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Move Over, WebEx, Here's Rosebud

By Don Fluckinger

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Opinion: A new document collaboration tool based on Acrobat could make current Web-conferencing tools like WebEx, Live Meeting and Breeze obsolete.

To John Mohan, CEO of **Rosebud PLM**, meeting software systems like WebEx, Live Meeting and Breeze represent Web conferencing 1.0: early 1990s technology with its roots in remote-control application-sharing programs like PCAnywhere.

But the former Sun trainer and consultant thinks he's got Web conferencing 2.0 in his pocket. Oddly enough, it's based on Acrobat.

Introducing the Rosebud document collaboration software. Rosebud is a collaboration tool that uses Acrobat as its platform and is powered by Java. The plug-in, now downloadable by early adopters, will likely see its commercial debut by the end of 2006.

As long as the client machines are running the latest Java Runtime Environment (free and automatically downloaded with Rosebud), the software works with Acrobat 5, 6 and 7, and will work with the upcoming version, on both Windows and Macintosh.

But, wait, meeting software based on Acrobat?

Yep. I've seen it in action. And as a frequent user of Breeze, WebEx and Live Meeting in software demos, I can attest that Rosebud runs circles around them for several reasons, including closer-to-real-time speed, clearer, zoomable images and easier two-way conversations. I'm sold on its potential.

"We don't do any application-sharing or compression," Mohan said. "Once you get the document it's only sending these little snippets of transactions."

So what's the catch? It's the usual David and Goliath scenario. Not only does Rosebud—a Acrobat small plug-in vendor—have to go head-to-head against Microsoft and its Live Meeting, but now that Adobe owns all former Macromedia products—including Breeze—Rosebud's competing with Adobe, too.

But will you use it?

Mohan said he's already got a major publishing company using pre-1.0 Rosebud to collaborate on book covers. Advertising agencies, architects and engineers would seem to be perfect markets, too, given Rosebud's ability to bring designers, clients and consultants together to offer input on the same document.

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Legal professionals negotiating with colleagues, clients and opposing counsel also would likely find Rosebud more efficient than other methods.

Rosebud works off the server, collecting comments and annotations, and even running a live chat window. While WebEx and Live Meeting might have some overlapping features, those packages work well as presentation software—whereas Rosebud uses Acrobat's features to make online meetings more egalitarian, with everyone able to offer input.

Of course, one couldn't do live software demos on Rosebud; you'd have to make do with screen captures and canned movies of software features in action. Mohan said Rosebud plans to incorporate what he calls a "presentation mode" in the plug-in, which will enable one host to present notes, slides, documents or any of the other multimedia elements one can—and will, after the upgrade Adobe said will be out later in 2006—incorporate into Acrobat.

Tying meeting software to Acrobat also means that if office workers are familiar with the application, they won't have to learn or install a new proprietary viewer or player: In test sessions with Mohan, it was instinctive to me to drag and drop Microsoft Office files onto the Acrobat-Rosebud session, which quickly PDF'd and became a part of the multiple-document demo, but only after I gave Rosebud permission (via dialog box) to show them to the group.



Look out, Acrobat: Microsoft XPS is on your tail. [Click here to read more.](#)

"You can't use [the competitors] for document collaboration," Mohan said, adding that because Rosebud works in Acrobat it allows paging through documents at speeds much closer to real time than traditional Web conferencing allows—there are no pregnant pauses, waiting for client machines to decompress and render what's happening on the host's screen.

Rosebud also offers all the document-level security Acrobat does (as in, if you don't have the password to a protected document, it can't go into a session) as well as additional layers to secure private meetings and the content therein. It also can "round-trip" comments into a document, meaning the person who initiates a session can accept some comments and reject others, and save them into a document.

The Rosebud server isn't married to a particular time or place. It collects and concatenates comments and documents as users pitch them in to a session, on their own time. While it can handle a lot of people at once—Mohan said the company isn't yet sure what the maximum is, but it's probably at least in the hundreds—people can check in and out of a session as needed, making collaboration an organic process that can take place over multiple days and time zones if needed.

"SMS [Short Message Service] would really close that loop," said Mohan, who seems to think up potential new features every other sentence when discussing his software. H said he's working on incorporating SMS messaging into Rosebud, which would notify participants in a session of the others' comings, goings and contributions to a document.

This would be a handy feature for multinational businesses that have offices on several continents: "Once Yoshii signs off on this draft of the contract, my phone will beep and we can move forward on this deal."

Next steps

If Mohan and Co. can get enough subscribers to purchase both Rosebud ASP (application service provider) services and Rosebud's server package, the company might then be able to afford to swing a deal with Adobe to get Rosebud to work on Adobe Reader—not just Acrobat—expanding the market for this plug-in more than tenfold.

But for now, Rosebud's backers hope to attract Acrobat power users via Adobe's new Acrobat user groups, users who in turn will take Rosebud back to the office and teach the rank and file how to use it effectively.

As for pricing, nothing's been decided yet, but Mohan said the company's current plan is to price the enterprise server competitively with Breeze, and to make the ASP side inexpensive enough to get the masses to try out Rosebud.

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