



Video Furnace Helps Brandeis University Solve Challenge of Video-on-Demand for students

The Customer

Brandeis University is one of the nation's leading private universities. Located in Waltham, Mass., nine miles west of Boston, Brandeis has about 5,000 graduate and undergraduate students, and employs some 1,200 faculty and staff. Approximately 8,000 desktop and notebook computers are in use in 100 buildings on campus.

The Need

The university converged its voice and data networks in 2003. A Cisco voice-over-IP (VoIP) system, including 5,000 hard end-points on campus, replaced an aging campus-wide Nortel PBX system. The successful introduction of this new system led Brandeis administrators to consider whether cable TV could also be delivered using the data network.

In addition, the use of video in curricular instruction was growing rapidly. Faculty members often were forced to use valuable class time to show course videos. When instructors decided to place a course video on reserve in the library instead, the video often was in use when students tried to view it.

The Solution

Although Brandeis investigated offerings from several providers, none of the other solutions worked well enough on Windows, Mac OS X, and Linux platforms to serve the needs of the entire Brandeis campus. According to John W. Turner, the associate director for networks and systems at Brandeis Library & Technology Services, only the Video Furnace system provided the cross-platform capabilities the university needed. In addition, the interactive program guide provided by Video Furnace's OnGuide Server and the system's inStream Viewer made it easy for users to locate and view the video assets they wanted to watch.

In late 2004, Brandeis began a pilot program to test the Video Furnace system and evaluate student reaction to this potential new service. The pilot program was so well received that Brandeis began a few months later to test the delivery of video for academic coursework. As part of this test, the university used Video Furnace's VFNow! component to provide high-quality, on-demand streaming video for students in two foreign language classes.

The Results

The cable TV test received such positive reviews that within months, Brandeis expanded the pilot to include four live channels. The typical channel lineup now includes a news channel, a sports channel and two network affiliate stations.

The VFNow! test also was an unqualified success. "The faculty and students loved it so much, they were begging us to increase the capacity," Turner said. "One reason the feedback was so positive was because the system was so flexible – it let them do what they needed to do. We had really only intended to encode maybe a dozen movies and film clips. In the end, I think we encoded close to 30 because they were just eating it up." Based upon this response, Brandeis plans to encode nearly 100 course videos next year.

"The students loved it," Turner added, "because it allowed them to watch the videos when they wanted, and where they wanted. It didn't tie them into a specific time period, and it didn't require them to wait for the video to become available – they could watch it morning, noon or night, wherever they were on campus with their laptop or PC."

Feedback from professors was similarly glowing. They reported that the system allowed them to use videos more extensively in their courses without taking additional class time to show them or worrying about limited student access to materials placed on reserve.

Turner also pointed out the Video Furnace system was incredibly easy to set up and use. "The box shows up, you plug it into your network, and it pretty much goes. And any problems or upgrades are handled remotely by Video Furnace. They dial into the system and take care of things for us. We don't really need to do much more than make sure the correct video input is on the correct source and change the channel to the right channel, and other than that, Video Furnace handles everything. What's more, there have been very few support calls from students or faculty on VFNow! or the inStream Viewer in any way, shape or form."

VFNow's easy integration with Brandeis' course management system, which allows students and faculty to access syllabi, lecture notes and class schedules via the network, also is a big advantage.

Finally, Turner noted that working with Video Furnace "has been outstanding. They continue to meet our needs, and they continue to offer new features that are really in line with what we're looking to provide. We haven't had to make any special requests to modify what they do to meet our needs – it's all been right there. I would highly recommend Video Furnace to any other school or university."