waiting until the market is better defined so its technology will deliver a clear advantage for dealers and end-customers. Also interesting is that many Ricoh customers use its high-volume, high-speed digital presses. At least some of these customers have sophisticated videoconferencing needs, so the company may be developing solutions that fit both the dealer and the commercial/high-volume print markets.

"Visual communications offerings are growing in popularity to help overcome barriers to collaboration and support companies' focus on moving forward," said Healy.

No matter how you look at the future of video conferencing, the next few years will be interesting for remote communications. Soon to be absent will be the gaffes, snafus, and glitches that are common today. While it won't be as good as the Holodeck on the Starship Enterprise, video conferencing may well be something we all look forward to—instead of dreading.

All we can say is stay tuned.