The Present and Future of Channel Branding

by

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Introduction

• Digital TV is all about more choice. That's great!
• But that makes the age-old business challenge for a TV station all the more acute.
• For today's digital TV executive, the name of the game is as it always was; attracting viewers and keeping them when they stop by, at a reasonable operating cost.
Introduction

• What's changed is the degree and sophistication of the competition!
• Today's TV viewer has much in common with today's hypermarket shopper, with lots of choice from shelf upon shelf of roughly similar products.
• This compelling analogy has spawned a new terminology for television, borrowed from the world of consumer markets, that of *channel branding*. 
Introduction

- Research in Europe and the Far-East has shown that homes equipped with digital multi-channel systems watch no more TV than homes equipped with the old analogue services.
- In such a market environment, the development of clear and understandable channel brands will be crucial to winning viewers and subscriptions and thereby maintaining revenue.
Channel Branding

• TV companies which understand consumer brands and how they can be built and exploited will be the successful ones.
Channel Branding

- Note here that we are considering *channel branding* not *programme branding*.
- A programme brand, relates to a specific piece of content at a specific time.
- A *channel brand*, is about a relationship. It fulfils a much broader, "editorial" role in the lives of its consumers; more like a newspaper or magazine brand than a brand of bread.
- And this is all-important because, in the pay-TV world, consumers pay for channels not for programmes.
Introduction

This paper addresses the following questions:

• In a multi-channel world how do you engineer your station to have a unique "look"; to stand out from the competition and keep viewers coming back?

• How do you engineer your master-control and automation to avoid a deathly "robotic" quality?

• How do you allow for covering developing news events?
Most of all……..

• how do you achieve this at a commercially acceptable price?
Introduction

• Starting out by looking at the range of current master-control and "channel branding" products, aimed at providing broadcasters with a range of tools to provide distinctive and attractive "house styles", the paper goes on to cover current and future developments in multi-channel, multi-stream, shared-operator and operator-less environments.
Introduction

• Finally, it covers the possibility of the ultimate in integration - the TV "brand-in-a-box" with provision for video and audio storage, mixing, keying and DVE-ing, combined with animated logo-insertion and character generation.
Logo Insertion

• Perhaps the simplest channel branding tool is the on-screen logo. Whilst relatively simple, the logo is a powerful device. It identifies the channel and works powerfully to reinforce the brand as it becomes associated with satisfactory viewing experiences.
• But there are several variations to be played on the straightforward logo theme. Modern logo insertion equipment incorporates a high-quality, linear keying path, so logos can be keyed fully or can be transparent. A degree of transparency can add a degree of subtlety without impairing the function of the logo.
• It has the further advantage that the logo does not totally obscure screen detail which appears behind it; allowing the graphic designer more freedom and more space.
Secondly, due to large internal memory stores, the logo may be animated. This can add a whole new dimension to the logo and is particularly suited to "high energy" channels for music or youth programming.
In-vision clocks

- A variation of an animated logo is an in-vision clock: which is - after all - nothing more than an animation which changes at a rate of one image per second.
In-vision clocks

- Popular in breakfast-time television, in-vision clocks are a strong opportunity to reinforce brand identity. This example is a poor in-vision clock. The channel director has opted for a sterile image which lacks design value. A great channel-branding opportunity has been missed!
• This is much better…….
• Integrated branding is available because animation design software permits minute and hour hands and face to be specified as separate bitmap files, thereby allowing complete creative freedom.
Junction management or “Continuity”

• There may, of course, be situations where a logo is inappropriate or un-desired.
• For example, there have been complaints about the use of logos on film-only (and/or pay) channels.
“Continuity”

- In these situations, a consistent editorial "look and feel" can be accomplished by the choice of junction styles (sometimes called "Continuity"). This is a complex subject;
“Continuity”

- here we will concentrate on the use of
  - audio voice-over,
  - interstitials and
  - various video effects

- All of which may be used to maintain an unfailing and "seamless" style; keeping viewers interested long enough to bridge the gap into the next programme.
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Disjunctions!

- It's interesting that we use the term "junction" or "continuity" for the link between one programme and the next.
- In reality, for the broadcaster we would be better to think in terms of *disjunction* or *rupture*!
Disjunctions!

• All the techniques we will discuss; the voice-over, the interstitial and the various video-effects, each is a vital ingredient in maintaining the relationship with the viewer during the most difficult moment in a television schedule - the break between one programme segment and the next.

• Psychologically, this is moment that that long postponed job can no longer be delayed or wherein our viewer may start to channel graze (or zap) in search of other entertainment.
Audio voice-over

• A voice-over is much more than a simple announcement. For the voice-over to be effective, it should follow an unfailing style.

