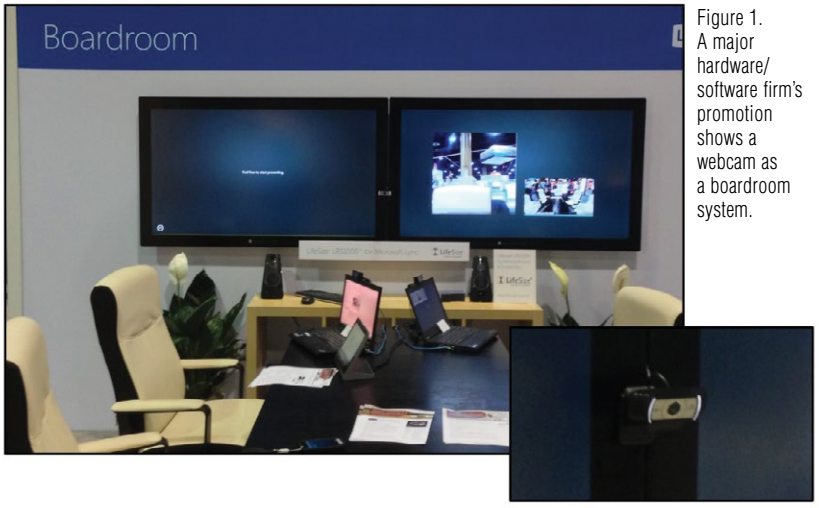

Figure 1. A major hardware/ software firm's promotion shows a webcam as a boardroom system.

The Ultimate Shotgun Wedding

The need for appreciating priorities and standardization.

By David Danto

It was way back around the days of Y2K that the AV industry started talking "convergence" with the IT industry. Convergence was a great buzzword to choose for what was, in reality, a pure shotgun wedding. The IT team had already absorbed the Telephony space in the 1990s and AV was really just going to be the next conquest in their eyes.

Funny thing about shotgun weddings, though: After the ceremony, both participants are rarely happy. Now, about 14 years later, it's clear that neither party ever really understood the other's priorities and values. IT people generally strive for the repeatable consistency that fits into an ITSM framework, even when round pegs are being put into square holes. AV people, on the other hand, generally strive for perfection, even when it absolutely isn't necessary. For the most part, this convergence thing is still a free-for-all environment, with few people on either side understanding the importance of the others' points. Many areas are still in need of some form of standardization.

What's In A Name?

I do realize that, when I begin to address "standards," people's thoughts frequently turn to "bits and bytes" or "speeds and feeds." Although sizes and signals are important, that's not really the most concerning part of the story. So many firms toss around the most basic terminology that enterprise end users can't help but be very confused. As an example, take a look at Figure 1.

At Enterprise Connect 2013, one major manufacturer of hardware and software was identifying this (as you can see in the sign) as a "Boardroom" videoconference system. Really? Wedge a webcam between two flatpanel displays, connect it to a PC running UC software and get a result that someone was comfortable calling a boardroom videoconference system? Either the people who set up the exhibit never actually spent time in meetings in a boardroom, or they thought the attendees would just be idiots. The user experiencing a system like that would probably result in his/her organization's Board initiating immediate firings.

To make sure you don't think this is a one-off problem, just a few months ago, another huge player in the IT space released its version of a simple conference room system. Take a look at its promotion in Figure 2.

David Danto (www.danto.info) is Director of Emerging Technology, IMCCA (www.imc ca.org), and Principal Consultant for Video and UC at Dimension Data.

Figure 2.
Another webcam-based system deceptively shows display images it couldn't possibly deliver.

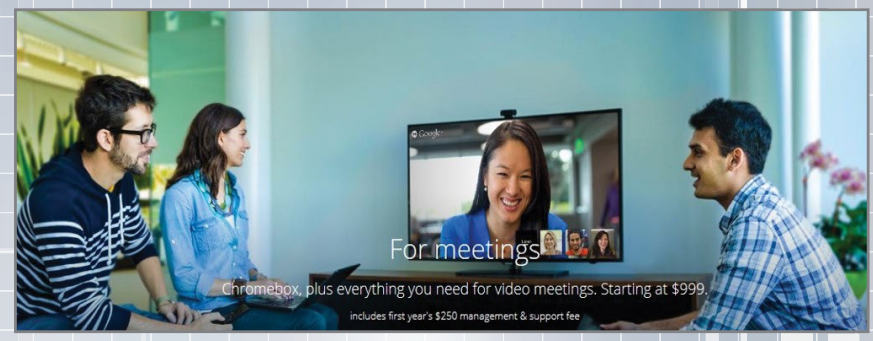

Figure 3.
Comparison of images as they appear in marketing materials with true camera captured images: the Reality.

IT people generally strive for the repeatable consistency that fits into an ITSM framework.

AV people generally strive for perfection, even when it absolutely isn't necessary.

The pictures on the screen (main and smaller icons) show clear, full-face video images (what TV people call head-and-shoulders shots). This is incredibly deceptive because no webcam-based system placed in a conference room could produce a resolution remotely similar to the one in that image. Take a look at comparison images in Figure 3.

