SWR CENTRALIZES SOUTH GERMAN PLAYOUT SERVICES WITH PIXEL POWER

At a glance

Regional broadcaster SWR, part of ARD Germany, wanted to replace its existing playout solution, enhance its workflows, and adapt to evolving demand in the unique public broadcasting environment.

SWR chose Gallium and StreamMaster from Pixel Power, a Rohde & Schwarz company, to provide integrated graphics and a flexible, software-defined solution to replace the existing playout system.

Summary

► **Customer**: SWR Baden-Baden, part of the ARD consortium (Association of Public Broadcasting Corporations in the Federal Republic of Germany).

► **Task**: Replace an end-of-life automation system with a modern and intelligent software-defined playout solution including fully integrated high-quality graphics.

► **Challenge**: Integrate with existing scheduling and other back-office systems. Support the required services and switching workflows needed. Import and link graphic elements in playout from various broadcasters. Realize a flexible solution which can evolve with future demands.

► **Solution/product**: Gallium and StreamMaster from Pixel Power, a Rohde & Schwarz company.

► **Key benefits**: The software-defined solution gives SWR the flexibility to adapt to evolving needs, flexible integration with software control, and a simplified graphical user interface. Close collaboration with the Pixel Power product and engineering team ensured successful delivery.

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Make ideas real

The customer

SWR (Southwest Rundfunk) is a public broadcaster in Germany with three main locations in Baden-Baden, Mainz, and Stuttgart. It is considered one of the largest broadcasters of the ARD consortium. Its channels offer a wide variety of media programs ranging from daily news to series, documentaries, live sports and more.

The challenge

The requirements for SWR's playout automation are extensive, complex, and evolving. The media and broadcast environments are quickly developing into new directions as viewer preferences and emerging technologies are driving change. SWR's old playout system was reaching the end of its life and the broadcaster decided to invest in a new, future-proof solution which could go beyond the limitations of the old system.

"In our search for a modern playout solution we needed to be ahead of the game and have a system that is truly future-proof, flexible and highly scalable," says Udo Fettig, Project Manager at SWR.

One of the main requirements for the new system was a focus on graphics in the playout solution. Importing and linking graphic elements from various sources is vital to SWR's playout workflows.

SWR manages playout for both pre-recorded and live content, which makes things even more complex. With live content, programs may run longer and cause several changes in daily schedules, making it difficult for operators to check program plans. The broadcaster wanted easy manual interactions within the playout automation system (when necessary). The playout must also allow quick and easy last-minute changes and let playout operators check the accuracy of the playout schedule.

"Live content may be the future of linear channels since thematic channels playing clips will eventually be replaced by VoD (video on demand). Being able to efficiently manage those channels is becoming more important to broadcasters," says James Gilbert, CEO of Pixel Power Ltd and Director of Product Management at Rohde & Schwarz Media.

The solution

Optimizing resources is essential for broadcasters who want to remain competitive. SWR aimed to identify and eliminate time wasted in its operations, resources, and materials, to improve overall quality of service. Innovative technology that automates mundane tasks, optimizes workflows, and streamlines processes is vital to helping SWR efficiently manage, expand, and centralize playout operations.

After intensive benchmarking, SWR discovered Pixel Power at the International Broadcasting Convention in Amsterdam. SHM Broadcast GmbH, Pixel Power's long-term partner in Germany, provided a local point of contact for the procurement process and assisted with the negotiation of the project and framework contract. Within a few months a prototype had been successfully created for SWR, and other public broadcasters wanting to streamline their playout processes took notice of the solution and its advantages.

A simplified graphical user interface

SWR needed a graphical user interface for an automation system that fulfilled their demanding requirements but was easy to use. When evaluating other playout solutions, the broadcaster concluded that the competition lacked many of the functions available in the Pixel Power system. With the Gallium and StreamMaster solution, the graphical user interface can be easily customized to fit SWR operational workflows.

"Gallium and StreamMaster are focused on the operator. The necessary metadata and the video content let operators see what is going on in the background and allows them to interact via the graphical user interface. The solution is very intuitive, and our operators could immediately start using it," Fettig explains.

Flexible integration with software control

The requirements evolved over the course of the project, and SWR realized it needed unscheduled graphics. In playout, sometimes important alerts and crawls need to be faded in. The team implemented the delivery of severe weather warnings, lottery announcements and more. A text-to-speech function was also added to improve access for visually impaired people.

SWR workflows include highly specific tasks that Fettig and his team needed to take care of rather than the vendor. "Gallium and StreamMaster provide the necessary APIs and system capabilities that allow customization, the customer can then tailor the system to their operations," adds Gilbert.

The flexible, software-defined nature of the solution made it easy to add manually controlled real-time graphic and audio layers to the configuration. Being able to dedicate layers assigned for these functions means any conflicts between automated and manual operations are avoided. Using the open Gallium REST API, an HTML5 interface was created, which SWR were able to model for their operational requirements.

Improving the content check process – junction preview

The content check process is particularly important to operators. They need to play media and check it on a broadcast monitor or vector scope in a full quality preview. A popular feature is the playlist item check that includes all layered elements such as graphics, audio, and subtitles. When creating a program, the junction preview lets users see the links between shows. Small graphic effects or video snippets can be easy to miss, a lot of complex things happen at once in playout centers.

With Gallium and StreamMaster, the junction preview feature is part of the same UI operators use on a daily basis, providing the user with a hassle-free experience. "The way the junction preview is implemented into the Pixel Power product stands out from the competition. Operators really enjoy this feature," says Fettig.

Conclusion

The scope of the original project has evolved since its implementation, and the Pixel Power playout solutions continue to meet SWR requirements. The broadcaster has reimagined and redesigned channel playouts and streamlined its operational workflows. After successfully implementing Gallium and StreamMaster, SWR playout management has expanded. SWR playout now includes several regional broadcasting channels in the ARD consortium and covers Southern Germany entirely.

"We are happy that the system is expandable and can scale up easily to meet our evolving requirements. Playout needs can arise very quickly, and the system lets us be even quicker," says Andreas Mungenast, Head of Playout and Media Operations Center SWR.

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