

Ways to Meet There When You're Here

BY LEON ERLANGER

Earlier this year, we took a look at four leading Web-conferencing services from Genesys, Microsoft, Raindance, and WebEx ("Take a Meeting Online," January 2004). Since that story, Raindance has released its Meeting Edition, which far surpasses its previous offerings. So we decided to pit it against two other new services in this growing category, aveComm and Macromedia Breeze Live.

AVECOMM

Atinav's aveComm started as a development platform for adding Web-conferencing capabilities to existing business applications, such as CRM. The company put together an interface for demo purposes, then recently began marketing the entire solution as a behind-the-firewall installation for enterprises and a service for small businesses or workgroups. The service has its pluses, but it is still in an early stage of development compared with Raindance and WebEx.

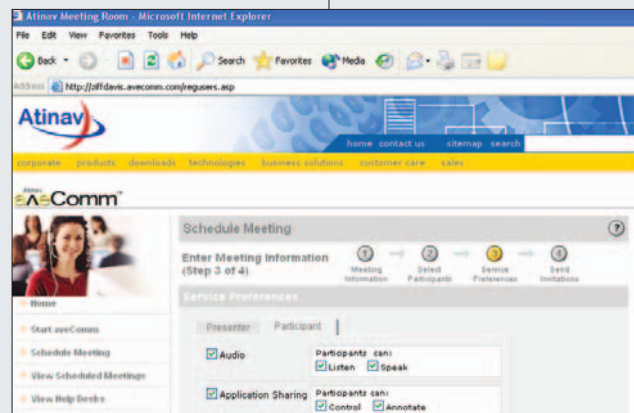
aveComm's strengths include its instant-meeting capabilities and excellent application sharing. The latter is especially important for this service, because application sharing is the only way to run your PowerPoint presentations, Web tours, and just about anything else. You also get whiteboard and annotation tools, individual and group chat, and file-transfer capabilities. You don't get polls, live video conferencing, quizzes, PSTN inte-

gration, or ways to show presentations other than through application sharing.

The meeting controls are decent. You set up rights during the meeting activation or scheduling process, granting presenter and participant permissions for application shar-

ing, annotation, and file sharing. During the meeting, the presenter controls most functions but can delegate host duties to another user as needed. During application sharing, participants can request temporary control, and the host can provide that as well.

ATINAV'S AVECOMM lets you assign detailed meeting permissions during the scheduling process.



There are several quirks, however. aveComm depends heavily on Voice over IP. You can use VoIP to call out to one or more regular phones, but in order to see who's connected by phone, VoIP must be used by the host. We found the

VoIP performance variable; it worked well only some of the time. Other times the host was barely audible. The interface also has some strange conventions. For example, if someone initiates a meeting by calling someone else, the second party, not the caller,

becomes the host. This seems counterintuitive, and confused us until we learned the reason: The feature is borrowed from aveComm's help desk applications, in which the calling customer wants the help desk to assume control.

An online scheduler imports entries from your Microsoft Outlook address book and places scheduled meetings in your Outlook calendar. You can also send e-mails with meeting links to participants. But you can't schedule a meeting from within Outlook (as you can

with Raindance), and you can't schedule recurring meetings.

Atinav claims it will fix a lot of these quirks and add more capabilities in future releases. Until then, aveComm may work very well as a development platform and behind-the-firewall solution, but not as a service. More mature solutions are available.

aveComm

\$40 per user per month (five-user minimum). Atinav Inc., www.avecomm.com. ●●○○○

MACROMEDIA BREEZE LIVE

Like aveComm, Macromedia Breeze Live is in its first version as a service and has some excellent features and some troublesome quirks. Overall, it shows a lot of potential as a multimedia collaboration platform.

Breeze Live is one component of a larger platform that includes Breeze Presentation and Breeze Training. Presentation is a PowerPoint plug-in that lets you add voice, video, audio, surveys, and quizzes to PowerPoint slides and package it all as a self-running Flash presentation. Training is a platform for setting up and managing e-learning courses. All three components can access a Breeze content library, to which you can upload and manage fully searchable presentations and other content for reuse in other Breeze collaborative functions.

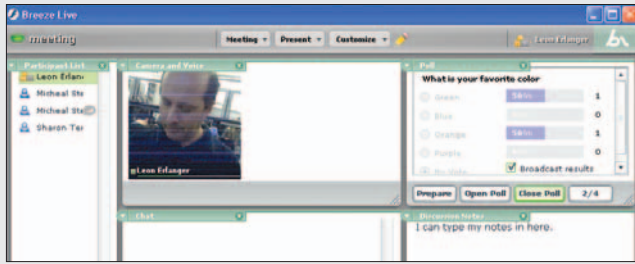
Breeze Live is the Web-conferencing component, and it's geared principally for presenter-dominated events rather

SCORECARD: WEB CONFERENCING

- — EXCELLENT
- — VERY GOOD
- — GOOD
- — FAIR
- — POOR

	Scheduling and setup	Web conference management	Collaboration	Vide Conferencing	Audio Integration	Recording	Administration and reporting	Ease of use	OVERALL
aveComm	●●●	●●●	●●●	N/A	N/A	●●	●●	●●●	●●
Macromedia Breeze Live	●●●	●●●	●●●	●●●●	N/A	●●●	●●●	●●●	●●●
Raindance Meeting Edition	●●●●●	●●●●	●●●●	●●●●●	●●●●●	N/A	●●●●	●●●●	●●●●

* N/A—Not applicable: The product does not have this feature.



