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Now playing: Digital signage

MULTIPLEX MOVIE CHAIN PARTNERS WITH CHANNEL COMPANIES TO BRIGHTEN UP MENU SYSTEM

By Lynn Haber

GOING TO THE MOVIES used to be as simple as buying a ticket and munching on popcorn. But competition among megaplex owners is changing all that, and theater chain Muvico Entertainment has embarked on an ambitious project to offer customers a 21st-century theater experience.

The Fort Lauderdale, Fla., company already differentiates itself with architecturally themed state-of-the-art theaters, but, in April 2007, it took another step by contracting with Schult Industries and Hammond Communications Group to light up its concession areas with a digital menu system integrated with the theater chain's retail POS (point of sale) system.

Schult is a creative-sign supplier, while Hammond is a multimedia communications solutions provider.

In September, the digital signage system



Muvico's multiplex in Rosemont, Ill., outside Chicago features state-of-the-art digital menus.

was up and running when Muvico opened an 18-screen theater with state-of-the-art projection technology in Rosemont, Ill., outside Chicago. It was the first rollout of a

planned half-dozen such systems. A POS system that will integrate with the digital signage system is also in the works.

The digital menu system gives Muvico, in business

since 1984 and currently operating 259 screens in its 14 locations, additional advertising revenue and simplifies menu management across multiple concession stands.

CASE FILE: Muvico

▶ **Solution providers** Schult and Hammond

▶ **The problem** Muvico was looking for ways to differentiate itself in the highly competitive megaplex cinema market

▶ **The solution** A digital signage solution that will be integrated with the company's POS system is replacing older equipment, improving aesthetics, saving money and increasing convenience for customers

Schult and Hammond created a solution that includes 40-inch LCD menus and 50-inch plasma TV screens for advertising.

“We stepped in as an integrator that allowed Muvico to leverage its existing investment in Scala software licenses, brought in Hammond as the software specialists and provided a turnkey solution for Muvico that includes everything from installation of the new solution to deinstallation of the old one,” said Bill Clapes, national account manager for digital products at Schult.

Timing is everything

BEFORE LANDING THE digital signage project, Schult had done several small jobs for Muvico involving posters. While Schult worked hard to introduce Muvico to digital signage during that time, the entertainment company wasn't ready to pull the trigger.

Then something changed. At the 2007 ShoWest convention of theater owners in Las Vegas, Schult co-founder Jeffrey Schult had the opportunity to discuss with Muvico executives the possibilities and cost of implementing digital signage.

“The price of the technology had come down to the point where it was cost-effective enough for us to move away from

using Mylars in backlit poster cases,” said David Thollander, director of purchasing at Muvico. Thollander added that he liked the benefits of digital signage: the ability to make changes on the fly, scalability, ease of man-

change them out two times a year,” said Thollander.

While moving away from Mylar and the associated costs was compelling enough, the benefits of back-end work associated with maintaining and managing the concession

Scala software was vital to moving ahead with the digital signage project. “Once we crossed that barrier, things moved very quickly,” Clapes said.

It's a go

SCHULT, AS THE PRIMARY contractor, brought in Hammond, a Scala certified channel partner, to handle all Scala and Radiant software scripting, programming and integration. Conference calls involving Schult, Muvico and Hammond got under way in April.

Schult brought to the table the customer relationship and the company's experience with digital menu design and

creation, networking, and installation. Hammond's role revolved around software programming, content creation, animation, management and technical support.

Hammond set up the equipment and software in its development production area after the monitors, PCs and other necessary hardware and software were delivered.

“Our job is to take the graphics that were supplied to us by Schult and make it work on the Scala software,” said Craig Miller, vice president at Hammond. The company was also in contact with Radiant technical support as it worked on integrating the Scala software with the



The Rosemont, Ill., theater will soon have POS integrated with digital signage.

agement and better visual appeal to customers.

Mylar is a trade name for sheet polyester used in backlit advertising cases. Mylars, however, tend to age over time and require changing to accommodate menu price changes.

Although Muvico limits the number of times it replaces the Mylars, the need to make changes to its menus is inevitable. The company works with a local vendor to design and create Mylars, ship them to theaters and have them installed.

Mylars cost about \$100 apiece. Changing all of Muvico's 2,500 Mylar signs at its 14 theaters once each year cost the company \$35,000. “Sometimes we'd

stand items and pricing also were attractive.

Schult proposed a solution that would integrate Muvico's retail POS system with the digital signage system. Integration of the entertainment company's Radiant Systems POS offering eliminates the need to touch menu boards at theaters.

To save money, the provider proposed using 160 Scala software licenses that Muvico already owned. Scala's third-generation InfoChannel software suite for digital signage handles authoring, networking, monitoring and logged playback and supports IP-based networks.

Allowing Muvico to leverage its investment in

Radiant POS system.

"Specifically, we needed to get a POS XML file from Radiant," Miller said. The Radiant integration meant that a digital menu would have to be updated only once in the POS system for it to be displayed on menu boards.

Schult also requested that Hammond software engineers write a menu management system as a layer on top of the Scala software. "We wrote up a set of functional requirements for how the digital signage systems were going to be managed and how the content would be displayed," said Clapes.

Designing a flexible management system was critical to the success of the project to handle different locations' requirements operating over a network. The menu boards run custom ScalaScript and VBScript programming and a Microsoft .Net application developed by Hammond.

Hammond software engineers built a prototype system that included POS, content update, animation, choreography and management components. With the digital menu system made up of three menu boards, it was important for Hammond to make the software easy to use for the client.

A key challenge in

designing the digital signage system was to make a compelling presentation to draw the customer to the menu but not produce sensory overload. A second challenge was to ensure that the pricing system and content management system were transparent and easy to use.

Once the prototype was approved, it was shipped to Schult for installation at the Rosemont theater. Hammond software engineers were available online and by phone to configure and set up the software.

As the installation is replicated in other locations, each theater will get three media players and a Radiant system server running the POS software with an XML pricing file. Schult engineers will be on-site to ensure that media player output goes to the right screens.

"One of the key benefits of working with Schult is that they provide a one-stop turnkey solution so we work with one project manager," said Thollander.

More to go

SCHULT WAS RESPONSIBLE for the network configuration and hardware layout at the Rosemont theater. The system consists of Windows XP-based PCs running a Scala player that presents content to the large screens, as well


as a TripleHead2Go box from Matrox Graphics for multiple-screen output. Schult ran Category 5 cable between the computers and screens.

Although the Rosemont digital signage system has been up and running, the Radiant POS integration for dynamic output to the system is still being tested. For now, POS information is delivered in a text file sent by Schult.

Muvico is now upgrading to Radiant 7.0, the latest version of the POS software. "As they roll out the upgrade, we'll follow up with the menu system," said Schult.

Today, Hammond hosts the central server, also known as the content manager that drives content to all locations. "We expect to roll out the digital signage to about nine of our

14 locations beginning in February," said Thollander. Some Muvico theaters, according to Thollander, are smaller or older or have physical obstacles that aren't conducive to digital signage.

Both Schult and Hammond will remain involved in the digital signage rollout as it progresses through this year. At some point, perhaps in the summer, Muvico executives plan to relocate the host server to the company's data center. About a half-dozen members of Muvico's IT staff will maintain the digital signage network and work with the Scala software as a Web-based interface for easy management. 

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