

IBC Innovation Awards – sample entry

[note that this is a dummy entry about a completely fictional project for a fictional client by fictional vendors. It is intended to give an idea of the sort of detail that is likely to catch the eye of the judges and make for a successful nomination]

Title of project

The 360 degree newsroom at Alpha Broadcasting

Award category

Content management

Company submitting this entry

Beta Systems Integrators

End user

Alpha Broadcasting Corporation

Other involved

Gamma Broadcast – cameras, editors and servers

Delta News Production – editorial newsroom systems, content repurposing and asset management

Epsilon Technologies – format conversion, IP communications and online publishing

Description

As the leading source of news in its territory, Alpha Broadcasting Corporation has a reputation for both its news values – accuracy and timeliness – and for the quality of its presentation. It was one of the first to install an all-electronic newsroom with desktop editing for journalists to complete their own stories.

In 2008 it decided the time was right to invest in a complete overhaul of its news production facilities. As well as the efficiencies it sought in terms of tapeless, file-based shooting and production, Alpha wanted to enhance its news reputation through two innovations: first, by moving to high definition throughout the production chain; and second by increasing its online presence with every story available in an extended version on the web as soon as it is broadcast.

This had to be accomplished within tight constraints. Not just was the capital budget limited, there was no scope for increasing the operational headcount, so the greatly extended online services had to be achieved with the same resources.

Alpha also sees delivering the news quickly as one of its key features, so the increased data demands of HD had to be handled without any additional delays in transfers, processing or editing. In particular, transfers between regional bureaux and the central production centre had to be swift and seamless.

Beta Systems Integrators worked with Alpha to move from a list of requirements to a detailed operational specification, and from this to a set of commitments on the performance of the delivered system. This was a bold and innovative move: defining a contract for a major broadcast project not in terms of equipment but in terms of outcomes. Both client and lead contractor demonstrated a great deal of faith, as well as understanding, in setting out the project this way.

With the target performance regime established, Beta could complete the systems design.

The first key decision was to choose cameras from Gamma Broadcast. While there are a number of manufacturers providing high definition camcorders suitable for ENG, the choice of the Gamma system was made because of its advanced file-based capabilities. The camera can record onto solid state memory cards and removable disk packs.

More important, it has connectivity built in, allowing crews on the road to send rushes back to the production centre over the internet if necessary. Ethernet and WiFi are built in, so a crew could transfer a shoot as an FTP transfer from a Starbucks coffee shop if necessary. When WiMax networks become implemented a plug-in transmitter will allow the camcorder to broadcast HD live back to the studio.

In a separate contract, Gamma also supplied the server network at the main production centre and in the regional networks, and desktop and craft editing workstations capable of editing in place on the server for maximum productivity and speed.

At the national headquarters the Gamma server network has storage for 750 hours of content in a fully Raid protected SAN array. Each of the five regional offices also has a server, with 150 hours of HD storage, linked via data network to the national server. There is automatic archiving to a data tape library.

Alpha Broadcasting was already a user of the Delta newsroom system, and to minimise the need for staff retraining it made sense to retain this proven platform. The project team worked closely together, though, to implement a range of new functionality in the newsroom which allows the journalist to create multiple versions of the same story quickly and seamlessly.

In particular, Gamma developed a new version of its desktop editor client which allowed the journalist to view the script as an element of the timeline, so that pictures, voiceovers and graphics are tied to the story not just the arbitrary time. If a script is subsequently edited the changes in video, audio and graphics are made automatically where possible.

With very little additional effort, a journalist can cut a short and a long version of the broadcast story, and a fuller extended version for the online news service. This was essential to meet the performance regime delivering high quality news to multiple platforms without any additional staff.

To publish the stories online Epsilon developed a plug-in for the Gamma editor. Once the story is ready for online publishing, all that is needed is a single mouse click. The Epsilon plug-in collects all the resources it needs, renders it at the right resolution for the output, collects the metadata from the Delta newsroom system, and publishes it.

Epsilon is also responsible for another important part of the system. To maintain speed, the desktop editors work on low resolution proxy versions of the content rather than the full HD.

Where stories are contributed from regional bureaux, or where a regional newsroom creates a story which uses material from the central archive, only the proxy is transferred at first. Subsequently, intelligent software looks at the content likely to be used in the finished version and starts transmitting that, at high speed, over dedicated IP circuits. The result is that, in most cases, all the full resolution material is ready by the time the editor has finished cutting the story and it can be sent to air instantly.

The system supports up to 25 concurrent users in each of the five regional offices, and over 100 users at browse resolution in the national headquarters without impact on the mission-critical broadcast infrastructure. Because all the editing is either by browse resolution proxy on desktop editors or directly on content on the server using craft editors, finished stories can be played out within seconds of completing the cut.

Phil Greek, the head of news at Alpha Broadcasting, said "This is a remarkable project for a number of reasons.

"First, there is the very special business relationship between the partners," he explained. "Our contract with Beta Systems is expressed in what we need to do, now and in the future. Their decision to work with us on this basis is what allowed us, and them, to come up with all the other innovative functionality we have incorporated.

"All the vendors who have supplied technology, and especially Gamma, Delta and Epsilon, have been open to our suggestions and implemented new features to do what we want," he continued. "Their co-operation has been open and honest, and we could not have achieved our performance goals without it.

"What we have is a system which will allow us to move from standard definition television news to high definition multi-platform news, without any compromise in speed or operational convenience, and without the need for any more staff to serve the additional platforms," he concluded. "That is a remarkable achievement.

"We set a very tough schedule of little more than nine months from contract signing to being on air, and we are delighted that the team has delivered all this technology ahead of schedule, allowing us to get on with training and rehearsals," added Phil. "Already some of the content is appearing on our website, and we are completely confident we will be on air with our new look HD news service by our target date of May 2009.

"I repeat, this is a highly innovative, and as far as I know unique, project. On behalf of everyone at Alpha Broadcasting, I am delighted and honoured that Beta Systems has put us forward for the 2009 IBC Innovation Awards."

Summary

This project demonstrates the best of content technology innovation. It brings together multiple vendors who have actively collaborated to combine the latest in broadcast and IT products and techniques. The result is a highly efficient, powerful and fast newsroom system which will serve both the prestigious new high definition news channel and extended online and TV anytime services.

The project also innovates in its contractual basis, being defined not by hardware, or inputs and outputs, but in terms of outcomes, and in particular that it should deliver the extended functionality with no penalty in terms of operation, speed or headcount.

DVD

The DVD features a set of graphics sequences demonstrating how the elements of the project work together, and some initial demonstrations of on-screen functionality.

If this project is selected for the short list it is our intention to shoot further video material showing the system in use through the final rehearsals and the on-air launch.