

Voyages TV uses Adtec's Soloist2 in Taiwan

By Andy Jacobs

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Launched in April 2002, Voyages Television is Asia's first 24/7 cable TV channel dedicated to the sale of travel holidays. The company selected Taiwan for the launch of its first VoyagesTV channel because cable penetration in Taiwan is more than 80 percent (the highest in the world), serving more than five million households. Taiwan also has a high standard of living, with a growing outbound holiday market.

The company's business plan required signal playout and distribution to 30 headends throughout Taiwan. By deploying a low-cost IP-based store-and-forward video player at every headend, coupled with an inexpensive unicast technology such as DSL, the company could lower the channel's signal-distribution costs by not having to rely on satellite broadcasting. (See Figure 1.)

Further, it believed that a unicast strategy with a player in every headend could provide customized playout. In addition to enabling local advertisers to target their communities, customization is also important because Taiwan has two language groups. With a unicast strategy, the company could provide Mandarin shows for the northern cable systems and Taiwanese shows for the southern cable systems. The company identified Adtec's Soloist2 MPEG-2 video player as being able to meet its requirements.

Reasonable price

The units, with composite/component output and 160GB of storage, cost well below E5,000 each. This was a key factor because the company needed to buy 30 video players.

Multitasking and capacity

The company needed a device that could playout 24/7 and ingest at the same time. It repeats shows frequently, offering 40 or 50 different travel packages at any one time. Therefore, it needed only about 60 to 70 hours of storage on the player.

The MPEG-2 video players can playout at 15Mb/s and simultaneously ingest at 4Mb/s. Because the company only needed to download 4GB to 5GB a day, and the fastest speed it could get from DSL in Taiwan was 1Mb/s, the ingest capabilities of the Soloist2 video players were more than adequate. DSL is relatively low-cost in Taiwan, and there is near universal reach.

Reliability

Reliability was a concern because the devices would be in headends throughout Taiwan, many of them far from the company's Taipei offices. The video players have proved to be reliable in the field. They are custom-designed to ingest and play video, nothing more; they are not a retrofitted PC running Windows. You plug them in and as soon as the drives spin to speed, you have video and audio output. They are only 1RU high, and unlike a PC, they rarely need to be reset.

Software

Adtec licenses its Symphony Pro software (now at Version 5.0), a suite of applets that perform several functions: create and run program schedules and lists, FTP, design and run graphics and crawls, and provide playout verification. VoyagesTV uses all the Symphony Pro applets, except for its FTP, which was lacking in some key features and has a mediocre GUI. After testing many third-party FTP programs, the company settled on Leap FTP.

Graphics

The company wanted to superimpose fresh graphics into its shows on an hourly and daily basis, without having to bring the shows back into the edit suite. One of the biggest successes it has had thanks to its new video players is with the crawl. The three or four travel products featured in the company's daily crawls generate 60 percent to 70 percent of its sales volume. It's important that it times the crawls to appear at specific segments of the show, as to not distract the viewers. The Soloist2 units have "shadow files" that allow the timing of crawls and other graphics to be programmed down to the precise video frame for each MPEG-2 file.

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Figure 1. This diagram shows a simplified version of VoyagesTV's IP-based signal-distribution scheme.