• For this, there is really no substitute but to use talented announcers. The only problem is one of economy. Clearly for talent to "hang-around" all day in order to make ten second announcements every half-hour is not very cost effective! Far better then that these announcements are pre-recorded at the start of each week (or even month) and played out from a dedicated audio server piloted by automation.
• In the illustration, the Oxtel Imagestore incorporates the Easyplay audio-server option which provides for up to 200 minutes of non-compressed, stereo audio playout. In this way, pre-recorded voice-over announcements may be completely undertaken by one 1RU box for compact multi-channel installations.

• A further advantage of this high level of integration is the simplification of the automation system, which only needs to interface with one piece of equipment.
Interstitials

- One very attractive channel-branding device is the interstitial. An interstitial is a short clip of video, from as little as 20 or thirty frames up to possibly 5 seconds, which is played between programmes and adverts, or even between each advert (a "bumper").
- Like the logo, the interstitial acts to reinforce the channel brand.
Interstitials

• Designed well, the interstitial works on a more profound psychological level than the logo, maintaining the brand in the mind of the viewer at those all-important junctions between different programmes and adverts.

• Like the choice of typeface in a newspaper, the interstitial is the "glue" that forges a consistent house style from the disparate elements that make up a typical station output.
Interstitials

- From a technical point of view, the interstitial is a short, recorded video clip.
- This may be integrated on a server, but problems arise, for example, for a predominantly film channel where programme segments are often relatively long. In this case a tape-based system may be more appropriate and the use of the server is a slight overkill for simple interstitials.
- In addition, due to control and decode buffering limitations, many servers do not perform well when playing very short clips.
• Happily, the Oxtel Imagestore has options for full-frame video storage, up to a total of 6 seconds. The figure illustrates a film channel utilising a Flexicart tape system for the films with interstitials stored and controlled entirely within the Oxtel Imagestore.
Re-branding

• Many channel branding activities might be better termed re-branding:
• That is one primary channel is re-branded several ways for differing audiences.
• For example, a universal film or sports channel might be re-branded for use in bars, homes, or in different territories, each requiring different adverts, logos and voice-overs.
Re-branding

• But this type of “opt-out” re-branding requires an A/B mix function so as to transition between the main programme stream and the local (or specialised) content.
Re-branding

- In this case the common channel content is derived from a Flexicart and each of the three sub-channels is branded by the downstream Oxtel Imagestores.
- Different adverts are stored on the local servers.
- Note that each Imagestore has to provide an A/B mix facility so as to wipe or mix between the common Flexicart and the local server.
Re-branding

- Imagestore provides this functionality by means of the A/B mix option which fits within the standard 1RU unit.
- Once again, this offers the highest degree of integration and space saving as well as simplifying the automation function.
DVE effects

- Films especially, present a particular difficulty at programme junctions (disjunctions): This is the credit sequence.
- With duration of many minutes, often with diminutive, unreadable text rolling over a black background, the credit sequence offers one of the least interesting visual experiences on TV.
- Given that this coincides with a powerful moment of psychological disengagement, the credit-sequence is just the right moment for our hard-won viewer to consider changing channels!
DVE effects

- Clearly we must do something to avoid them reaching for the remote control.
- This problem is often aggravated by statutory requirements to show the credit sequence. Often these are vari-speed re-dubbed, so that the text rolls much faster than it did at the cinema.
- But this often exaggerates the un-readability, rendering the experience even more depressingly uninteresting!
A partial answer to this problem was pioneered in the USA where the term "squeeze and tease" has been invented to describe a situation where the credit sequence is input to a DVE unit and geometrically manipulated into a small part of the overall screen area (squeezed) so as to "reveal" up and coming events in the following schedule. Thereby "teasing" the viewer and keeping them loyal to the brand.
“Squeeze and Tease”

- This animation illustrates a "squeeze and tease" manipulation, revealing the evening schedule.
- Combined with a strong voice-over, this form of junction management can go a long way to maintaining viewer loyalty during perhaps the most difficult moment in any TV schedule.
DVE effects

• Once again, Oxtel have integrated all the tools required for the "squeeze and tease" within the Imagestore product. Known as the Squeezy option, the integrated 2-D DVE can be configured to perform a variety of squeezes, pans, wipes and similar effects on full-motion SDI video in real-time.

• Squeezy's agility allows it to be placed at various points within the Imagestore signal path, allowing a single box to perform functions which would otherwise require multiple units with extensive interconnections.

