

Delivering on digital

Screening new and back-catalogue shows for buyers is slowly moving away from tape and DVD to online and satellite distribution. So what are the issues? By **Dominic Schreiber**

When the likes of Channel 4 International, Fremantle International Distribution and All3Media International set up shop in Cannes this weekend, one thing they won't be unpacking will be hundreds of videotapes and DVDs to show buyers.

Instead, their sales teams will be able to pull up thousands of hours of new and library programming from a server at the touch of a screen. And it might not be long before the more technically savvy sales execs are downloading screeners to their iPods or Sony PSPs when they go into a meeting with a programme buyer.

At the same time, more and more distributors are putting their screeners and other broadcast materials online, and with broadband connections getting ever faster, the days of couriers DVDs or tapes around the world are looking numbered.

"It just makes absolute sense that somewhere down the line, the delivery of programming is not going to be done by the arcane method of putting a tape in an envelope," notes Ted Riley, head of television distribution for Canada's Alliance Atlantis, which has been delivering *CSI* in digital format to some of its clients for two years now. "It just sounds so un-21st century."

The benefits of moving to a tapeless sales process certainly seem obvious. As well as the cost savings from not duplicating and sending out tapes, sending a digital file direct to a buyer's computer is a far quicker process than getting a package through customs, especially in some developing markets. But before the industry moves to completely tapeless distribution, there are still some major technical issues to overcome.

"It would be good to be able to deliver programming that way, but we're certainly not there yet," says Tim Mutimer, director of sales at Granada International, which is looking at digitising part of its catalogue.

Indeed, most distributors are only just starting to offer screeners online, let alone sending complete finished programmes to broadcasters.

"It took a long time for the market to catch up," says Matt Wright, director of OTV Systems, which designs screening systems for companies including C4I, Fremantle, All3Media and Minotaur. "But

finally I've got people to put the whole lot online. It's taken six or seven years."

Set up in 1999, OTV started out by creating screening systems for companies to use at markets and exhibitions, but these days it also works with clients such as All3Media and C4I to digitise their screeners and put them online.

Mobile screening

"More and more people are getting used to downloading video images to their computers and viewing things on computers or mobiles," notes Mike Morris, deputy managing director at C4I, which is currently updating its website so that broadcasters will be able to download screeners.

"The aim is to get it fully functioning by Mipcom, but we'll have a trial service to show by MipTV," says Morris. "Screeners will be available and buyers will be able to download the transmission materials as well."

For C4I, the strategy is all about increasing sales efficiency against a backdrop of rising distribution costs and falling licence fees. "Because you've got many more broadcasters

SmartJog digital delivery

STEP 1

The content owner sends the master tape of the programme to its local post-production facility to be encoded into an Mpeg2 file and posted on to a SmartJog server. SmartJog has 300 of these installed at broadcasters and post houses in 55 countries around the world.

STEP 2

The content owner verifies the recipient then delivers the programme to its client via SmartJog's global satellite network.

STEP 3

The broadcaster logs on to its SmartJog server, using a USB smart key with an electronic signature. The programme can then be previewed at the desk or moved off the SmartJog box to the playout centre for broadcast.



The Simpsons and *CSI*: soon savvy sales execs may be able to download screeners to their iPods or Sony PSPs

initially. For now, though, the system is being used alongside traditional tape delivery.

"It forms part of our deliveries that we do on *CSI* every year," says Riley. "Because *CSI* is everywhere,

there are moments, usually in late fall and spring, when we do tranches of deliveries and they're very hectic periods of time. SmartJog has helped us streamline that process."

The system has been most effective in eastern Europe, notes Riley, but the main hurdle elsewhere is the fact that many major networks still have tape-based broadcast centres. "In a lot of mid-sized markets it's doing well, but in the big markets it's not doing as well," he says. "I think a lot of concerns have to do with the fact that for networks and stations to buy into SmartJog in a big way they've got to do some major revision of their receiving departments."

In the longer run, Riley also wonders if the internet will become a more efficient means of delivery than satellite. "Is it going to be usurped by

the internet. Then there are a lot of file integrity issues."

SmartJog gets round this problem by using a satellite delivery system connected to servers at locations around the world. Satellite, argues Rosenbaum, is a more efficient means of delivery than the internet, and pricing is very competitive compared with traditional delivery methods, with a one-hour drama costing roughly \$135 to send via SmartJog, compared to the \$150 it would typically cost a US studio to create and ship a DigiBeta.

The need for speed

"We guarantee the speed of delivery," says Rosenbaum. "We will get your file to that location in a speci-

to serve, you need bigger, more complicated ways of managing your rights, and the tendency is for costs of distribution to increase," says Morris. "And there's got to be a downward pressure on licence fees. Although there's more money in certain markets, overall that's going to be spread much more thinly. So you've got to find ways of attacking the market dynamic."

Wright also believes that digitising content can increase distributors' sales. At MipTV, for example, OTV provides a screening facility for Fremantle which gives buyers instant access to thousands of hours of programming going back to 1997. "You can't do that with tapes," he says. "You're looking to enhance your sales process, make it more efficient in meetings with buyers. But also you can sell more ad hoc."

Putting screeners online can also boost back-catalogue sales. OTV has developed software that tracks what buyers are viewing. "With back catalogue it makes more sense to get that online," he argues. "Because you don't have as much time at market screening it. We've got software so we know who's watched what and how long they've watched it for."

Many broadcasters, however, still like to have a tape they can take home and view. And when it comes to the delivery of completed shows, there are still major limitations to internet delivery. "You can't just send your 6Gb broadcast master file over the internet - you'll bring some networks down," explains Mark Rosenbaum, chief executive of French technology company SmartJog, which delivers series for companies like Alliance Atlantis using its own secure network.

"Typically you can only send a couple of gigabytes at most through

fied amount of time, which you can't do over the internet."

So far the company has focused its efforts in the US, where it is used by all the major studios, except Warner Bros, to distribute screeners. Clients such as Fox are also using SmartJog at markets and the company has teamed with Reed Midem to offer a screening system for smaller distributors, as well as a completely digital screening set-up for Mipdoc.

The number of distributors using SmartJog to deliver finished programmes is more limited, but the company does have some impressive clients. Fox, for example, is using SmartJog to deliver shows such as *Prison Break*, *24* and *The Simpsons*, and at Alliance Atlantis, Ted Riley anticipates a time when all his company's programming is sent out dig-

anything else? Will the internet provide another solution? Is there going to be an easier and more effective method of doing it in the future?"

Perhaps the biggest concern surrounding the delivery of master copies is security. "As an industry that is investing time and resources into raising the awareness of piracy and the protection of producer rights, we should be making sure that present and future delivery modes are secure," says Rachel Glaister, head of press and marketing at All3Media International. "We are responsible for the safe conduct of our clients' programmes and presently there is no distribution industry uniformity about what is safe and secure. I would prefer to see more industry uniformity before we go down any broadband delivery route that entails costly set-up."