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April 15, 2010

Live from NAB: What's Happening in Probing Test and Measurement

Of the handful of cable vendors at the NAB show in Las Vegas, many seemed to be talking about probes. And they prefer to call their products "monitoring solutions" as opposed to "test and measurement."

Calvin Harrison, COO of IneoQuest, said his company started out in test and measurement for cable and telco operators, but it has evolved into end-to-end monitoring and service assurance. As a result, its customer base has expanded to include broadcasters and content providers.

He said broadcasters have used IneoQuest's monitoring because they don't like losing control of their product as it goes through the distribution chain. "A lot of probes sit between the local broadcaster and the service provider," Harrison said.

And broadcasters especially are interested in service assurance for their video that goes directly to mobile devices. "The iPhone is changing the game," he added.

For transport monitoring, IneoQuest sells probes that give an end-to-end view from the program perspective. According to Harrison, in the past, operators were most interested in the IP flow but, recently, there's been more focus on the multi-program transport stream.

The SCTE recently released three new 168 standards to help with transport monitoring. (For more on SCTE 168, click here).

Pixelmetrix was featuring video product quality as it moves along the distribution chain. Pixelmetrix President Danny Wilson said the company's largest customer is CNN, but it wants to add more U.S. cable business. It already has cable customers outside of the United States.

Wilson said Pixelmetrix's monitoring solution, with probes along the transmission chain, was built "from the ground up" to help ensure video delivery meets operators' expectations.

Content Monitoring

Pixelmetrix also was touting its Electronic Couch Potato (ECP) product. The ECP is deployed at the headend, where it continuously scans through all channels and audits them to help ensure the correct channels appear in the correct tiers.

U.K.-based Virgin Media signed an agreement with Pixelmetrix to use the ECP across its digital TV network. "This is a different concept in monitoring," said Wilson. "The ECP sits after the set-top, a little like Slingbox."

Pixelmetrix wasn't the only vendor to mention EchoStar's Sling.

Volicon's Senior Director of Marketing Andrew Sachs said, "We want to get rid of Slingbox out of pay TV."

Although Slingbox is most often thought of as a consumer device for "slinging" cable TV content to other devices, Sachs explained that cable operators have deployed Sling technology at the edge of their networks to provide unmanned troubleshooting.

Volicon's edge monitoring would replace the Sling technology with a post-set-top-box solution to monitor and troubleshoot linear, on-demand and interactive content. "We see what the customer sees," said Sachs.

IneoQuest also monitors content on the other side of the set-top box, using probes at the edge QAMs to capture video that the subscriber sees and to fix any problems before customers complain and trucks have to be rolled.

Triveni Digital also plays in the digital TV monitoring space.

Triveni VP of Sales and Marketing Ralph Bachofen said he didn't like the word "probe" because it gives the idea that the device has no intelligence. But Triveni also does remote monitoring with its new StreamScope RM-40 software.

-Linda Hardesty

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