

Inside AT&T: Briefing Customers through Telepresence

Executive Summary

The AT&T Corporate Briefing Center (CBC) in Bedminster, N.J. plays a central role in building and strengthening client relationships and informing customers about AT&T solutions. But scheduling conflicts, cost and environmental concerns sometimes prevented AT&T executives, subject experts and even the customers themselves from attending a briefing in person. The answer is the AT&T Telepresence Solution®, an advanced video conferencing technology that enables distant attendees to participate as if they were in person. The company's use of telepresence in customer briefings is growing, both as an element of in-person briefings and as a substitute for travel.



Introduction

Customer relationships are vital to every business. At AT&T, success in establishing and strengthening key customer relationships requires the investment of time, talent and technology. At the heart of the process is the company's Corporate Briefing Center team.

Working closely with AT&T sales teams, senior executives and the customers themselves, briefing center professionals plan, organize and manage the presentations that inform customers about AT&T solutions and deepen personal and business connections. In 2011 the AT&T Corporate Briefing Center at Bedminster, N.J. conducted some 252 customer briefings – an average of more than one session every business day. Most briefings last a full day and engage two to twenty customer representatives.

"AT&T sales teams may want to position our senior leaders with their customers to increase their confidence in AT&T, or to uncover an opportunity," said Eileen Whelan, Briefing Center Consultant. "We have many repeat visits. Clients see their relationship with AT&T as strategic so they want to understand our direction and see the new solutions we are working on. Our goal here is to provide customized briefings that strengthen these relationships and accelerate sales."

The Challenge

The planning process begins with a meeting between briefing center staff and the customer sales team. As they tailor the agenda for each customer, the briefing center team must also identify, secure and prepare briefing presenters who are experts in such areas as product marketing, network operations, communications security and technology.

"We have a lot of challenges getting the right people in front of our customers due to schedule conflicts and travel restrictions," Whelan said. "The subject matter experts are geographically dispersed – from local to across the U.S. and around the world. These speakers have their normal day jobs that we must work around as well."

In an ideal world, customers would have ample time and money to meet AT&T executives and technical experts in Bedminster. AT&T subject experts would be readily available. But these resources are limited, and people must meet multiple and conflicting responsibilities. Together these factors add up to significant challenges for the briefing center team:

- **Scheduling.** With up to 20 customers and multiple AT&T presenters and executives to schedule, finding a date when all participants can travel to the briefing center can be difficult.
- **Travel cost.** The cost of travel in dollars, time and potential delays can put this option out of reach for some customers, particularly in a difficult economy.
- **Sustainability.** Issues of resource use and global climate change have become yet another impediment to travel as more companies are looking to decrease their carbon footprint.

To overcome these challenges, the CBC has turned increasingly to the company's own AT&T Telepresence Solution. "Last year we started seeing some cancellations due to travel restrictions," Whelan said, "so we began offering virtual briefings via telepresence as an alternative to enable customers to save on travel expenses."

The Implementation

AT&T uses telepresence as a key communications tool in and beyond the AT&T enterprise. With its natural image size, common room design, exceptional quality audio and high-definition video, the AT&T Telepresence Solution creates the impression that remote parties are actually present, face to face, at the same table. Conferees can share images, video and audio content or bridge in additional web conference or audio conference participants.

These capabilities are key assets for the CBC, which frequently uses telepresence as a supplement within face-to-face meetings. "In some instances we will use a virtual component in a briefing where we will tap into one presenter who is remote, while the remainder of the briefing will be here in Bedminster," said Christine O'Leary, Briefing Center Consultant. "For that one segment we'll walk customers over to the telepresence room and bring up the call."

In a recent Briefing Center session hosted in New Jersey the leading AT&T expert on unified communications joined the meeting from Massachusetts via telepresence. The customer, a major apparel manufacturer, was "extremely impressed" with both the presentation and the telepresence technology," said Strategic Account Manager Sandy Zoubek.

In other cases the whole meeting becomes a virtual briefing and the bulk of the session is run via telepresence. "We conducted the first such session in early 2009," Whelan said. "We do everything the same and source the presenters as we would typically do, but the customer is at a remote site and the briefing consultant manages the presenters on this end. Usually the agenda includes several topics via telepresence with a break planned at midday."

