

Deploying DS For Sports Venues

It's more than just a big AV job.

By Shonan Noronha, EdD

The integration of a digital signage solution in a sports venue is similar to installing an AV system at any large entertainment space, but there are some key differences. Stadium and arena signage calls into play several internal teams, such as sponsorship and advertising sales, IT and facilities, and a variety of creative groups. Content scheduling and management software is also a critical component of large-scale digital signage (DS); hence, the entire DS system must be ready to play ball with video production and marketing, as well.

From an AV viewpoint, advanced planning is required to ensure the system works within the current infrastructure, respecting existing limitations of closet space, cabling procedures and network capacity. On the DS front, advanced planning is critical to ensure smooth software integration and effective training of both technical and non-technical users. Business-process management and coordination of the various parties involved in the DS solution also offer additional revenue opportunities for the AV integrator willing to step up to the challenge.

For the new DS network at Air Canada Centre in Toronto, Canada, Maple Leaf Sports & Entertainment (MLSE) brought on Digital Display & Communications



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Gate 1 at Air Canada Centre features a 42-screen curved video sculpture.

(DDC) as a consultant in the early stages of the project and then contracted the company to design, build and integrate the system. “Gathering and articulating all the critical business and communication objectives of the MLSE network in a usable manner was the first challenge. The summation of this information had to bridge the interests of various groups, and attention had to be given to current and future operational needs, especially with regard to the system design and software platform,” explained Stuart Kirkpatrick, DDC President/CEO.

The \$3M digital signage network, part of the \$48M upgrade, features 52 media players driving content to 320 display screens. “How the system would be put together to allow for optimal efficiency and sustainability from an operational perspective was extremely important,” said

Kirkpatrick.

The 320 LCD displays, ranging in size from 32 to 82 inches, have been strategically placed for maximum impact and configured in unique ways to add to the aesthetic appeal of the facility. “Many of the selected screens are near seamless—with barely a mullion, so they were ideal for videowalls,” reported Kirkpatrick. “We used 52 TTuff media players because they were powerful yet compact. The configurations varied quite a bit; sometimes one player for one screen, or one player driving a four-screen diamond, and we even have one player driving 42 screens that form a curved video sculpture.”

Content scheduling and management software selection typically is a complex process that requires a checklist of the various possible content sources (live feeds, corporate sponsors, ad agencies, etc.) and

types of file formats (JPEG, MPEG, Flash, QuickTime) that will be displayed. It is important to determine upfront the capabilities that are required of the content management software. For example, is there need for a trigger to switch from a live feed to specific content at a certain point, such as when a goal is scored? Is the GUI (graphical user interface) easy to use and easily accessible through a web browser?

In Toronto, the core team at MLSE reportedly had been researching and talking with various software companies for nearly three years. Five companies were invited to respond to a request for information based on established specifications and screen configurations.

“Two companies were selected to present to the decision-making team,” explained Kirkpatrick. “Omnivex Moxie was selected based on its powerful feature set and capability of handling all the issues, along with its strong IT and operational

focus. There are network management tools within Moxie, such as auto-sensing, remote configuration and integration with Microsoft applications, that would simplify IT’s job from an operational standpoint.” Pricing and licensing considerations, in addition to the comfort level of the IT group, also influenced the final selection.

Rich-media signage content requires considerable computer processing power. For the MLSE project, Matrox, Sapphire and Black Magic video cards were selected because they provided the necessary capabilities and were easy to integrate.

Blank screens are not an option in a live sports environment, and the Air Canada Centre system was no exception. Bidirectional RS232 audio and video control was required in the Cat5 content distribution system to ensure that information on the status of the screens was available for diagnostic purposes. Magenta Research’s compact, rackmountable

Octet system was selected because it provides both the required communications links and reliable transmission, switching and flexible distribution capabilities.

As if complexity and scope are not enough of a challenge, many stadium signage projects come with additional restrictions related to sponsorship by electronics manufacturers. This presents no problem when the sponsor offers a comparable product. But, when a competitor’s product is the only practical solution, a little creative flexibility, such as custom plaques to hide offending brand names, may be required.

In venues where digital signage is both complex and important to the experience, effective communication is the touchstone of success. This includes communication between client, vendors, contractors/integrators and those responsible for system operations, as well as a smooth flow of information between media players, display screens and control systems. ■



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