Bay Area's No. 1 problem an opportunity in disguise

Can 'telecommuting' solve traffic woes?

By Frederick L. Pilot

AS IT HAS for the past eight years running, the Bay Area poll once again pegged transportation as the No. 1 regional problem.

On a roster of problems identified by Bay Area residents, only the category "Other" came close to transportation's ranking as the top local concern. The poll, sponsored by the Bay Area Council and the public television station KQED, was taken in November and sampled the opinions of 600 Bay Area residents.

Transportation was identified as the most important issue facing the Bay Area by 38 percent of those polled. "Other" was mentioned by 31 percent. Other serious concerns, such as drugs, homelessness, pollution and crime garnered no more than 8 percent each.

Apparently, the tyranny of traffic — which siphons more and more time out of the days and lives of busy Bay Area residents — affects a lot of us on a near-daily basis. Hence, it is mentally more pressing and closer to home than other serious, global problems.

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As the proverb goes, problems are often opportunities in disguise. And for businesses, problems may represent new, untapped markets awaiting a solution.

Viewed in this context, the transportation problem represents a tremendous marketing opportunity right in the back yard of a key segment of the Bay Area economy: firms that manufacture and sell computers and telecommunications products and services. If more fully used within the sizable ranks of white collar and other local "information workers," these products and services could go far toward reducing gridlock when commuters are trying to get home.

The Bay Area, while cursed with commuter conundrums, is blessed with a bounty of some of the leading developers and manufacturers of personal computers and software as well as prominent providers of telecommunications products and services.

Local computer and telecommunications companies have, ready to sell today, a collective solution to the Bay Area's No. 1 headache. Interestingly, this solution doesn't involve the transport of even a single commuter. Nor does it entail enhancements to the existing transportation infrastructure.

Instead of more asphalt and concrete for wider freeways and higher bridge tolls and gasoline taxes to pay for them, the transportation solution our local computer and telecommunications firms can provide is an "electronic highway."

Instead of creeping along at 10 to 20 mph on overcrowded Bay Area freeways, thousands of workers would enter this electronic highway at light speed, sending the fruits of their labors to their offices during part or all of the week through computers, modems and telephones.

This form of commuting — referred to as "telecommuting" — over electronic highways has received increased attention since the Loma Prieta earthquake wreaked devastation on their concrete counterparts in San Francisco and Oakland.

Telecommuting also is getting serious attention from the Bush administration as a means of reducing the nation's oil consumption and automobile emissions by moving work to people instead of vice versa.

For computer and telecommunications companies, telecommuting also offers a very practical application of the advanced technologies they have developed over the past decade or so.

Marketers in these industries face the challenge of translating the technological advances that have resulted in faster processing power, increased access and connectivity and improved user interfaces into practical terms and benefits that may be easily understood and recognized by non-technical as well as technically oriented consumers.

Telecommuting offers an excellent, basic application of computer and telecommunications technologies.

Any harried Bay Area family with information worker breadwinners could immediately realize the benefits of telecommuting. Instead of spending one to four hours of the workday trapped in limbo between home and office, telecommuters and their families would regain precious time to spend together.

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