

Technical Webcasts Offer Practical Solutions for Speeding Products to Market

By

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What a tangled web we weave! Not so, say the design engineers of the world's foremost electronics companies. According to a recent survey conducted by *EDN* magazine in January 2001, designers are turning to the web in record numbers to visit the sites of net-savvy silicon vendors. Their mission: to untangle the knotty problem of shrinking design cycles with the help of user-issue webcasts that offer practical problem/solution advice to get designs to market more quickly.

According to the *EDN* survey, engineers today work on an average of 15.3 projects per year, four more than in 1995. The design phase for each of these projects now extends about four months, with the total time-to-market shrinking to seven months. Thus, design teams have roughly 210 days to go from the drawing board to delivering product to the consumer. As a result of this time crunch engineers have turned more frequently to outside experts, vendors and third parties that can help train them on new techniques and deliver timely information to shorten the design cycle.

While several mediums have arisen to help transfer this information, one in particular has come to the forefront in recent years: the webcast. Webcasts have come a long way since first used as a sales tool. In the past, they were strictly non-technical vehicles for introducing new products and for reviewing features. Increasingly, however, the proliferation of the Internet makes the web the perfect vehicle to extend customer service, offering unique ways to help designers make most efficient use of their time. According to the *EDN* survey, customers don't want to simply be told what device to use and why. They want the supplier to provide in-depth information concerning the nuances of how to make it work.

Thus a different kind of webcast has found an eager audience -- a technical webcast that focuses on a narrow topic and offers drill-down user information. Far removed from its marketing predecessors, these webcasts address specific problems and solutions, offering technical tips to help engineers become familiar with a vendor's devices and tools. More than a theoretical exercise, they cover timely subjects and allow designers to ask real-time questions to the people who know best: the actual developers of the applications and customer-support staff.

For companies such as Texas Instruments (TI), broad access to its technical expertise has enticed more than 3500 engineers to log onto its webcasts since the inception of the program. An average of 300 designers view each session live, with an equal number watching an archived version over subsequent weeks. Further, this audience is diverse. While North American engineers have taken to

the webcast more readily, making up 2/3 of the total viewership, the number of international participants is growing and should continue to grow as word of this new tool spreads and other companies begin to offer similar support.

But putting on a good webcast is no small undertaking. TI, for instance, gathers ideas for topics by examining data from a myriad of sources, some key sources including customer support venues, web site databases, customer e-mails and hotline calls. Members of the technical staff, often the developers of the technology, speak at a webcast, giving their insights on how the product works and answering application questions. An effective webcast also can build alternative resources onto the hosting web page. It can contain links to technical documents on the topic, while a downloadable presentation provides slides and speaker's notes.

The end result is a customer-service tool that takes into account the busy schedule and time-related work pressures of designers. Not only do technical webcasts help engineers work through design problems and get to market more quickly, they also provide an archived resource. If a designer should miss the original airing of the webcast, he or she can pull up an archived version, which can be viewed 24 hours a day, seven days a week for as long as six months after the actual event

Viewership of these Webcasts is growing. For the engineer, technical webcasts provide a much-needed resource. For the vendor, they provide access to customer feedback with "one-on-one" feel. Such interaction is vital to any supplier/customer relationship.