• Essentially, Squeezy may be used in three modes; to manipulate real-time video over another video input, or over a graphic, or to manipulate a graphical input over real-time video.
The very considerable power of the Imagestore, combined with the integrated Squeezy DVE extends Imagestore's channel branding applications into the area known as Interactive or Enhanced TV services.....known as iTV.
iTV

- The enormous information bandwidth liberated by MPEG coding has made possible a form of multi-channel broadcasting which gives the viewer a sense of interaction.
- Although not truly "interactive" in the strict sense, such a system usually consists of several views of - for example - the same football match or motor race and makes these available as different Program Elementary Streams (PES) on the same MPEG System Multiplex.
iTV

- Because the "set-top box" decoder is simply decoding different PIDS within the same system transport MUX, decoding begins almost immediately.
- These different channels are not declared in the EPG, so the viewer has the impression of "flicking" between various views of a common channel in an interactive way.
Interactive TV channels

- This slide illustrates a screen shot of just such a channel
Interactive TV channels

• This slide illustrates how this may be engineered.

• The system comprises the primary Imagestore which is used to derive the background graphic, common graphical elements and the DVE-squeezed primary broadcast image.

• This is common across the three channels.
Interactive TV channels

- Individual view cameras are introduced into each of the following Imagestores (each complete with their own Squeezy DVE), each generating a compressed image and relevant graphic.
- The four outputs are fed to the MPEG multiplexer.
Manual presentation

- So far, we have considered, largely automated, channel branding applications. Whilst fine for pre-recorded programmes and films, some types of material are rarely well enough behaved in terms of duration to be automated.
- Of these, sport is one of the worst. It is also one of TV's most important and popular forms of content, so provision must be made for handling the necessary junctions between sports action and the - all-important - revenue generating commercials.
Manual presentation

• In these instances, there is rarely any option but to employ human beings: they are best placed to make the complex aesthetic and practical decisions required to produce a satisfactory master-control function.
• Unfortunately they are also expensive!
• Especially so because their judgement is only required relatively infrequently.
Manual presentation

• More complicated still, across a wide range of channels, manual intervention may be required some, but not for all, of the day.
• For instance it's common that manual intervention might be required:
  • in a cartoon channel around late afternoon (peak "schools-out" time),
  • around 6pm to 7pm for the news-channel and
  • later in the evening across a group of sports and film channels.
Manual presentation

• An understanding of just such a business "model" underpinned the development of the Oxtel Presmaster 100 master control switcher.

• At one level, the Presmaster 100 master control switcher is a control-panel for the Imagestore, meaning that the A/B mix, the store library, the keyers etc. may all be controlled from a conventional switcher control surface.
The difference resides in the fact that one Presmaster 100 switcher panel can control from one channel of Imagestore to a total of two-hundred simultaneous TV channels.

Individual channels, normally under automation control, may be selected and controlled manually and groups of channels can be controlled at the same time.
Brand-Differentiation

• Of course, true channel branding is more simply than logo insertion and slick master control, it's also about differentiation……..
Brand-differentiation

- Successful brand-differentiation seeks to echo the values of the brand in all its products and guises.
- So a high-quality film channel must reflect "Hollywood-quality" (even HDTV) pictures and multi-channel sound.
- A high energy youth-music channel must reach out to empathise with its audience: after all, anyone can play music video all day!
Brand-differentiation

- Oxtel is presently developing tools which greatly aid brand differentiation achieved at reasonable cost.
- The first of these is an HDTV variant of the Imagestore product.
- The second, multi-channel audio equipment designed to accommodate the transition to 5.1 sound.
- Lastly well consider on-screen automated character generation which can enormously augment, otherwise sterile TV output.
HDTV

- Because the separation of video processing and control is inherent in the Presmaster 100 system, it is essentially resolution independent.
- At NAB 2000, Oxtel previewed the new HDTV Imagestore. HDTV Imagestore brings Oxtel's expertise in the branding of digital SDI channels to the new world of high-definition television.
HDTV

- Designed to operate on SMPTE292M standard (1.485 Gbits/s, 1080i and 720p HDTV systems), Imagestore HD offers an upgradeable path from a powerful downstream two-level keyer, through to logo and image storage, A/B input mixing with associated AES audio mixing and automated voice-over playout.
5.1 sound

- The move towards multi-channel sound started with the popularity of Dolby Labs *Dolby Surround* system, a matrixed, 4-channel system in which the four signals are encoded into a pseudo-stereo pair.
- This clever technique has a number of advantages. Firstly, because of its encoded nature, a Dolby Surround signal can, not only be treated as a stereo signal, but also is completely acceptable when reproduced on stereo (and even mono) equipment.
Unfortunately things are not so simple in the new world of digital television, where the liberating technology of data compression has allowed the adoption of a full five-channel sound systems. Typical arrangements are: left, centre, right, right back and left back, as illustrated. To these five channels, an extra, one-tenth bandwidth Low Frequency Enhancement (LFE) channel is usually added; the complete system being termed 5.1 ("five point one").
5.1 in transmission

- But, whilst 5.1 discrete audio channels provide better fidelity, in the TV plant they mean very many more audio circuits. And worse, there exists very little equipment in the market for dealing with these new engineering duties.

