

Traffic Operations in the Centralcasting Environment

“We chose VCI for all of our broadcast stations because it is a cutting edge solution that meets the open architecture requirements of Ackerley’s Digital CentralCasting environment.”

*– Keith Ritzmann, Chief Technology Officer
The Ackerley Group*



As evidenced at NAB 2001, "centralcasting" has replaced HDTV as the newest trend and hottest topic in broadcasting. That's because, unlike HDTV, centralcasting has the potential to offer real and immediate benefits including a positive impact on profitability.

The centralcasting discussion most often revolves around master control operations and technology including automation, spot insertion, program playback, and networking. This is due to the fact that the consolidation of engineering operations offers the greatest opportunities for controlling expenses and achieving economies of scale.

Of equal importance, and offering opportunities for *both* savings and improved revenue, are the traffic systems that handle inventory management, scheduling, and accounts receivable. The traffic system is the only system that touches a station's entire revenue stream all the way from order entry to scheduling to invoicing. And despite the fact that it is the backbone of the broadcast business, 80% of the traffic systems in use today are based on technologies designed long before the conception of centralcasting.

When The Ackerley Group launched their Digital CentralCasting™ environment in 1999, the group was clearly breaking new ground. They required the support of vendors who could help them redefine their business practices while simultaneously implementing a new technology architecture. They chose VCI as the single traffic system provider because VCI offered a leading edge solution that met Ackerley's open architecture requirements. The inherent efficiencies of the software helped to ensure that a centralized traffic staff would be able to handle consolidated operations proficiently. Additionally, with the STARS II and STARS II+ systems already installed at some Ackerley stations, VCI had demonstrated an in-depth understanding of the television market along with a track record of consistent responsiveness and a commitment to meeting customer requirements.

This paper describes some of the characteristics that make VCI--both the company and the technology--the optimal solution for centralized traffic operations.

Open, Standards-Based Technology

The STARS II+ traffic system is an open, standards based solution that runs on Microsoft® Windows NT®. The software conforms to modern software design techniques and supports current development standards including the Open DataBase Connectivity (ODBC) standard and the Extensible Markup Language (XML), which facilitates data exchange between internet-capable applications. Applications based on industry standards improved productivity, share information more readily, and can accommodate future changes more easily. With centralcasting still in its infancy, the ability to accommodate change is very important. As the concept of centralcasting continues to evolve, the supporting systems must also be capable of evolving.

Systems that take advantage of standard components naturally result in a lower cost of ownership. Up front investments are lower due to the widespread availability and application of standard technologies. For example, VCI's STARS II+ traffic system runs on a standard Windows NT server. Because this platform has far-reaching application outside of the broadcast industry, the up front investment for an

individual broadcast operation is greatly reduced. In some cases, broadcasters implementing STARS II+ can even take advantage of existing components and infrastructure used in support of other functions. This helps to reduce not only the up front investment, but also on-going administrative, maintenance, and upgrade expenses as well.

Proprietary solutions with limited application will have a higher overall cost of ownership resulting from a greater up front investment and higher ongoing expenses. In addition, because they do not take advantage of general advances in technology, proprietary platforms will feature fewer and more costly upgrades.

Robust Open Database Technology

At the core of STARS II+ is a relational database that conforms to the Open DataBase Connectivity (ODBC) standard. This robust database is the key to gaining economies of scale within a centralcasting environment, without enforcing a single mode of operation upon the individual stations. The STARS II+ database brings several unique advantages to the centralcasting environment.

