

Always-on video portal by Perch has been adopted by hundreds of companies around the globe

By Gillian Shaw GILLIAN SHAW
Published on: May 8, 2015



Vancouver start-up Perch launched with a videomessaging service but it has morphed into an always-on video portal that allows companies with employees around the globe to create virtual offices.

It's the third incarnation for Perch's product, first conceived as a security system that turned old iPods into home monitoring cameras. That was before the company's co-founder and CEO Danny Robinson's kids started using the system to leave him video messages, turning beta testing into video messaging.

As with many tech start-ups, that turned out to be only a stepping stone to the commercial product that's now being used by employees at hundreds of companies around the globe and most recently had Perch named one of five Cool Vendors in Unified Communications for 2015 by industry analyst Gartner.

"The aha moment was when my daughter came home and held up her report card to the iPad to show Danny," said Maura Rodgers, Robinson's wife. She is founder of the social promotions platform Strutta and Perch's vice-president of marketing. "We thought, this is very cool, the kids are using it to communicate directly. What if it could be live."

The way Perch works is by using a dedicated iPad mounted at work or at home with the Perch app (though you can use Perch anywhere you have an Internet connection with an iPad or iPhone). You can set up a Perch portal using email (although for security reasons not free online services like Gmail and others) and once that's verified you can invite colleagues.

Users can control their availability. They can opt to turn Perch on and let others in their network use the iPad's camera to see that they're available to chat. If you want to talk to someone, walk up to the Perch screen and the face detection automatically opens the microphone.

"You can use it in live mode, where you essentially create a virtual window to connect spaces or you can use it where it's online but more of an ambient mode, where there are images that broadcast your availability and let people know that you are available to talk," said Rodgers.

Unlike video calling services such as Skype or Facetime, Perch doesn't require a call – you can just walk up to it and start talking. That's what Carman Neustaedter's one-and-a-half-year old son does when he wants to get Grandma's attention – or at least his version of talking. Grandma's in Kelowna, but connected via a portal in the family's kitchen.

"When my one-and-a-half year old was born, we had already started using Perch," said Neustaedter, an assistant professor in Simon Fraser University's School of Interactive Arts Technology, whose research focuses on human-computer interaction and interaction design. "He can push a stool to the kitchen counter and when he climbs up to look at the screen, he knows he's looking at grandma's house.

"He'll start squawking to get her attention."

Neustaedter said video calling and connection services such as Skype, Facetime and Google Hangout are designed with a calling mode.

"To me what Perch is doing that's really smart is changing the connection model that people use," he said.

Neustaedter said the traditional calling mode "is growing stale," and while people will try leaving connections open on other video calling services, they're not designed for it and the result he said is "clunky."

"Perch is designed for that purpose to leave a connection open for a long period of time and so I see this as a transition to this new way of connecting that makes more sense for people as they begin to rethink the way they connect with their family and friends and co-workers."

Perch is based on a "freemium" model. It's free for download but with added features at a fee for large corporate users that want to use the system to keep their employees connected.

It is being used by employees at hundreds of companies around the globe including TripAdvisor and Vancouver's Slack.

Rodgers, who uses Perch to stay connected with her mother in Boston, said she is also increasingly hearing from companies and individuals who are using Perch to connect to elderly parents and relatives.

"It's so simple for my Mom to use," said Rodgers. "She knows when I'm there and she'll just pop in and say 'I haven't seen you in a couple of days, what have you been up to?' "It lets me know how she's doing and I get to see how she's doing."

How to use Perch

1. If you have company email, it's very simple. Download the app and sign up with your email address. It will send a verification email to your inbox, click on the link to link to verify and you're on Perch.
2. When you open the app, it will ask you if you want to authorize the camera on your device, the microphone and the GPS locator. The first two are necessary if you want to use Perch as the video connector it is, the third – your location – is optional.
3. You can send invitations to others who share the same domain email. For example, I sent an invitation to my tech editor Bart Jackson and when we both had the Perch app downloaded and turned on, each of us automatically appeared on the other person's screen. I tapped on Bart's photo, started to talk and the mic on my iPhone (you can use your iPhone or even iPod when you're out and about and don't have your iPad handy) turned on automatically and I started talking to Bart.
4. Right now, you can only use Perch with people who share the same domain for their email. So Bart and I signed up with our @vancouversun.com email addresses – it wouldn't work if we tried it with gmail addresses. That's for security reasons, says Perch and if you realize how it works, you'd understand why. You might not want everyone with a gmail.com address to show up on your network.
5. However, Perch's marketing VP Maura Robinson uses it to keep in touch with her mother so it is possible to use it for family and friends, not just at work. The way to do it? Use an email address at your domain. Perhaps you have a blog with your own domain name – you can use that. For example for our family, I have a sailing blog to share our sailing trips with friends and family – I can just let everyone in the family sign in with an email address on that domain. You can add your Mom, your sister in Saskatoon or other people you want to connect with as easily as if they were sitting beside each other having coffee at home.

Original Article: <http://vancouversun.com/news/staff-blogs/always-on-video-portal-by-perch-has-been-adopted-by-hundreds-of-companies-around-the-globe>