

A Teleconferencing Case Study: The Historic U.S.-Egyptian 'Telemission'

By Edward I. Placidi

The stage was set for a first in teleconferencing and one of the most important transmissions in the much-talked-about medium. Walter Cronkite was brought in to emcee in New York, where a host of U.S. business leaders and members of the press filled a meeting room at Rockefeller Center. In Cairo, Egypt, Bill Beutel was manning the microphone surrounded by a panel of ministers of the Egyptian government. In five other cities across the U.S., meeting rooms linked by satellite with New York and Cairo were filled with potential U.S. investors.

The "Telemission," as the program was billed, was certainly on the highest level with such sponsors as the Overseas Private Investment Corporation, a self-sustaining U.S. government agency, the United Nations Development Program and United Nations Industrial Development Organization, the American Express Company, the Bank of America and others. Not only Egyptian President Mubarak spoke; President Ronald Reagan also participated. However, though preparation had begun almost a year beforehand (a critical necessity in planning a major teleconference), apparently not enough or little attention was given to several important basics.

The live satellite program bringing together U.S. businessmen and Egyptian officials to explore investment opportunities in Egypt opened with the whiney strains of Egyptian music. And suddenly the audience was flying over Cairo, particularly over the sites of new industrial and other projects underway in the area.

At satellite headquarters in New York, however, the screen was set up in such a way that, depending on one's height and how far back one was sitting, the bottom one-third to one-half of

the picture was blocked by the heads of the audience. Throughout the Telemission, people were jumping up to read the name and title of speakers flashed at the bottom of the screen; others were craning to see the complete picture.

Following the flight over Cairo, Mubarak made a gracious statement welcoming U.S. investors. As he finished speaking the video transferred to Beutel who began to introduce the first of several excellent film clips, but the audio was delayed. The audience came in at the middle of the introduction. The same technical problem recurred repeatedly throughout the broadcast.

Prior to the start of the program, members of the audience at each of the six U.S. sites were invited to ask the panel of ministers questions concerning the investment climate in Egypt. Their questions were taped for use during the transmission; the ministers were expected to answer extemporaneously.

During the Telemission, on several occasions unidentified voices half drowned out the question askers; while Beutel, who was directing questions to one or another of the ministers for a response, repeatedly stumbled over what was being asked as well as who was who on the panel. As for the ministers, they fell flat for the most part. Their answers were vague, repetitive and overly brief; stuttering was often prolonged. Altogether too often, they either failed to answer the question or missed the point. Half way into the Telemission, the audience even began to chuckle whenever one minister in particular took on a question.

The impact of an historic satellite transmission from opposite ends of the world was certainly lessened by inability to see the screen. A raised stage area was called for. For that matter, the

room itself was cluttered with wires, partitions, speakers and other equipment while seats were packed together—making movement difficult. In any meeting situation, the layout, comfort and functionality of the site are paramount.

The technical difficulties unfortunately were not eliminated, but this was not as big a problem as the seeming lack of preparation of the participants. The Egyptian ministers were not only clearly unprepared for fielding difficult questions from American businessmen—which could be due to myriad reasons from language barrier to nervousness to cultural differences—but were not prepared or adequately coached on being aware of their image on camera.

Evaluating the audience—its purposes, expectations, level of sophistication—and clearly identifying conference goals and objectives—directing each sentence, gesture and visual in that direction—are root elements in the planning of a teleconference. The American investors assumedly were looking for concrete answers to pertinent questions from representatives of the Egyptian government, and whether or not their needs were fulfilled is a moot point.

Teleconferencing is destined to become a bigger and bigger market. But many will continue to shy away from the medium at least in the short-term because of the considerable challenge in mastering its use. Yet video-conferencing is certainly not something mysterious either. To master teleconferencing's special communicating techniques, planning must begin much farther in advance than face-to-face meetings and with the help of specialized pros who understand all the variables and potential pitfalls. 🌐