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## Businesses turn to virtual meetings

In today's fast-paced business environment, staying connected with fellow co-workers and customers is increasingly essential to a firm's success. However, busy schedules can sometimes make it difficult for a business to keep in touch with these important people.

Furthermore, many businesses are realizing the negative effects of rising gas prices and other increases in travel expenses. Earlier this year, the IRS increased the standard mileage rate to 50.5 cents, up two cents from 2007. In an effort to reduce costs, many businesses are turning to alternative solutions, such as conference calls.

Conference calls instantly connect geographically diverse employees, customers, partners or vendors on one phone call. Unlike business trips, they can be planned quickly, and users can easily dial in to join the call.

Carl Medley serves as chief business strategist for Customer Communication Group in Columbia. He helps businesses across the state develop and implement organizational-improvement, communication and training strategies to reach their goals. Medley conducts periodic and regularly scheduled conference calls each month to organize and manage various project teams and to check in with clients.

"Conference calls are easy to use, are convenient to access, offer many beneficial features and are much more cost-effective than traveling for a face-to-face meeting every time I need to discuss business with clients," said Medley. "I've found conference calls to be an easy way to frequently collaborate and do business in a productive manner—regardless of participants' travel schedules."

Medley uses a conference calling service from Socket, a Columbia-based telephone and Internet service provider. Like many other providers, Socket charges no set-up fee and requires no contract or commitment, so Medley can use the service as often or as seldom as he needs it.

Convenient features are often available for conference-call moderators, including a secure interface to monitor participation, mute callers and see who is speaking at any given time. Calls also can be recorded to share with colleagues who were unable to join the virtual meeting.

"Oftentimes, my customers and I are able to accomplish just as much with a conference call as with a face-to-face meeting," said Medley. "With this system, we can easily gather to communicate, even if we are hundreds of miles apart."

- Carl Medley

Because conference calls can be set up with little cost or risk, it's a valuable service when a traditional face-to-face meeting is inconvenient or impossible. Medley believes that as travel expenses continue to rise, more and more businesses will realize the virtues of conference calling.





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