



by Ben Hunt

TELIRIS: ROOM FOR GROWTH AT THE TOP TABLE

When British Airways was trying to tempt business passengers back on to its aircraft early last year in the wake of September 11, its message was simple: there's no substitute for "being there".

Many users of traditional videoconferencing equipment might agree, yet allowing business people to "be there" without travelling is precisely the aim of Teliris, an Anglo-US technology group.

Its Global Table product provides a natural and instant meeting environment that allows executives to do all but shake hands.

The jumpy, scrambled pictures and delayed, scratchy sounds of traditional videoconferencing have been replaced by giant plasma screens delivering DVD-quality pictures with high-quality sound that does not appear to suffer from any latency (delay) problems.

Customers buying Global Table acquire "rooms" from Teliris that are kitted out with a package containing all elements of the videoconferencing suite.

Participants in the meeting sit behind similar tables in offices with similar backdrops, creating an atmosphere that is close to that of an actual meeting.

Unobtrusive cameras, designed to optimise the eyeline of participants, beam the pictures back and forth while microphones sit in the specially-designed boardroom table in front to pick up sound.

The flexibility of Global Table offers customers the ability to hold meetings involving

people from several international centres at once and also enables phone callers to be patched in with an audio link.

Global Table is the brainchild of serial technology entrepreneur Marc Trachtenberg, chief technology officer and co-founder of Teliris. Another co-founder is Martyn Lewis, the former BBC newsreader who is the group's chairman.

Mr Trachtenberg spotted a gap in the market for a more natural videoconference experience about four years ago. "We saw a need to improve distance interaction and we have spent time designing, engineering and working with customers to create a framework for meeting over distance," he says.

The first showcasing of the Global Table was at Lazard, the investment bank, in the middle of 2001. Since then Teliris has sold about 20 Global Table rooms to customers including Lazard and Pearson, owner of the Financial Times.

More recently Vodafone signed an agreement to buy rooms to link up its offices in Tokyo, Düsseldorf and San Francisco with its headquarters at Newbury in the UK, and Teliris says it has just signed its biggest ever deal, with a major pharmaceuticals group.

Mr Trachtenberg says that with "dramatic growth" the Global Table is coming into the "mainstream" and that the group has an order backlog of more than 60 rooms.

The average initial order has risen from 2.5 rooms per contract in the first nine months of 2002 to six in the fourth quarter.

"The market is now adopting this solution in a large and substantial way. We have met all our internal sales and deployment targets," he says.

Teliris says that while many purchasing decisions are taken after a chief executive or other senior executive has viewed the system it is not just they who are using the facility once installed.

"We are working with many customers and they realise that this is not simply a luxury for the boardroom, this is something for the whole organisation so they are not just putting in two or three rooms but six or seven," says Mr Trachtenberg.

Teliris executives are convinced their solution has found its moment because it offers a solution to problems created by the fearsome financial pressure many companies are finding themselves in and the uncertain geo-political environment.

In the most crude analysis, videoconferencing can save vital cash from travel budgets, but Teliris believes that installation decisions are being made as much with employee lifestyle in mind as they are with money.

Mr Trachtenberg says that while many executives have been reluctant to travel in the wake of September 11 - which he says provoked a "flurry of interest" - companies are increasingly aware of the strain that travelling puts employees under and are keen to find ways to help minimise time in the air.

But more than that, Mr Lewis believes that Global Table can offer companies the ability to initiate a sea-change in the way they function.

"This really is not just about saving money but the way a company can change its entire

culture and the way it does business as you are handing back a huge chunk of time in ways that were not possible when they could not conduct meetings without travel," he says.

A change of corporate culture through videoconferencing does not come cheap. DVD quality picture and Dolby sound require 4.5 megabits (million bits) per second of bandwidth while the hardware supporting the framework is state of the art.

Global Table rooms begin at \$150,000 and rise to \$350,000 depending on customer specifications.

But the group is offering a solution that is genuinely disruptive in a sector that has often disappointed its customers, and the Global Table pipeline suggests that, unlike many former business travellers, it may just be set for take-off.