

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Christine Perey



Powerful, Yet Simple

When I reviewed the PictureTel iPower 960 with ImageShare, in early 2001 (<http://www.nwfusion.com/reviews/2001/0326rev.html>) the tall black tower intimidated me at first. Once I got all the cables connected and turned it on, I was favorably impressed by the system's audio and video quality and collaborative features. It was the first generation of People+Content, in which the video (people element) was encoded and handled differently from the supporting materials one might introduce in a meeting (content element). I applauded the grace with which the developers managed to integrate two challenging applications: videoconferencing and visual collaboration—both for presentations and true collaborative work.

Together, the third generation 9000 series hardware platform, enclosed in a sleek 2U high chassis, and the fifth generation of software (released for all iPower products in March 2003) provide the iPower 9800 users experiences they will want to repeat and, in some cases, even review.

Videoconferencing, Visual Collaboration PLUS Streaming

With the release of software version 5.0 users of all three iPower platforms enjoy the benefits of a third, equally important and challenging technology: streaming. Without in any way compromising the conferencing and collaborative capabilities, Polycom has made it supremely easy to initiate and control a streaming media version of a conference.

From within the iPower application interface, in the Options menu, I selected “stream to Web.” By entering a conference name and password, I immediately started streaming to my virtual audience (up to five viewers on the stream without the involvement of any additional servers). From a pop-up menu, I am able to change what the audience sees from within this same screen. For instance, were I an instructor, I could set the streaming so its default would be to always stream to others my audio and video, as well as my content, regardless of the type of system(s) with which I am conferencing. This way, viewers can always be looking at an instructor even when other video participants are asking questions. There is also a voice-activated switching option for the full meeting dynamic to be seen by those audiences receiving the stream.

One of the best features of iPower streaming is how seamlessly it integrates the People+Content technology. While the video is streaming (in Windows Media format), content is captured as JPEGs at the same display resolution as the iPower system itself, up to 1024x768 (XGA). Content (whatever is in the transmitting system's content window) is captured every five seconds and synchronized with the audio and video. Since encoding to Windows Media Player takes about 10 seconds on the iPower 9800, the slides have the same delay.

For the viewer, all that's needed is Internet Explorer with Windows Media Player (v7.0 or higher). After entering a user name and optional password, the streaming platform will prompt the user to install Windows Media version 9.0 for maximum quality.

If live streaming is either not an option or not needed, software release 5.0 will also permit the iPower user to record to the local hard disk. This is a simple way to archive a meeting if someone unable to attend needs to review the session at a later time, or if a presentation needs to be made available for on-demand viewing through a web browser.

I'm a very strong advocate for the convergence of videoconferencing and streaming media and the iPower 5.0 implementation of this balancing act is an excellent way for users and integrators in both domains to begin experimenting with the synergies between these two technologies.

But streaming isn't the only new feature of the iPower 9800 I found I could use.



- What:** Polycom iPower 9800 Software version 5.0
- In short:** Group videoconferencing and conference streaming/recording system
- Results:** Yes, definitely ready for prime time
- Who:** Polycom
- Web:** http://polycom.com/products_services/0,1816,pw-35-3091,00.html
- Price:** \$18,000 without displays or cart

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Christine Perey is the president of PEREY Research & Consulting, Inc., a market research and business development consulting firm. You may contact Christine via e-mail at cperey@perey.com

New Way to Control the Application

Although the intuitive on-screen user interface for the iPower is virtually the same as in previous iPower generations (and in the TeamStation before that, which I also liked), the new iPower wireless keyboard and remote control are extremely easy to use when controlling the system features. I quickly got addicted to the quick keys built-in above the traditional PC keyboard for call initiation, call termination (hang up) and zoom. By keeping the color and button size exactly the same on the keyboard and simplified remote control, Polycom continues to demonstrate an outstanding sense of industrial design. The new keyboard comes standard with the 9800 and 9400 models but can also be purchased separately for the 600 and 900 series system users running 5.0 software.

PowerCam Plus

This is the first time I have used the PowerCam Plus camera with Limelight automatic camera pointing technology and I'm afraid I can't go back from here! I've been liberated, given the opportunity to get up and walk around during a long or particularly stimulating virtual meeting or presentation without giving the far end the cold shoulder. The camera model is the basic difference between the 9800 model which includes PowerCam Plus, and the 9400 model which comes with the iPower 70 camera.

Built-in 4-port MCU

Another feature that one quickly gets accustomed to is embedded multipoint support on the terminal. The 9800 comes with a built-in 4-port multipoint bridge, which can be upgraded to support up to 12 ports on IP, provided bandwidth is available. In addition to standard embedded multipoint video, the internal MP supports People+Content functionality, which allows any of the sites in the call (not only host site) to present content and have full capabilities. People+Content is only available when other systems in a call have support for People+Content through software version 5.0.

H.264*

The iPower 9000 series with 5.0 software are the first Polycom systems with the processor "boost" to run H.264. Based on a precursor of the final specifications due out later in 2003, H.264* offers higher resolution at sub-512k bandwidths. While a differentiator when the iPower 9000 systems are put in a competitive low bandwidth video quality test, I already find the H.263 codec implementation in iPowers to offer substantially higher video quality than the video in ViewStations and during my evaluation wasn't able to perceive a noticeable improvement from the new codec. You might be wondering why there is an asterix. While Polycom released the iPower 9000 series in late first quarter 2003 with this codec based on a spec that has yet to be officially ratified by the ITU, the company is confident that any last minute changes will be minimal and as soon as the approved specification is available a software upgrade will be released.

Other details

I didn't test the ImageShare II because I don't use a laptop but the tabletop interface comes standard with the 9800 model. I understand that the 9000 series systems come with a built in DVD drive which might be valuable in some situations. All iPower models are offered with several network options including ISDN QuadBRI, V.35, RS-449 or IP. I only tested and used the IP connectivity and found it extremely easy to configure.

In general, I don't think you can go wrong by upgrading to 5.0 on any iPower; if I had a board room or large conference room that needed a new videoconferencing system, I would not hesitate to put the iPower 9800 at the head of the table. ♦