In one such experience, eight executives from a major West Coast investment firm came to an AT&T facility at San Ramon, Calif. for an all-day, transcontinental telepresence meeting with AT&T executives. "Most of my clients live within 20 minutes of our west coast office, so it was an easy commute," said Brian Quinn, AT&T Signature Client Director. "I can't get this number of customer executives to take a three-day trip and spend two nights on the East Coast."

"The feedback I received was very positive," Quinn added. "Their CIO is a big fan of telepresence. The customer was able to hear from our best and brightest experts, without all the hassle of traveling across the country for an in-person briefing." At the customer's request, plans are in place to conduct a follow up session in the near future using telepresence.

All efforts are made to follow the formula proven by experience at Bedminster. Folders go out to participants in advance that include the agenda, speaker biographies, feedback forms and such. Customers may receive tent cards for easy identification on the telepresence screen. Planners typically build more breaks into the telepresence session and ensure that participants leave the room for part of the day to attend another presentation or have lunch. "The one challenge is dealing with time zone differences which can shorten the briefing day," said Whelan.

Competition for the popular AT&T Telepresence Solution facilities is another issue. AT&T has installed over 180 rooms due to strong internal demand. Though conflicts can arise, customer meetings take priority.

Zoubek said the combination of convenience and travel savings led her client to request a virtual presentation via telepresence during their in-person briefing so they could witness it personally. "My client actually has offices in the headquarters of two of their largest retail customers," she said. "They've ended up flying people back and forth every week, but both of those retailers have telepresence. Now they are considering adding their own facilities to reduce international travel and trips back and forth to those retailers."

The Results

The availability of telepresence has given the AT&T Corporate Briefing Center important new flexibility. Situations are easily accommodated that once would have made a briefing impossible. In 2009 nearly one briefing in four (24 percent) included the use of telepresence or another virtual component. And the use of virtual briefings, in which customers took part entirely through telepresence, nearly doubled in one year.

"Telepresence makes scheduling easier," said Whelan. "If there is travel involved we need a longer window. When we meet via telepresence it is often easier to find one day that works for the customer versus three days out of the office."

For longtime customers with established relationships, telepresence makes it easy to hold meetings that supplement, or even supplant, annual face-to-face reviews. Emergencies are also easier to manage. Travel problems caused by a surprise snowstorm or volcanoes, for instance, might force planners to cancel a face-to-face briefing. As a last-minute emergency measure, telepresence can save the day by enabling snowbound participants to take part without travel. Basing the entire meeting on telepresence can minimize the threat of bad weather from the outset.

Telepresence is also helping the briefing center staff make the best and most efficient use of busy executives and technical subject experts. "Often we are tapping the same speakers again and again," said Whelan. "Telepresence allows the presenters to meet with more customers in the same amount of time because they don't have to travel to give that face-to-face presentation."

Whelan cautions, however, that judgment is needed in choosing when to schedule telepresence or in-person meetings. For example, an in-person meeting is preferred when AT&T senior executives are engaged in the relationship-building process and meeting with customers for the first time. These often include dinner and networking opportunities the night before that can't be replicated via telepresence.

"Telepresence gives us the flexibility, but we need to deal with each situation on a case by case basis," Whelan added.

The Bottom Line

The convenience, cost and sustainability advantages of telepresence have proven popular among AT&T sales teams and their customers. Travel budgets sometimes limit the number of participants that can attend a briefing. "Our objective as a sales team is to get the most influential decision makers in one room," said Quinn. "This is a golden opportunity that is maximized with telepresence."

And its use promises to grow as customers install their own telepresence rooms and new public telepresence facilities become available. .

"The reaction has been really positive," said O'Leary. "A lot of account teams still want to bring their customers here to the briefing center for that up close and personal experience with the presenters, but they really like telepresence as an option. It's the next best thing to meeting in person. As more rooms become available and people are more pressed by time, budget constraints and sustainability concerns, I think virtual briefings via telepresence will only become more prevalent."

About the "Inside AT&T" Series

This is one in a series aimed at sharing the lessons AT&T has learned within its own business about how next-generation solutions can pay off: enhancing productivity and reducing total cost of ownership (TCO). Our own approach is built on the principle that solutions must deliver value and enhance the performance of business applications. AT&T faces the same business challenges as other enterprises, and if a solution creates value for AT&T, it will for customers, as well.

For more information contact an AT&T Representative or visit www.att.com/telepresence.