

HP customer case study: Starz Entertainment Group

HP Media Storage solution helps provider of premium movie content leave subscribers wanting more



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—James Porter, vice president, post production and broadcast operations, Starz Entertainment Group



Industry:
Communications,
Media &
Entertainment

Challenge

Implement a solution that can store and manage Starz' repository of uncut movies and television content and help kick-start Starz' broadband movie download service Vongo.

Solution

The integrated HP Media Storage solution

Simplicity

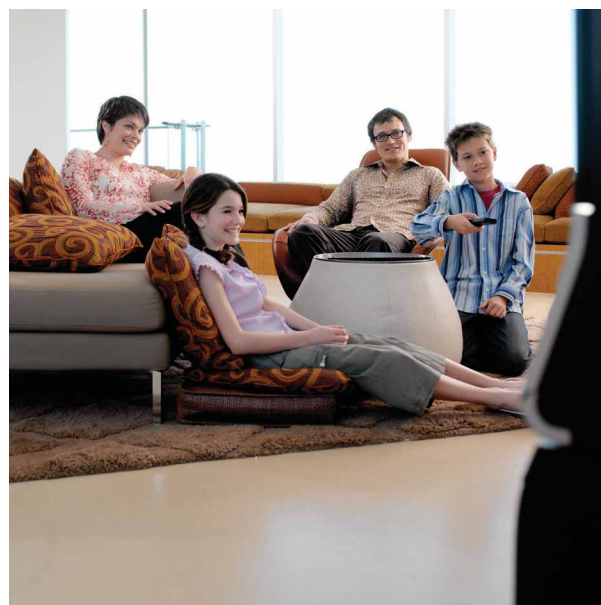
- Multiple servers can access video content without the need to create redundant copies.

Agility

- The solution gives Starz both high-speed performance and the capacity to handle future growth.

Value

- Starz realizes reduced operational costs and improved customer service.
- Broadband consumers can access over a thousand movies, download as many as they want, and watch them as often as they like.



It's the first rule of show business: always leave 'em wanting more. But first you have to deliver the goods—and that can present a thorny challenge to content providers in the digital age. Today media companies must be able to manage massive amounts of digital information; for example, a single, full-length, standard definition movie in digital format can consume 140 gigabytes of storage space. Multiply that times thousands of titles and you've got a storage problem of blockbuster proportions. But, despite storage challenges, fundamental shifts in the entertainment world are presenting attractive opportunities for digital content management and digital delivery of content to companies that can figure out how to capitalize on them.

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—Stephen Smith, manager, automation and systems integration, Starz Entertainment Group

“There is a sea change taking place,” observed Bob Greene, executive vice president, advanced services, Starz Entertainment Group. “The entertainment industry is figuring out how to extend its business while ensuring it does not cannibalize existing revenue streams. There are two key industry trends that we are seeing. First, our distribution partners—cable, satellite, and telco operators—are moving to a fully digital world. Second, there is a changing dynamic with the consumer in the areas of choice, control, and convenience. Customers choose and control the content they want to see, and they desire the convenience of seeing it when and where they want. Portability is a key aspect so that consumers can take their digital photos, movies, and music with them wherever they go.”

A leading provider of premium movie services in the United States, Starz Entertainment Group LLC offers 16 movie channels, including the Starz and Encore channels with approximately 15.1 million and 27.1 million subscribers respectively. Starz Entertainment Group airs more than 1,000 movies each month across its pay TV channels and is a forerunner in offering its subscribers advanced services, such as Starz HDTV, Starz On Demand, and VongoSM—a new video download service for broadband that delivers movies and other video content over the Internet for playback on Windows[®] platform-based PCs, laptops, select portable media devices, and TV.

HP Media Storage solution streamlines delivery of uncut movies to millions

Starz knew it was uniquely positioned to capitalize on the transformation of the entertainment industry; it just needed to get all of the right pieces in place.

“Years ago we made the decision—financially and strategically—to license and invest in exclusive Internet subscription distribution rights to our first-run movie content and much of our older library films,” Greene explained. “With the rights in place and broadband penetration rates at an inflection point of more than 40 million households, we knew that the time was right to aggressively enter this space. Movies will drive the broader business, and we are making it easy for customers to access and enjoy our product with Vongo wherever they are. Moving into the broadband business gives us an added, very natural step forward.”

However, success with media creation, management, and distribution depends on three primary factors—speed, security, and access to data. Efficient and highly productive development processes lead to higher quality product, faster completion of projects, and on-time delivery of content. Media organizations need computing, storage, and network resources that will meet consumer demands for 24 x 7 high-performance access to rich media content for new channels of distribution, including mobile and video on demand (VOD). To beat competitors to market while reducing costs, companies need to speed development of new content—from creation to delivery.

Recognizing that the cost/capability ratio of HP’s Media Storage solution presented an opportunity to implement a scalable, robust, and flexible content preparation pipeline, Starz pioneered a creative solution that preserved confidence in product quality while delivering customized branding capability well beyond that of their existing infrastructure. Starz initiated the project, working with HP to digitize all of its tape-based content and convert it to an industry-specific file format. The solution supports the Starz digital asset environment, which includes content ingestion, repurposing, management, and packaging for distribution.