A webcam can't zoom in on who is speaking or produce a shot like the one shown unless the participant is sitting right in front of the camera and screen. People off to the sides or across a table will appear much smaller. As such, identifying the body language, expressions and other factors—the critical value-add that videoconferencing supplies—will be nearly impossible. (The resolution of an HD webcam will be better than the image on the right in Figure 3, but the size and perspective won't be.) What this new system is going to do is convince unsuspecting customers (who respect the manufacturer) to begin to use videoconferencing, and then have bad experiences that will give the entire industry another black eye.

Releasing systems that so obviously are destined to create experiences that don't live up to the promise shows that the IT industry as a whole has not learned much from the many years of marriage.

Not Just An IT Problem

Before my colleagues in the AV industry think this is just a one-way problem or that "IT people or firms don't understand what's needed," take a look at Figure 4.

The Cisco MX300 pictured is a fantastic all-in-one videoconference system. It comes with its own Cisco touchpanel control, microphones, freestanding display, PTZ camera: everything required for a four- to eight-person room, to have a fabulous experience. Although this is plainly obvious to everyone, one of the top 10 AV systems integrators in the US refused to install it for a client earlier this year unless they were allowed to replace the microphones, connect an external DSP/mixer and use a third-party control system.

The integrator claimed (in writing to me, personally) that the system as designed by Tandberg (before it was bought by Cisco) would not pass their engineering review for performance. Really? A system designed specifically for that medium-size room application is not acceptable unless the client spends thousands of dollars on

Figure 4.
A modular, all-in-one videoconference system that produces good results.

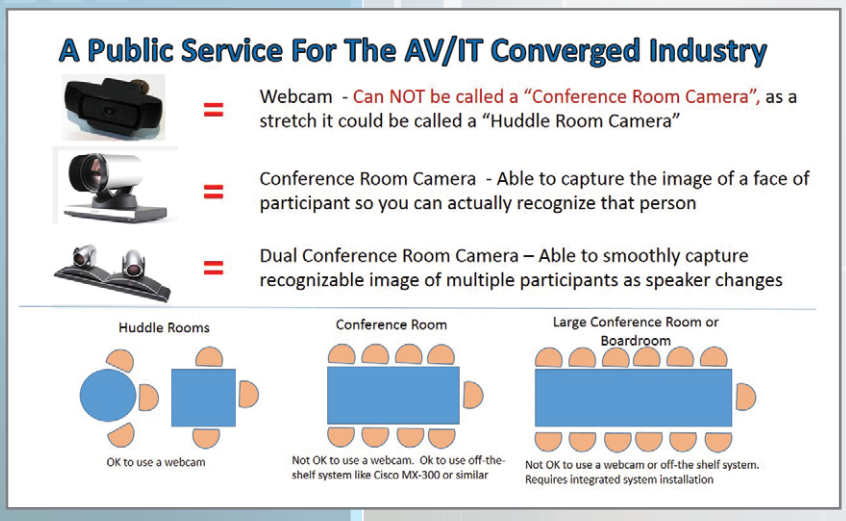

Figure 5.
A Guide to the Basics of Room Names and Camera Applications.

additional equipment, customization and programming? Again, in this case, either the integrator thought it was speaking to idiots or this is one of dozens of AV integrators that have not accepted the fact that the AV industry can no longer blindly charge clients for customization where the results are only marginally better than an off-the-shelf system, if at all.

For the most part, AV integrators have missed the boat with AV/IT convergence. Many still approach the space with a 1990s mentality, either still looking for that next, easy "hang and bang" job, or giving their installer crew just enough IT training to be dangerous to enterprise clients. Despite the innumerable warnings and advice that change was needed, most AV firms have done little or nothing to add skills in IP networks, virtualization, smart building technology or any of the other building-blocks that will be required going forward.

A Necessary Guide

Clearly, both AV firms and IT firms have not reconciled their role and appropriate contributions to the converged space, even at the simplest level of nomenclature. Those responsible for rooms and systems at end-user organizations often find themselves either frustrated with the poor quality or high expense of delivered systems, or overly involved in the build-out process just to make sure it will produce useful results.

What's missing is an industry-wide guide to standard definitions and terminology. Such standards are needed to detail what the differences are, for example, between a boardroom (which probably needs customization) and a simple videoconference room (which likely does not). Terms such as Huddle Room, Team Room, Scrum Bar and many more that are thrown around by architects, manufacturers, IT firms and AV firms have to mean the same thing to everyone involved. Figure 5 is my attempt to just scratch the surface of debunking some of the recent deceptions.

It would be useful if one of the many standards-based organizations took on the task of creating a guide and glossary that everyone in the industry could abide by. It would be a Solomonic list of the room types and system types that are available, as well as the features associated with each. Regrettably, this is unlikely to happen because manufacturers' agreements on standards proposals have not been easy to achieve of late.

Using the W3C's work on WebRTC as an example, the larger players are frequently only interested in supporting the ideas that help their market position. Compromises have proven just about impossible. There's no reason to think an effort to standardize room type names and acceptable technology for each would be any more successful.

In order for the industry to move forward, end-users are going to have to reject ridiculous claims and unnecessary customizations and shun firms that try to sell products and/or services that are based on them. Only then would the marketplace begin to weed out the deceptions and firms that stand as an obstacle to true AV/IT convergence.