- Let's look at a typical transmission facility operating in with stereo, for terrestrial, analogue and cable transmission and 5.1 audio outputs for satellite.

- When multiple two-channel AES digital inputs are used to carry 5.1 sound, the preferred channel assignment is: Pair 1 = Left, Right, Pair 2 = Centre, LFE and Pair 3 = Left Surround, Right Surround.
5.1 in transmission

- These extra channels cannot usually be accommodated on the VTRs audio tracks, so a common arrangement is to supply the three extra AES pairs by means of a timecode slaved digital multi-track recorder.
5.1 in transmission

- These signals, along with the standard stereo pair as an embedded audio source, feed an Oxtel Presmaster master-control suite.
- In the normal course of events, all signal processing (stereo audio and video) is accomplished within the Oxtel Imagestore.
- This powerful image-store and video processor also provides flexible audio mixing by means of the internal Easysound board.
- This arrangement is especially useful because Easysound is designed to accept, either AES inputs or embedded audio, simplifying installation.
5.1 in transmission

- The new addition to the control-room, is the new stand-alone Easysound.
- The extra AES inputs feed the Easysound and provide cross-fades and fade-to-silence across the 5.1 signals, which mimic exactly the manipulations on the standard stereo channels.
Encoded multiple-channel sound on AES bearer

- Another solution to multi-channel sound is to use one or another of the proprietary coding systems which encode multiple channel sound onto a single AES bearer.
- In this situation, it is vitally important that the data remains unchanged. In order to handle this, Oxtel have developed a parallel, protected AES path through the Easysound mixer.
- Cross-fades are clearly not allowed, and voice-overs are inhibited too. But, because these encoded systems ensure audio frames are synchronous with video frames, if a cut is arranged between the encoded bitstreams at an appropriate point, synchronised with the AES cross-fade and this produces an acceptably glitch-free edit when decoded back 5.1 audio.
Automated character generation

- Product differentiation may also be achieved with information which enhances the basic viewing experience. If done well, this extra information can give a sense of live, vibrant television; even with the most "canned" of material.
Automated character generation

- Music channels have been very energetic in this area of branding.
- Automated video playout is complemented with on-screen graphics which detail, the singers real names, their love-lives, their chart performance and other information.
Automated character generation

• ........all of which add a sense of personal involvement on the part of the broadcaster and evolve a camaraderie between the channel and the viewer; the very essence of channel branding.
• But this added-value normally requires added effort, and the offices of skilled CG operators.
Easytext...

• The Easytext development for Imagestore, is designed to enhance Imagestore's master-control and channel-branding facilities by adding the ability to render dynamic, on-screen text in real time.

• Any TrueType font may be employed at all point sizes from 12 to 600 pixels.

• All fonts are fully anti-aliased and standard text effects, such as straps, rolls etc are supported.

• The difference with Easytext (which was previewed at IBC 2000) is that the generation of on-screen, rendered text is highly automated.
Easytext…

- On-screen design starts with the creation of an image template which may contain a mixture of images, image primitives (like filled or graduated rectangle) and static and dynamic text.
- Template creation is accomplished using Oxtel's *Text Builder* PC based creation tool.
- The completed template is download to the Imagestore via Ethernet using the same mechanism for downloading logos or on-screen graphics.
Automation and interfacing

- Dynamic fields within the template may be updated by commands within the automation control protocol or from another source of dynamic textual material, like the internal Imagestore clock.
Automation and interfacing

- Even GPI inputs can be used to increment an on-board counter; ideal for simple, score-keeping duties.
Brand in a box!

- As you can see, the diminutive Oxtel Imagestore is pretty much a master-control engine in a box.
- So, a natural progression would see the server incorporated within a variant of the Imagestore unit.
- Incorporating powerful channel branding features such as still or animated logos and in-vision clocks with versatile mixing and DVE functions along with MPEG-2 audio and video playout from internal hard-drive and internal character-generation functions, such an integrated unit practically provides a complete "brand-in-a-box"!
• Ideal for network pass-through with advertising "opt-out", this imaginary product (and it is “imaginary” at the moment!) would controllable as one entity from an external automation system; making system design simple and logical.
Conclusion

• This paper has presented some of the available tools for channel branding and has gone on to consider how, we at Oxtel plc, see these evolving over the next few years.
• These products have been presented, not as electronic boxes, but as tools to develop stronger channel brands.
• Underpinning the technology, is the very real business argument for the need for the establishment of a powerful channel brand image.
• Indeed, a channel's survival may ultimately rest in the ability to forge a consistent and coherent image in viewers' minds.