1. *Elimination of redundant data entry.* Through its shared data table structure, STARS II+ allows multiple stations to share common information. For example, information such as agency records, advertiser, records, and product codes are entered once for the entire cluster. This helps to increase productivity and reduce costly data entry errors.
2. *Unlimited data parameters.* The STARS II+ system allows as many data types as needed to support both cluster-wide and individual station business requirements. For example, STARS II+ supports an unlimited number of spot types. This can be important if the cluster encompasses both large and small market stations with various network affiliations as each of these entities will have a different rate structure.
3. *Unlimited volume of data.* Because STARS II+ never purges data, both current and historical data is always available online. Remote sales organizations can access real-time and historical data as if it were stored locally. Databases with limited capacity force traffic operations to archive information offline, most often in paper format. This puts a tremendous burden on the centralized traffic operation because it must support the information requests of the entire cluster.
4. *Accessibility of data.* Because it is ODBC compliant, STARS II+ allows other applications, such as Microsoft Excel, Word, and Access and Crystal Reports, direct access to its database. This gives users at both station and corporate levels the flexibility of using preferred applications in the general course of business while also taking advantage of the wealth of data maintained by STARS II+.
5. *Consolidated and individualized reporting.* STARS II+ offers complete flexibility for both consolidated and individual station reporting. Reports can be created online in whatever format is required by the individual decision maker, regardless of how it is entered into the system or is scheduled to go to air. This flexibility is important in a centralcasting environment where reporting requirements will vary from station to station, as well as from station level management to corporate management.

Speed and Real-Time Processing

The speed of the traffic system is critical in a centralcasting environment because of the volume of data being managed and the number of users supported. VCI STARS II+ is based on 32-bit compiled software code and a client-server architecture with a well-indexed and compact database. It supports real-time functions including spot scheduling and reporting. It is not necessary to bring down the entire system for backups, and invoicing can be completed during normal operational hours without slowing down the entire system. STARS II+ also allows for unlimited expansion of PC's and printers without system degradation. These features are important to growing broadcast organizations since cluster configurations are likely to change in the future.

Reliability

In a centralcasting environment, a traffic system failure will have serious consequences because it will cease the operation of all of the stations within the cluster. To increase reliability, STARS II+ takes advantage of standard and readily available hardware components, including RAIDed, hot swappable disk drives. STARS II+ also deploys redundancy throughout the system to ensure continued operation even in the event of a key component failure.

Usability

Usability of traffic system software should be evaluated from two standpoints: 1) how quickly users can enter data and complete tasks, and 2) how easy it is to train new users.

STARS II+ offers a graphical user interface that is both easy to learn and operate. STARS II+ offers standard menus and toolbars and supports common functionality such as cut-and-paste and drag-and-drop. These features help to speed up the data entry process.

Clients often describe the STARS II+ user interface as clean, easy on the eye, and easy to use. These attributes are desirable on two levels. First, fewer mistakes will be made when the software interface is readable and useable. Within a centralcasting environment, with all of the sales, media, and agency details coming through a single system, one error can result in significant revenue loss.

Second, operators are more likely to 'enjoy' using a system that is easy to use. This should not be taken lightly. If operators enjoys using a system, they will be more open to leveraging the system to its maximum potential. A traffic coordinator who is as truly at ease with STARS II+ is more likely to make better decision about spot placements and clearances. In this case, the user's comfort level with the software has direct impact on profitability.

Flexibility

While an ultimate goal of centralcasting is to achieve economies of scale by consolidating common functions such as inventory management, scheduling, and invoicing, broadcasters must be careful not to enforce a cookie-cutter approach on individual stations within a cluster. Program formats will be driven by network affiliations. And each market will have different demographics and ratings which will drive unique sales practices.

Because STARS II+ is based on a robust, open database, it supports standardization of common practices and information, while also allowing complete flexibility. User-defined parameters can be changed easily to accommodate changes in business operations or strategy. As previously noted, reports can be created online in whatever format is required by individual decision makers, regardless of how it is entered into the system or is scheduled to go to air.

The modular design of STARS II+ offers complete flexibility over human resource deployment, even from cluster to cluster. For example, one cluster might assign traffic resources by station, making one traffic coordinator responsible for an individual station's log, copy, and media. Another cluster may choose to assign resources on a functional basis rather than by station. In this model, one person would be responsible for creating the log for all stations within a cluster. Another would be responsible for copy management for all stations. STARS II+ offers the flexibility of allocating resources according to the model that best suits individual business requirements.

Automation of Routine Processes and Communications

To help increase operator productivity and handle complex orders more easily, STARS II+ automates many common processes and communications. A partial list includes the following:

- Automatic rescheduling of pre-empted spots
- Automatic scheduling and handling of bookends as a single entity
- Automatic cross-referencing of copy instructions with the media library
- Automatic balance rotation
- Automated end-of-schedule billing

VCI helps to improve productivity and reduce costly errors by providing a high degree of automation between STARS II+ and all leading automation systems. In addition to supporting the widest range of scheduled events, VCI provides standard interfaces for one- and two-way file transfer (download and 'as-run' upload) between most major switching and insertion systems, as well as custom interfaces.

