



Driving Performance: Facing the Customer

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Facing the Customer

Instant Messaging Unites Work Groups and Inspires Collaboration

By [John Pallatto](#)

Instant messaging (IM) has long been an ad hoc service that corporate groups spontaneously implemented to make it easy to work together, whether the team resides in one building or is scattered across the globe.

It was so easy to set up America Online, Yahoo!, or Microsoft Network accounts that instant messaging use swept through many organizations before the IT department knew what was happening. In fact, it was probably being used in IT at least as much as in any other department.

Most managers took the view that if it supported team collaboration, and it did not compromise corporate security, why intervene?

But that laissez faire attitude is rapidly passing away as corporations recognize that inescapable security, regulatory, knowledge management, and intellectual property issues exist that now require them to manage the use of instant messaging in the workplace.

At the same time, enterprise software developers seized upon IM as a major new productivity application and market opportunity. They now offer IM as a part of packages that could be implemented within corporate firewalls and offer additional features, including voice, video, and whiteboard.

Thomas Weisel Tracks Messages

Using IM to communicate with customers came naturally to the traders and brokers at Thomas Weisel Partners, a San Francisco-based merchant bank. Many customers don't want to be troubled by phone calls or lengthy e-mails. But they are willing to chat with their dealers to get the latest information about their accounts and make decisions.

However, the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) regulations could view correspondence via instant message as a written communication that the company must preserve for review at a later date, explains Pamela Houseley, Thomas Weisel compliance director.

The SEC wants companies to preserve written communications so that regulators can check whether brokers violate rules by making exaggerated claims, false statements, or unwarranted guarantees of investment performance, Houseley says.

In November 2001, Thomas Weisel implemented Facetime Communication Inc.'s IM Auditor, which automatically routes instant messages exchanged by employees and customers to a central archive. This allows the company to retrieve and review any messages to ensure they comply with SEC regulations.

The key advantage of the Facetime system is that it allows the company's bankers and brokers to keep using AOL, Yahoo!, or MSN as their IM clients of choice, she says. Facetime recently added support for the Reuters IM client, which is also utilized within the securities industry.

"The beauty of Facetime is that it can capture all of those instant messages regardless of what product people are using," Houseley says. "I could force people here to use AOL, but I couldn't force their clients to use AOL," she notes. The company's traders will use whatever IM client is most convenient for their clients.

"The benefit is we can now retain and review instant messages, which is not an SEC requirement yet, but I think it will be," she says. Other firms have also started archiving instant messages, so it is good to be ahead of the game, she notes.

The company looked at several other IM logging applications, but at the time Facetime was the only available system that worked with the public IM clients, notes Beth Cannon, IT manager with Thomas Weisel in San Francisco. The others required the use of a proprietary IM client. "We would have had to move to their proprietary client and made our business clients move to that technology client as well, which was not an option," she notes. "We wanted to have as little impact on our users as possible and be able to comply with the written communications rule."

Another advantage of Facetime was that it worked with the e-mail screening system that Thomas Weisel had installed. The product, Assentor, produced by SRA International Inc., was also designed for financial services firms concerned about regulatory compliance.

With Assentor and Facetime working together, the compliance office can use one interface to retrieve any e-mail or IM conversation to check for any rules violations, says Cannon.

All of the messages are stored on write-once compact discs for long-term storage. SEC rules requires a company to retain the records for at least three years, or for as long as there is an open inquiry for a particular set of records, Cannon explains.

While the IM archiving system has been in place for a year, Cannon says she isn't aware of any of the company's IM records coming under regulatory review. Archived e-mail records have come under regulatory review.

Ryder Shares Knowledge

Ryder System Inc.'s Supply Chain Solutions Division took a different approach than Thomas Weisel because it wanted to take advantage of the security and application integration advantages of using an internal corporate IM system.

Ryder, based in Miami, Fla., selected the IBM/Lotus Sametime IM and Web conferencing application because it offered the most effective means of knowledge sharing and work group collaboration, says David Baildon, group director of product and knowledge management.

Sametime helps the division gather and share information about the transportation and supply chain management industry, which in turn helps the company create supply chain systems for customers, according to Baildon.

Security was the main reason why Ryder went with a proprietary IM system, Baildon says. Sametime works behind the firewall and supports encryption to protect the information that is exchanged between work sites across the Web.

However, the company also wanted to take advantage of the application-sharing and online meeting capabilities that are built into Sametime, he says.

"The idea was that we would allow people to easily find the other people who were online, to chat with them and get their experience or their comments or suggestions," says Baildon. The application-sharing capability allows people to organize meetings to share data in spreadsheets, charts, and presentations.

Ryder was already a Lotus Notes shop, so it made sense to implement Sametime as an extension of the company's existing environment.

If the company wanted to use public instant messaging networks like AOL or Yahoo!, Ryder still would have had to implement other collaboration applications, such as Web conferencing services, to get what Sametime provides in the same package, says Baildon.

The company also uses a related application, Lotus Quickplace, a Web-based team collaboration workspace that lets users share information and edit documents online.

People at Ryder also use Sametime to cut down on "phone tag" and to reduce long-distance and international calling expenses, Baildon notes. Rather than just trying to call a colleague, Baildon says he first checks to see if that person is online in Sametime. If so, Baildon will initiate an IM conference. Or if a phone call might be more effective, he will check to see if the person is free to take a call before dialing the phone.

If he wants to arrange a phone conference with a colleague in Mexico, for example, he uses Sametime IM to make sure the phone call originates in the U.S. rather than in Mexico to gain a 45 percent savings in international phone charges.

Since people are able to meet to solve problems over the Web, this has eliminated a considerable amount of travel time and expense.

In addition, Sametime is used as an online training tool, which further reduces the need for travel and expenses associated with on-site training.

"We have been able to reduce our travel expense to where we are coming in about 20 percent under budget this year because we have gone to distance learning using Sametime," Baildon says.

So far, about 2,000 people in the Supply Chain Solutions division have started using Sametime since Ryder began implementing the collaboration system two years ago. Baildon says the company will continue to expand access to Sametime as the division budget allows.

The challenge that remains, he says, is to get everyone in the division to work with Sametime. "We still have people out there who have the application who haven't really embraced it as many others have," says Baildon.

"If you don't use it, you don't get the benefit of it," he observes. "So a big part of our effort is to spread the word. Show them the value of it. Hound them, whatever it takes so they get on board."

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