A centrally managed, campuswide playlist provides content that's relevant to the entire campus community. Individual units in charge of specific displays can use whatever pieces they deem appropriate for their own audience.

Instantaneous Reach

Effective campuswide digital signage communications

By Wilson Lo

After being announced as a host venue for the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics, my colleagues and I at **The University of British Columbia** (Canada) began preparations for the thousands of visitors expected to come see the Olympic torch relay and attend events at the Doug Mitchell Thunderbird Sports Centre.

Part of this preparation was the installation of a large outdoor digital display located at a main intersection for incoming traffic to our Point Grey campus. With only a few weeks left to the start of the games, the display had to be constructed and populated with content. Given this impending deadline, partnerships between UBC Information Technology, UBC Public Affairs (now UBC Communications & Marketing), and UBC Media Group (now UBC IT A/V) were formed to deliver a proof-of-concept digital signage solution for the large display. And deliver we did.

After the Olympics, the UBC administration continued its prior focus on finding an enterprise signage solution for the campus. So began a more formal pilot project, leveraging much of the work and experiences discovered during the Olympics.

Established in 1908 and currently home to 54,000 students from around the world, UBC is one of Canada's most prestigious postsecondary institutions. With campuses in Vancouver and the Okanagan Valley, UBC provides a globally connected research community with opportunities to learn, discover, and contribute within the surrounding beauty of the mountainous Canadian West. Our community also includes the Robson Square Centre for Continuing Education and its 45,000 students and staff, plus three affiliated teaching hospitals throughout the province.

In April 2011, UBC rolled out its 15-display digital signage network. The software-based installation allows us to instantly reach all students, staff, faculty, and visitors using multisite digital screens. Adopted primarily for broadcasting campus material, the system enables us to diffuse information for emergency preparedness, brand content, campus operations, and curriculum-related content from central locations to our academic facilities across the province. The solution was the result of a process involving a pilot phase and close collaboration with vendors to produce a digital signage platform suiting UBC's needs.

Digital Signage Needs: A Closer Look

Besides the need for an emergency communications vehicle, university officials wanted to put forth a more contemporary

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public identity that would better embrace the merits of today's digital opportunities, and the university's communications and marketing departments were eager to go beyond the traditional print and online media strategies for their outreach efforts. Our faculty and administrators were looking to create awareness for activities and events, as well as more campuswide initiatives that would reinforce UBC's brand identity in the eyes of our stakeholders. Business units such as Food Services also saw the need for extending and improving existing signage solutions. And academic schools such as the Faculty of Education and the Faculty of Arts were looking into the possibility of adopting this new technology.

The solution, of course, had to allow emergency broadcast content to be controlled from a central location. It also needed to be scalable from both a business and technology perspective. Our team was aware that deployment of new display endpoints should not incur additional licensing costs but only include the direct cost of the associated hardware and its related installation, and the actual introduction of the display into the signage network should require minimal installation time, configuration, and infrastructural support.

> A centralized management model with distributed local autonomy gives individual units the independence to approach digital signage in a way that fits their existing workflows while still providing centrally managed infrastructure and support.

Selection Considerations

Prior to choosing the Haivision CoolSign digital signage solution, we looked at several commercial products and open-source solutions. In addition, we conducted a pilot phase with our vendor to fully evaluate whether the installation would provide an intuitive workflow given our specific set of functional requirements.

We considered disaster recovery and security issues. Security was particularly important. Prior to our purchase, we wanted to ensure our digital assets would be secure, without the risk of theft from users on the network. Since the solution would be providing the primary means for emergency messaging to our entire university population, the solution also needed to provide high availability, which translated to a 99.99 percent uptime. Any solution that did not meet this requirement was considered unacceptable.

Since the solution was intended for operation by several internal client units, it was also important that we obtained a turnkey product. This would present several advantages related to autonomy and control of content creation, management, and play scheduling. In addition, this format offloads system and networking demands from units, freeing up more resources for creating engaging content and ensuring effective management.

A turnkey solution would also have the advantages of better pricing and more dedicated service from our vendor, since we would only have one point of contact for the entire workflow. Furthermore, a turnkey solution could be implemented more quickly.

The platform's software enables the creation, management, and delivery of powerful, dynamic content across our entire network

to single, a group of, or all displays. It is an integrated, efficient software package equipped with easy-to-use management tools.

Managing Content

UBC's Department of Information Technology provides all IT-related strategy, applications, infrastructure, and support services to the UBC community. We also operate and support the digital signage infrastructure for the campus. This includes the network, firewall, virtual servers, and software licenses for the system. The IT Department also owns the signage service and provides all onboarding, training, and support to users.

These system costs are all centrally funded. On the other hand, UBC units own and pay for their signage displays, the computers associated with such displays, and any supporting infrastructure required locally to operate that display (like power drop, data drop, mounting, etc.). Therefore, UBC units provide their own resources for creating and managing signage content.

As in any marketing-based initiative, whether for a campus setting or otherwise, identifying the audience is key. For that reason, the Central Communications and Marketing department makes a concerted effort to educate the units who onboard with the signage service that timely, location-based, and relevant content is what will make people notice their displays. We also understand that for nearly all of our campus units, digital signage is an entirely new channel of communications. Therefore, we provide them with guidelines and offer feedback on their designs.

We consider that each unit knows their audience best, which is why their content is managed locally. However, we encourage units to go beyond simple .jpeg files and explore motion graphics and full HD video content.

We also have a campuswide content playlist that's centrally managed and relevant to all. Recent rotations have included notices for Remembrance Day ceremonies, teaser profiles of student athletes partaking in the 2012 London Olympics, and student film projects posted to our large outdoor display. Units can either subscribe to this playlist or use individual pieces of content that they feel would be appropriate for their audience.

Within units, students or other individuals can submit content to their local signage administrator for rotation in either our campuswide content playlist or for consideration on our large outdoor display, which is maintained centrally by signage service staff. All units are required to display university brand content in addition to emergency messaging; third-party advertising is prohibited on the entire campus network.

This centralized management model with distributed local autonomy is important to the success of our digital signage solution. It gives individual units the independence to approach digital

signage in a way that fits their existing workflows while still providing centrally-managed infrastructure and support. This allows us to grow the capacity for creating great content that will meet the needs of our community.

Signage Supports Alumni Weekend

Successful applications of our model include the recent promotion of UBC's 2012 Alumni Weekend.

We collaborated with individual units to select and "take over" signs that would have the highest probability of being seen by our Alumni Weekend participants. Next, we specified content that would add value to the Alumni Weekend experience. This included a curated stream of tweets from the #UBCAlumniWknd conversation on Twitter, photos from the Alumni Weekend photo booth, video from our "Start an Evolution" campaign, and postings that highlighted upcoming events throughout the day.

The result was a total of 27 screens displaying content with 67,114 total impressions of Alumni Weekend content. We hope to continue this coordinated approach next year by adding live-stream video, campus maps for wayfinding applications, alumni profiles, and transportation information.

Expanding the System

Since installing our system in April 2011, we have increased our number of displays from 15 to 110. We have also deployed dynamic menu boards for UBC Food Services, and we are now planning for live video streaming throughout our signage network. We have experienced a 100 percent retention rate from our participating units.

By implementing a system that is both reliable and scalable, we have also experienced significant economies of scale with regard to resources for networking, system infrastructure, security, disaster-recovery, software licensing, training, and support. We can now conduct strategic campus-level initiatives concerning UBC branding and emergency broadcasting with confidence. From a content perspective, there is now more uniformity and consistency to our branding message—thanks to a centrally managed system where units also can easily syndicate content across the entire network. **UB**

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