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## Channel branding

*Advances deliver powerful marketing tools to broadcasters.*



Just a few short years ago, channel branding for broadcasters might have been a simple matter of inserting basic text graphics during commercial breaks to promote upcoming programming. Today, however, competitive pressures and audience fragmentation are greater than ever worldwide. And marketing and media departments are demanding far more targeted messages and sophisticated graphics that are fully integrated with station branding, while they make the most of limited station resources. Fortunately, the latest advances in channel branding are fully up to this complex challenge, allowing stations to easily manage channel branding with the reach and precision of a full advertising campaign.

### Master control

It was once common to think of master control graphics as a simple matter of adding a basic character generator at master control. But today's more advanced approach is to provide a complete system for the marketing department to create, modify, preview and control graphical promos within the station's established workflows. And the graphics themselves must support the station's brand with a unified message and design. To accomplish that goal effectively requires seamless integration with the broadcaster's existing media asset management, traffic, scheduling and automation systems, as well as the ability to individually control and previsualize the graphics, plus a full complement of tools and information from nearly every station department.

Globally, channel branding has become a particularly hot area of interest. We're seeing two distinct types of users emerging. Channels relying on prerecorded programming may simply want to free up resources by automating the creation and scheduling of station promos. However, for broadcasters with an increasing number of channels, the stakes become considerably higher. With live events and other premium programming, they demand the ability to control and customize promotions to maximize their considerable investment.

The "on-tape" stations looking for the automatically generated promos are typically those that are set in terms of their programming and scheduling. For example, they might include the National Geographic channel, a movie channel or one featuring programming like documentaries or cooking shows. Typically, all their programming is previously recorded and ready to go on-air.

To generate promos for stations with prerecorded programming, channel branding technology reads from their traffic databases the information about the shows or ad blocks — considered the primary events. It uses defined rules to automatically generate the graphics — the secondary events. After the station's automation system triggers the primary event, the channel branding system takes control of these secondary events and plays them without the need for user intervention, guaranteeing accurate timing. Optionally, the secondary event promos can also be triggered by the station automation system.

These types of promos are generally simple graphics that convey the most basic information such as the names of the show now playing and upcoming programming. For instance, 15 minutes before a two-hour movie ends, a promo can automatically run for the next show in the schedule. Because the promos are automatically generated, operators can't editorialize and create customized promotions. However, stations can generate a multitude of graphics and play them out precisely in the programming without allotting an operator solely for this function. And because more advanced systems can seamlessly playout a mixture of 16:9 HD and 4:3 SD content as required, there's no need to create two separate formats of "coming up next" promos.

With a template-based channel branding system that allows for the creation, modification and preview of promos from several types of users within the facility, the station can increase the number of on-air graphics without increasing the number of graphic designers. When the graphics department incorporates a shared database with other departments at the station, personnel from marketing, graphics, scheduling and promotions can all create promos, quickly and easily, right from their desktops. For broadcasters offering prerecorded programming, channel branding can be a highly cost-effective tool resulting in huge savings of man hours.

### **Live events and changing schedules**

Broadcasters whose programming includes more live events and is more apt to have schedule changes may want to maintain editorial control and the ability to customize promos. It's not enough merely to say which movie or show is coming up next. These stations with live and premium programming typically want to use their channel branding system as a well-integrated marketing system. It's critical to aggressively promote expensive content like high-profile live events or blockbuster movies to ensure strong viewership. So it's necessary to editorialize with highly sophisticated, well-integrated promotions far in advance of the event.

In fact, channel branding efforts can be very much like a full advertising campaign. Perhaps your station marketing department has determined that you need to reach an audience of 10 million people to demand the advertising rates that will ensure a solid return on your investment in a program. Then, you'll need to locate enough promos across all channels with enough viewers to reach more than 10 million people. Yet today's rapidly fragmenting audience presents a challenging problem, especially as viewers increasingly rely on DVRs to time-shift viewing and fast-forward through this promotional content.

To reach those viewers, stations are now communicating to their audience while they are watching the programs themselves, rather than during the commercial breaks. Sophisticated graphics effects like squeezebacks, tickers and lower thirds may be embedded within the broadcast content. Real-time 2-D and 3-D graphic effects at the top, bottom or sides of the screen can add powerful branding capabilities. Short clips from the video archive can make promos tremendously more compelling and memorable. Whether static or animated, silent or enhanced with sound, these messages can be time-relevant, topical and personalized to viewers' interests, even if they've recorded the program to watch later.

## **Retaining flexibility**

Complex channel branding in such situations also requires a high level of flexibility and the ability to handle time-critical changes. Last-minute changes to existing playlists are common in live programming. So, channels focusing on sporting events and special reports must be able to deal with fluid schedules. If a game runs into overtime or breaking news pre-empts regular programming, important station promotions must still run at the appropriate point in a show.

More sophisticated channel branding systems offer flexibility in these time-variable situations by inserting promotions based on the timecode of a specific program rather than on an absolute time of day. Since the relative start point of a promo template in relation to the main program remains constant, updates in the playlist do not affect the graphics schedule.

This kind of advanced channel broadcasting system, however, does much more than simply merge a station's promotion and branding strategy with the playlist. It can also help broadcasters control and monitor the content. Broadcasters can previsualize their promos in context as well as centralize the entire workflow onto one desktop. That means, for instance, checking both the movie and the promotional graphics together from the traffic tool at the precise moment in the show's timecode that the promo is scheduled to run. This ensures that nothing from the movie is affecting the promo, such as subtitles or other key visual content in the area of the screen where the graphics emerge. Allowing users to create and visualize graphics from within the station's existing traffic tool is also a real advantage, greatly reducing the user learning curve.

There are even more possibilities ahead to further harness the power of channel branding. Social networks will soon play a key role in the channel branding mix. As broadcasters look for new ways to mine potential viewers, they'll want to target social media users who have expressed interest in their favorite sports team, movie, political topic or documentary subject via Facebook, Twitter, etc. While no broadcasters have yet implemented this type of application, it's clearly an idea close to fruition.

Increasingly, more broadcasters will want to create “crosschannel” promotions to advertise programs and events that will air on their other channels. We’re also beginning to see that even traditional “full-screen 60-second” promos can greatly benefit from the integration of the messaging with traffic and metadata.

Future developments in channel branding can be hard to predict, but one thing is certain: It will always be the marketing challenges and the needs of broadcasters that drive channel branding systems. Regardless of whether broadcasters primarily desire greater automation of basic programming schedule information or more sophisticated, customized, fully integrated promos, all stations now realize that dynamic graphics that better integrate the corporate identity with overall channel branding bring a wealth of real benefits that directly affect the bottom line.

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