

HELLO, CENTRAL

Phone Conferencing Tips BY LOUIS JAFFE

MOST PEOPLE HAVE HEARD the term "conference call" and know it means a group phone call. Several participants in different places, connected simultaneously, can hear and converse with each other. Few of us have been in a conference call, however. Fewer still know that it's one of the most powerful, easiest to use, and least expensive communication tools, well within the means of briarpatch businesses, public-interest groups, and even families.

(The terms "audioconference" and "audio teleconference" are synonymous with "conference call" and I will use them interchangeably.)

Although it's been around for years, conference calling isn't a highly visible industry. Say "teleconference," and most people think video — yet two-way video is still technically difficult and prohibitively expensive. Audio is the workhorse — simple, cost-effective, and usage is exploding. Ordinary telephones work fine, and a conference call can include any phone anywhere in the world. Some calls are for as few as 3 to 5 people, but the typical group size is 12 to 16. Occasionally hundreds of people may be on one call.

How can 16 people, let alone a hundred, talk together on one phone call? With groups up to about 16, it's really no problem. You can converse pretty much as you would in an in-person meeting and not worry about it — you'll seldom have more than one person speaking at a time. The interconnect equipment (called a bridge, because it bridges together multiple lines) is set up to minimize background noise. It does this by transmitting the voices of only the one or two people who're actually speaking, while keeping the rest of the group in a listen-only mode. When a new person starts talking, the bridge instantly raises that line to full volume and fades back the person who just quit talking. Without this technique, the cumulative background noise of all the rooms people are calling from would be overwhelming.

To handle larger groups you need a more formal protocol: a moderator who calls on people to speak in turn, and a method for those who want to speak to be recognized. *Robert's Rules of Order* works surprisingly well.

A typical conference call, the monthly board-of-directors' meeting, goes something like this:

At 6 PM Pacific time, from the desk in my study in San Francisco, I dial an 800 number and am answered by a brief recorded message: "Welcome. Please stay on the line. Your conference will begin shortly." Hold music comes on.

At about the same moment — 8 PM central time — others are calling the same number: Bob, our chairman, Jenny, the comptroller, Alan and Richard, the other two regular board members. Richard is on the road this night, expected to call from Houston.

After a half a minute the music stops, and I can hear the three people who've already called in. Bob and Jenny are at home in Kansas. Alan is phoning from his lakeside summer cottage somewhere in Missouri. They're discussing the weather, the kids — typical

pre-meeting small talk. We hear a short electronic beep, signaling that someone else has been connected.

Bob: "Hello, who's just joined us?"

"Hi, Bob, this is Richard. The plane was late, of course — I just made it to the hotel."

"Hi Dick. Okay, everyone's here, let's call it to order."

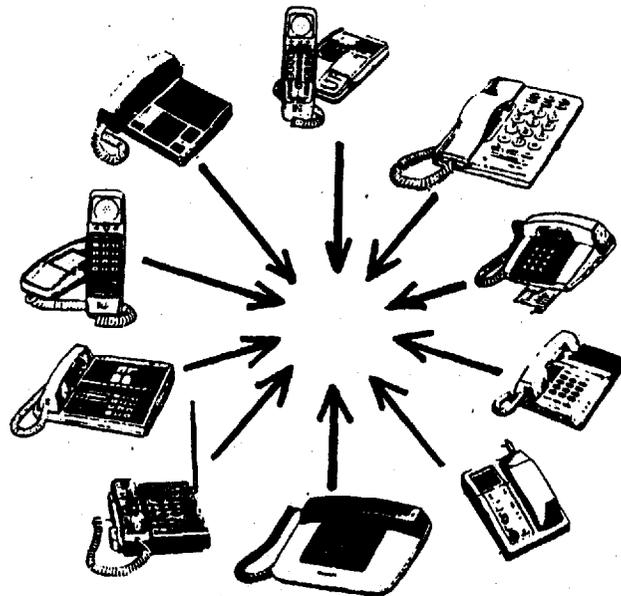
For the next hour and a half, business is conducted as at any board meeting. Motions are taken and votes recorded following Robert's rules of order. An occasional joke or aside keeps the proceedings from becoming deadly. Forty-five minutes in, I'm getting cauliflower ear and a crick in my neck. I switch on my speakerphone and hang up the receiver, so I can listen and talk hands-free. At an hour and twenty minutes the meeting begins to wind down.

