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Enterprise Content Delivery Networks Grow in Value

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As the demand for digital media mushrooms across consumer and business segments, IDC expects that content delivery network (CDN) services will gain increasing adoption as they provide cost-effective and robust alternatives to the enterprise do-it-yourself model. Content delivery networks tackle not only content aggregation and delivery but also network optimization, analytics and reporting, and digital rights management (DRM).

The following questions were posed by Ignite Technologies to Melissa Webster, program vice president of IDC's Content and Digital Media Technologies research, on behalf of Ignite's enterprise customers.

Q. Enterprise content delivery solutions are now being developed as an enterprise delivery platform. What does this mean for businesses that are adopting video and need rich media distribution?

A. Enterprise content delivery solutions reliably and securely deliver *any kind of content* — whether live or on-demand video or other types of content that need to be pushed out to user desktops or laptops — to any user, regardless of where the user is located and how he or she is connected.

As our research shows, most large organizations are investing substantially in video and rich media for an ever-broadening array of use cases — from executive communications to training to videoconference record/playback for collaboration. They need a delivery platform that makes it easy for folks in corporation communications, marketing, sales, training, and other groups to publish and deliver all of this content.

Q. What are all the delivery technologies that enterprises depend on to distribute content?

A. This is a great question because what an enterprise delivery platform does is integrate several technologies and key capabilities into an end-to-end solution that addresses the myriad challenges inherent in delivering video and rich media across the enterprise network.

And by the way, "enterprise network" is really a misnomer. The enterprise network is a patchwork of different networks that have different bandwidth constraints and characteristics. Some may be multicast enabled; others aren't. In remote locations, the network may be slow and unreliable. There are usually big differences in performance and bandwidth and thus the capacity to carry video and rich media traffic. As networking folks are quick to point out, the network is only as good as its weakest link.

Using a software-as-a-service (SaaS) solution can help here; it not only is quick to deploy but also spares the organization the headaches associated with managing WAN connections. More importantly, an enterprise delivery platform that has intelligence about the network and current network conditions, and that provides caching at multiple tiers, can address these challenges through peer-to-peer (P2P) technology. By drastically reducing the amount of traffic that has to be carried over the enterprise network, it enables organizations to effectively deliver video and rich media content over their existing networks without expensive upgrades.

And thinking about all the different ways that enterprises are publishing video today, we realize that it's a rich mix. For example, we are seeing increasing use of live video in the enterprise — especially for executive messaging. On-demand video continues to grow — especially for training. And then there is content that needs to be pushed out to all employees — maybe staged in advance ahead of an important announcement — or content that needs to be pushed to a specific group of employees — for example, sales tools.

These different styles of publishing all have their unique delivery challenges, and they make use of different technologies. Without an enterprise delivery platform, organizations are left with different tools to deal with these different styles of publishing. What organizations need is a single, unified platform that hides those differences and all the complexity and makes it easy for users to publish their content to their intended audience — whether via live, on demand, or push — without needing to learn different tools.

Finally, I'd just like to add that tracking and analytics are critical so that content publishers can see what their reach is and whether their content is being watched, whether users are watching all the way to the end, and so on. Clearly, tracking and analytics need to be integrated right into the delivery process. It's the same thing with security: It needs to be integrated into the platform so that the organization can leverage its LDAP, Active Directory, or other user authentication and authorization systems to ensure that the right content is delivered to the right people. No one wants to see confidential information making its way onto YouTube!

Q. Do these delivery technologies impact the end-user experience?

A. Absolutely. We've all had experiences watching video on the consumer Web when there's a delay before the video starts to play, or the video stops playing and starts buffering, or the frame rate degrades and frames are dropped, or the video and the audio fall out of sync. These are all examples of delivery problems, and they severely impact the end user's experience. The information is poorly conveyed or not conveyed at all.

If it's on-demand content, a highly motivated user may come back and try to watch again later, but if it's a live event, it's a failure. Corporate communications, marketing, sales, and other teams that are using video and rich media to convey their messages need to think about delivery. The quality of their videos will only be as good as the quality of delivery!

Q. What does it mean to enterprises to have the option of a zero-footprint client installation?

A. A zero-footprint client installation enables organizations to easily extend enterprise delivery services to new users without needing to preinstall client-side software. It opens up a slew of additional ways that organizations can leverage their investment in their enterprise content delivery platform. For example, suppose you want to make enterprise video available to employees from home, from their personal computers; with a zero-footprint client installation option, the organization doesn't have to worry about installing software on those PCs — PCs that it doesn't own or manage.

Similarly, enterprises can connect their customers, partners, and suppliers without asking them to preinstall client software on their PCs. There is a lot of benefit in being able to leverage a single platform to communicate not just with their employees inside the firewall but also with their business partners and other stakeholders outside the firewall.

Q. How do you envision enterprise content delivery platforms evolving over the next year?

A. I think we can expect to see customers begin to leverage their enterprise delivery platform in several new ways.

First, there's the "YouTube for the Enterprise" phenomenon. Social media is a very hot topic in the enterprise today, and we're seeing growing interest in giving employees an easy way to publish videos they produce themselves and share them via enterprise portals or social networks so that they can exchange best practices or technical tips, explain how a product works, or collaborate. An enterprise content delivery platform ensures that these videos can be consumed without impacting the network.

We can also expect to see enterprise content delivery platforms play an increasing role in the delivery of content to mobile devices. As our research shows, enterprise users have big plans for mobile content. In some cases, it's about connecting a mobile worker to a videoconference. In other cases, it's about empowering field workers such as service technicians by providing them with "how-to" videos. There are all sorts of interesting applications for mobile.

Finally, I think we'll continue to see customers integrate a wide variety of both client-side and server-side applications with their enterprise content delivery platform to accelerate key business processes. We saw this early on with learning management systems for training, but there are countless other examples. Vendors that have built out a comprehensive set of APIs — on both the server and the client — enable their customers and technology partners to seamlessly integrate the enterprise delivery platform into the enterprise's mission-critical business processes.

ABOUT THIS ANALYST

Melissa Webster leads IDC's Content and Digital Media Technologies research program. This program tracks, analyzes, and forecasts markets and trends in document and content management, records management, digital asset management, digital rights management, and authoring and publishing software.

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