

# Conference Man

Sujit John | TNN

**F**or many years Sanjay Bansal saw people struggle with video-conferencing systems. He himself was in the audio-video business, and though online video became mainstream early last decade, he found customers had connection difficulties. If it was a multi-location conference, these difficulties were compounded. Setting up a video call wasn't easy. The images tended to be either miniature ones, or blurred. In a multi-people, multi-location conference, it was never clear who was talking.

Four years ago, Bansal decided to take a technology leap. He invested in R&D and changed everything about the way he worked, including the name of his company, from Total Presentation Devices to Business Octane. And he stepped into the nascent space called telepresence, dominated globally by companies like Polycom, Cisco, Tandberg (which Cisco acquired in 2009) and LifeSize.

Telepresence is the top end of the video-conference stack, where you have large, often multiple, screens, life-size images; where you can establish eye contact with the person at the other end; and the quality of video and audio is infinitely superior to traditional video-conferencing systems.

Bansal told himself he must go beyond what has been done so far by the global firms and at lower costs. And from what we have seen of his and rival systems, he appears to have met those objectives. "We can do video conferencing across 40 locations with up to 600 participants," Bansal said over a telepresence system from Gurgaon where his company is based. He connected the system to his employees in Chennai, Mumbai and Hyderabad with a simple touch on a small touch-screen panel before him, and this multi-location conference demonstration was conducted with hardly any hitch for over an hour. Video and audio were crystal clear. Whenever someone spoke, the central screens would immediately bring that location and person to the fore.

Most telepresence rooms have no more than three screens. Where Bansal out-does others is in going up to six screens. The upper set of three extra screens can each be subdivided into multiple screens (each showing different locations), so that everybody has a good visibility into who is present in which location, who is moving out, coming in. A single touch of a button zooms an overhead camera onto the notes on your desk and shows it

to everybody on one of the big screens. Another shows presentations on a white board and yet another your laptop presentation.

Business Octane uses Polycom's cameras and codecs (programs used for encoding and decoding audio/video signals). But adding the extra three-screens capability and doing a seamless 40-location video conference is technologically complex, says Bansal. He says the company has filed a number of patents in this area.

Telepresence is still in its infancy, and Bansal's business is new, but he already does Rs 55-crore business, and has customers like Vedanta, Novartis, Air India, law firm Amarchand Mangaldas, AgroTech Foods, and DuPont India. "Vedanta has installed

our system across 12 locations, including in London. And they say the capacity is never enough," says Bansal.

Bansal grew up in Chandigarh. His father was in HMT in Punjab. Bansal did mechanical engineering from Punjab Engineering College in Chandigarh, and then completed a post-graduate degree in marketing & finance from IIM-Lucknow in 1992. He worked for three years as a management trainee with Godrej, and then started his own audio-video venture. He says he always wanted to be an entrepreneur. "And whatever I touch, I have always wanted to make it big."

By 2007, when he started Business Octane, he had made enough money to make the large investments that telepresence required. Bansal declines to say how much was invested, but he had to hire software professionals, audio-video experts, touch panel experts. He's now investing in demonstration rooms around the country to showcase to customers the value that telepresence brings, given that it's still an unfamiliar space to most. "Customers always buy when they see they are getting a higher value than the money they are paying for it," is Bansal's dictum.

That's particularly important because such systems don't come cheap. A full six-screen version can cost up to \$250,000 for a single room; smaller ones come at \$60,000. But the potential savings in just travel costs can be enormous. "More than cost savings, telepresence can provide a strategic competitive advantage, enable faster decision making and quicker implementation," says Bansal. That's exactly the reason why the likes of Polycom and Cisco are today putting enormous money into it. Bansal looks to be in the right thing at the right time.

## SANJAY BANSAL

FOUNDER, BUSINESS OCTANE

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