Based on open industry standards, HP Media Storage offers media production and distribution companies both the high-speed performance and capacity they need to handle future growth. As it turned out, the proof-of-concept trial went so well that Starz didn't hesitate to put the system into full-time production.

"HP took the time to understand our business needs first," emphasized Stephen Smith, manager, automation and systems integration, Starz Entertainment Group. "Then they presented a solution that was carefully tailored to give us the best performance and the best return on our investment. The HP solution gives us flexibility and manageability that we did not have before."

HP solution delivers shared access to movie files—a key benefit

Starz leverages the HP Media Storage solution to store and manage a large repository of movies and television content, which is delivered to cable and satellite operators and ultimately to more than 27 million subscribers via 16 channels, including Starz and Encore, as well as the Vongo broadband service.

Using the HP StorageWorks Enterprise Virtual Array 8000, HP Media Storage creates a fast, efficient, high-availability storage area network (SAN) that provides Starz with 175 terabytes of capacity—which translates to hundreds of movies stored today and scalability for the future. The entire system, including all applications accessing it, is based on HP ProLiant servers. StorNext data management software from Advanced Digital Information Corp. (ADIC) allows the entire storage capacity to be presented to the application as a single, high-performance file system.

With its SAN architecture, the HP Media Storage solution creates a virtualized storage environment that delivers shared access—a key benefit for Starz. This means that a single copy of a video file resides in one location and all other servers have shared concurrent access to the file.

"This feature significantly increases workflow productivity because no server has to wait to access the file," offered James Porter, vice president, post-production and broadcast operations, Starz Entertainment Group. "And it reduces bandwidth bottlenecks since the huge video file is captured, transcoded and packaged within the SAN rather than on local devices. This not only makes media management simpler it eliminates the need to transfer files through out the system."

Shared access also allows streaming video content to be delivered without creating redundant copies on multiple servers. As a result, Starz allows cable, satellite, and broadband providers—and consumers, directly through Vongo—to experience high-performance access, while Starz itself can minimize server and storage resources. Porter noted that HP Services also provided the consulting and integration needed to deliver the comprehensive solution.

Partnerships are critical to validating the Starz vision

Even with the support of its larger parent company, Starz knew it needed both focus and commitment to truly invest in the business.

"It's important to do research, and we do that thoroughly," Greene asserted. "But, to be first to market, you often have to go on a belief structure that allows your company to move forward. It's not enough to articulate a vision; it must be validated by partners and competitors alike. In our case, we want to be first and successful. When we launched Starz, it was critical to capture real marketing information in order to truly understand what consumers want. As a result, we have new products that reflect that thinking—and a big part of that are the technologies and solutions from HP."

The foundation of Starz' differentiation from its competitors is built on the company's long-term exclusive rights to its content. The company embraces a very forward and collaborative approach to its business dealings, strategically partnering with cable and satellite companies, portals, film studios, and technology companies—to whom Starz can provide content for IPTV services through its linear content while partnering with them on DSL solutions with its broadband capabilities. Starz' direct approach to consumers with its Vongo broadband service is yet another differentiator for the company.

"We are showing the studios how to keep content secure and build a flexible infrastructure," said Greene. "We're helping cable operators to get there, and we can say to the portals, 'Here's how to get into the entertainment business.' In addition, our partnerships with our cable and satellite distributors provide us with an excellent infrastructure from which to work—allowing us to continue to grow our global markets."

Next-generation service hinges on latest technology

Starz entered the broadband download market with the launch of its Starz Ticket service in 2004 on the RealNetworks platform. "This provided us with real in-market subscriber and consumer behavior information," Greene related, "which led us to develop our next-generation service, Vongo."

Launched in Beta in January of 2006 and recently having gone "Gold," Vongo delivers movies and other video content to broadband or wireless-enabled devices that support Microsoft® Windows Media Player 10 and Portable Media Center (PMC). Movies can be played on PCs, laptops, select portable media devices, and televisions. Vongo subscribers have access to more than 1,800 full-length feature films, concerts, extreme sports, and more, as well as a live streaming Starz TV channel for a low monthly fee.

"The development of Vongo was a catalyst for us to create an even stronger co-marketing and technology relationship with HP," said Greene. "From a pure business perspective, time to market was critical, so finding the right company was extremely important. This is where HP stepped in front of everyone else.

"HP's willingness and eagerness to work with us has been crucial to our success. HP was very responsive from the beginning and even willing to invest in a proof-of-concept early on—with the idea that if Starz succeeded, HP would too. It was obvious to us that HP was fully committed, so we got to where we wanted to go much faster. There is still that willingness from HP to work together and push the envelope into new areas."

All indications are that Starz' offerings do indeed leave subscribers wanting more. And with the support of advanced technology, such as the HP Media Storage solution, "more" is always right at their fingertips.

For more information on the HP Media Storage solution, visit
<http://www.hp.com/go/mediastorage>

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