



Buckeye Testing Centralized Delivery of ETV

As more interactive applications become available, cable operators large and small will want to receive and deploy them in the most efficient manner possible. But what's the best way for them to achieve that?

Denver-based Comcast Media Center, which provides centralized content services for the industry, has prepared its transmission capabilities to centrally deliver and manage ETV (EBIF) applications through its HITS Advanced Interactive Services (AxIS).

Buckeye CableSystem, a Toledo, Ohio-based cable provider, is learning valuable lessons in a beta-test of ETV applications delivered through HITS AxIS. The test is allowing Buckeye to thoroughly explore all of the aspects of delivering interactive TV in a real-world environment.

Since last fall, Buckeye CableSystem has been conducting consumer trials of applications, including a dashboard with news, weather, and sports, and interactive Yellow Pages.

"We view this as an opportunity to allow us to better understand the various effects and requirements for supporting interactive applications in our network," says Jim Brown, director of engineering, Buckeye CableSystem.

HITS AxIS centrally manages all of the functions that typically would be required by a local headend, including carousels, ETV provisioning, ETV scheduling, and muxing applications with video signals and monitoring.

Applications are delivered via satellite or fiber to a HITS AxIS server in the cable headend. Virtual private networks (VPNs) are used to deliver ETV user data back to the HITS AxIS iTV operations management center.

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HITS Axis is compatible with Cisco or Motorola (DAC and NAS) headends and it works with a wide range of set-top boxes, notes Gary Traver, SVP & COO, Comcast Media Center. Initial applications have been delivered using a TVWorks EBIF user agent. HITS Axis has relationships with more than 20 suppliers that support ITV applications development and delivery.

In the beta test, Brown says Buckeye had to overcome challenges that included incompatibility with some set-top boxes, and understanding and managing additional interactive traffic on the network.

“The few technical challenges were perhaps minimized further when compared to our trying to implement ITV applications on an individual case-by-case basis,” Brown says. “Perhaps one of the largest challenges, however, has been educating testers and managing expectations and requests.”

Buckeye and HITS Axis are conducting customer satisfaction surveys with the existing user group to determine interest in particular applications. Meanwhile, HITS Axis beta tests will expand this spring to include cable systems operated by BendBroadband, MetroCast and Sunflower Broadband.

“These experiences will help to underscore the importance of the industry’s efforts to standardize cable architecture and create an open ecosystem for advanced interactive video services,” Traver says.

For Buckeye, Brown says, “We are hopeful that in the end the HITS Axis platform will provide us with a practical platform as well as a selection of viable applications to further enhance our service offering.”

Lessons learned: Centralized application delivery through HITS Axis “has removed the need to acquire and integrate a significant amount of application specific hardware and software from our network as well as providing us with a means to access applications that we otherwise may not have realistic access to,” Brown says.

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Participants also have learned valuable lessons for ETV developers. ETV/EBIF applications must work within each cable system's unique operating requirements, they say. This includes adapting applications to support an MSO's branding requirements, such as maintaining a consistent look and feel.

In addition, the beta testing has shown that ETV applications can work differently on different set tops. Developers also have been required to address the demands of updating their applications once they have been deployed on a cable system.

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