MACROMEDIA BREEZE LIVE has a very flexible and elegant interface that you can reconfigure to suit different types of collaboration.

than interactive meetings. It relies heavily on VoIP for audio conferences. You have to find your own service for typical PSTN-based audio conferencing, and there is no integration between PSTN and Web, as there is in Raindance.

As you would expect, Breeze Live employs Macromedia Flash both for the interface and presentation format. Breeze Live offers slide presentations, application sharing, Web tours, polling, instant messaging, chat, file sharing, whiteboard, and note taking. It has some nice administration and reporting features, too, letting you assign passwords to users, limit meetings to designated users, and assemble users into groups.

As with aveComm, Outlook integration is limited. You can schedule meetings at the Breeze Central site, which automatically sends out e-mails with meeting links to participants, and you can send out VCal events to add the meeting to their calendars, but you cannot create a meeting off-line in Outlook.

The Flash interface is very attractive, flexible, and easy to use. It includes a title bar on top; buttons for Slides, Screen Sharing, Collaboration, and Discussion at the bottom; and a central stage, which shows display areas (called pods) for the different types of content). As you switch from, say, the presentation layout to the collaboration layout, the pods reconfigure themselves instantly. Presenters can create customized pods and layouts, move layout buttons and windows around, and prepare presentations and take notes outside the staging area, so others can't see

them. The presenter can also broadcast a video, add live video of Webcam-enabled participants, and promote participants to presenters with one click.

We did, however find a number of things confusing. First, the only way to have a meeting of equals is to make everyone a presenter. We liked the PowerPoint plug-in and had a good time adding Flash video and audio to our presentation, only to find that we couldn't display the multimedia additions to the group in Breeze Live, but only as a standalone presentation. Web sharing let us type in only a single Web URL at a time—clicked links to other Web pages didn't get transmitted to participants—and each time we activated the feature, two browser screens popped up on every participant's display.

Despite these caveats, we're impressed with this service and look forward to future versions.

Macromedia Breeze Live

\$9,500 annually (for up to 10 concurrent users). Macromedia Inc., www.breezecentral.com. ●●●○○

RAINDANCE MEETING EDITION

In our previous review, we found Raindance Web Conferencing Pro Seminar functional but uninspiring. Since then, Raindance has released Meeting Edition, which represents a giant leap forward in multimedia and ease of use.

Raindance Meeting Edition is the best of the products we've tested for small, impromptu meetings (even better than WebEx, in fact). The interface

has been completely revamped, with a much more Windows-like feel and intuitive drop-down menus and task panes. Web/PSTN conferencing integration is top-notch. Icons tell presenters which participants are online and in audio conference, and you have the ability to mute and disconnect users directly from the Web.

One of the nicest new additions is live videoconferencing, with optional picture-in-picture and a unique feature that switches the video to the person talking. Raindance has added excellent Outlook integration, with a plug-in that lets you set up meetings in Outlook and then enters meeting times in participant's calendars automatically.

You get the usual PowerPoint slide and other document presentation. You also get whiteboard and application sharing, which has very good performance and lets you display small portions of your application while hiding the rest of your screen. Browser sharing was much easier to use and more practical than the same feature in Breeze Live. Only one screen comes up on participant displays, and presenters can lead the audience through a Web tour simply by clicking on links. Annotation is available at all times.

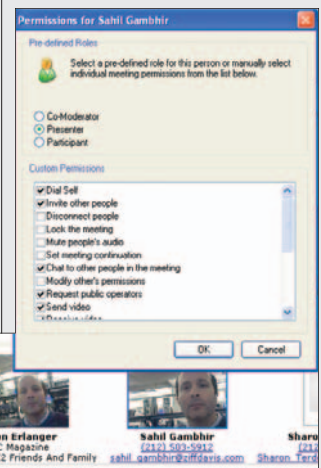
The interface is easy to get used to. A task pane on the left called the Meeting Bar shows live video, a list of participants, and your meeting's feature options. Click on a participant and you get options to chat, e-mail, save a business card file, or initiate a call.

It's easy to fire up instant meetings of equals. You simply send an e-mail invitation containing the meeting link and a conference ID. When the participant clicks on the link, the software is downloaded, the connection made, and a dialog box asks for the person's phone number, which is then dialed by the Raindance bridge. No need for everyone to call an audio-conference number.

Permissions are easy to set

and very flexible. You get default granular permissions for co-moderators, presenters, and participants, which you can adjust to your liking. During the meeting, the moderator can change the permissions of all or individual participants simply by clicking on a name, choosing Permissions, and checking appropriate boxes. Another nice feature: When a moderator or presenter brings a PowerPoint presentation or other document up for viewing, it is first displayed in a private window until the presenter decides to display it to the group. Slide thumbnails are still displayed below for navigation.

Overall, we still prefer the power of WebEx for a company's overall conferencing needs. But if users in your



RAINDANCE MEETING EDITION

comes with an excellent, intuitive interface that lets you reassign meeting permissions while in a conference.

organization lean more toward small, impromptu meetings, Raindance is worth a close look.

Raindance Meeting Edition

Five-user pack: \$274.95 a month plus 20 cents a minute for audio conferencing. 10-user pack: \$399.95 a month plus 18 cents a minute for audio. Raindance Communications Inc., www.raindance.com. ●●●●○

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www.raindance.com