

# VIDEO SERVERS SPELL NEW BUSINESS

*Simulating the same effect as videowalls, multichannel video servers are significantly expanding AV integrators' installation offerings*



*The focal point of Samsung's display at January's Consumer Electronics Show features an array of 120 LCD displays in a visually stunning "tornado" simulation.*

by Don Kreski

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**If you** attended CES or one of the auto shows this year, you couldn't help but notice that super-bright LED displays have largely replaced traditional videowall cubes in big multi-screen displays. More subtle is a change in the processing systems that power these exhibits and a very wide range of other video applications.

According to Joe Niziolek, president of Progressive Communications in Chicago, customers interested in the videowall look are now using multichannel video servers to simulate the same effect. "Since digital video editing has become so inexpensive, people are now able to output segmented streams of the same video clip to multiple monitors or cubes to create these big screen effects," says Niziolek, who provides programming, engineering, and other services to contractors who install these types of displays.

Although server technology doesn't replace the videowall processor, Niziolek says it does make multi-display effects available to those who can't afford to buy or rent such pricey systems. "If you're looking at a good multisource processor, it's \$50,000 and up," he says. "If you use a 4 channel video server, it's going to cost you \$4,000 - \$8,000. Then you can then create wonderful things in the editing process."

David Parish, CEO of server manufacturer Visual Circuits, says that server technology offers a range of advantages not only in rental and staging but also in AV integration and production. "The technology offers greater precision of control, more frequent updating, and the ability to combine video with graphics and web objects—and it takes advantage of digital media."

One firm capitalizing on these benefits to build new integration business is Bluewater Technologies Group of Detroit. For example, one of its installations on a new multimedia restaurant and lounge in downtown Detroit features multiple 42" and 60" plasma displays that can be positioned at table level or raised up close to the ceiling. "During the day, customers can plug into the plasmas with their laptops and be able to run an impromptu meeting over lunch," says Bluewater project manager Mark Chizmar. "At night they create a club atmosphere. They might use the plasmas to show a guest digital artist, give their customers information about upcoming events, or ask them to find secret passwords for drink and food specials. It really is limited only to their creativity."

On the staging side, Chizmar and Niziolek helped to build a unique, tornado-shaped display for Samsung at CES, using 120 17" LCD monitors stacked to create a contiguous sweeping picture when viewed from a distance. "That would traditionally be done with a videowall processor," Niziolek says. "But here we linked multiple video servers together so that each monitor had a separate video clip coming into it. The sequencing and timing were all worked out in the editing process."

Chizmar and Niziolek also worked together on a more traditional LED wall at General Motors'

booth for this year's auto shows. "They had three 9 x 12 foot images that were side by side by side," says Niziolek. "In the old days you'd take a videowall processor and just stretch the image across. But instead the video clip was split it into thirds in editing. So there were three pieces of video that all played simultaneously next to each other for a contiguous picture."

Generally, Chizmar says video servers can replace VCRs or DVD players as a video source. "Using them is a trend because of the ease of operation, the small space they use, the flexibility and the accessibility through Internet connection," he says.

Parish says today's biggest market for server technology is retail. "Digital signage has the opportunity to be profoundly more effective than printed displays, because it can do a better job of grabbing your attention and very quickly delivering a compelling message," he says. "Then networking the servers can have huge value for retailers, giving them the ability to make sure the right message is in the right place at the right time – and the ability to update the message based on a wide range of external factors at negligible incremental cost."

Chizmar agrees. "In the case of a bank let's say, you can actually broadcast a new financial message out to maybe 5,000 branches and within a few hours cover them with the same message scheduled to appear at the same time, and be able to run until you tell it to stop."

Market statistics also support this trend. Research firm Frost & Sullivan reported global MPEG server sales at less than \$40 million in 2000, yet predicts nearly tenfold growth to \$350 million by 2005. MPEG video itself is becoming a predominant format, with over 180 million chipsets sold in 2002, according to In-Stat/MDR, a provider of research and market forecasts of semiconductor and advanced communications equipment and services.

This is not to say that BlueWater or Progressive have stopped using videowall processors – quite the contrary. For one thing, servers can only be used with pre-recorded material. "If it's a live feed and you want to spread it over multiple monitors, that would require a processor," Niziolek says. "Then too, the processor is a lot more flexible if you have to make a last-minute change."

Chizmar says his firm always tries to budget one in, even "We always try to budget one in, even if it's a smaller scale unit. "We like to arrive prepared in the event that something has to be changed immediately," he says.

Niziolek maintains it's not difficult for integrators to use server technology for simple projects. But for those requiring more experience and expertise, it makes sense to outsource. "We make it less expensive because we can stay more current with new hardware and software than a guy who does one or two systems a year," he says.



According to Parish, the biggest obstacle to selling these products isn't grasping the technology but rather understanding the customer. "When you start selling these types of servers, very often the constituents that you're selling to are IT people," Parish says. "So its a different language and a different set of requirements that have to be addressed. Secondly, you're not going to sell a lot of video servers into boardrooms or traditional AV applications. To really take advantage of the rising tide, you need to begin looking at some of these other markets."

Despite these difficulties, opportunities for integrators are large. "In retail, if you create the right kind of relationship, you might sell a system 500 times to 500 locations."

Whether you're targeting a retail or training application or dealing with outsourced or programmed in-house jobs, the new systems are significantly expanding the impact a pro AV contractor can offer his or her customers for a given project at a given budget. For most firms, that can only mean one thing – new business.

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