Bob: "Anyone have anything else?"

Everyone: "Nothing at my end. That's all I have," etc. Bob: "Guess that's it. Thanks everybody. G'night."

A week later my director's-fee check comes in the mail.

Meet-me-bridge call. Callers dial into an automatic switching area that has been reserved for their use. No operator is required.



Kevin Kelly

In almost any profession I can think of, the most underrated tool is the telephone. Cheap, fast, dependable, universal, and incredibly productive. And it has hidden talent, outlined here. It's taken two pioneers in computer conferencing to remind me of the underutilized virtues of telephone conferences. Larry Brilliant, co-founder of the WELL, moved into computer conferencing after using telephone conferences almost daily for years. He referred all my questions about telephone nets to Louis Jaffe, who moved in the opposite direction, from co-launching Chariot (the Colorado computer conferencing system closest to the WELL in atmosphere and structure) into audio-conferencing as the most effective populist network. He now works with a teleconferencing service from San Francisco.

Kevin Kelly

This board meeting was a typical no-frills, small-group conference call. Five of us met for an hour and 20 minutes. The total cost was about \$125, of which something over half went to the teleconferencing company for access to its "bridge"; the rest went for ordinary long-distance calls from our phones to the bridge, a procedure known as a "meet-me conference." Travel to an in-person meeting would typically have cost four to ten times as much.

Above this minimal level of service you have operator assistance, which is still the most popular type of conference call. Either the operator places a call to each participant (operator-assisted dial-out), or participants phone in and the operator greets them (operator-assisted dial-in).

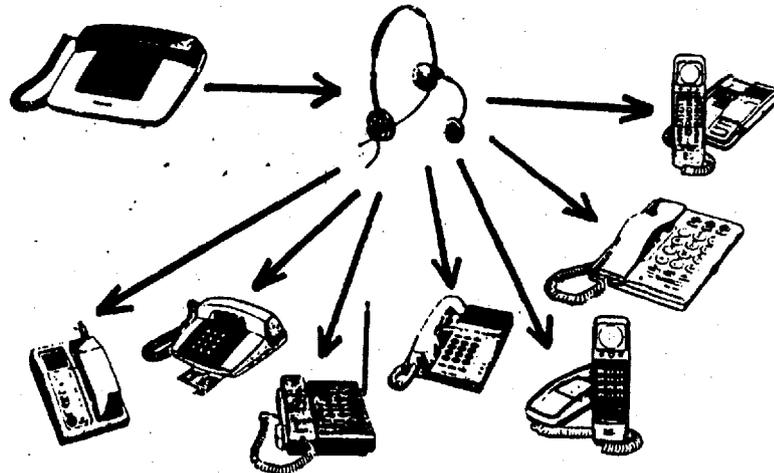
Meeting by phone is a lot easier for me than flying from San Francisco to our head office in Kansas City every month, and it saves the company a lot of money. On the other hand, at least twice a year I do fly to K.C., and we all converge at a private dining room in a hotel to have dinner followed by the meeting. Our occasional face-to-face meetings give us a chance to party and relax together, to keep faces attached to voices. Between the in-person get-togethers, we meet half a dozen times by phone, doing probably 80 percent of our routine business with greatly reduced hassle, time, and expense. It would be a drag, after all, if we never saw each other. The operative principle seems to be: Alternate in-person meetings with tele-meetings. As a rule of thumb, a ratio of one in-person session to every four teleconferences is often workable.

WHAT'S IT GOOD FOR?

Amazing things have been taught by phone, including master classes of cello and piano technique. Executives attend tele-seminars without leaving their desks; the guest lecturer may be anywhere in the world. Support groups use teleconferences for mutual self-help on a vast range of topics.

Disasters and crises touch off urgent teleconferences, with people calling in from phonebooths, cars, planes and boats, tropical resorts, wherever the bad news catches them.

