

Working with a Net

TV Guide turns to an automated solution for preflighting and digital ad submission

BY GRETCHEN A. KIRBY

IN TELEVISION, there are many recognizable icons—the NBC Peacock, the tell-tale ticking of 60 Minutes' stopwatch, the CBS eyeball—but few rival the TV lover's most sacred companion, *TV Guide*.

Published weekly by the TV Guide Magazine Group, New York City, *TV Guide* offers a compact, easy-to-grab-from-the-coffee-table alternative to channel surfing.

Those precious ads

What keeps the publication thriving, like many other magazines, is its advertising base. "We receive ads from more than 700 different advertisers," remarks Tim Davis, graphics manager for *TV Guide's* advertising production department. "And we're confronted with a problem of receiving consistent files. ... One of the joys, yet curses, of desktop publishing is that everyone thinks they can design a good file for printing.

"My department mostly receives QuarkXPress files," adds Davis. "Ideally, we'd like to get files that have already been collected, preflighted and ready to go. Then, we can either [write] PostScript from those files, or we can create a PDF (Adobe Portable Document Format). Those files would then be sent on to any one of the 10-plus printers that we use."

With an eclectic mix of advertisers and agencies feeding digital files



to *TV Guide*, file quality gets called into question. The predicament presents the magazine with two choices of action: The complacent approach would be to simply wait and hope that advertisers are quick studies and pick up the concept of good file preparation quickly. The second approach would position the magazine as a teacher. Davis and his colleague, Benjamin Waldie, software engineer for *TV Guide's* IT department, chose the teaching role.

Taking flight

In search of a solution to automate preflighting, Waldie and Davis discovered Markzware's (Santa Ana, CA) FLIGHTCHECK application.

While the software offered the verification functions the publication needed, its implementation was not ideal. "Our designers prefer to be designers," Davis professes. "Their expertise is not in preflighting, so we needed to make preflighting easier for them—almost invisible, in fact. And we needed to assure that we down here in production have consistently clean files."

Having trust in Markzware's products, Davis and Waldie signed *TV Guide* up to be a beta tester of the developer's DRUPA debut, Markz-Net. "MarkzNet has two main functions," explains Kristiaan Cop-pieters, Markzware's chief engineer. "The first is to [facilitate] file exchange across the Internet. More importantly, it also allows you to preflight before the file is handled by its recipient."

In certain environments—pre-press operations and high-ad-volume publishing houses—mere software licenses fall short. "You still depend on the sending party to do the preflighting and to configure FLIGHTCHECK Collect properly. There's still the risk that [file creators] will send a job that's not actually useable," Coppieters adds.

In developing MarkzNet, Coppieters recalls that his company sought a way for putting ad integrity control into the hands of its recipient: "We needed a way for the receiving party to be sure that the

files they receive are the files they want and that they've been checked for all of the things that could potentially cause problems" during production and in the pressroom.

On the move

File transfer architecture was also important. The solution of choice would have to be accessible and cost-effective. "More and more of our advertisers want to send us files electronically," Davis comments. "A dial-up ISDN can be really expensive, and we found that it's only the large ad agencies who would use it."

Instead, the publisher looked to the Internet and FTP (File Transfer Protocol). Ad files uploaded to the publisher's FTP site would be directed to the server upon which MarkzNet resides.

"Locally, in our server, we would set up the parameters for preflighting an incoming ad," Davis explains.

"Another way of looking at MarkzNet," proffers Coppieters, "is as a smart FTP client. Currently, if people use the Internet [to transfer files,] they have to collect all the job elements. Then they have to fire up StuffIt, drive the compressed files over to an archive, fire up Fetch and wait for the file to be sent." MarkzNet automates this somewhat labor-intensive process.

"The ad sender has no predetermined preflighting checks. These are established by *TV Guide*. Before, when files were sent, they might have forgotten to include images or fonts. But these need to be included, as you know. What MarkzNet does, is automatically grab those things from the sender's system and store them in a compressed archive that's sent over the Internet," concludes Coppieters.

"There's no cost to our clients, and most have an Internet connec-

tion. ... It enables a lot more of our advertisers to get their files to us in a much more timely manner," Davis asserts.

Electronic insertions

In addition to automating file verification, MarkzNet will allow *TV Guide* to capture insertion order information and manufacturing directives. Through the Web browser, the ad creator is prompted to complete a submission form; the data collected here could be as simple as print run or ad placement preferences. This job ticket information may be aggregated as a text file that can be imported to an internal operations system or printed for hard-copy reference.

By popular demand

As *TV Guide's* percentage of digital ad arrivals rises, Davis and Waldie hope that native application submission will decrease. "We currently accept PDFs, ... so, we created a PDF certification process, and we've put most of our larger advertisers through it already.

"We've probably visited 75 [agencies] by now. And when we're through with the process, we know—and they know—that they can make PDF files that work," Davis concludes.

Plans to support the ANSI accredited standard PDF/X-1 is in the works, reports Coppieters: "Currently, it's not supported in its entirety; still, you could set up a individual checks that will [verify PDF/X-1's elements.]"

"We process 500 to 600 digital ads during a two-and-a-half-day production cycle," notes Davis, who adds that post-beta mode, "MarkzNet will enable us to be more flexible with our advertisers, and that's very important to us." ■



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