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March 20, 2013, 10:00 AM

For Video-Demo Actors, Nice Work if You Can Get It

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By Scott Denne

[Johnny Tyronne](#) spends many of his working days sitting there and looking important. His employer, a fast-growing New Jersey tech company, couldn't be more thrilled.



Johnny Tyronne

Tyronne, whose resume includes hand modeling for electronic cigarette ads and appearances as an extra on "Saturday Night Live" and "The Good Wife," is one of a handful of actors whose incomes are getting a boost by helping demonstrate video-conferencing systems.

Video conferencing—the ability to gather multiple people in far-flung locations, with everyone visible on screen—was long a staple of science-fiction TV shows and predictions about the future. Despite decades of effort from technology companies, it never really took off.

That may be changing, thanks to video-calling technologies like [Skype](#) and iPhone's [Facetime](#), as well as a greater need among businesses to bring together an increasingly global workforce. Since 2008, sales of video-conferencing equipment grew by nearly half, to \$2.63 billion in 2011, according to [IDC Research](#).

The video-conferencing boom came just in time for Tyronne. When he got the call from [Vidyo](#), a maker of video-conferencing software, in May 2011, work from television and commercials was tapering off, he said.

He walked into what he thought was going to be a one- or two-day photo shoot, like most other modeling jobs, but instead it turned into a regular gig—participating in demonstrations of Vidyo's technology for journalists, industry analysts and prospective customers and partners—that he works sometimes as often as four days a week.

Work as an actor tends to come all at once and then none at all, so it is mentally satisfying to have something stable—and with his pay averaging about \$400 for every day at Vidyo, the difference was obvious to him when he filled out his tax returns last year, Tyronne said.

For his video-conferencing work, usually Tyronne is wearing a grey suit. Occasionally, he is dressed as a doctor—health-care companies are becoming big buyers of video-conferencing products. Depending on which of its products Vidyo is demo-ing, he's one of the faces, in front of a blue background, coming through on anywhere between four and nine screens. Sometimes he's one of two, three or four faces split across a laptop, desktop, iPad or iPhone.

Sometimes the demos only last 10 minutes, leaving him with plenty of down time.

It's not especially taxing work, Tyronne said, but it's not without challenges—especially for someone who's admittedly fidgety.



Johnny Tyronne

"It takes a lot of practice for me to sit still and stare at the camera," said Tyronne, who sometimes breaks up the monotony by doing magic tricks to cap off a demo.

The expanding video-conferencing market also means more industry trade shows, where professional actors can be especially useful.

"When you're walking through a trade show and you see someone move or juggle, you do a double-take," said Megan Lueders, marketing chief at [LifeSize Communications](#), the video-conferencing division of [Logitech International](#).

LifeSize sets up shop regularly at trade shows in various industries, setting up booths that enable passers-by to sample the company's video-conferencing equipment by conversing with actors who are in LifeSize's Austin, Texas, headquarters.

Using professional actors is a good way to get potential customers into its booth and keep them engaged, Lueders said. "They're not scared. They will be anyone you want them to be."

LifeSize Communications likes to have its actors engage in small talk with people at trade shows—what's the weather like, how was their trip, have they seen anything interesting, and so on. But grabbing the attention of someone who's walking by or just standing there can sometimes be awkward. Current technologies have less delay and far better resolution than what most people are accustomed to seeing with consumer-grade video conferencing.

The difference is significant enough that people often don't realize they're looking at a live feed.

"They stop and stare at you and think it's a recording that they're looking at, until you say something very specific. You kind of just nudge that person awake," said actress Kelly Cameron. The way people look at you when they think you're a recording is very different than when they realize there's a live person on the other end, she said. "It's almost like you're in a sideshow."

Cameron has also done commercials for [Whole Foods Market](#), [PBS Kids](#) and several banks, which cast her "because I have that soccer-mom look." But those jobs are harder to find for an actress, like Cameron, who is not on one of the coasts.

In about three years, Cameron had somewhere between 15 and 20 jobs with Austin, Texas-based LifeSize Communications. That's not a life-changing amount of work, but in a market like Austin everything helps, she said. "It's a fun chance to improv and just be yourself. It can be more exciting than a scripted job," she said.

Not every video-conferencing job in the acting world is a chance to practice improv. [Radvision](#), one of the earliest companies in the video-conferencing sector, uses about two or three actors every tradeshow, but often provides them with a script to help sell Radvision's video gear.

Vidyo first turned to actors for help last spring, when it introduced a product aimed at multi-location business meetings that can support anywhere from 4 to 20 screens. Until then, it had been using employees for all its demos, but with so many screens it needed more faces and didn't want employees spending all their time giving demos.

"At some point you have to think, 'They've got a day job. I need sales people to sell,'" said Ashish Gupta, its chief marketing officer.

Now the company runs about 50 demos a month, each with between four to six participants, and the half-dozen actors it hires on a regular basis are a big part of those. LifeSize—less prolific in its hiring of actors than Vidyo—hires a group of two to five actors for each of the 12 to 17 tradeshow it participates in every year.

Even though they're often just sitting there, the work can be fulfilling. When they appear in commercials, actors don't get a chance to be so close to the sales of the products that they're hawking.

"I feel important to be a part of it even if I'm just saying 'Hello' every so often," Tyronne said.

But hiring actors isn't universal in the industry. [Cisco Systems](#) and [Polycom](#), the current market leaders in video conferencing, don't hire actors for trade shows and customer events. Cisco, for example, prefers to use its own employees, who have a better knowledge of Cisco products—both how they work and for what applications they are best suited, a company spokeswoman said.

With the success Vidyo is having in using actors, the company hopes to add more of them to its regular roster. But like many good jobs, some of the work is being outsourced. In addition to professional actors and even friends and family of employees, Vidyo sends some of the work to call centers in the Midwestern U.S. and the Philippines.

But hiring actors brings a special touch to making a sale that's not as easy to get from a call center.

"Sometimes you want to lighten up the mood in a trade show and doing a few magic tricks gives it that human touch," said Vidyo's Gupta.

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