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STAN'S SCOOP
ON THE BROADCAST INDUSTRY

Subject Adaptive Playout Systems = True Flexibility

Author Stan Moote, Vice-president of Business Development

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Adaptive Playout Systems = True Flexibility

By: Stan Moote, Vice-president of Business Development

Over the past decade, we have seen a large-scale multichannel explosion. New media aside, broadcasters' main cash flow still comes from traditional playout delivery mechanisms.

While traditional playout systems tend to factor in a high degree of redundancy and failover to protect the cash register that drives the primary air channels, this is not always the case for other tiers of channels, where economics of operation may rule out the tried-and-tested approaches. In these cases, it is scary to think of all the unprotected chains and the dollars at risk should failures occur. Many businesses have a risk management side that contemplates how to address the impacts should failure occur.

The frustrating fact is that while trying to increase HD offerings and improve the audio experience for consumers, we typically lose sight of two areas: redundancy and channel count growth. The trick is to have a balanced plan; however, with the vast changes in today's technology, we often assume this is not attainable. The key to implementing systems that allow for both redundancy and flexible growth is to focus on an architecture that is forward looking enough to quickly meet both these demands.

Generally, we simply take the word of vendors that a "scalable" server system means we can easily add in more channels and storage. But I maintain that in today's environment, we need "adaptive" playout systems capable of meeting both scalability and redundancy requirements AND addressing the economics of scaling out a system over time. For example, prime revenue-producing channels need a secure backup plan, whereas some channels just need to be kept on-air with some type of content to minimize the phone calls.

Breaking down playout systems into pieces that need to be adaptive, we have storage, automation, branding/graphics and, of course, file format-independent baseband outputs (Figure 1). In many cases, having a number of standalone devices that deliver clip playout with branding and other services is not an adequate solution. In order to allow for scale and simpler operations, a scheme that enables blending of traditional and integrated playout channels is a more appropriate approach.

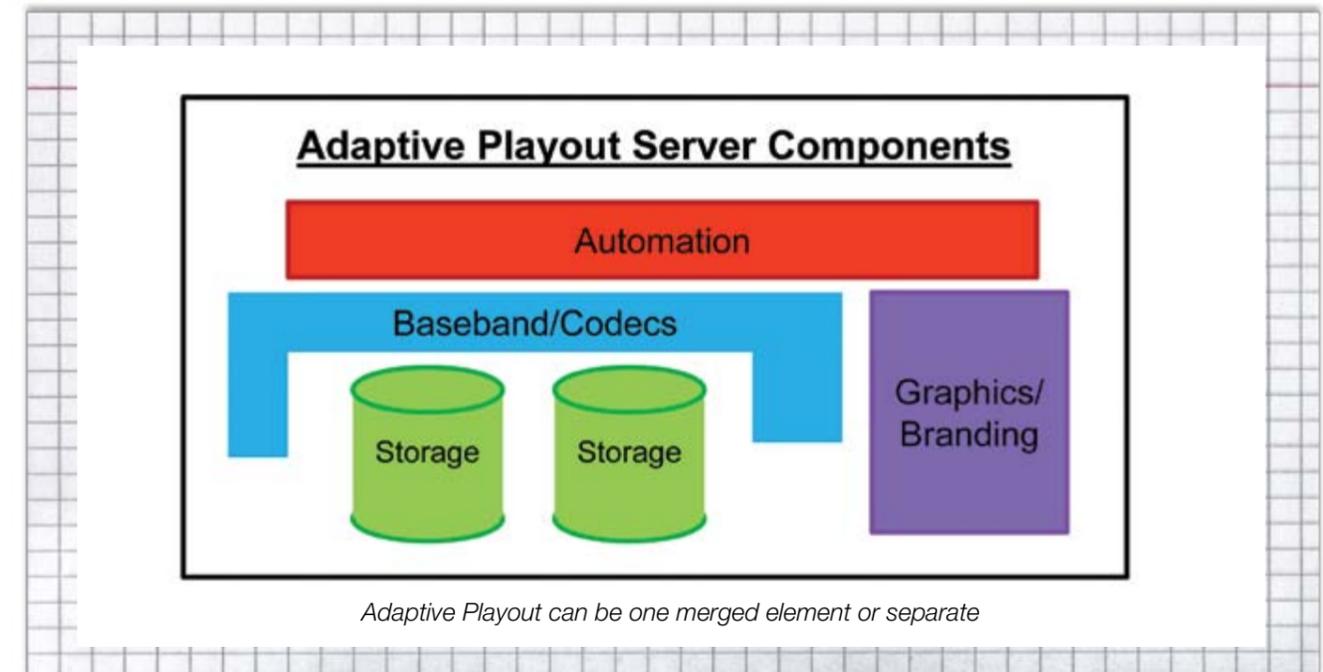
In a blended solution, the existing traditional air-chain still drives the primary, high revenue-generating channels, whilst, integrated playout channels — with their onboard branding and other facilities — service the lower-revenue channels. At the same time, those integrated playout channels can leverage the ingest (baseband and file) workflows of the existing system, making the system easier to manage. Users only need to know one overarching workflow and one user interface, so the learning curve is close to, if not nil. The same thing goes for monitoring; existing systems can be leveraged to harmonize the system and reduce overall risk.

Implementing a blended solution also gives you an array of choices; for example, use integrated storage and automation to drive those integrated playout channels, or utilize shared storage to simplify media management and/or external automation to streamline file-based workflows. Conversely, part of the redundancy strategy may be for some playout channels to have their own storage and/or onboard automation to provide an ultimate backup solution should the worst happen to other channels — including primary air chains. Even in these types of workflows, a common user interface and approach to monitoring remains, making operations simpler and transition to prevailing technologies easier to handle.

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Of course, the blended approach is not for everyone! But vendors who can deliver a blended solution can also deliver a traditional playout solution, integrated playout channels with everything "in the box" and any combination in between. This creates the best of all worlds — and the security of knowing that your system will adapt no matter what the future holds.

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Harris Broadcast
Englewood, CO USA 80112 | Tel: +1 303 476 5000
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