

CASE STUDY

VIACOM INTERNATIONAL MEDIA NETWORKS



CUSTOMER

Viacom International Media Networks
Amsterdam & London

CHALLENGES

Standardizing playout to support over 110 international channels in two International Media Centers viewed around the globe

Quick turnaround in order to launch new channels

SOLUTION

An automated playout solution that integrates program media and templated graphics under automation system control

BENEFITS

System carries significantly lower operational costs than traditional media servers and their associated playout technology, while being highly reliable in its performance

Gives full channel control and responsibility to the scheduler instead of a technical operator

Using Smart Playout Center To Meet Increasing Channel Demand

BACKGROUND

When Viacom International Media Networks (VIMN) needed a reliable playout solution to handle the rapidly expanding channel count at its two main distribution facilities in Amsterdam, the Netherlands and London, they chose the Smart Playout Center™—an automated, multichannel, integrated playout system from Grass Valley®.

Roderick Aal is VIMN's vice president of technology for the UK, Northern European Regions, Australia, and Russia. His Media & Technology Services division is responsible for the support, innovation, monitoring, and distribution of 110 TV channels which are divided between two International Media Centers in Amsterdam and London. Overall, Viacom brands are seen globally in nearly 700 million households in approximately 170 territories and 37 languages via more than 200 locally programmed and operated TV channels.

Aal's interest in what some call "channel-in-a-box" technology dates back to 2009, when he began working as a beta tester with Netherlands-based PubliTronic (now part of Grass Valley) which had developed a new type of 1 RU playout node called the Nexus server. Nexus allowed VIMN to continue to add new channels without the typical expense associated with traditional video production and distribution equipment. In a single box, he could load the content for a channel and the device would automatically add the appropriate titles and audio elements for each region of the world being served. From that point on, his vision for the future was clear.

"We wanted an integrated system that could, and should, do everything, instead of buying a disparate chain of devices for captioning and master control," said Aal. "I think we were very instrumental in the original design of the channel-in-a-box system because it was clear to us that automation had to play a larger role in multichannel distribution."

From those early prototype Nexus devices, Aal and his team are now upgrading their two facilities with new Grass Valley Smart Playout Center with K2 Edge™ playout nodes, the next generation of playout devices that provide the flexibility and reliability that Aal is looking for to keep his operations successful and running smoothly.

"In the past we were restricted by a linear process whereby we'd handled each piece of content individually, which took a lot of time and effort," said Aal. "Now we can work on files collaboratively and simultaneously to increase productivity. This is how a successful media business works."

SOLUTION

After five years of operation, many of the original Nexus servers are being replaced with Smart Playout Center K2 Edge playout nodes. Sitting side-by-side in each VIMN facility, they provide the type of performance Aal says is critical to keep their carefully thought-out business model successful. Aal and his team have devised a highly redundant, storage area network of servers, all tightly linked to asset management and scheduling systems in a veritable triangular prism. When a piece of content is changed on one device (such as on the on-site Pharos asset management system) all of the associated servers automatically update their rundown lists and distribute the content accordingly.

"The idea is to have all of the systems working together in harmony in order to keep the workflow smooth and productive," said Aal, noting that they now have about 500,000 assets stored over four petabytes of HD system capacity. All servers in their Amsterdam and London facilities are hot-swappable and configured with full redundancy and media recovery.

“There’s little doubt that we could support and process so many channels as accurately and timely as we do without Grass Valley’s Smart Playout Center. I have been a long-time believer in what some call ‘channel-in-a-box’ systems because they bring a lot of value to an organization like ours.”

Roderick Aal, VP, Technology
UK, Northern European Regions, Australia, and Russia
Viacom International Media Networks



Smart Playout Center reduces the need for a large technical staff and improves system performance while reliably serving a diverse audience—which translates to less cost and a faster return on new technology investments.

The K2 Edge playout nodes offer timely linear publishing and permit VIMN to create a tightly integrated content creation architecture that now includes a scheduling system (MediaGeniX), nonlinear publishing (Flow Works), and media asset management (Pharos).

K2 Edge also allows Aal and his team to use an application called Channel Composer™ to easily add graphics, and insert region-based commercials and DVE moves on top of the video as it is being played out. This is done mostly in real time.

Template-based Automated Graphics Production

At VIMN’s facilities in Amsterdam and London, a graphics designer creates a graphics template that is used for a variety of content types. The engineering staff translates what the designer wants to see on screen within the K2 Edge playout node and adds the templates using Channel Composer. Within K2 Edge, the new data is electronically inserted into the template, without human intervention, and appears on screen as a fully rendered (even sometimes animated) graphic.

“More importantly, when someone makes a change to a file in one part of the process, it ripples through all of the other parts, creating this cohesive workflow that makes the handling of content very efficient,” said Aal. “So, we don’t need as many maintenance engineers or staff operators as we used to, and we perform nearly twice as many file transfers.”

The program schedulers at VIMN now serve as the captain of the channel—they are in charge. When a schedule is submitted, it is recognized by all of the playout devices and played out at exactly the right time, without the need for an operator to check it manually.

“We’re very strict on late deliveries [of content],” said Aal, adding that the K2 Edge systems have been very reliable. “We hardly ever have to make repairs, which means these devices have amortized very quickly and we certainly have gotten our money’s worth. Most of the content we provide is repeated many times during the day on any one channel, so an automated system like the Smart Playout Center and K2 Edge are the right tools for the job.”

BENEFITS

For VIMN, the goals for their Amsterdam and London facilities were four-fold: to create an integral and transparent business solution for the organization; to manage and innovate publishing and content operations and strategy; to unleash content revenue potential; and to reduce operating costs through centralized management of the content publishing supply chain. All have been cost-effectively met with a powerful and highly integrated playout platform—fully leveraging the Grass Valley Smart Playout Center.

At the end of the day, deploying the significant amount of Grass Valley playout nodes that VIMN already has (with more to come) is all about reducing content processing time and minimizing the risk of errors—both on-air and internally. To accomplish this VIMN had to establish a networked architecture that could facilitate the highly accurate, centralized management of the content publishing supply chain. This was achieved by implementing a set of common processes and integrated media technologies to receive, process, store, schedule, deliver, and publish their content in the right quality for a multi-platform environment.

Using IT-centric equipment like the Smart Playout Center accurately met VIMN’s criteria—to realize significantly lower operational costs than traditional media servers and their associated playout technology, and be highly reliable in their performance.

ABOUT GRASS VALLEY

For more than 50 years, the Grass Valley name has been synonymous with innovation, leadership, and performance. Our full range of solutions and services is unmatched in the industry, leveraging the economies of scale of the IT industry with our proprietary core knowledge of media processing and storage. Grass Valley customers include most of the world’s leading broadcasters, teleproduction facilities, and service providers, as well as independent video professionals who rely on our products to cover the world’s most high-profile live events, as well as to

benefit from efficiencies in day-to-day operations. When you’re watching news, sports, or entertainment programming—whether on a TV, the web, or a mobile device—you’re watching Grass Valley at work in today’s connected world.

For information about Grass Valley solutions and services, please visit: www.grassvalley.com.

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