

It's time to put it to work.



Waving Hello, From a Distance

By MICHEL MARRIOTT
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WHEN Melody Wilt, a new grandmother, made the 10-hour drive from her home near Reading, Pa., to her daughter's house in Chapin, S.C., for Thanksgiving, she took along more than a 20-pound smoked turkey.

She went bearing a U.S.B. Web camera, sophisticated teleconferencing software and an Internet-inspired vision that will allow her to continue visiting even after she returns home. "I want him to be able to see me, to hear my voice," she said of her 3-week-old grandson, Joseph Sinclair Lewis. "I want to be able to read stories to him and share some of his firsts."

Mrs. Wilt, a manager at a regional educational services agency, said videoconferencing technology had gotten so good, so affordable and so easy to install and use that she is comfortable using it to open a two-way video window between her and her grandson when she is unable to visit in person.

"It's great timing that this technology has gotten to this point," Mrs. Wilt, 52, said shortly before making the drive south with her husband, Arthur. "It seems like the perfect way for me to see all the many changes he is going to go through."

There are no definitive numbers on how many people use Web-based videoconferencing. But there is anecdotal evidence that face-to-face electronic communication is gaining a foothold beyond the executive suite, and that the typical home users are no longer the stereotypical geeks straining to see each other over crude Webcams connected by sluggish modems.

"It was in a novelty phase," John Carey, a professor of communications and media management at the Fordham University Graduate School of Business Administration, said of the first wave of Webcam use. "It was mostly techies and exhibitionists, people who show themselves, and pornography and all of that."

Today's consumers have more options. A high-end system can cost as much as a flat-screen plasma television. Some modestly priced units, including the Packet8 VideoPhone, plug into an electrical outlet and use the Internet.

Long a mainstay of science fiction, the concept of being able to see and speak with someone over a vast distance, or even a short one, languished for decades in laboratories and tangles of technological choke points. Chief among them was adequate bandwidth, said Robert C. Hagerty, chief executive of Polycom, the market leader in videoconferencing, which makes the \$149 PVX system that Mrs. Wilt has in Pennsylvania and is installing for her grandson in South Carolina.

"You need a good connection," he said, acknowledging that broadband adoption in North America is rapidly increasing. He noted that today's typical high-speed connection is capable of carrying, in both directions, at least the 128 kilobits of data per second that "rich

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media" requires. In other words, that is the baseline for television-quality color images that sync reasonably well with equally clear audio.

Additionally, Mr. Hagerty said, significant improvements in videoconferencing software, like the new H.264 video compression standard, are helping to make the technology more efficient and accessible.

"We talk with our hands; we show our body language," he said. "We lose all those things in a phone call."

With improved videoconferencing, he added, "we get them all back."

Professor Carey said consumers' desire for videoconferencing had been partly stoked by the popularity of instant text messaging, which has been adding video capabilities. Even blogs, he said, are including video.

"What didn't work three years ago now works reasonably well," he said.

Professor Carey also noted that early tests of videophones found that many people, particularly women, were put off by the prospect of being seen by callers before they were prepared to be seen. "A lot of people were concerned that they'd get a videophone call and they'd be in a bathrobe or their underwear."

Those concerns have been eased by technology, he said. Most modern systems give users the option of transmitting their images.

In Eagan, Minn., a suburb of St. Paul, Greg Scott, the unofficial information technician for the Eagan Hills Alliance Church, is setting up high-speed videoconferencing to help local families electronically visit loved ones stationed in Iraq.

Mr. Scott, a member of the church and operator of an information technology company in the area, said he conducted a fairly successful test of the system a month ago using limited bandwidth. But his expectations rose recently when a local telecommunications company donated a T1 connection for the project.

"This is going to let lots of soldiers in Iraq with families here talk face-to-face," Mr. Scott said.

Bryan Martin, the chief executive of 8x8 in Santa Clara, Calif., the maker of the Packet8 videophones, said it was not surprising that face-voice communication had a powerful hold on people. The box in which its phones are sold is covered with almost a dozen words that mean hello in various languages. More telling, perhaps, is the invitation printed on the box to "speak in color."



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