Streaming Video

When - and how - to use video as a PR tool

By Ian Lurie

Just a year ago, everyone was talking about streaming video and the companies that produce it. Live webcasts and six-figure Internet video budgets were, it seemed, the wave of the streaming future.

The dot-com crash, slow broadband Internet acceptance, and some spectacular live webcasting failures have combined to bring streaming video back down to earth. Video delivered over the Internet is still a powerful tool, but you have to justify the expense and effort required, and have a solid plan for an easy implementation. How do you do that? By answering two questions on a case-by-case basis:

- Is streaming video the best way to communicate my message?
- If the answer is yes, what's the simplest way to record and stream the content, and still meet the requirements of this project?

By doing so, you can insure relevant use of video streaming, and avoid unnecessary expenses.

STREAMING: AN OVERVIEW   People often use the term 'streaming video' incorrectly. It's important to understand exactly what it means, because the term implies a minimum investment in equipment and/or software.

'Video' is easy enough — moving pictures captured by a webcam, DVCam or other video recording device.

'Streaming', however, is less obvious. Streaming, in the context of the Internet, means delivery of content in small pieces, with the browser or player displaying the clip, piece by piece, during download.

Imagine that your video is a soft drink, and your Internet connection is a straw. You can try to get the entire 8 oz. can into your mouth, all at once, and swallow it. The results are bound to be ugly, though. A more sensible approach is to drink it through the straw, one sip at a time. You still get to drink, but you know how the cola tastes before you finish it.

OK, so that analogy stretches things a bit. But the illustration is a powerful one: Streaming is a delivery method. It is meant to allow faster viewing of large video files, as you can start watching a video even if your computer has only received a small fraction of the entire clip.

If you are going to deliver video to your audience over the Internet, streaming is a must. A reasonably high-quality video file will be quite large, and expecting visitors to your web site to wait for a 2-25 megabyte download is unreasonable. Streamed, though, a 2-megabyte video clip is palatable for all but the slowest Internet connections, and a 20+ megabyte clip looks first-rate on a cable modem or DSL connection.

TO STREAM, OR NOT TO STREAM...

Armed with a high-level understanding of the streaming concept, we can answer our first question:

- When should I use streaming video?

To answer the question, consider three things:

Your audience. With whom are you trying to communicate? Are they web-literate? What are the chances that they will have the computer, software and Internet connection capable of downloading and playing the video? If you believe that less than twenty percent of your audience will be able to download and play the video, for whatever reason, streaming is not worth your time or money.

Your Message. Is your message one that is uniquely suited to video? When we streamed a series of interviews from the Democratic National Convention, video made sense because we were interviewing major players in the Democratic party — the personalities were part of the message itself. One of our clients used video recently because their subject matter — recovery efforts after September 11 — was emotionally charged, and those emotions were a critical part of their content. If it is impossible, or nearly impossible, to get your message to your audience without video, then streaming is a good solution. If you can do just as well with a few pictures or a well-written paragraph, again, forget streaming. The 'cool' factor alone is not enough to justify the investment, believe me.

Your Budget. Can you afford streaming video? As you will see in the next section, it's relatively inexpensive. But at a minimum, streaming video requires a recording device, encoding software and a server on which to store the final product, plus labor. And if your video is popular, you'll have to pay your web host for additional bandwidth. Most web hosting services restrict the size of the straw through which you can deliver content to your audience. If you need more they'll provide it, but only for a fee. There's no easy answer to this question, but make sure that you know how much recording, preparing and delivering your video will cost. Count on spending a minimum of $2-3000 for recording, encoding and streaming even a single small clip. There is an economy of scale, though —10 clips don't cost ten times as much.

GETTING IT DONE

If your audience, message and budget are all suitable for streaming video, then it's time to figure out exactly how you're going to accomplish it. To insure that you deliver the most cost-effective and high-quality solution, consider these issues:

Live or On-Demand? You can stream video using a live webcast, or 'on-demand'. A live webcast delivers a video stream from the lense of the camera directly to web surfers' video players. On-demand webcasts deliver the video stream from a file that was recorded, edited and encoded previously. In my opinion, there are very few instances that justify the tremendous expense, risk and overall hair-pulling of live webcasting. Typically, you can deliver on-demand video in a very short time. At the Democratic Convention, we went from interview to on-demand, close-captioned video in both Real-Player and Windows Media Player in under 2 hours. Increasing the cost to our client by 300-400% just to broadcast live would have been daft. If your content isn't time-sensitive, like a sporting event, poll results or some type of interactive forum, don't even think about a live webcast.

Multiple Purposes? Will your video be broadcast using traditional media as well as the Internet? If so, then you may have to use a more expensive camera. Typically, an off-the-shelf Digital Video (DV) Camera is fine for streaming video. But you may need to look at a higher-end DV Cam or a Beta Cam if your video is going to find its way onto television.

Skills and Resources. Who is going to record and encode the video? A novice, or someone who knows their way around streaming video? I don't recommend the former — there are too many niggling technical factors that can derail your efforts — but if you have to use a beginner to prepare your content, keep the process simple. Get a DV Cam that supports FireWire, and a FireWire-compatible laptop. That way, your video person can record and encode using just two tools. If you have an expert, but they're a one-person team, the same rules apply — keep it simple.

Keep It Simple. Did I repeat myself? Yes, because this is critical to cost-effective, useful video streaming. At most of our events, we have one or two-person teams, operating a DV CAM and a firewire laptop. We shoot the video, download it to the laptop, edit it and encode it on the spot. We use standard tools that run on a desktop computer, like Adobe Premiere™, and we steer clear of pans or other complex shots. We know our content will be delivered in a relatively small window on a computer, and even with incredible advances in encoding technology the video will be lower than broadcast quality. Simple tools work just fine, keep costs low, and mean that we can prep and upload video very, very quickly. Remember, you still have the tape — if you do need broadcast-quality content, you can re-edit it later in a full-service facility.

COMMON SENSE WINS OUT

Streaming video has a lot to offer communications professionals who are selective and deliberate in the way the apply the technology. By carefully weighing whether to use streaming video for a particular message, and then working to apply the simplest possible method of recording and delivery, you can deliver a powerful, efficient message.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dubbed 'The Mad Prophet of Information' by his staff, Ian Lurie has worked as an information architect and web designer since 1993. He started Portent Interactive, a web and information design consultancy, in 1995.

You can see examples of video PR campaigns planned and designed by his company at http://www.everydayheroes.tv and http://www.goiam.org/library.asp.