Written by Bob Emmerson
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User-driven innovation should be good for the business community. I say should because in the past, IT management has tended to resist applications and devices they don't control. The list includes user-driven, consumer-centric developments such as PCs, WiFi access points, and IM. Usage of these products started in the home, enabling tasks to be performed in new and better ways. WiFi entered the enterprise as a stand-alone solution for departments, and later on IT assumed control. IM started life as a chat medium for techies and the kids, but presence is a powerful communications parameter and products such as Microsoft Messenger have become enterprise applications. So what's next?

Can Social Networking Fit the Bill?
At the European Spring VON event I saw a great social networking application, and that got me thinking about the viability of these products as conferencing and communications applications for SMBs. The requisite functionality is there in the solutions on offer from Google, MSN, Skype, and Yahoo!, but security and support are obvious issues. Skype, for example, punches holes through firewalls, and it uses "super-nodes," which means that your PC is used to carry other people's traffic.

The application that caught my eye is Raketu, and that's also the name of the company (www.ra ketu.com). They're based in New York City. Raketu doesn't use super-nodes, so it's not intrinsically insecure nor does it open your computer and network resources to other anonymous users. The functionality includes voice/video calls, voice mail, conference calls, IM including interoperability, SMS, conference text, file transfer, reminders, and e-mail.

Figure 1: The Raketu interface. Presence icons are displayed on the left, and a news feed is displayed on the right.

In addition, Raketu delivers free or cheap national and international calls from computers and mobiles. It runs on mobile phones, so it's a de facto FMC solution, and it can also be used via a Web browser, allowing users to make phone-to-phone calls without a computer. Users can therefore access and use their account when they are in the office or on the road.

So far so good, but is it secure? Would IT accept it or be able to deploy it in a secure way? The answer is probably no if it's an enterprise and a qualified yes for the SMB space. The Raketu solution could run over a VPN, but even better would be a professional version of the product. I called Greg Parker, CEO, President, and Founder of Raketu to see if this idea was viable and learned that a business version will be launched in quarter four of 2007, so it should be out there by the time this article appears.

This product will omit the entertainment feeds but add business information such as breaking news and stock quotes. Users can set alerts so that this content is delivered at the appropriate time.

Desktop Meetings
When desktop portals are enhanced with high-quality video and a suite of communications and collaboration services, the experience replicates that of a small meeting. This is the application area that SightSpeed (www.sightspeed.com) targets.

"We saw a gaping hole in the current videoconferencing market between the traditional videoconferencing/telepresence systems and the low-end IM-centric products that have poor video quality and which are unsupported," says Peter D. Csathy, SightSpeed's CEO.

The company, which is based in Berkeley, Calif., recently released version 6.0 of its offer as well as an upcoming version that targets SMBs. New functionality in V6.0 includes full SIP conversion at the back end as well as the ability to record live calls, video, and/or voice on the PC.

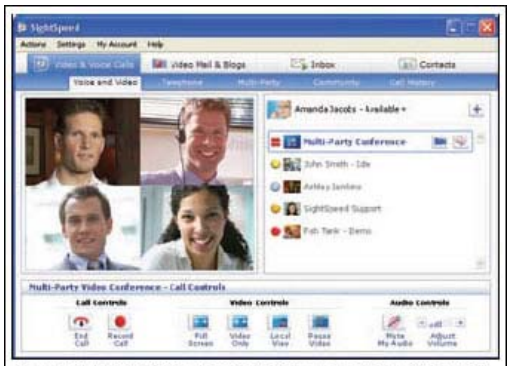

Figure 2: Users of SightSpeed can place free video calls, leave video messages, and post videos to their blogs or personal Web sites. The "click-to-call" video buttons can be pasted into community or social network sites such as MySpace.

As illustrated in figure 2, multi-party conferencing is enabled as well as messaging and free PC-to-PC video and voice calling. The SMB version will be fully supported, and the architecture is intrinsically secure; i.e., no super-nodes necessary.

Cinematic Telepresence
Once upon a time, people sat around a conference table, and they collaborated by passing documents back and forth. And presentations were made on slides or overhead foils.

Videoconferencing systems are essentially an electronic way of replicating that environment, but until recently, and for a variety of reasons, they fell short. Now, as shown in figure 3, we have solutions that feature big, high-resolution displays. This means that participants appear to be in the same room; i.e., the display is close to life size, hence the term "telepresence."