

:: Customer Premises & Service Bureau Conferencing Bridges

(Edited from a white paper by Nancy Pieretti of Octave Communications)

The emergence of IP, the **convergence** of voice and data, and new technologies such as **spontaneous mobile conferencing** are starting to drive the conferencing market in new and exciting directions. In fact, these technology innovations are affecting the way commerce is transacted and how employees, customers, and suppliers interact with one another.

Today business is operating with a simple, perhaps obvious, maxim: Make it as easy as possible for the customer to come to you. Keep your front door open to the customer; for most global companies, that front door is still the telephone and the host of applications that rely on voice communications.

Conferencing is one of the business world's core enabling applications so it is imperative that users have available to them the entire suite of capabilities needed, ranging from **operator set-up** and handled voice conference calls to **reservationless** conference capabilities (a technology that allows people to meet on a conference call without having to get assistance from an operator), through to the ability to launch and participate in **rich media** calls, including what is often called **Web conferencing** or **data conferencing**.

Description: At the core of these **conference calls**, be they voice, data, video, or any combination of the three, is a device called a conferencing **bridge**. Such devices can be located at service bureau billed to many customers on a per-minute usage basis, on a single customer's premises for exclusive use, or hosted off of a customer's premises by a service bureau for a single customer. **Bridges** are an extension of a company's telecommunications infrastructure, and as such require special installation and services.

Issues: Like many other telecommunications services which are critical to a company's business, yet not part of their core competency, conferencing bridges are typically outsourced, hosted, or made available through one or more service bureaus. While there was a trend over the past five years toward local as well as global businesses purchasing their own conferencing bridges, that trend was reversed 18 months ago, with the majority of such devices now outsourced or hosted. In some cases, customers "pushed" the bridges they purchased out the door to hosting services. The decision to purchase a bridge or have it hosted depends on the style or, even more, the competency of the buyer. Buyers should ask their supplier to give them access to customers who have done both or, better yet, tried one approach and then switched.

Buyers should be aware of the trends in their communications patterns before purchasing a bridge. Are you migrating your voice traffic to IP? — If so you will

likely migrate to **VoIP**, and will need a bridge that supports both circuit-switched voice and VoIP. Is your company beginning to rely on **Web-based conferencing** as an adjunct to your voice conference calls, or as an enhancement to voice calls? — If so, ask the bridge manufacturers you're evaluating if they support all of the collaborative services you expect to migrate to.

Finally, typically bridges cost between \$500 and \$800 per **port** (per phone line supported) today. This is due in large part to today's primary reliance on hardware. As the market migrates to **VoIP** and **rich media** services, a whole new crop of bridge makers is emerging who will deliver "**rich media servers**," which will do much of what today's hardware bridges do. These new devices are expected not only to expand the capabilities of bridges to integrate voice with **Web conferencing** and video, but also to be **software-based**. As such, TeleSpan expects the average price per port for bridges to drop to well below \$500 per port by mid-2003.

TeleSpan Home	Table	Next Tutorial	Guide TOC	Next Ad
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