High Marks for Distance Learning
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Imagine learning how to use the latest computer software without leaving your desk, your office, or your home. What if a child could take calculus classes with the best math teacher in the state, or take oboe lessons at a school otherwise too small and remote to have a music teacher, much less one who knows the oboe. Imagine acquiring the skills or continuing education credits you need to advance your academic or professional career without the expense and inconvenience of travel.

Several years ago, these scenarios would have seemed unbelievable, but today they are a reality. Distance learning is no longer a matter of televised lectures. It’s a rapidly evolving world, embracing diverse technology and delivery methods such as broadcast and cable television, video conferencing, teleconferencing, the Internet, multimedia, and streaming video—and satellite technology is always part of the mix.

“The benefits of distance learning have been widely recognized for decades,” says Terry Hart, Loral Skynet president. “At Loral Skynet, we have always been enthusiastic about applying technology to the pursuit of educational excellence. Satellites and distance learning are particularly well matched, not simply because of the unique capabilities of satellite transmission, but because space technology tends to represent the ultimate in high-tech learning.”

Today, Loral Skynet’s fleet of Telstar satellites is delivering the advantages of distance learning to people of all ages throughout North America. “We’re helping our customers deliver valuable training and education to students from pre-school through graduate school, as well as business professionals, retirees, and hobbyists,” notes Hart. “It’s truly life-long learning, epitomized by the services offered by two of our customers, Nebraska Educational Telecommunications, and etNetworks, Inc.”

Learning that goes the distance

Serving the schools, colleges, government agencies, professionals, and individuals throughout Nebraska and beyond is Nebraska Educational Telecommunications (NET) of Lincoln, Nebraska. Established in 1954, NET has the noble mission to educate, challenge, and inspire the people of Nebraska, the U.S., and the world through excellence in non-commercial telecommunications. As NET proudly points out on its Web site, “Our middle name is education.”
NET’s home station, KUON-TV, was the seventh educational television station in the U.S. Today, NET offers a comprehensive suite of educational programs, and is expected to broadcast about 25,000 hours of educational programming this year. “For our Schools TeleLearning Service, we broadcast more than 150 instructional programs five hours a day, every day, throughout the school year, to elementary and secondary schools statewide,” explains Mike Beach, director of engineering for NET.

“We also have an innovative Web-based program called CLASS that addresses subjects from algebra to zoology.” NET programs for higher education include Going the Distance, GED ON TV, and CorpNet. Special programs, such as the Law Enforcement Training Project, offer training and continuing education credits for professionals.

Whether the subject is science for six graders or professional training for police officers, NET’s goal is to deliver the information people want, when and where they want it, in a way that they can make the best use of it. “The common factor in all of the programs and services we offer is the information itself,” explains Beach. “The technology makes distance learning possible, but it’s the content that truly matters.”

One thing that makes NET unique is the level of commitment from the state of Nebraska. “Our legislature has long understood the advantages of distance learning, and it recently approved our expansion on Telstar 5 from 20 channels to 30,” says Beach, who cites Telstar 5’s location in the U.S. arc as another important advantage for NET. “Telstar 5 is due south of Omaha, which is the best physical location for us. It also gives us the bandwidth, power, and footprint we need to reach people anywhere in Nebraska and as far away as Puerto Rico, Alaska, and Hawaii.”

According to Rod Bates, NET general manager, one of the most important benefits of NET’s distance learning programs is that it supplements the curricula of Nebraska’s rural schools in a very cost-effective way. “Some of our smaller schools cannot offer sciences and foreign languages, which are required for college admission,” Bates observes. “We can put our best teachers in our studios in Lincoln, Nebraska, to reach students in hundreds of small communities throughout the state. Distance learning helps us improve the quality of education while reducing the overall costs.”

Satellite-driven training benefits business

Delivering high quality, cost-effective training to the desktops of businesses everywhere is the mission of etNetworks, Inc. Founded in 1999, the Nevada-based company combines digital satellite technology with the power of the Internet to offer its subscribers a practical alternative to conventional corporate training regardless of their physical location.

“We offer the highest quality distributed learning experience in North America today,” reports John Tyson, chairman, CEO, and founder of etNetworks. “We deliver the finest content with CD-quality audio and video to subscribers’ desktops and conference rooms, allowing them to benefit from the latest training programs without having to leave their
offices. Travel expenses and the inconvenience of being away from home and office can be avoided entirely."

Tyson estimates that etNetworks’ solution is 80% less costly than traditional brick and mortar solutions. Other advantages include the timeliness of the content and its accessibility. “With our service, it’s much easier to keep the training materials for rapidly changing technology courses current,” says Tyson. “And because training takes place in the most convenient location possible—right at their own facility—more employees are able to benefit who might not otherwise have an opportunity to attend an off-site session.”

Last November, etNetworks joined with IBM Learning Services, the world’s largest information technology training organization, to launch the IBM Learning Service Network. The unique service delivers IBM training courses to IBM’s employees, customers, and Business Partners. Courses, which address technical, sales, and other business topics, are supported by online course registration, question-and-answer forums and testing over secure Web site connections.

The subscription-based service includes an unobtrusive satellite dish on the exterior of the subscriber’s building. The equipment is installed, tested, and maintained by Loral CyberStar. Currently, the service is transmitted by Loral Skynet’s Telstar 7 satellite to subscribers in the U.S. and Canada. “We expect to be serving Europe and all of Latin America by the time you are reading this magazine, and in 2001, we will be serving the Pacific Rim,” notes Tyson. “As we expand globally, the Loral Global Alliance should be very beneficial to our service.”

Tyson anticipates that video-on-demand will be delivered as part of the etNetworks service later this year. “With a click or two of your mouse, you’ll be able to request a class and view it on your desktop a few hours later,” Tyson predicts. Additional innovations are certain to be introduced as the service evolves.

“It is always a pleasure to work with innovators like NET and etNetworks who not only use technology but also advance it,” says Hart. “It’s particularly gratifying to help our customers find new ways to make education and training possible for more people around the world.”