

Issue #14, June 2007

An informal discussion of multimedia communication

This Issue

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The internet is becoming an increasingly dominant force in modern life; a fact that seems almost too obvious to articulate. The internet has transformed not just how we communicate with each other, but WHAT we choose to communicate.

Before internet speeds were fast enough to carry the bandwidth of images and sound (for instance, in the early to mid 1990's) the internet was largely a text-only arena. E-mail and simple text-based websites were the primary way individuals interfaced with the World Wide Web.

Basically, the text-only internet of the early 90's was an electronic reproduction the paper based office and learning environment. The introduction of broadband has changed all of that and the internet we experience today is peppered with moving images and sound bites. The old text-based internet is still there, but it has been overlaid and complimented with multimedia elements.

LDC Group recently developed a series of short multimedia newscasts as part of its involvement in the piloting of the Revised Quality Framework for Disability Services. These newscasts were delivered to stakeholders in two ways; on DVD and via the LDC and DHS websites. The newscasts were all

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under 4 minutes in length, and were filmed at various stages of the project's development to provide stakeholders with a snapshot of an important theme or activity.

So what is multimedia good at?

Engagement is a real strength of multimedia. Just look at the phenomenal success of the website youtube.com; the video segments might be short and often badly shot, but users are taking pleasure from seeing others like themselves depicted. Stakeholders relate to other stakeholders, and multimedia is a powerful way to engage people on an emotional as well as conceptual level.

Multimedia can be accessed in a variety of way; individuals can view files over the internet, DVD's can be created for distribution along with printed materials, and multimedia presentations can also be projected at public forums to encourage discussion around certain topics. Several of the newscasts produced by LDC Group were used in forum discussions.

What equipment is out there?

To do a basic multimedia presentation, like creating a slide show with a voice over, you need nothing more than a digital camera (or scanner, if you prefer to snap your photos on film) and a microphone. There is freely available software to help you put it all together. Microsoft offers one called Photo Story, which you can download here: <http://www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/using/digitalphotography/photostory/default.mspx>

For something more sophisticated which has moving images and animations, you will need a digital video camera and some dedicated video editing software. LDC prefers to use this kind of software even for simpler presentations because the fine adjustment of image and sound is often not possible with the free softwares like Photo Story.

One genuine advantage of the free software is that any stakeholder with a camera can produce THEIR impression of a project and convey that to everyone else.

Use of music?

Music is like glue; it can hold a multimedia presentation together. It can also significantly change the tone and emotion of a presentation. There is music already composed that organisations can simply buy for their own purposes. This is called Library Music. Some of it is very good, but LDC Group prefers to employ the services of a composer to write original music. Library music is a bit like a catalogue of emotions; if you happen to find exactly what you are looking for its great, but the fit is never as exact as you will achieve with original music.

What are some of the limitations?

Internet speed is still an issue. Many homes and businesses still do not have broadband. In fact, for the March quarter of 2007 only two thirds of new connections in Australia were broadband, the rest were presumably dial-up and ISDN (the slower connections). Speed affects the size of

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the multimedia file one can view online, and size in turn affects quality. This has practical consequences for how you might think about constructing a multimedia product.

For example, the multimedia newscasts LDC produced for the Revised Quality Framework for Disability Services project were rendered down to 320x200 pixels (that's just under half the resolution of a standard definition DVD) so they would be small enough to download from a website. We made two web versions of each newscast; a broadband version and a dialup version. In technical terms we compressed one version more than another (compression is what allows .jpeg images to be so small but still look very good on screen). When you compress an image heavily, the quality suffers. For the newscasts, this meant that graphics and text needed to be large enough to still be readable at the lower quality. This is an especially important consideration when persons with vision impairment are accessing the files.

Length is another limiting factor. If you want to make a short and punchy presentation it is going to be necessary to skimp on certain details. This is not a limitation, however, if we view multimedia not as the sole carrier of information but as a way to excite stakeholders about a project and encourage them to visit websites, attend forums or read printed material in order to find out more.

To view examples of the multimedia work produced by LDC please visit our

website:

www ldc.net.au/multimedia.html

Note:

ABS statistics on internet subscriptions can be found at:

<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/8153.0/>

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