

RapidUsers

Digital Rapids StreamZ Encoder Fuels Free Agent Fever for NBA's Miami HEAT

The User

The HEAT Group,
Miami, Florida

The Challenge

encoding live and on-demand content efficiently and at high quality for the Miami HEAT website and internal production workflows

The Solution

StreamZ

The Benefits

"By enabling us to efficiently create high-quality material for HEAT.com with very fast turnaround, Digital Rapids helps us engage and grow our fan base, and that has a direct impact on our revenues."

With the worldwide appetite for online sports growing by leaps and bounds, streaming video is rapidly becoming an indispensable tool in the marketing arsenal of the major leagues and their individual teams. From a technical standpoint, the key to successful deployment is to be able to deliver reliably across a range of bitrate-constrained settings — including both desktops and mobile devices — while maintaining the visual quality that fans have become accustomed to from DTV. That makes video encoding and transcoding a key element in the success of sports organizations' online video initiatives. For The HEAT Group, owners of the Miami HEAT National Basketball Association (NBA) team and operators of Miami's AmericanAirlines Arena, the right tool for this critical job is a StreamZ encoding system from Digital Rapids.

The importance of streaming video as an integral part of the team's overall marketing strategy was underscored at the recent start of the NBA's 2010 free agency period. HEAT mascot Burnie took up temporary residence on an exterior ledge of the arena, pledging not to come down until HEAT star Dwyane Wade re-signed with the team. To fuel publicity surrounding the stunt, Burnie's seven-day vigil was captured on video by a robotic HD camera. The live video signal was encoded in real time by The HEAT Group's StreamZ system and streamed to the NBA servers that host the HEAT's extensive online video offerings. Fans were then able to check up on Burnie's exploits live at HEAT.com.



Miami HEAT Mascot Burnie during his week-long streamed campaign

"We were able to stream Burnie 24-hours a day for a week," says Ed Filomia, The HEAT Group's senior director of broadcast services. "So we really put our Digital Rapids system to the test, and it worked great." The StreamZ system was also used for live streaming of the welcoming party and press conference marking the signings of Wade and his new superstar teammates LeBron James and Chris Bosh. But beyond the occasional big event, the system has proven its value to Filomia and his team by facilitating the day-to-day workflow of a busy production group.

"We are basically the in-house production agency for The HEAT Group," Filomia says. "We produce and execute any live or pre-produced event presentations for all departments, including advertising, marketing, and our HEAT.com website. That includes not only ticket promotions and public service announcements, but also television shows that air on NBA TV and on SunSports, the regional partner for Fox. We also make content (like half-time features and pre-game shows) that is used in more than 70 live game broadcasts each season."

In addition to programming for external consumption, Filomia adds, the group also handles a whole spectrum of production for The HEAT Group's internal needs, ranging from "training videos for our 1,200-plus event staff to motivational videos for the players featuring legendary coach and HEAT President Pat Riley."



Ed Filomia of The HEAT Group

A producer/editor with eight regional Emmys and a producing background including stints at local Fox and CBS affiliates, Filomia has seen tremendous growth in the HEAT organization's use of video production over the last 13 years. "When I was hired in 1997 to start a media production department," he recalls, "I was basically a one-man band: cameraman, producer, editor, director, writer. I even had to build my own edit suite. Putting video on the Internet really didn't exist for us back then." Nowadays Filomia manages a busy, sophisticated operation that includes a staff of four engineers, a production department with eight "preditors" (producer/editors), and a team of graphic animators for digital signage.

Building fan engagement

Video on the Web has become a big part of the production group's efforts. Filomia says that HEAT.com has the most content of any team site in the NBA and — perhaps not coincidentally — has the highest Web traffic in the league. Used to help shape a team's brand and to build fan engagement, Web-delivered video rewards fans for visiting team sites and provides an enticing taste of the in-arena action.

"What we've tried to create here," Filomia says, "is what we call the HEAT Experience, and a big part of that is HEATV, which is how we've branded our in-arena video content. After the games, we've got our fans wondering what HEATV is going to do next. It might be an interactive fan contest, an entertaining video, or a fan-cam reel. Sometimes you get some really interesting moments in the arena, and we take those and put them on HEAT.com so that the outside world can see what they are missing by not being at the game. Our Digital Rapids StreamZ encoder is a big part of our being able to turn that around quickly and reliably on a nightly basis."

The HEAT Group arrived at a Digital Rapids solution having already tried to handle their encoding requirements with software-only solutions. "We were building a lot of content here in the media production department," Filomia says, "and we knew that we had to find an efficient way to make it available for all of our fans everywhere in the world. So we started with some software options, but encoding was a long process that included overnight rendering, and it just wasn't meeting our needs."

The turning point came, Filomia says, when he asked The HEAT Group's supplier for non-linear editing systems, CIS Group of Davie, Florida, to help find a better solution. "They pointed me to Digital Rapids. So we got a demo, and we ended up keeping the demo box. Once we had the box here, I couldn't afford to be without it." As The HEAT Group's production workflows increasingly incorporated high definition content, they subsequently upgraded the StreamZ system to HD, enabling real-time ingest of HD-SDI signals with embedded audio.



HEATV associate producer Chris Rivera using StreamZ

From ingests to transcodes

One job the Digital Rapids system handles for the production group is transcoding to the target formats that will be posted online for end-user viewing. "We take a high definition clip that we've created," Filomia says, "and we run it through the Digital Rapids encoder to create a set of files in the proper codecs for publishing on the Web." The encoder is also used for live streaming on HEAT.com of special events, such as this year's free agent signings, as well as private events for season ticket holders, which are streamed to show others the benefits of having season tickets.

The HEAT Group is also using StreamZ at the ingestion end of its workflow for utilizing clips from the league's video archives. "We have a direct fiber link between the arena and NBA Entertainment's digital media archives," Filomia explains. "So we can order archived clips that we have previewed, and the league will push those to our local server in an MXF-wrapped codec. The Digital Rapids system watches the local server, and when new clips arrive they are automatically transcoded to 50-megabit XDCAM, making them available to our editors in our native editing format via our Avid Unity ISIS media network. Because I already had the Digital Rapids system for our streaming operations, I didn't have to go out and buy another separate system; I can use StreamZ for everything."

Despite the variety of tasks for which The HEAT Group relies on the Digital Rapids system, Filomia says he is "really just scratching the surface. We've been focused on using the system for our immediate needs, and it's not only meeting but surpassing our requirements. Yet we also know that it can do so much more. There are so many features that we haven't tapped into yet." The media production group will soon be settling into a new facility in a separate onsite building, complete with a TV studio, at which point Filomia expects to take greater advantage of the system's capacity for live streaming.

Even with many aspects of its capabilities left to explore, Filomia says, the Digital Rapids system has already made a significant contribution to The HEAT Group's operations. "The Web has become a valuable vehicle for us to reach our fan base on a 24-hour basis, at work or at home, both here in Miami and internationally. The more content we can keep updated on HEAT.com, the more eyeballs we get, and those eyeballs turn into sales of tickets or merchandise. So by enabling us to efficiently create high-quality material for HEAT.com with very fast turnaround, Digital Rapids helps us engage and grow our fan base, and that has a direct impact on our revenues."

