



Application Story Cruise.com

WiredRed's e/pop Web Conferencing Supports Cruise.com's Sales Force Decentralization and Business Continuity Initiatives

The Internet has given many small companies a competitive edge because they are able to reach out to millions of consumers all over the world due to the lightening speed and intelligence of today's leading search engines. But the Internet has also given these same companies the ability to search for, recruit and train new employees they may not have found otherwise. It has helped organizations to decentralize operations, sometimes outsourcing core business functions and establishing some departments in various states or even abroad.

Once a company decides it is in its best interest to decentralize, the question becomes how to integrate all business processes, manage them centrally and make sure that all departments function as one cohesive business unit?

WiredRed's e/pop Web Conferencing has enabled one successful company, Cruise.com, to train and maintain a sales force spread throughout the U.S. Cruise.com was launched in 1998 and today is the largest web site specializing in discount cruise vacations. Vacations from 99 cruise lines can be booked and purchased online and offline by experienced agents. Approximately three years ago, Cruise.com, based in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, starting seeking sales agent talent outside of Florida and now recruits and contracts with agents from all over the U.S.

Once the sales function was, for the most part, decentralized, Cruise.com had to find a method in which to train the sales and customer service force, which numbers approximately 180, on its software and systems. Most importantly, the means by which to train new employees had to be extremely easy to use as well. Once the decision was made to incorporate web conferencing as the means by which to hold new agent training classes, it became a matter of whether to bring web conferencing in-house or to contract with a leading service provider that could host the application for Cruise.com.

Problem:

- Cruise.com required a less costly alternative to web conferencing services in order to provide comprehensive employee training

Solution:

- e/pop Web Conferencing, a full-featured, affordable, multiparty web and video conferencing software

Business & IT Benefits:

- e/pop allows Cruise.com to train up to 15 people in 40 hour sessions at a fraction of the cost of a managed service
- Located in Florida, e/pop supports Cruise.com business continuity efforts when the headquarters must evacuate due to inclement weather
- Cruise.com doesn't have to limit training sessions and employees are better trained and more productive as a result

“Initially, we weren’t set up to host our own conferencing application, and like our phone service, we decided that outsourcing this function was the way to go,” said Jose Grullon, the IT administrator at Cruise.com. “While our agents are experts in the cruise and travel industry, not all of them are highly technical. We had to find a fast and fairly inexpensive method in which to train new agents and to provide recurring, ongoing training to the entire department.”

Cruise.com researched web and video conferencing services and tried out several, however, because of the lengthy training sessions that last approximately 80 hours and include 10-15 people per session, services were far too costly. Cruise.com made the decision to bring the web conferencing application in-house after finding WiredRed’s e/pop Web Conferencing through a standard web search. Cruise.com found that e/pop has all the features they require for efficient training purposes, including application and desktop sharing, remote control and VoIP audio.

“We quickly realized that it would be much more cost-effective to own and manage the web conferencing application in-house,” said Grullon. “e/pop allows us the freedom to conduct trainings for new personnel, ongoing training and have company meetings whenever we need to without worrying about per-minute charges.”

New hires at Cruise.com must complete a 40-hour training program once they join the Cruise.com sales team. Vivian LaMadrid, the company’s corporate trainer, is responsible for making sure that new employees are fully trained and knowledgeable about not only the software and systems at Cruise.com, but also on the policies and procedures of various departments.

Cruise.com does employ a fully web-based, in-house reservation system that actually eliminates much of the cost and infrastructure, such as application servers, for the reservation process. The company’s Agent Booking Center (ABC) allows the agents to book the cruise while talking with the customer, and the Agent Booking Engine (ABE) is where the reservation information resides in a database format. A separate application, Consumer Booking Engine (CBE) allows customers to book their own cruises online. LaMadrid’s job is to make sure that all new agents are fully knowledgeable about how both the ABC and ABE systems work so that the Cruise.com customer booking and invoicing processes are seamless, quick and easy.

Web Conferencing Supports Business and Training Program Continuity

Doing business in the eye of hurricane country requires companies to have special business continuity and emergency plans in place for the lengthy hurricane season in Florida, and throughout the Southeast. Cruise.com relies upon its telephony systems, including phones, and Internet connectivity in order to support its web-based business model. Cruise.com’s co-location facility in Utah enables IT personnel to redirect phone lines in the case that they lose power or are evacuated from their offices in Fort Lauderdale.

“During hurricanes, we may still have power and dial tone, but when local authorities ask us to evacuate for safety purposes, we must leave our building until we have permission to return,” explained Grullon.

Organizations in the Southeast must be prepared for the onslaught of hurricanes, especially due the severity of seasonal hurricanes experienced in recent years. In the event of a weather-related emergency, Cruise.com’s web-based applications allows “business as usual” for Cruise.com employees that are based in other parts of the country or even for those that must work at home because of regional evacuations.

“Even during a hurricane, the show must go on,” said LaMadrid. “During one evacuation I was able to get home to Miami and continue the training session that was interrupted thanks to e/pop.”

For Cruise.com, the business continuity and the cost savings benefits of bringing their web conferencing application in-house was the right decision. e/pop Web conferencing is easy to use and just like training in a physical location, there are several “classrooms” set up, such as the Outlook Express Set-up Room, Trouble-shooting Room and Remote Assistance Room that only requires the trainee to click on the correct link to enter the training session.

Not only is e/pop Web Conferencing easy to use, its installation takes just minutes and upkeep and maintenance is minimal. Beyond the cost of the standard software license, Cruise.com’s IT staff installed e/pop on a dedicated PC and the company utilizes a dedicated T1 line for Internet connectivity.

As with any software application, the more you utilize it, the less it will cost in the long run. LaMadrid trains approximately 15 people in two week long sessions per month. If the company used a service to accommodate its current training schedule it would cost the company approximately \$10,000 per month. After purchasing e/pop to bring web conferencing in-house, the company now spends approximately \$7,200 per year on the software alone – less than what it would cost for two trainings.

“For Cruise.com, it wasn’t just about the money, but about providing complete, comprehensive and ongoing training to all new employees,” said LaMadrid. “When we used a service for training we had to limit it to very important meetings or initial training and had to eliminate recurring training sessions. Being able to provide more intensive training has benefited both the company from a productivity standpoint. Our new employees are better trained and therefore more equipped to do their jobs too.”

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