Press conferences are staged by conference call instead of in a banquet room. Costs are reduced an order of magnitude compared to an in-person event, yet attendance may actually be higher — reporters can participate without leaving their desks. For smaller companies or public-interest groups struggling to get their message out, this



Operator-managed audioconference call. Initiated by one caller, the operator rings each member and adds them to the meeting.

factor can make the difference between coverage and no coverage.

The vast majority of teleconferences are simply routine business meetings. Most are done by commercial companies, either as motivation-builders — often for salespeople in the field — or to tackle operational problems. Nonprofit and self-help groups may have different goals, but their communication needs are much the same: motivation and management.

Teleconferencing means freedom to hold meetings in response to events, unhampered by worries of who's where. It offers a new power to organize over distance, for either special events or ongoing work, and added leverage for scarce operating funds.

I've seen audioconferencing successfully used by rural healthcare workers, medical grant award committees, a single-parent support group, a fairness-in-media organization, ecology action groups, boards of directors of schools and colleges, alumni committees, and a college athletic association. If you're involved with activities of this type and are not audioconferencing regularly, you probably should be.

DIFFERENT FLAVORS

Conference-call service providers are a little like restaurants: Some have white tablecloths, a home-like atmosphere and an attentive staff; others make you carry your own tray, line up at the hot table, and sit at bare formica.

The difference between conference-call companies is the user support they provide. Besides bridging phone lines, what are they doing for you? As a teleconference user

you have four general levels of support to consider:

- **LOW.** By prearrangement with a service provider, callers dial into a bridge that has been reserved for their use. Calls are automatically answered and interconnected. Usually the lowest-cost form of service, this is called a "meet-me" conference.
- **MEDIUM.** The operator's role is similar to that played in a person-to-person call. There is no effort to establish an ongoing relationship with the user; each transaction starts from scratch. Immediately prior to the call, the organizer of this teleconference gives the operator names and numbers of persons participating. The operator calls each person in turn, putting everyone on hold till the group is complete, conducts brief roll call, and leaves the call. No extended services, such as audiotaping, are available. Suitable only for smaller groups; as the number of participants mounts, the process of calling each person in turn while everyone else holds for the start of the conference becomes too time-consuming.
- **HIGH.** The teleconferencing company gives regular users a service representative with whom they can deal on a continuing basis, and will keep user participant lists for calls on file, so they don't have to be resubmitted for every call. If requested, operators monitor the entire conference, immediately call back anyone who's accidentally disconnected, and perform other services like audiotaping the proceedings and sending copies to participants.
- **CUSTOM.** The service provider consults



extensively with the client to plan a special event, such as a tele-press conference. Advanced technical arrangements may include telephone-to-radio broadcast hookups, satellite video with conference-call audio, or 900-area-code pay-per-dialup events. The telephone operator is often replaced by a professional announcer acting as master-of-ceremonies.

HOW MUCH DOES IT COST?

A ballpark figure for bridging with operator assistance is about \$15 per hour per person, to which are added the long distance (LD) charges to dial from each site to the bridge. Typically the minimum bridging fee is for 20 minutes, with charges above that pro-rated to the nearest minute.

During the business day (the maximum-rate period) calling between almost any two points in the U.S. runs about \$15 per hour. Thus, for a weekday conference call, you're looking at \$15 for bridging plus \$15 for LD, or \$30 per hour per person. To find the total group cost we multiply this figure by the number of participants, and find that a group of five people scattered around the country can talk for one hour for \$150; a group of fifteen would pay \$450.

There are few breaks on bridging fees, but evening and weekend calls will get you the typical 40 percent and 60 percent discounts off long-distance tolls, bringing the total cost down to about \$21 per hour per person, or just over \$100 per hour for five people. You often pay less for long-distance if you dial in to the bridge than if the conference-call service calls you. Calling in, you use the carrier of your choice (MCI, Sprint, etc.), and are billed directly (for the long distance, but not for the bridging) by the carrier. If instead you are called from the bridge, the conference-call service at their option may mark up the LD. Practices and markups vary. You can profit by doing your own rate comparisons and questioning service providers closely.

