

## EarthCam executive comments on webcams

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A decade ago, it was a clever novelty: a webcam pointed at an office water cooler. The first one is still online, at [www.coolercam.com](http://www.coolercam.com), broadcasting a fresh picture every 10 seconds.

But in the succeeding decade, webcams have grown from a techie novelty to a way of life for some people -- some of whom have evidently overdosed on them.

As for the cooler camera, "Way back then, it got a lot of hits, but the counter has not gone up hugely in the last couple of years," said Ryan Wilson, manager at Interactive Market Systems, the water cooler's home. Located in Sandy, Utah, the firm provides statistical analysis for marketers. "There used to be a Web ring of cooler cams, but that has all gone away," he said.

Fredrik Nilsson, North American manager at Swedish webcam vendor Axis Communications, isn't surprised. "It was fun to make a live image of a water cooler in 1996, but it is not very impressive today -- you need a real application," he said.

Nilsson noted that there are actually two kinds of digital cameras used to put video or stop-motion pictures on the Web. Consumer-grade cameras that attach to a computer via a USB port are typically referred to as webcams. Cameras with integrated intelligence that can attach directly to the Internet are called network cameras.

Webcams can sell for as little as \$20, while network cameras can be had for less than \$200. Most (like the cooler cam) are used to make snapshots every few seconds rather than full-motion video.

Better quality

Quality has improved steadily since the devices appeared in 1996, Nilsson noted. Most webcams can generate 30 frames per second when there's available bandwidth. Average resolutions are between VGA (about 300,000 pixels) and 2 megapixels.

"As recently as three years ago, you never saw anything higher than VGA," he noted. "As for color quality, I would say that the cameras have been close to true color for the last two years now." Light sensitivity is good enough that it hardly matters in most settings, and night vision is available for about \$500, he added.

The most significant trend among network cameras has been the rise of large markets for the cameras among construction contractors, departments of transportation and departments of tourism, noted Brian Cury, head of [EarthCam Inc.](http://EarthCam.com), a network camera vendor in Hackensack, N.J.

The construction contractors want cameras to document the progress of the construction of a particular building, with the images accessible via the Internet to all the stakeholders of that building, Cury said. Transportation officials like them for traffic management, security and to document daily operations. Tourism officials, of course, want to broadcast scenery, Cury said.