

Beamer me up!

Video calls are as easy as plugging into a phone jack

For a live feed, ESPN requires a couple of trucks, a ton of monitors and relays, maybe a dozen technicians, many miles of cables, five or six cameramen, a few stage managers, at least two announcers in pancake makeup and an ample supply of buffalo wings on the media room's buffet table -- all just to air an NCAA basketball game for a couple of hours.

Yet the advertising on any Web cam box would have you believe grandma and grandpa can accomplish this same feat with a software CD, a tiny troubleshooting flashcard and a toothy grin.

Dream on. Of course, what do we expect for \$89.95? Well, maybe not an ESPN ground crew, but some of those complimentary buffalo wings might at least mute our rage as we try, in vain, to tune in familiar faces on the Internet. And, even if we stumble across our Web cam's "on" switch, getting anyone we care about to cast the same high-tech spell several time zones away is like talking someone through brain surgery using Morse code. So most Web cams end up crammed into our junk drawers with all the household's malfunctioning pens.

Jetsons-like video calls for the masses have been a perpetual empty promise since the 1964 World's Fair. Seeing, and being seen by someone who isn't there, is still mostly a luxury afforded only to psychics, schizophrenics and Katie Couric when she interviews Kermit the Frog via satellite from Hollywood. Sadly, the chances rank-and-file Digital Slobs could ever wave to their girlfriends in Canada (we have them, really we do!) has been about the same as George Jetson getting a promotion from Mr. Spacely. That is, until now (insert timpani drum roll here).



KEN IGE / KIGE@STARBULLETIN.COM

GiGi Gertson of Dallas was impressed with the Beamer's simplicity and portability.

The good people at Vialta (www.vialta.com) have created the Beamer, the first video phone that trained monkeys (i.e. your in-laws) can operate. If you've ever plugged in an answering machine, you've got a license to drive the Beamer. It's simply a go-between from your regular house phone to your wall jack.

My sister, GiGi, and I got the chance to take a couple of Beamers on a Honolulu-to-Dallas tin-cans-on-a-string test drive.

Step by step, I called GiGi like normal. She answered. I asked her, "How come Mom didn't hug us more growing up?" and GiGi said, "Because we ruined her early matrimony furniture" (that's how we say "hello" in my family). But right after that I said, "Ready?" and she said, "Ready," and I punched a button (a SINGLE button) and we were put on hold for about 15 seconds while the Beamer revved up. Then, whoop, there I was, on air in Dallas. Then she punched her button and I saw her.

Reality check: It has the same audio-to-video time lag we've come to expect watching CNN reporters in flak jackets. The Beamer doesn't yet work with cell phones, and the video quality varies house to house. We got a much better frame rate (four or five a second) when GiGi took the phone to our mother's kitchen in Louisiana. (Another perk: The Beamer works anywhere there's a standard phone jack.)

The price is significant but not unreasonable (\$500 for two), and

there's no hidden fees or extra charges tacked onto your phone bill. So for less than the cost of one round-trip flight, grandparents can get their fill watching grandkids progress from diapers to driver's licenses half a world away. It's perfect for military families, business-traveling moms or dads, or even single adults who learned, perhaps through therapy, that their family relationships are much easier to manage in two dimensions. But since the census says all Americans move an average of 12 times in a lifetime, the Beamer may be the best way all globetrotting Digital Slobs can prove to our moms we are, literally, keeping our noses clean.

Curt Brandao is the Star-Bulletin's production editor. Reach him at at: cbrandao@starbulletin.com

[E-MAIL THIS ARTICLE](#) ||| [PRINTER-FRIENDLY VERSION](#)

[E-mail to Business Editor](#)

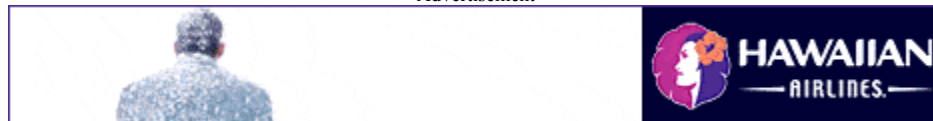
[BACK TO TOP](#)

Text Site Directory:

[\[News\]](#) [\[Business\]](#) [\[Features\]](#) [\[Sports\]](#) [\[Editorial\]](#) [\[Do It Electric!\]](#)
[\[Classified Ads\]](#) [\[Search\]](#) [\[Subscribe\]](#) [\[Info\]](#) [\[Letter to Editor\]](#)
[\[Feedback\]](#)

© 2003 Honolulu Star-Bulletin -- <http://starbulletin.com>

-Advertisement-



[\(Click Here for More Info\)](#)