Although they could save money by dialing in rather than having the service company dial them, many users still prefer to be called. For one thing, attendance figures are often higher if the participants don't all have to remember to dial a certain number at a certain time. For another, the long-distance charges all go on one itemized statement instead of being billed back to each participant. Due to fragmentation in the telecom industry, it often costs twice as much to call a town within your area code, just 50 miles away, as it does to call thousands of miles across the country. Conference calling can be a big timesaver for local groups, but the current illogical rate structure makes it somewhat less cost-effective for them.

WHERE TO GO FOR SERVICE

American Teleconferencing Services (ATS), Overland Park, Kansas. I am part-owner of this company. We do all kinds of audioconferences, from very small to very large. We have our own switching center and operators, tied into the phone network. Call 800/776-0700.

Darome Teleconferencing Services. Our competitor. Try both of us — we each do things a bit differently. Call 800/327-6631.

AT&T. They have two conference-call arms, completely independent of one another. One is the operator-controlled conferencing that's been around for ages; the other, Alliance, uses newer computer-based hardware. Alliance has somewhat better audio quality and more flexible service options, and also costs more. AT&T doesn't provide the same level of personal service as some, but they do stand ready to handle any and all comers at short notice, 24 hours a day. Probably best for a quickie, generic conference call. Call 800/225-0233 to get an AT&T conferencing center. AT&T Alliance is 800/544-6363.

DO-IT-YOURSELF TELECONFERENCING

There are ways to put together your own small-scale conference calls without paying bridging fees.

- **Three-way service from local phone company.** Part of the enhanced-service spectrum that also includes call-waiting and call-forwarding, three-way enables you to call one party, put them on hold by depressing the switch hook, call another party, then confer with both. Only a conventional single-line phone is needed. The service costs around \$3.50 a month.

- **2-line phone set with conference feature.** If you have two phone lines into your home or office, you can buy a phone set that will do a conference between parties on both lines, plus yourself. It's even theoretically possible to do a three-way call on each line, then bridge them in your phone set for a five-party call. Radio Shack recently had a two-line phone with conferencing on sale for \$69.95. The electronics in cheap phones don't do as good a job as professional teleconferencing bridges, however.

- **PBX with conferencing capability.** PBXs (multi-line switching units for offices) often have the built-in capability to conference three or more lines. These capabilities usually go unused, because they require some technical sophistication to operate. It's easier to call a service and say "do it." Nevertheless, the potential is there in many office switchboards. ■

Tap into a worldwide network built on controlled anarchy & nearly free access

Trying to explain Usenet is like trying to paint a fart. Part of the trouble is that Usenet is a decentralized, ad hoc invention that is beyond any individual person's knowledge, and it changes daily. Further difficulties arise when you believe that it is also The Future.

Start with: it's a teleconferencing system where everyone types in messages using their personal computers. The comments are sent to volunteering main-frame computers and distributed worldwide to "mailing lists" of subscribers. What the subscribing users get each day are electronically distributed journals made up of letters, announcements, and (generally) short articles on a particular subject. Sometimes there is an editor (moderator), but usually there is not — part of the anarchistic tendency.

I get mail from folks all over the country, sent to me via Usenet through the WELL. It's just about the only kind of mail I will answer, because it is so convenient to do so. I can send mail to almost any technically oriented professional, and it is likely to be the only mail he/she will answer. (You'll notice long gibberish-looking Usenet addresses with many Is and @s within them appearing on people's business cards now.) Together, the WELL and Usenet have superceded any printed publication as the single source yielding the most tips, leads, and pointers to stuff that eventually appears in Whole Earth Review.

Robert Horvitz, who telecommunes with us through the WELL from Washington, DC, has become an expert explorer of Usenet, primarily through self-education. I found it much easier — in fact essential — to have a Usenet veteran at my side to guide me through the labyrinth of commands and Sphinx-like riddles demanding the proper keystrokes to get in. Anyway you go, it ain't designed to be easy. Despite — or because — of that, the Usenet community has attracted a remarkable subset of helpful and extremely informative citizens. —Kevin Kelly

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