For the Ackerley environment, VCI created a customized automation interface that allows them to manage multiple playlists for the different network affiliates through a single automation system at a central location. The interface also accommodates standby programming and provides automated as-run updating for log reconciliation and billing. According to one Ackerley traffic manager, the ability to accept

an as-run log from the Sundance playback system has reduced the reconciliation process by 75% of the time previously required to complete the task.

In the centralcasting environment, sales operations become removed from the central business and administrative functions. This will almost always necessitate some form of sales force automation. To streamline the sales process in the centralcasting environment, VCI's broadcast sales force automation package, VCI Sales Desk, can be integrated with STARS II+. All data becomes available at the any step in the process and to any level of management involved in approvals, regardless of their physical location within the cluster or group. Electronic mail messages are automatically generated to notify other interested parties of approvals, as is often the requirement with political or trade advertising. In the event of a pre-empted spot, Account Executives can receive instant, electronic makegood notification. This offers the benefit of immediacy and helps to ensure that all spots get rescheduled in a timely manner. In a paper based system, communications between a centralized traffic operation and remote sales organizations will be slow and inefficient. Processes driven by inefficient forms of communications will frequently result in revenue loss.

Integration With Other Applications

Adherence to industry-recognized standards ensures that STARS II+ can integrate seamlessly with other standards-based applications. For example, VCI has completed integration of STARS II+ with InVision, Inc.'s DealMaker system. Integration of the two systems, both of which take advantage of XML, will streamline the sales data entry process and allow the seamless transfer of sales orders from a group's proposal systems to the traffic systems.

In addition to integrating with most popular email applications, STARS II+ interfaces with PETER STORER & ASSOCIATES, INC. and the Maxagrid, Revenue Management System, as well as with web-based applications, and even custom applications based on standard technologies.

More Rapid Development and Delivery of New Capabilities

A reliance on standard technologies makes it easier for VCI to bring enhancements to the core STARS II+ system. Later this year, VCI will release a new STARS II+ application, called VCI ClientConnect, which will help broadcasters improve customer service by offering web-based account inquiry capabilities to their advertising clients. ClientConnect will offer significant advantages to the centralcasting environment by empowering clients and sales reps to access critical account information--including copies of contracts, placements schedules, invoices, statements, in-house media, and other pieces of information--anytime of day from any web-enabled location without intervention from the centralized support staff.

Experience Meeting the Business Requirements of The Broadcast Industry

Broadcasters considering the move to clustered operations must carefully evaluate all of the technology options available, both for master control and supporting business functions. Equal consideration should be given to each vendor's understanding of the television market and their track record for applying the latest technology to modern business requirements.

For broadcasters following The Ackerley Group's lead towards centralcasting, VCI offers not only proven and standards-based technology, but a wealth of experience in implementing modern business solutions. These same factors have led over 150 other broadcasters--in all size markets and of all network affiliations--to choose VCI over alternative solutions. And while centralcasting itself is still new to the industry, VCI's track record for helping broadcasters keep pace with modern business practices is solid and long-running.

About VCI

For 25 years, VCI has delivered technically advanced business solutions to the television broadcast industry. In 1989, VCI developed the first PC-based traffic system. Just four years later, VCI introduced a completely redesigned client-server system that integrated the core business functions of sales, traffic, and accounting. Today VCI offers open, standards-based solutions designed for modern broadcast business practices. *VCI Stars II+™* helps broadcasters assemble and edit logs faster than ever before and manage commercial inventory more effectively. *VCI Sales Desk*, empowers sales organizations to make better financial decisions while managing client accounts more effectively. Based on the popular Microsoft® Windows NT® operating system, both Stars II+ and Sales Desk offer robust functionality, an easy-to-use graphical user interface, and ODBC database support for flexible customization and reporting. VCI's commitment to providing high-quality core broadcast business solutions has resulted in over 150 customer installations throughout North America. STARS II+ is a trademark of Video Communications, Inc.

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