

Shopping for IPTV

QVC's employees need to know what new products are launching and what their competitors are doing, so they need to watch TV at their desks. **Geny Caloisi** finds out how

WHEN SHOPPING CHANNEL QVC needed to update the way its employees accessed information and worked, it found that the solution lay in internet protocol (IP) technology and it used Exterity equipment to meet its goal.

The company decided that it wanted to stream TV to employees' desktops as well as to communal areas of the building, including the reception and the café areas. It also wanted to provide its merchandising department, which is responsible for selecting the goods that are sold on the QVC TV channel and website, with constant access to a wide range of TV channels, via multiple end-points — including large screens in the department and to individual desktops.

The channel, headquartered at Marco Polo House in Battersea, South London, has a computer operations centre in Liverpool which also needed to be linked, so that sales information could be streamed live to large screens in the studio control gallery and the merchandising department, giving people the opportunity to have an 'at a glance' view of current sales.

Marco Polo House has been QVC's home since 1993. The building, where BSkyB also used to have offices, was fitted out with an old coax-based radio frequency (RF) television distribution infrastructure.

For the sake of speed, ease and economy, QVC decided when it moved in to use and build on this same system. However, as is typical with such a system, many inherent drawbacks had to be either overcome or lived with. The system could not keep up with the channel's rapid expansion and QVC decided to look for a new solution.

HARD TO REACH

There were two big problems with the existing RF system that prevented QVC from successfully using the network. The first was signal degradation across the site; because the Marco Polo building is so large, at 157,357ft², that signal degradation on long runs across the site tended to cause ghosting and break-up of selected channels, which meant that it was impossible to stream good quality TV to any area other than near the broadcast hub.

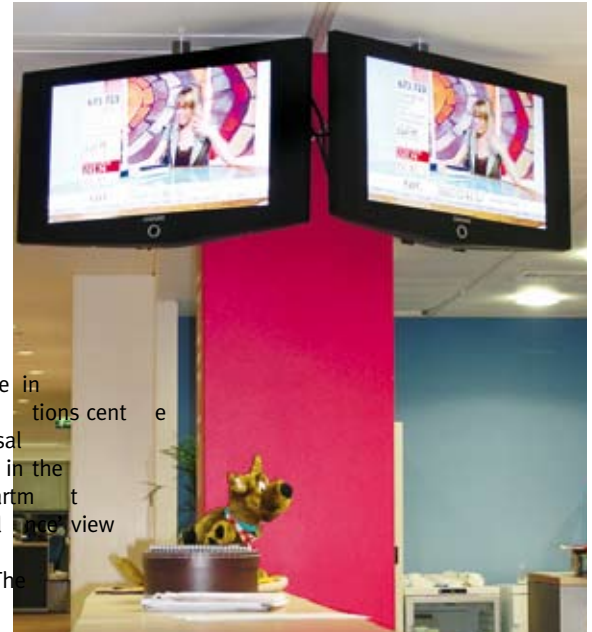
The second issue was the inability to add channels over and above the 20 supported by the modular RF set-up. With so many TV channels now available, QVC needed a much more scalable solution.

'We could not deliver in-house TV using the existing system because it just did not have the capacity,' says QVC director of engineering, Richard Burrell. 'It had simply run out of bandwidth and channels were interfering with each other. The system was out of date, and we were having to patch it up more and more.'

'A major issue was the speed at which the system had to be provided', says broadcast engineering projects manager, Leo Smith. 'We had a two-week window within the overall plan for the refurbishment works within which all under-floor wiring had to be completed.'

RF OUT, IP IN

Looking for an alternative to the RF system, Smith came across an option that he thought might be the answer: 'I



spotted a different type of TV distribution installation at another broadcaster that instantly appealed. The concept was on-demand delivery of channels via a convenient-to-install Cat5 based infrastructure that also supported many more channels than was possible on our on traditional coax-based system.'

Fortunately the building already had Cat5 cabling.

The next step was for QVC to contact a number of TV distribution system integrators. One of the companies that Smith came across was Klicktv, a London-based company specialising in the design, installation and support of TV and video distribution systems. The company had previous broadcast customers, and had implemented many successful deployments using Exterity's IPTV equipment which delivers TV and video around buildings and campuses over local area networks (LANs). These products represent the digital equivalent of the traditional RF-based distribution systems, but offered flexibility, scalability and control.

'We worked very closely with Klicktv on their proposal in order to ensure that we put forward the most effective solution to meet QVC's unique requirements', says Exterity's ceo Colin Farquhar.

'We were confident about the speed at which the deployment could be completed, as our solutions can typically be installed within a few days, which fitted neatly into QVC's small window for its programme of development. IPTV is typically much faster and easier to install than coax systems because we use the existing IP wiring.'

The deployment took only a few days to install and consisted of Exterity's IPTV solutions which deliver digital media from any source to LCD or Plasma displays, projectors, desktops or laptop PCs. Eight 32in plasma screens were installed on pillars in the merchandising department, as well as access points at every desk. Large screens already in the reception area were connected to the system as well as a number of smaller screens in the café. □

CONTACTS

www.exterity.co.uk